

# FOUNDING FATHERS

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## Paul Green's 'The Lost Colony' Performed On Roanoke Island

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ON the 350th anniversary of the founding of the first English colony in America the people of Roanoke Island, off the coast of North Carolina, are staging a commemorative pageant. It is a particularly inspiring event to the citizens of North Carolina and Virginia, who have been attending in increasing numbers. To others less familiar with the details of Sir Walter Raleigh's valorous and tragic attempt to carry the English spirit into the wild new world it is an uncommonly impressive evocation of the daring that seeped into this country from the wave-beaten beaches just north of Hatteras. For Paul Green, author of "The Lost Colony," and the others who have contributed to a community celebration have approached their work in a reverent mood. They believe in what Sir Walter's men were trying to do amid the pines and cypresses at the water's edge. With the brave monument to the Wright brothers constantly visible on the crest of a sand dune across the sound, they have reason to know that the daring was good and that it has prospered. When President Roosevelt visits the island on Aug. 18 to speak from the outdoor stage in Fort Raleigh it is hoped that he may have time to join with the crowd that sits in the arena in the evenings, facing the Great Dipper above and a band of anxious colonists at the foot of a little hill.

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FORT RALEIGH is off the beaten track. It is close by the fishing village of Manteo (population, 547), about 100 miles southeast of Norfolk, joined to the mainland by two causeways and not far from Kitty Hawk and Kill Devil Hill, where the Wrights put on wings, and Nag's Head, where the shipwreckers once lived. Although Manteo is small and isolated, it is naturally proud of being the place where the first English colonists tried to get a footing in the wilderness and where Virginia Dare, the first child of English parentage, was born. During the last five years various local and State historical associations have been reconstructing the original Fort Raleigh behind stout palisades, following as nearly as possible the meager records of the time. This has been one of the most consistent labor projects of the depression. There have been small pageants in recent years to celebrate the first two of Sir Walter's attempts to establish an English fortress on this island.

BUT "The Lost Colony" represents the efforts of local citizens and Roanoke Island historical associations to celebrate the final 1587 colonization with a pageant of considerable artistic scope. From the WPA Theatre in New York have come six actors for leading parts and several assistants and counselors. A choir of men's and women's voices has come from the Westminster Choir School of Princeton, N. J. Otherwise "The Lost Colony" is a North Carolina and Virginia adventure in association with the people of Manteo, who began it. The University of North Carolina has dispatched some of its Carolina Playmakers, notably Samuel Selden, who has ably staged and directed the whole work. The open-air theatre has been built by local WPA labor. The costumes have been made by local WPA seamstresses. From the CCC camp nearby have come the boys who

play the parts of the Indians. And from Roanoke Island and Manteo in particular come a good many citizens and local dignitaries who impersonate Sir Walter's colonists three or four times a week. Although attendance was small when the pageant opened, it has been rapidly increasing to a thousand or twelve hundred persons each night. Manteo is swamped over the weekends. The local telegrapher has become an unofficial room clerk. Every cot and porch hammock groans under the weight of a visitor at night. Probably the CCC boys are the best bedded islanders this Summer. They know where they are going to lay their heads.

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SINCE the word "pageant" has a perfunctory and dutiful sound, the local fugelmen discourage it. "An outdoor play with music and dance," says the program. Enthusiasts call it a "symphonic drama." But a critical outlander feels justified in describing "The Lost Colony" as a pageant that has made an extraordinarily versatile use of spectacle, sound, pantomime and cadenced speech. Since the occasion is historical, the dramatist's province is largely circumscribed by the historical records. In this instance they are stimulating enough, for the attempt to plant an English colony on the shores of America was fraught with great peril from the beginning. Having obtained authority from Queen Elizabeth to colonize "remote heathen and barbarous lands," Sir Walter first dispatched two ships by way of exploration in 1584. After skirting the coast the expedition spent two months on Roanoke Island and then returned to England with tobacco and potatoes, which were new to England; two Indians, Manteo and Wanchese, and good tidings of a pleasant land.

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IN 1585 Sir Walter sent a band of 108 men to the island. After nearly a year there they returned to England with Sir Francis Drake, who called at Fort Raleigh before their own supply ships had appeared. Soon afterward the supply ships did appear, only to find the fort deserted. Before returning to England they left on the island a guard of fifteen men and supplies for two years. In 1587 Sir Walter, who could not be spared from England in person, made a final attempt to establish a permanent colony by sending a company of ninety-one men, seventeen women and nine children. When they arrived at Roanoke Island they found the fort destroyed and no sign of the fifteen men except one skeleton. They rebuilt the fort, constructed several log huts and settled down to what they hoped would be permanent existence. Virginia Dare was born before the ships sailed back to England for more supplies in the Autumn. As a result of the threat of war with Spain, however, no English ships were permitted to leave home waters for three years. When a relief party finally appeared off Roanoke Island in 1590 they found Fort Raleigh again destroyed and no sign of the colonists. No one knows to this day what fate overcame them. It was not until 1607 that a permanent English colony was settled in America at Jamestown.

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THIS, being the bare outline of history, is also the bare outline of the pageant. But in writing it Mr. Green has infused history with a religious reverence for the

men and women who laid down their lives to make Sir Walter's dream come true. Although the form of pageantry makes the description of character difficult and loosens the texture of narrative, Mr. Green has written history with a compassion that turns his characters into unconscious symbols of a brave new world. He has communicated their earnestness by contrasting the egotistical court of Queen Elizabeth with the rude austerity of life inside the embattled log fort amid hostile savages. The dances translate the freshness and wildness of the new world more eloquently than words or scenery could. The glory of the ancient English hymns, carols and ballads, sung to an organ accompaniment, pulls the lost colonists into the great stream of human nobility. Part pageant, part masque, "The Lost Colony" is a simply stated idealization of the adventurous impulse that founded this nation in the restless image of Shakespeare's England. We can be wise 350 years after the event. Mr. Green's wisdom is rooted in a poet's love of a fair land.

Apart from its function as a commemorative pageant, "The Lost Colony" also represents Mr. Green's old ambition to write what he sheepishly describes as "symphonic drama." He has been moving in that direction with "Roll Sweet Chariot" of 1934 and "Johnny Johnson," which he wrote with Kurt Weill last season. For he has the Wagnerian hope of composing dramas that employ the myriad arts of the theatre and that give themes a grand spiritual fervor by orchestrating the dance, song and acting. There is already talk of a mass play in that form on the subject of the Constitution, to be done next Winter, if possible, with WPA actors and theatre artisans. "The Lost Colony" is a step toward such a fulfillment, although the nature of the current occasion confines the freedom of an author's imagination. He cannot master a scene in history as passionately as

he can master the spirit of the individual man. At best pageantry is a horizontal art; drama is vertical, ranging from the inner life of the private man to the empyrean of human aspiration. Drama is also more compact in structure and fiercer in spirit. Drama discloses in burning action the secretive tumult of the heart. What a pageant maker is compelled to describe externally the dramatic poet can show in the being. He can dissect first causes; he is there before the reporter has arrived. It is a heroic job, especially according to the dimensions Mr. Green has in mind; and it will require more practical craftsmanship than he has put into any of his previous plays and all the poetic vitality that lives within him. From the theatrical point of view, "The Lost Colony" is another trial-script for his great project of symphonic drama.

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**B**UT that is not the point of view of the thousands of visitors who are making the long pilgrimage through the shimmering and wilting Summer heat to the fishing village of Manteo this month. They are drawn by their love of this broad land where so many dynamic things have happened in 350 years. The story of America from these bare and defeated beginnings on Roanoke Island to the roaring, headlong present across the entire continent is an epic that passes the understanding and would make the great drama of all time if men could write it. As far as the circumstances permit, "The Lost Colony" is a beautiful beginning. It is informed with pride in and admiration for those who stood on their own feet, alone, in the presence of danger and privation. Being chiefly a community enterprise, it overflows with sincerity. For the simple things, when they are honestly intended, are both humbling and exalting. They are more religious than sermons. They are the truth of the spirit that oftentimes makes men greater than they mean to be.