THE PURPOSE of the voyage from England to Jamestown in 1607 was commercial. Instead of the hoped-for gold, silk, and spices, however, the English found abundant natural resources, such as wood and native species like tobacco, which soon fueled the new economy.

Virginia shippers, like those in England and the rest of Europe, required large and seaworthy vessels, well-maintained harbors, coopers, rope makers, and provisions. Ships came from West Africa to Virginia, often by way of the Caribbean, laden, not with goods, but with human cargo—captured Africans bound for slavery.

Contemporary harbor activities would astound a seventeenth-century sailor. Large, modern container ships measure over a thousand feet in length, whereas the Susan Constant, the largest of the original three Jamestown ships, measured only 116 feet.

Traditional knowledge and family-owned businesses still have a place in the modern harbor. At a company in the Royal Chatham Dockyard in Kent County, England, workers still make rope the old way, using a ropewalk that is nearly a half-mile in length. Colonna’s Shipyard in the Port of Hampton Roads, Virginia, founded in 1875, is a family-owned business that repairs modern cargo ships.

Harbors have always been centers of naval activity and passenger service. Chatham Dockyard in Kent, England, now a historic site, once built warships. Facilities in the Tidewater region of Virginia together constitute the largest active naval base in the world. Huge passenger ferries carry people back and forth from Gravesend and Dover in England to mainland Europe, while cruise ships embark from Norfolk to the Caribbean and Bermuda.