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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS ANDREW LAWLER, AUTHOR OF "THE SECRET TOKEN"

 JUNE 19, 2019 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Andrew, thank you very much for doing this interview on the occasion of the paperback release of *The Secret Token*, which is about the so-called Lost Colony of Roanoke. I remember learning about Roanoke in the third grade and the amazement I felt when I realized there was this mystery that had never been solved. How did you set about unraveling the mystery? What drew you to the subject?

AL: My parents were serious history buffs. We spent vacation days traipsing around broiling Civil War battlefields. Thankfully, we also went to the Outer Banks to enjoy the beach. But even there, history forced us out of the surf and into the car for the trek to Roanoke Island for the three-hour outdoor drama called The Lost Colony. It was a memorable experience—lots of cannons going off, and Indians attacking the English who then attacked the Indians (not to mention the swarms of mosquitoes attacking all of us). In the end, the settlers marched out into the dark woods, singing bravely. Then the audience filed out behind. The walk to the car was terrifying for a young child. So, from an early age, long before I could read, I was filled with the dread of what it must have been like to be abandoned in a land as strange to them as Mars would be to us.

I didn't give much thought to the mystery once I was out of my parents' clutches. After all, there was little new to say, just the same old letters and reports for historians to argue over. Then, decades later, I ran into a British archaeologist. He mentioned that he was digging "in a little place called Hatteras." I knew immediately that he must be searching for the Lost Colony, but he stonewalled me once he discovered I was a writer.

Soon I learned that a second team was working to unearth physical evidence of the settlers' fate as well. Two fiercely competitive groups were seeking an answer to America's oldest cold case. This was catnip to a journalist. I eventually gained access to both archaeological digs, and I quickly realized the story required more than the one-off online piece that I did for *National Geographic*. And when I discovered the fascinating cast of characters involved in the search, I was hooked.

AM: And these characters, many of them anyway, influenced American politics long after they were dead and gone.

AL: Yes, the lost Elizabethans had an impact on later American history that they never could have dreamed of!



Andrew Lawler

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The Lost Colonists were quickly forgotten in an England embroiled in a terrible war with Spain that lasted as long as the American conflict in Afghanistan has lasted in our own century. Most English seem to have assumed the settlers melted into the Native American population, as suggested in a 1604 London play by Ben Jonson.

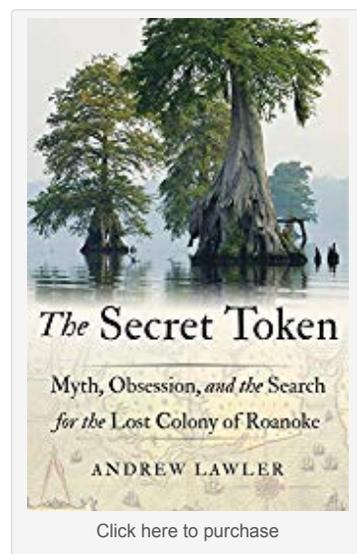
Not until the 1830s—250 years after they were abandoned—did their fate become a source of mystery and fascination. The generation of the founding fathers was dead, and Americans looking back to their early past rediscovered Roanoke. By then, it was not just a taboo for people of European stock to mix with people of color; it was also illegal in much of the United States.

This was a fraught time. Andrew Jackson was president of a fearful and divided nation. Nat Turner's rebellion provoked fear of slave uprisings across the South. Catholics from Ireland and Germany poured into the North. And peoples like the Cherokee were forced west. In this environment, the obvious solution to the embarrassing problem of the Roanoke settlers was for the colony to be "lost." It was at this time that the term "Lost Colony" was first coined, by a Boston-born female author. For the next century, the myths and legends that grew up around the Roanoke venture—almost always created by women—were wrapped up in these contemporary concerns about race and immigration.

AM: Your book is not just a history, but a history of history. What I mean is, you've written not just about the events involving the Lost Colony, but about evolving views about the Lost Colony over time. You mention that the book began as a piece for *National Geographic*. How did you begin to frame it as a narrative that encompasses centuries of history? How did you set out to organize the book?

AL: When I stumbled on the two teams competing to find physical evidence of the Lost Colony's fate, I thought that would be the sole story. Their scientific finds would solve this old mystery. It all seemed simple—the book would chronicle experts looking for and finding answers. But that's not what happened. The teams did find loads of evidence, but there was fierce disagreement among them as to what that evidence meant. Then I began to run into amateurs obsessed with answering the question of what happened to the settlers. A whole group of people without advanced degrees was spending weekends digging in the swamps. This seemed unusual and intriguing, and they became part of the story too. I became curious as to why people were so curious about the Roanoke voyages.

Then one day I asked an obvious question: who coined the term "Lost Colony"? No one knew. Finally a literature professor at East Carolina University mentioned that he thought the term appeared sometime in the early 1800s. That changed everything, sending me off on a search not for the colonists, but for the history of the colonists. Suddenly this was more than an attempt to figure out the fate of a hundred-odd long-dead Elizabethans. It became a window on the evolution of the United States. So the book reflects that journey, from the search for physical clues to a kind of social history of America. The colonists, I realized, were a useful mirror of how we Americans see ourselves.



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filled with lusty dark men. This was a period when women were struggling to obtain the vote and other basic rights. It was also a time when fears of African Americans and the huge influx of foreign immigrants were rife among whites. Her birthday celebration on Roanoke Island in the early twentieth century became a kind of high-tone white supremacy rally, where she was hailed as the first white person born in the New World (Spaniards arrived much earlier, but didn't count). Even today, her name

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AM: Who is Virginia Dare?

AL: Virginia Dare is the most famous American about whom we know so little. She was the grandchild of Governor John White, who mentions in passing her birth and baptism on Roanoke Island in August 1587. Beyond that, history is silent. But her memory was revived by nineteenth-century women looking for early American heroines. She was recast as the survivor of an Indian massacre that cruelly wiped out the other colonists, and she was imagined to grow up into a beautiful blue-eyed, blonde-haired teenager who was skilled with a bow and arrow, and who rebuffed the advances of Indian warriors. Her story, which invariably ends tragically, became wildly popular well into the 1920s.

She was both a symbol of female power—a young girl living by her wits among "savages"—as well as a powerful archetype of white supremacy. In the many versions of the tale, she remains virginal, a blonde girl trapped on an island

is invoked as a warning against the immigration of darker-skinned people—just check out www.vdare.com. It's a strange afterlife for the babe of Roanoke.

AM: Let's talk about you for a minute. Would you mind sharing your writerly biographical background? I've seen you called a "journalist," but you're more than that, I think. You are, simply put, a writer. Journalism isn't the only field of writing for you. What's the story of you as a writer? How did you become a writer, which I take to be one who earns his or her principal living by writing?

AL: There's an old Woody Allen saying that those who can't do, teach, and those who can't teach, teach gym. I would add that those who can't teach gym, write.

When I was young, I was interested in the space program and planetary science, but I lacked the ability to master even rudimentary math, much less physics. Then I discovered that I could write about those subjects for a general audience. I didn't need to be an expert, just curious enough to ask questions of the right people. That was a revelation. I could follow my whims. So I wrote about NASA for years, which led to covering science and Washington politics for newspapers and magazines. Another interest of mine had always been history and archaeology. When I grew bored covering DC, I began to write about digs in the Middle East. With the outbreak of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2001, that obscure beat suddenly became a hot topic. I've learned to trust my passions to take me where I need to go.

So for two decades I was a gumshoe reporter working on constant deadlines. I churned out hundreds of stories, but I began to itch to do something larger and more challenging than the next news piece or three-thousand-word feature. A magazine story about chickens, of all things, launched me into book writing. This was like having my training wheels removed and being sent out on a busy road alone. There was no editor down the hall waiting for copy, and no particular readership to address. This was both exciting and terrifying.

There are those peculiar moments when I'm writing a book where it all feels too much, too hard, too complicated. And then you go back to your desk and you make the impossible possible. There are also moments when I dance for sheer joy in the kitchen, waiting for the tea to boil, knowing there is nothing else I would rather do. But while the writing is mostly a solo routine, the business of writing is not. I have been very, very lucky, with patient editors, a savvy agent, and a very understanding partner who have my back.

AM: Does your partner read your manuscripts before they're published?

AL: No, and I don't think my partner reads the final product either. And that's just fine with me.

AM: That's hilarious! There's a line from your book that sticks with me: "the final leap has to be one of imagination." That's true of all history to some extent, but particularly for the one you tell. If history is the assimilation of facts to form a coherent narrative about past events, then it's difficult to achieve without, well, facts. You've done a nice jobs pursuing different lines of inquiry based on known facts. But did the ambiguity ever get to you? Did you ever grow frustrated when facts—and answers—eluded you?

AL: As L.P. Hartley wrote, "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." History is what we make of the past, and that is always a blend of facts, old and new interpretations, and our own imagination. Ambiguity is always an essential element of storytelling, and that includes what we call history. In fact, it is the ambiguity of what happened to the Roanoke colonists that has turned the Lost Colony into such a powerful myth. We have few facts, but many theories.

Those ideas shed more light on us than they do on long-dead Elizabethans. But I find that fascinating. Take the gold Elizabethan ring owned by a gentleman and found in the 1990s on Croatoan, the very place the colonists were said to have gone after leaving Roanoke Island. It turned out, once I poked around, that it was neither gold nor Elizabethan nor even owned by a gentleman. It was just a cheap brass knockoff marketed to Indians a century after the colony vanished. The desire to tell a good story led archaeologists and then the media astray, to put it mildly. So imagination is the proverbial double-edged sword, both useful and treacherous.

AM: Indeed it is, Andrew. But I hope this interview hasn't been. Thank you very much for sharing your insights with us.

AL: My pleasure. And if your readers are interested in what I've written and where my book tour is taking me, they can always check out my website, www.andrewlawler.com.

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About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is associate dean at Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center. His books include Literature and Liberty (2014), Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Pragmatism, and the Jurisprudence of Agon (2017), The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrington (2017) (editor), and Lines from a Southern Lawyer (2017). Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](#).

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