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COLONIAL AMERICA

A Very Short Introduction

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Appealing to the alarm of propertied Englishmen, the West Country promoters urged the export of sturdy beggars to a new colony in Virginia, where the poor could be put to work raising commodities for transport to England. By producing commodities that could not be raised at home, colonial plantations could improve England's balance of trade with other nations. In sum, the promoters offered a neat package that would control and employ the poor while generating new wealth and power for the realm.

The West Country promoters insisted that the Indians would regard the English as kinder and gentler colonizers than the Spanish. Invoking the so-called Black Legend that the Spanish were uniquely brutal colonizers, the promoters insisted that the Indians would welcome the English as liberators. But the English had been far from gentle liberators in their recent conquest of Ireland. Indeed, that brutal conquest served as their school for overseas empire, the English equivalent of the Spanish invasion of the Canaries.

In 1585 Sir Walter Raleigh, a West Country promoter, planted the first English colony at Roanoke, a small, sandy island on the North Carolina coast. When the local Indians refused to provide food, the colonists massacred the local chiefs. But that yielded no more food, so the first set of colonists sailed home. Raleigh's second set arrived but soon vanished, apparently into the country where the Indians either killed or assimilated them.

In 1607 the English tried again, this time to the north at Chesapeake Bay, which offered better harbors, navigable rivers, and a more fertile land. About two hundred miles long and

twenty miles wide, the bay was a complex system of waterways, an environmental meeting place of tidewater estuaries and freshwater rivers, which offered ready navigation about 100 miles upstream until interrupted by waterfalls, where the coastal plain gave way to the rolling hills of the Piedmont.

The broad coastal plain sustained about 24,000 Indians divided into thirty tribes but united by an Algonkian language and the rule of a paramount chief named Powhatan. The natives practiced a mix of horticulture, fishing, hunting, and gathering. Living close to the bone, the Indians had precious little surplus to tide them over in case of some unanticipated shortfall like an infestation of worms in the corn or the arrival of hungry and well-armed colonists.

Powerfully built, savvy, and dignified, Powhatan led the most powerful chiefdom that the English found along the Atlantic seaboard. Unlike a nation-state, which relied upon a bureaucracy and army to maintain obedience and collect taxes, a paramount chiefdom was an elaborate kinship network that gathered and redistributed tribute. He took one hundred wives from subordinated chiefdoms to produce numerous sons to govern their villages in the next generation. Powhatan left the subordinate chiefs alone so long as they paid their tribute in wives, maize, and deerskins, and so long as they joined his war parties sent against the Siouan-speaking Monacans and Mannahoacs of the Piedmont. The natives waged a war of quick raids meant to kill a few warriors, take some captives, and humiliate a rival—before beating a hasty retreat homeward to celebrate. Lacking professional armies, the Indians could not sustain the protracted and long-distance campaigns of conquest like those of the English in Ireland.

Rather than crush the newcomers from England, Powhatan sought to turn them to his advantage. He hoped to contain them, subject to his power as subordinate allies to help fight the Monacans and Mannahoacs. Above all, Powhatan wanted to secure through trade or tribute their metals, including weapons. Unable to predict the

future, the Algonkians did not know that the initial few colonists were the opening wedge for thousands to follow, bent upon transforming the land and destroying the Indian world.

For their part, the ethnocentric English were poorly prepared to understand and accept a culture so different from their own. Because the English worshiped a single omnipotent God, they disdained the native pantheism as paganism, at best, and devil-worship, at worst. Coming from a culture that coveted private property and demanded heavy labor, the colonial leaders considered the Indians lazy and backward. Those leaders also feared that their own laborers so hated civilized discipline that they would try to run away to live in greater ease with the Indians. The colonizers meant to subordinate the Indians, lest the lower-sort colonists turn Indian and thus against the colony.

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Unlike the Spanish in Florida and the French in Canada, the English sent no missionaries to convert the Indians of Virginia. Instead, the English meant first to absorb the Indians as economic subordinates, who could then be taught Protestant Christianity at the regular church services of the colonists. Ignoring the Indian villages and fields, the English insisted that Virginia was a wilderness that their God required them to take and improve into productive farmland. Indians who resisted could expect to be treated like wild and dangerous beasts. The English sense of superiority remained impervious to their own follies as colonists in a land long mastered by the Indians.

After Raleigh and the other West Country men lost favor at the royal court, leadership over the colonial project fell to the Virginia Company, a cartel of London merchants with a charter from the Crown. They sent three vessels to the Chesapeake, arriving there in April 1607. Seeking security from Spanish discovery and attack, the colonists sailed up the James River about sixty miles to establish Jamestown beside a swamp on the north bank. They named both river and town to flatter their new king, James I. For

further protection, the colonists surrounded their wooden huts with a triangular stockade mounted with cannon.

The swampy location proved deadly, for it bred millions of mosquitoes, carriers of malaria. The colonists also suffered salt poisoning from the brackish water of their wells. Those who lived were often too weak and apathetic to work, so they starved. Of the initial 104, nine months later only 38 lived. Between 1607 and 1622 the Virginia Company transported another 10,000 people to the colony, but only 20 percent were still alive there in 1622.

Even when healthy, many early colonists refused to work diligently at raising crops to feed themselves, for they preferred to search for gold and to extort corn from the Indians. After all, the promoters had insisted that the natives would welcome the English with generosity and submission. And what was the purpose of being civilized Christians with superior arms and armor if not to command the weaker, heathen peoples of new lands? The colonists did not understand that the local Indians had scant surplus to spare.

Chesapeake colonies

And to Powhatan's dismay, the colonists refused to trade the weapons that he so coveted. The Indians lashed back, killing seventeen intruders, stuffing their dead mouths with corn as a sign of contempt. The colonists responded with escalating violence, burning villages and massacring their men, women, and children. The raiders also captured some fellow colonists who had run away to the Indians to escape the hunger, hardships, and brutality of their domineering leaders. The governor made examples by burning them at the stake or breaking their backs slowly on the wheel.

The conflict abated in 1613 when the colonists captured Powhatan's favorite daughter, Pocahontas. Held in Jamestown and indoctrinated by the English, she accepted Christian conversion, took the name Rebecca, and married John Rolfe in 1614. Weary of war, Powhatan made peace with the colonists. In 1617 Pocahontas visited England, where she promptly died of disease.

Powhatan expired a year later, and power passed to his brother Opechancanough.

The colony also benefited from John Rolfe's development of tobacco as a cash crop that could bear the high cost of transportation to market in England. Consumers would pay premium prices to satisfy their craving for the addictive nicotine. Because tobacco plants prefer a long, hot, and humid growing season, the crop thrived in Virginia but not in England, giving the colonial farmers a comparative advantage. Virginia's tobacco production swelled from 200,000 pounds in 1624 to 3,000,000 pounds in 1638. Drawn to Virginia by tobacco's profits, the colonial population surged from only 350 in 1616 to 13,000 by 1650. As tobacco cultivation expanded and the population grew, the planters needed more land, which they took from the Indians.

This expansion provoked renewed war. On March 22, 1622, Opechancanough led a well-coordinated surprise attack, which destroyed the out-lying plantations, killing 347 men, women, and children. The survivors rallied at Jamestown and a few other fortified settlements, while the natives killed livestock and burned plantations. The Virginians developed the strategy, practiced in subsequent colonial wars, of waiting until just before corn harvest to attack and destroy the native villages and their crops, consigning the survivors to a winter and spring of starvation. In 1632 Opechancanough accepted a bitter peace, granting massive land concessions. Twelve years later, he staged a second and even deadlier surprise attack, killing more than 400 colonists. But the colonists then destroyed most of the Indian towns along the rivers, dispersing the survivors into the hinterland. Captured by the English, Opechancanough was shot dead in a Jamestown street, terminating the paramount chiefdom built by Powhatan. Disease and war reduced the Virginia Algonkians from 24,000 in 1607 to only 2,000 by 1669.