

“into the vast unknown”

*The Changing Ending*

of

*Paul Green's*

*The Lost Colony*

BY E. THOMSON SHIELDS, JR.

Start with a paradox. In the 1930s, local promoters tried to put Depression-era Roanoke Island on the map with a pageant about people who had gone off the map. Playwright Paul Green was commissioned to write *The Lost Colony* as the story of English attempts to establish a colony in North America. Of the late sixteenth-century expeditions that Sir Walter Raleigh sent to Roanoke Island and the

Outer Banks, the 1587 colony was the least successful. When ships were finally able to return to Roanoke Island in 1590, the only clue to the colonists' whereabouts were the letters *CRO* carved into a tree and the word *CROATOAN* carved on a palisade post. Aside from a few later rumors, nothing else about the colonists was known. It was this “Lost Colony” that Green wrote about. In other words, when commissioned to write *The Lost Colony*, Green was asked to write a script about an event that took its historical actors off the map, a story with no clear ending. By focusing on the most open-ended of Raleigh's Roanoke endeavors, Green turned what sponsors thought would be a traditional historical pageant into an open-ended literary drama.

The historical events that Green was asked to write about in *The Lost Colony* had solid sources for a narrative beginning and middle. However, there was no equivalent historical source material for an ending. Various theories about what became of the 1587 colonists have been suggested, but none has enough evidence to be accepted as the most likely hypothesis, let alone to be accepted



COURTESY OF THE PAUL GREEN FOUNDATION

ABOVE Left to right, Frederick Koch, Paul Green, W.O. Saunders, D.B. Fearing, Melvin Daniels, Ike Davis, Martin Kellogg, and Chauncey Meekins considering a site for an amphitheater in Manteo, NC, where a pageant about the Lost Colony would be performed