SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY

3 1223 08564 3717

MERCED

POCAHONTAS *and the* POWHATAN DILEMMA

"Townsend . . . writes with a sharp sword and a crackling whip."
—John Leonard, *Harper's Magazine*

CAMILLA TOWNSEND

MARCH 10, when Rolfe dictated his will, had been a Sunday. On Friday, March 22, the Powhatan people launched a great assault against the colony, killing approximately one-quarter of the residents—somewhere between 350 and 400. The Indians used to their advantage their age-old techniques of warfare—intertribal cooperation, advance planning, and the preservation of secrecy, enabling simultaneous attacks in multiple places. They used creativity and

trickery to surmount the problem of their lack of equivalent weaponry. The night before and early that morning, groups approached settlements up and down the James River in an apparently friendly fashion, in some cases even breakfasting with the colonists. At an appointed time they attacked with deadly suddenness. At Mulberry Island, for example, where a young relative of William Pierce was living on the land that the Pierces and the Rolfes claimed, all were killed: Thomas Pierce and his wife and child, two English serving men, and a young French boy they had with them. Jamestown and its immediate environs, including the Rolfe plantation, went unscathed: an Indian boy who was living with a colonist "as his son" leaked word of the coming assault. Some say more than one person told. At any rate, those within easy rowing and riding distance of the fort were warned, and a military defense was mounted that apparently caused the Indians to abandon any plan of entering the area near the town. It is even possible that the Indians never intended to attack this most densely populated section.[22]

For years, various theories have been floated to explain the Indians' decision to reverse their former policy so suddenly and so completely. Most acknowledge that the Indians were losing their land, but only a few have given that idea central importance. Specifically, some have blamed Argall's harshness and then the policies of the new councils. Others have argued that the Indians were more incensed about religious questions, including the new efforts to indoctrinate their children. Some have insisted that the Indians responded almost spontaneously because the English had shortly before murdered a famous warrior with almost mythic status—Nemattanew, or Jack-of-the-Feather. A few have found compelling the fact that the attack coincided with the religious celebration of the four-year anniversary of Powhatan's death. It is also true that as the Indians took up their positions on the eve of the attack, it was the five-year anniversary of Pocahontas's funeral. But the vast majority of them would not have known that and probably would not have cared much if they had.[23]

In hindsight, the Indians' motivations seem quite clear. They had information now, after all. Pocahontas had died, but Uttamatomakin had returned and spoken of what he had seen in London. If any doubted him at first, the last few years of continued importation of people and supplies from England, and the increasing number of settlements, would have provided compelling corroborating evidence. His lessons could not have been lost: England's technology was superior, its population vast. Rather than having seen England's most powerful weapons and greatest concentration of goods, the Powhatans in Virginia had glimpsed only the tip of the iceberg. The Europeans were not even desperate for food, as had once been believed. They wanted land, and to get it, they would destroy the Indians eventually. There was only one moment when the Indians were stronger, and that was in the earliest period of settlement, before the English had transferred their people and their power. That was now. If there was any hope for the Indians, it was to take action immediately, while they still could. With the element of surprise on their side, they might yet eliminate so high a percentage of the settlers as to convince the others to leave. Conservatives may have hoped merely to cause the English to confine themselves to Jamestown, while younger, angrier warriors probably believed they could yet kill them all, if the Indians worked together effectively enough. In any case, they would take their river and their kingdom back. Other factors may have been proximate causes, may even have determined the exact timing of the attack. The ultimate cause, however, seems clear enough.

But it was already too late. In 1607 the Indians might have done better, but they did not then have the information to make full-scale hostilities seem rational. And even if they had acted at once, their efforts would only have delayed matters, not changed the course of history. The technological differential remained what it was. No one could change the fact that eleven thousand years ago farming had made sense in the Fertile Crescent and had made no sense in the Virginia Tidewater. Sedentary living and the ensuing inventions over

the course of millennia had given the Old World inhabitants untold advantages over those of the New.

In March 1622, however, the long-term results of the chain of Indian raids were not at all clear. To a large extent, the Indians had been successful; it remained to be seen how the English would respond. March was a good time for the assault, the tail end of winter, when the Indians were still living inland, broken into small units and families, not yet having regathered at their major riverside villages, where they would be vulnerable to counterattack. If all went well, the surviving English would abandon the place, and by summer the Indians could plant their old lands again. As the Indian warriors moved inland into the denser trees, along winding deer paths and footpaths that they knew but the English did not, they brought away with them about twenty prisoners, most of them young women. These would have the option of becoming mirror images of Pocahontas—of becoming Indians if they chose. Some did. Anne Jackson, who stayed with the Pamunkey until 1626, then was ransomed, was unable to fully break her ties with those whom she had learned to love. The colonial authorities shipped her back forcibly to England. Even Jane Dickinson, who apparently had wanted to be ransomed in 1623, implied in 1624 that her life with the landowner who had bought her freedom in order that she might work for him was a worse kind of slavery than she had experienced with the so-called savages.[24]

Most of the colonists, however, did not share these feelings. Never having lived among the Indians, failing to see them as people, most of the settlers felt only hatred. They might have decided to leave if they had believed the danger would stretch on interminably. But there was to be no standoff between matched adversaries. Instead, they meant to kill the Indians. When Londoners blamed the disaster on them, for having grown too cozy with the natives, they wrote back in rage: "You pass soe heavie a Censure upon us as yf we alone were guiltie. You may be pleased to Consider what instructions you have formerly given us, to wynn the Indyans to us by A kinde

entertaiyninge them in our howses, and yf it were possible to Cohabitt with us, and how ympossible it is for any watch and warde to secure against secret Enemies." Well, they said, now they were at last free from any and all instructions to win the Indians by kind entertaining. "We have slaine divers, burnt theire Townes, destroyed theire [fishing] Wears & Corn. Sir George Yardley in his last expeditione brought into the Colonie above a Thowsande bushel of corne . . . By Computatione and Confessione of the Indyans themselves we have slayne more of them this yeere, then hath been slayne before since the beginninge of ye Colonie."[25]

Indeed, the initial report written in the colony about the "barbarous massacre" made the claim that in the long run, the event was a net positive: at last the colonists were free to remove the Indians and take the country for themselves without complications: "This Massacre must rather be beneficiall to the Plantation then impaire it . . . Now by vanquishing of the Indians, [it] is like to offer a more ample and faire choice of fruitfull habitations, then hitherto our gentlenesse and faire comportment to the Savages could attaine unto."[26] In words reminiscent of a modern-day killer who claims he would never have hurt his victim so badly if she had not been foolish enough to struggle, the colonial chronicler continued to insist it had never been his choice to fight, even as he loaded his gun and drew on his armor. The policy of extermination had been born.

William Pierce joined actively in the expeditions sent against the Indians. Perhaps he wore the armor, girdle, and sword that the dying John Rolfe had left him. If so, the sword that Pocahontas had once handled was now turned against her own friends and family. When the area had been "pacified"—that is, all Indian resistance had been broken—Pierce established a plantation at Mulberry Island, where he owned lands adjoining those that he held in trust for Rolfe's daughter, Elizabeth. He was named captain of the guard and commander of Jamestown, so he also maintained a small household in the town, where he had three servants, including an enslaved African

woman, one of twenty who had come off a Dutch ship in 1619—the first African slaves to arrive in the future United States. His daughter Joan, Rolfe's widow, married a wealthy man named Captain Roger Smith. Thomas's half sister, Elizabeth, grew up in her new stepfather's household.[27]

When Thomas was approaching twenty, Pierce paid for his passage to Virginia and thereby gained more land in the headright system.[28] What the boy's youth had been like is unknown. What is certain is that when he attained adulthood, he wanted to cross the sea. In 1641, at least six years after his arrival, he asked the colonial officials for permission to visit Opechankeno "to whom he was allied." He did not hesitate to refer openly to his blood relationship to the enemy chief, who had eluded capture after the events of 1622 and had therefore remained in power, as it seemed beyond the ability of the English to oust him. Thomas also asked to visit "Cleopatra, his mother's sister." Behind the English nickname there existed a real woman whom Thomas wanted to see. Was this "Cleopatra" a sister who had gone to London with Pocahontas, survived, and returned with Uttamatomakin? It seems quite plausible. There is no record of what transpired between them.[29]

A few years later, in 1644, the unrelenting Opechankeno, now at least an octogenarian, led another great rebellion. It was less successful than the last, for the English were by now much stronger. This time, the chief was captured, caged, and executed. Now Thomas was forced to choose sides. He participated in the war against his mother's people. He must have done so with apparent alacrity, for by 1646 he held the title of lieutenant and was rewarded with the assignment to keep Fort James in the Chickahominy territory. By a new law, this meant that the four hundred adjoining acres would become his property in perpetuity, provided that he and at least six working men lived on it at their own expense for three years and put the fort in good repair. Thomas was eager to establish himself in this area. The lands he had inherited from his father, where he had been born, had been

worked by others after Rolfe's death, and little by little Thomas had sold most of them to those who were actually living there. He focused his efforts on the Chickahominy territory instead, and in 1656 and 1658 purchased 350 additional acres. Thomas would die a rich man.[30]

At about the same time he went to the "fort lands," he married the daughter of a colonist. They apparently had a daughter named Jane. Like her grandmother Pocahontas, Jane grew up to bear one son, then died when he was very young. He lived to have children, and the children to have children. They were among the colony's elite.[31] Thomas and his wife may also have had sons: in the 1660s a Thomas and William Rolfe or Relfe, whose connections make them sound suspiciously like such sons, moved from Virginia to North Carolina. Perhaps they did not want to wait to inherit land when there was so much available immediately in the Carolinas; and perhaps they were not at all loath to leave behind an area where their father was openly referred to as Powhatan's grandson.[32]

While Thomas was establishing his fortune and founding his dynasty in the 1640s, the world of Pocahontas's other family members—that of her siblings, cousins, nieces, and nephews—fell apart. In October 1646, in the wake of the rebellion of 1644, Opechankeno's successor, Necotowance, dubbed "King of the Indians" by the British, was forced to sign a peace treaty in which the Indians ceded most of their lands, acknowledged that their right to remain on certain territories was due to the generosity of the English king, and promised to pay an annual tribute to the colonial governor. Necotowance told his people, "The English will kill you if you go into their bounds."[33]

When Necotowance died, all semblance of a paramount chieftainship disappeared; each tribe struggled to survive on its own, following its own tactics. Elizabeth, a daughter of the chief of the Nansemond, married an English minister named John Bass who was a member of the House of Burgesses. They were able to preserve their lands and their family history for generations.[34]

It is fashionable in some circles to lament Pocahontas's death, not for herself or her family or her people, but for the sake of history: it is said that had she lived, advocating for her people in the tumultuous decades that followed and encouraging more intermarriage, events might have turned out differently. Indian-white relations might have been more harmonious. It is naïve to think so.

The destruction of Virginia's Indian tribes was not a question of miscommunication and missed opportunities. White settlers wanted the Indians' land and had the strength to take it; the Indians could not live without their land. It is unfair to imply that somehow Pocahontas, or Queen Cockacoeske, or others like them could have done more, could have played their cards differently, and so have saved their people. The gambling game they were forced to play was a dangerous one, and they had one hand, even two, tied behind their backs at all times. It is important to do them the honor of believing that they did their best. They all made decisions as well as they could, managing in what were often nearly unbearable situations. There is nothing they could have done that would have dramatically changed the outcome: a new nation was going to be built on their people's destruction—a destruction that would be either partial or complete. They did not fail. On the contrary, theirs is a story of heroism as it exists in the real world, not in epic tales. Their dwindling people did survive, against all odds. There is a loop in the Pamunkey River that has surrounded Indian land time out of mind. It is called the Pamunkey Reservation now, and the people there say it shelters Powhatan's bones. In the summer, wildflowers grow at the edge of the water, and Pocahontas's people can still catch a faint smell of the sea, just as they could in 1606.