

The Thirteen Colonies: Life and Times Before the Revolution

The Powhatan Confederacy and Pocahontas

The Virginia colonists had an up-and-down relationship with the native peoples of Virginia. The native peoples and the colonists had differing opinions on land use, which continued to cause conflict between the groups. The native people did not seek to own land exclusively, as the colonists did. The English had expected to be able to subdue and exploit the Native American populations, as the Spanish had. However, the English did not send an army to support the colonists. Instead, the colonists were left to themselves to figure out how to deal with the native peoples.

Powhatan was the name of a tribe, and the English called both the tribe and their leader, Wahunsonacock, by the name Powhatan. Wahunsonacock (Powhatan) was the leader of both the Powhatan and a confederacy, or loose organization, of Native American groups that was spread over most of the Virginia coast and into Maryland. (Powhatan is also discussed in connection with the Eastern Woodlands, on pp. 156–157.)

In the beginning, the Powhatan aided the colonists of Jamestown as much as the Wampanoag helped the Pilgrims in Plymouth Colony. The Powhatan showed the colonists new plants that would grow well in their fields and gave them food. However, when the colonists still were not growing enough food by the second year, Smith tried to force the Powhatan to give them food by burning their fields and villages. The Powhatan attacked. According to Smith's history of the time, which certainly contains much factual material but may also contain some legends and exaggerations, at one point he was captured by Powhatan and about to be executed when Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, stepped in and saved him. Smith wrote: "She hazarded the beating out of her own brains to save mine; and not only that, but so prevailed with her father, that I was safely conducted to James town, where I found about eight and thirty miserable poor and sick creatures." Jamestown was then in the middle of the "starving time." Smith goes on to give Pocahontas credit for saving the colony: "Such was the weakness of this poor commonwealth, as had the savages not fed us, we directly had starved. And this relief . . . was commonly brought us by this Lady Pocahontas . . . she, next under God, was the instrument to preserve this colony from death, famine, and utter confusion."

In 1614, Pocahontas married John Rolfe, a colonist, and took the Christian name Rebecca. When he returned to England for a visit, she went with him. Pocahontas was a sensation in England and was presented at the royal court. She was touted as "the first Christian ever of that Nation [the Powhatan], the first Virginian ever [to speak] English, [and the first to have] had a child in marriage by an Englishman." Unfortunately, Pocahontas died, possibly of smallpox, before she could return to America.

After Smith's return to England, other governors tried to force the Powhatan to cooperate. They told the Native Americans to ignore their chief Powhatan and bring food and furs to the colonists. Warfare broke out and continued through much of the first half of the 1600s.

Tobacco as a Cash Crop

John Rolfe is notable not only for being Pocahontas's husband but also for introducing tobacco agriculture into Jamestown. Local tobacco was not of a high quality, but in 1612, Rolfe tried growing milder tobacco imported from the West Indies.

Tobacco had been introduced to Europeans in the 1500s by the Spanish. Columbus's crew took the plant back to Spain with them after their exploration in the New World. Initially, tobacco was used for medicinal purposes, but recreational use soon spread across Europe. King James of England had written a pamphlet against tobacco smoking in 1604, calling it "a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black stinking fume thereof nearest resembling the horrible stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless." Nevertheless, the ranks of the tobacco smokers continued to grow, and, in time, many of them would be supplied with tobacco from the Virginia colony named for King James.

The first tobacco crop from Jamestown was sent to England in 1617, and, by 1619, tobacco had become the colony's chief crop. By 1669, the colony was exporting 15 million pounds a year. Early on, the Virginia Company had tried to dissuade colonists from relying on just one crop, but farmers who were seeing their profits jump each year ignored them. In 1624, all attempts to limit tobacco agriculture were lifted.

In 1619, a Dutch ship brought approximately 20 African laborers to Jamestown. These may have been slaves or they may have been indentured servants. In either case, they are believed to be the first African laborers brought to the English colonies in North America. For more on the beginnings of slavery in America, see "Slavery" on p. 184.