

# Alexander Whitaker Biography

## Alexander Whitaker

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# Biography

Alexander Whitaker's importance rests upon his sermon *Good Newes from Virginia*, the only substantial piece of his writings that survives. Whitaker sent this work from Henrico, Virginia, to his friend William Crashaw in England after 28 July 1612, and when it was published in 1613, it became the first American sermon to appear in print.

Born the first child of William Whitaker and Susan Culverwell in 1585, Alexander Whitaker went to Eton in 1598, and in 1602 to Trinity College, Cambridge, his father's alma mater. Here he completed his B.A. in two or three years and his M.A. in 1608 before receiving holy orders in 1609. Evidently moved deeply by his friend Crashaw's sermon before the Virginia Council on 21 February 1609, Whitaker left England on 27 May 1611 to bring the gospel to America. In Virginia he served as the minister for Henrico, for the town of New Bermuda, and for those communities further upriver. As the minister to Sir Thomas Dale at Jamestown he very likely instructed and baptized that nobleman's ward, Pocahontas, to gain a first and highly influential convert for the English church in America.

According to Crashaw's introduction to *Good Newes from Virginia ...*, Whitaker seeks to answer "the calumnies and slanders, raised vpon our Colonies, and the Countrey it selfe" in his sermon. The minister attempts to demonstrate that the Virginia Plantation is now on sound footing, having withstood the verbal and physical attacks of its adversaries, both from within and without, verbal and physical, white and Indian, and that it is worthy of additional support from the Virginia Company and all Englishmen. It is highly probable that Whitaker expanded his original sermon as delivered in Virginia before he sent it to the Virginia Company in London. His fairly detailed comments on the habits of the Indians and on natural resources and topography would be redundant for those who viewed them on a regular basis, but these descriptions were eagerly received in England and are now of unquestioned historical significance. These relatively unintegrated passages place *Good Newes from Virginia* well within the realm of the earliest English travel, promotion, and propaganda narratives dealing with America.

Alexander Whitaker died at the age of thirty-two in the spring of 1617. His ministry of six years in Virginia ended abruptly when he drowned crossing the James River.