

# THE FIRST ARMENIANS IN AMERICA DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD (Beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> – First Half of 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

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## **Abstract**

It is difficult to determine the exact number of Armenians emigrated to America during the given period of British colonialism, since no documents have been preserved about the registration of newcomers, including that of the Armenians, till 1820.

It should be noted that the settlement of these few Armenians in America at this period is not connected with the intentional emigration to USA from the various Armenian-inhabited regions in the subsequent years; they were merely individuals outside the main stream of emigrants.

**Keywords:** New World, America, First Armenians, Virginia Colony, Jamestown, John Martin the Armenian



**Captain John Smith**

The Armenians have left for the United States of America for personal, educational, economic, political, cultural, religious and other reasons.

Still in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the first few Armenians were among the early settlers setting out from Europe to North America. In that period of British colonialism, very little incoherent information, often also in want of historical verification, has been presented about Armenians departed to America. Thus, according to the American historian Louis Adamic, the colony of Virginia, founded in Jamestown in North America, in 1607, by the Virginia Society of London, was populated by Polish, German and Armenian

laborers who had come after fighting against the Turks in Hungary for four years under the command of “the bulwark and savior” of the colony, the twenty-seven-year old captain, John Smith.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adams 1932: 27; Gavian 1945: 4; Tashjian 1947: 1-2; Adamic 1945: 287; The National Experience 1963: 14; Avakian 2000: 13-17.

The American primary sources mention: “The Poles, Germans, and Armenians were the laborers and tradesmen of the colony; and unlike the colonists who shunned work, they were accustomed to hard and sustained labor.”<sup>2</sup> These people, having “crude manners,”<sup>3</sup> had become skilled in the production of pitch, tar, soap powder, glass beads and baubles, with which they traded with the American Indians, as well as they participated in the battles fought against them by the colonists, thereby favoring both the economic and the political progress of the newly-created colony of Virginia.<sup>4</sup>



In spite of the above-cited fact, the Armenians and the other laborers arrived with them, for twelve years, were found in a slave-like state and were considered in the eyes of the British as “inferior foreigners,” deprived of civil, economic and political rights whatsoever.<sup>5</sup> That is why, in 1619, in Jamestown, the Armenians, along with the Polish, German and Irish laborers had taken part in “the first consciously political upheaval in America for the purpose of extending rights to the common man,” which, at the same

<sup>2</sup> Tashjian 1947: 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Adamic 1945: 287.

<sup>5</sup> Adamic 1945: 287; Lang 1981: 120-121.

time, was a brilliant example of the manifestation of unity of the representatives of various nations in the struggle waged against the violation of human rights in the New World.<sup>6</sup> It is known that the rebellion had “fortunate conclusion,” since, in the same year, the first representative assembly created in America, the House of Citizens of Jamestown had decided that “they (the rebel laborers – K. A.) shall be enfranchised and made as free as any inhabitant there whatsoever.”<sup>7</sup>

Noteworthy is also the fact that, according to certain sources, in 1620, in Virginia, the names of Zorobabel (probably: Zohrab Abel<sup>8</sup>) and Stephan,<sup>9</sup> had been preserved in the lists of the deceased people, as well as a gravestone with a foreign, probably, in Armenian, letters was found in the cemetery of Jamestown,<sup>10</sup> but their Armenian origin is conjectural.

In the subsequent years, we are informed about the next Armenian, who set foot on that American region from certain documents which have reached us. In these documents, provided by the London Virginia Society, when the southern part of colonial America was proclaimed by the King James I of England a resettlement territory for economic, political and commercial purposes, the name of “Martin the Armenian” or “John Martin the Persian”<sup>11</sup> (probably, the fact that he had obtained Persian citizenship in at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during the days of Shah Abbas, has been taken into account) is mentioned several times.

There is no adequate information about the motives of John Martin’s voyage to the New World. The disconnected data preserved allow us to conclude that Martin the Armenian had come to America in 1618 or 1619 as a servant for the governor of Virginia, George Yeardley,<sup>12</sup> who had come to Jamestown to accomplish the program of radical reforms, since “good hands were not to be had in America for love or money”<sup>13</sup> in the period of colonial America; besides, the entry of manpower was encouraged there in every possible way, in order to realize the riches of the New World. Consequently, it may be assumed that John Martin was one of the comparatively old servants enjoying G. Yeardley’s confidence, who had migrated to Europe, probably, in the years 1610-1612.<sup>14</sup>

Before long, in 1619, John Martin obtains British citizenship in Virginia, then a region of more than a thousand inhabitants, becoming thus “the first naturalized person on the American continent” in the colonial period.<sup>15</sup> He, as a free man, becomes the

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<sup>6</sup> Adamic 1932: 288.

<sup>7</sup> The National Experience 1963: 15; Tashjian 1947: 3.

<sup>8</sup> Lang 1981: 121.

<sup>9</sup> Tashjian 1947: 2.

<sup>10</sup> Moushegh, Bishop 1912: 15.

<sup>11</sup> The National Experience 1963: 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> Adams 1932: 28.

<sup>13</sup> Tashjian 1947: 3.

<sup>14</sup> Tashjian 1947: 4; Mankouni 1962: 95.

<sup>15</sup> Kelty 1937: 206; Malcom 1919: 52.

owner of 95 acres of land (1 acre = 4.060 m<sup>2</sup>) and is engaged in the culture of tobacco, widespread at that time in Virginia.<sup>16</sup>

It is possible to conclude that the privileges to act freely, from which John Martin had also benefited, were made possible thanks to the rebellious protest of the foreign worker, in the same 1619, as a consequence of which certain economic and political rights had been gained.

John Martin, engaged in tobacco cultivation during about four years, he then returned to England, in 1622, with his “parcel of tobacco,” he himself had grown, where as a foreigner, a double tax was demanded at the custom house. In this connection, John Martin had applied to the law-court of the Virginia Society. His application, dated on the May 8, 1622, presented to the court of law, concerning the double taxing, has been preserved, of which a passage is quoted: “Iohn Martin the Persian makinge humble suite for the Companies fauo<sup>r</sup> to the ffarmors of his Ma<sup>ty</sup> Custome to free him from payinge double Custome w<sup>ch</sup> they required of him beinge a Stranger notwithstandinge he was made a freeman in Virginia by S<sup>r</sup>. Geo: Yeardley then Gouvernor as by Certificate vnder the Collonies Seale appeared”.<sup>17</sup>

John Martin succeeded in winning the case; he was permitted to import to the Mother Country his lot of tobacco with the usual duty imposed on British citizens. In this manner, the British court has, for the first time with John Martin’s case, clarified, in general, the economic relations between the Mother Country and the “foreign” colonists, further promoting the development of trade.

Attested, once again, as a British subject, John Martin, has had a further progress in position: he has become a member of the Permanent Committee of the London Virginia Society and has taken part in the numerous important sessions with the right to vote.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the minutes of the “extraordinary” and important meetings, dated on October 20 and November 12, 1623, and on January 14, 1624, he is mentioned as “Martin the Armenian.” It is also known, that he, together with a certain Lord Argal and seven others, has voted in favour of the question of the delivery of the Society’s petition to the King. Al. Brown, in his book “The First Republic in America” has written, that John Martin’s real name, in Armenian pronunciation, should have been Hovhannes Martian.<sup>19</sup> We think that Hovhannes Martirossian is also a possible variant.

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<sup>16</sup> Mankouni 1962: 95.

<sup>17</sup> The Records of the Virginia Company of London 1906: 633. It should be noted that the writings of these and the rest of the original materials are in Old English, even – in Latin, in some cases there are spelling and punctuation inaccuracies, which the author has left unchanged. The translations of the original materials are also done by the author of the present paper. In the English printed materials of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries non-traditional sound-units were used to present different words. Thus, the letter “v” – instead of the letter “u” (e. g.: “vse”/“use”, “seauen”/“seven”) or: the letter “i” instead of the letter “j” (e. g.: “Iohn”/“John”) or: the letter “e” instead of the plural suffix letter “-s” (e. g.: “booke”/“books”) [Smith 2006: ii], and some letters are presented with small letters in the abridged words.

<sup>18</sup> Tashjian 1947: 5.

<sup>19</sup> Malcom 1919: 54-55.

In 1624, following the liquidation of the London Virginia Society by King James I,<sup>20</sup> information about John Martin has also come to an end.

Subsequently, in 1653, two silkworm-breeder Armenians had come to America to restore the silkworm-breeding industry having an important state and trade significance for the Virginia colony in that period, which, however, had been suffering a major setback. These two Armenians had come to impart their skills to the native inhabitants. With their knowledge and experience, they were enjoying great authority in their homeland and were brought to America from the Ottoman Empire (probably: from Izmir) thanks to the personal efforts and material means of the eminent leader to the colony of Virginia, Edward Digges.<sup>21</sup> He, being engaged in the silk trade, had been informed about the successes of Armenians in the field of silkworm-breeding from his father, who, at one time, held the position of the Ambassador of Great Britain in Russia.<sup>22</sup> It is well-known that the larvae of the silkworm were imported to Russia mainly from the Armenians in Asia Minor.<sup>23</sup> This two Armenians were keeping a careful eye on the growth of mulberry trees, necessary for the ripening of silk cocoons in the Ed. Digges' silkworm-breeding territory, in Denbigh, Belfield (at present: Williamsburg) and in the vicinity of River James.<sup>24</sup>



Colonial Jamestown, 1614

We are informed about one of the Armenians, “George the Armenian” from the resolution passed by the Virginia Council in December, 1656, where it is reported: “...George the Armenian for his encouragement in the trade of silk and to stay in the country to follow the same have four thousand pounds of tobacco allowed him by the Assembly”<sup>25</sup>. It should be noted, that, in spite of the exerted efforts, the desperate

<sup>20</sup> The National Experience 1963: 18.

<sup>21</sup> Malcom 1919: 55. Tashjian 1947: 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Dawn Illustrated Year-Book 1922: 45.

<sup>24</sup> Mankouni 1962: 95.

<sup>25</sup> Malcom 1919: 56; Tashjian 1947: 7.

Armenians, who had not obtained any tangible results in the initial stage, had even wanted to return home.<sup>26</sup>

However, the job of silkworm-breeding had soon such a stunning success, that its “earnest supporter,” the English silkworm-breeder, John Ferrer has woven an extensive eulogy, composed of 173 lines<sup>27</sup> entitled “To the Most Noble Deserving Esquire *Digges*: Upon the Arrivall of His Two Armenians out of *Turkey* into *Virginia*.” Here is a fragment:

“But noble *Digges* carries the Bell away  
(Lass! want to eggs made so small the essay)  
His two Armenians from Turkey sent  
Are now most busy on his brave attempt.  
And had he stock sufficient for next yeare  
Ten thousand pounds of Silk would then appeare  
And to the skies his worthy deeds upreare.

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Courage, brave Sir: Sith Ayde from God is sent  
Proceed, go on, drive forth thy great intent.”<sup>28</sup>

The development of silkworm-breeding had a crucial significance for the British authorities. “Virginia provided Charles I with the coronation robe, while the silk robe of Charles II was undoubtedly prepared by the cocoons cultivated in his domain in Virginia. A gentleman named Digges had sent for Armenians to come to Virginia for the production of cocoons,” has written Ed. Eggleston at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup>

In this way, as Bishop Moushegh Serobian has noted in his “Armenian-American Almanac” (Year A, Boston, 1912), in Virginia, “the Armenian mind and skill have been able to promote the American industry of silk-spinning in the cradle of formation,” becoming the firstlings of the silkworm-breeding and sericulture in the New World.<sup>30</sup>

Very scanty, often conjectural pieces of information have been kept about the Armenians emigrated during the subsequent years to America. In the period covering the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Armenians arrived mainly from certain European countries having rather active relations with Great Britain (particularly from Holland), as well as from India,<sup>31</sup> and were resettled in the various newly-created colonies (Virginia, Massachusetts, South Carolina, Georgia). Thus, the first Armenian, who settled in Massachusetts in 1682 was the Hungarian-Armenian scientist Stepan Zadori (possibly a variant of the Armenian surnames Zadourian, Assadourian or Astvadsatourian);<sup>32</sup> then the clergyman, Reverend Fr. Peter Toostian (possibly: Petros Doostrian) and a member of his diocese, Jacob Sadouri (possibly a variant of the Armenian names-surnames

<sup>26</sup> Mankouni 1962: 95.

<sup>27</sup> The Reformed Virginian Silk-Worm 1655: 33-38.

<sup>28</sup> The Reformed Virginian Silk-Worm 1655: 38.

<sup>29</sup> Mankouni 1962: 95.

<sup>30</sup> Moushegh, Bishop 1912: 15; Buxton, Buxton Rev. 1914: 219.

<sup>31</sup> Malcom 1919: 56-57.

<sup>32</sup> Tashjian 1947:7-9; Wertsman 1978: 1.

Hakob Sadourian or Assatourian or Astvadsatourian),<sup>33</sup> who settled in South Carolina in 1719; subsequently, there is mention of the cultivator Stepan Tarrian (or Teryen, Tarrien, possibly Terian), who settled in Georgia in 1738.<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult to determine the exact number of Armenians emigrated to America during the given period of British colonialism, since no documents have been preserved about the registration of newcomers, including that of the Armenians, till 1820.<sup>35</sup>

It should be noted that the settlement of these few Armenians in America at that given period is not connected with the intentional emigration to USA from the various Armenian-inhabited regions in the subsequent years; they were merely individuals outside the main stream of emigrants.

Summarizing the desultory information which has reached us about the first Armenians, who had left for America in the period of British colonialism, it is possible to conclude that their vast majority was composed of Armenians scattered in various European countries due to economic and historical circumstances or their alienated generations, who, owing to commercial or other reasons, being related to Great Britain, had, independent from each other and mainly for individual motives, moved to the new resettling colony and had been involved in the various spheres of its economic and spiritual life. That is why they mostly bore alienated names and had adopted other trends of the Christian faith. Nonetheless, the allusions periodically met in the American official colonial documents, concerning their Armenian origin, assure of the great interest with regard to the national belonging of the foreign resettlers in the New World in that period, acquiring thereby a certain national and historical value.

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<sup>33</sup> Tashjian 1947: 9-10; Wertsman 1978: 1.

<sup>34</sup> Tashjian 1947: 10-12. Wertsman 1978: 1.

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