

Edward Diggs - Colonial Governor of Virginia and silkworm producer

Edward Digges

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Edward Digges was born at Chilham Castle, Kent, England on March 29, 1620 and died at his Bellfield Plantation, in York County, Virginia on March 15, 1674/5.

He was the fourth son of Sir Dudley Digges (1583-1638) and Mary Kempe (1583-?). Sir Dudley was the Master of the Rolls for King Charles I and an investor in the Virginia Company of London. Edward was a member of the English aristocracy, related through his paternal grandmother, Anne St. Leger (1555-1636), to the aristocratic Neville family who had been close to the English throne for generations and could trace their descent from John of Gaunt, 1st Duke of Lancaster and his father Edward III of England.

Edward entered Gray's Inn in 1637 to become a barrister.

Edward Digges immigrated to the Virginia Colony about 1650 and purchased the Bellfield Plantation in present-day York County, Virginia, near Yorktown. His efforts at this plantation are noted as one of the first attempts by the colonists to raise silkworms in hopes of production of Virginia silk to compete with the Orient. Edward Digges employed two Armenians to help him but the industry proved a failure. To this day there are numerous mulberry trees, which were used to raise the silk worms, still standing on the land of the old plantation. He was given a seat in the council in November 1644, "having given a signal testimony of his fidelity to this colony and commonwealth of England."

Edward Digges served as Colonial Governor of Virginia from March 30, 1655 to December 1656, for which he received a salary of 25,000 pounds of tobacco, with the duties levied on vessels, and marriage license fees. In December 1656, The House of Burgesses selected Samuel Mathews as governor to replace Edward Digges and Digges became the colonial agent to England. In this position, Digges was to go to England and meet with English merchants about the price of tobacco and to secure the rights of the colony. Leaving in March 1657, he took a letter from the House of Burgesses to Oliver Cromwell, who had been ruling England since 1653, following the English Civil War, to settle the long pending controversy between the Colony and Lord Baltimore.

In 1655, Edward married Elizabeth Page (1625-1691), daughter of Captain Francis Page (1594-1678) and Isabel Wyatt (1595-?). Capt. Page's brother-in-law, Francis Wyatt, served as a Virginia Company of London Governor in 1621-1624 and Crown Governor in 1624-1626 and again in 1639-1642.

Gov. Edward Digges and wife Elizabeth Page had six sons and seven daughters. By the time of his death (March 15, 1674), only eight children were still living,

for the Governor's will leaves legacies "to all my children being four boys and four girls".

Elizabeth died in 1691; the inventory of her personal estate (recorded 24 Aug 1692, York Co. Deeds, Orders, Wills &c 9), provides interesting information on the way of life of Virginia planters. The division of the estate shows that only three children (William, Dudley, and Edward) were still living in 1692. (See *Adventurers of Purse and Person*, 4th edition, ed. John Frederick Dorman, Vol. 1, p824 fn32).

A large tombstone was placed over Edward Digges' grave near his home at Bellfield by his wife, Elizabeth Page, and is inscribed:

To the memory of Edward Digges Esq. Sonne of Dudley Digges of Chilham in Kent Kn t Esq; Bar t Master of the Rolls in the rain of K. Charles the First. He departed this life 15th of March 1674 in the LIII d year of his age, one of his Mag ty Councill for this his colony of Virginia. A gentlemen of most commendable parts and ingenuity, the only introducer and promoter of the silk manufacture in this colony. And in everything else a pattern worthy of all Pious Imitation. He had issue 6 sons and 7 daughters by the body of Elizabeth his wife who of her conjugal affection hath dedicated to him this Memorial.