

CULTURES AT JAMESTOWN

Introduction



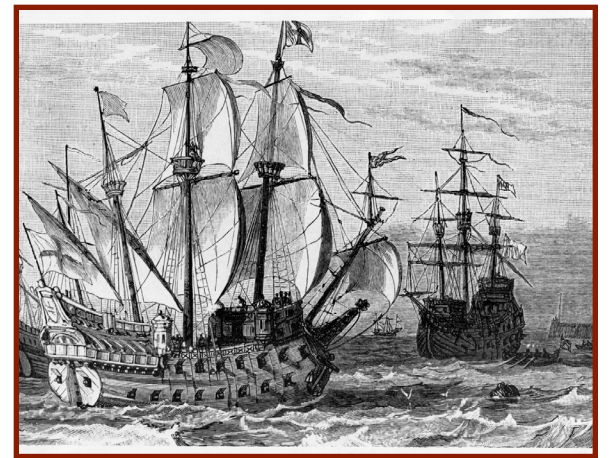
of Jamestown is the meeting and interaction of these three distinct cultures. It is also the story of an environment or natural surroundings, which provided challenges for all three groups as they interacted with the land, water and other natural resources around Jamestown. Before beginning with these stories, however, it is important to understand what had occurred in Europe and other parts of the world that made it possible for Jamestown to begin.

Why did Europeans explore?

The fifteenth century was an exciting time in Europe. People became more interested in the world around them. The invention of movable type helped spread information and new ideas. Artists and writers flourished. At the same time, nations saw trade as a way of increasing their wealth. Merchants dreamed of new sources for goods such as gold and spices. For centuries, Arab traders had controlled existing trade routes to Africa and Asia, which meant European merchants were forced to buy from Italian traders at high prices. They wanted to trade directly with Africa and Asia, but this meant that they had to find a new sea route. The stakes were high. Whoever succeeded in establishing trade relationships would in all likelihood become rich and achieve great fame for himself and for his country. However, exploration of this nature was very dangerous business. Superstitions persisted about what lay beyond Africa's Cape of Good Hope, as no European had even seen the west coast of Africa beyond the Sahara. There were no maps or charts and very little knowledge of winds or currents.



known as Prince Henry the Navigator. Though Prince Henry did not sail himself, he made it possible for others to do so. He set up a center for exploration where interested people could share their knowledge of geography. Here they learned all they could about maps and navigation, including the use of the magnetic compass and the astrolabe. Portuguese shipbuilders developed a new kind of ship called a caravel, which could sail into the wind as well as with the wind. Armed with this knowledge, Portugal led the way. During the 1440s, brave sailors set sail and explored the African coast farther than ever before. In 1488 Bartholomeu Dias managed to sail around the southern tip of Africa, only to turn back because the crew was afraid to continue. Ten years later, Vasco da Gama completed the voyage around Africa and on to India. These accomplishments paved the way for others to explore and reach the riches of Asia. Even more important, Prince Henry's sailors overcame the fear of the unknown and led the way for others to turn westward to the Atlantic and the Americas, where eventually the small settlement of Jamestown would be born.



Why did the English wish to establish colonies?

Great changes were occurring in England during the sixteenth century. Economic changes centered on sheep. During the 1500s, the demand for woolen cloth in Europe soared. In order to meet this demand, a series of legal actions made it possible for English landowners to enclose their farms, fencing off large areas as grazing lands for sheep. Manufacturers spun and wove the wool into cloth, which merchants sold throughout Europe. As a result, landowners, wool manufacturers and merchants amassed great wealth. Many of these people began to look for ways to invest their new-found wealth. One of these ways was to invest in colonies.



work. Many were reduced to begging or to stealing to survive. Migrating to a new world seemed a hopeful choice for many of these people, as it did for English leaders who saw colonies as a way to solve the problem of the growing numbers of displaced and poor people.



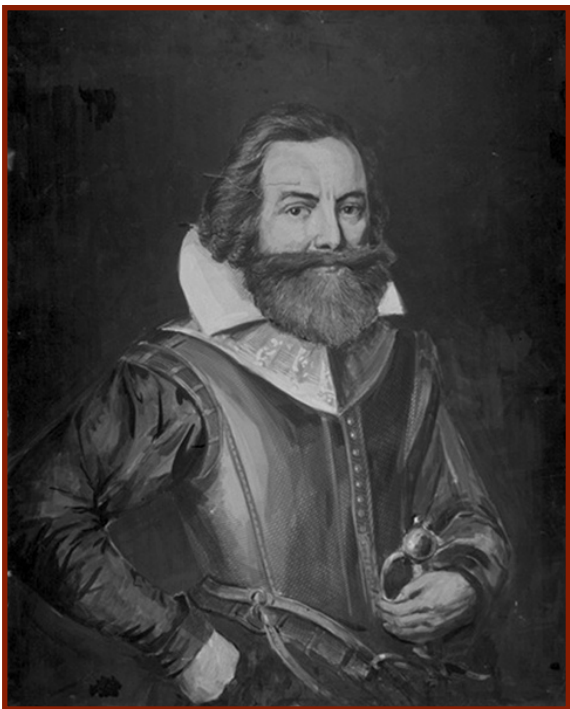
England also looked at the settlement of colonies as a way of fulfilling its desire to sell more goods and resources to other countries than it bought. If colonies could send raw materials, such as lumber, from the abundance of natural resources available in the colonies, then England would not have to buy these from other countries. At the same time, the colonists could be a market for England's manufactured goods.

The English knew that establishing colonies was an expensive and risky business. Therefore, merchants organized a business venture – a joint-stock company called the Virginia Company of London. In 1606 King James I granted the Virginia Company its first charter, including the right to establish colonies in Virginia and extending all rights of Englishmen to the colonists. Under this charter, wealthy men invested money to finance ships and supplies needed for the first voyage to Virginia. A second charter in 1609 invited the public to buy shares in the company. A third charter in 1612 provided for lotteries, with tickets sold in London and surrounding areas and prizes for winning ticket holders. This was another way the Virginia Company tried to raise money to finance the Virginia colony.

Who were the English who set sail for America?

In December 1606, 144 mariners and adventurers set out from the docks east of London to sail across the Atlantic to found a colony in the Chesapeake Bay area of Virginia. Aside from the crew, the group was a mixture of “gentlemen” and adventurers. Gentlemen made up between a third and a half of the group. Most of them were young, in their twenties or thirties, seeking adventure and their fortunes. Several settlers, like Captain John Smith, were ex-soldiers and privateers who had fought against the Spanish in the Dutch wars. Among those who were not part of the gentry were a dozen or so skilled craftsmen and artisans, including a blacksmith, a mason, two bricklayers, four carpenters, a tailor, two barbers, and a surgeon. The remaining colonists included unskilled workers such as laborers and boys. Many believe that the majority of these men had no long-term plans to settle in Virginia. Instead, most went to explore and find riches, like gold and silver. Some hoped to find the elusive Northwest Passage. Apparently, there was no intention to make the colony an agricultural settlement or one amenable to family life, since no women were aboard. The primary motivation for the colony was profit.

The colonists arrived with limited personal possessions and items supplied by the Virginia Company to be used for survival and trade with the Indians. They were likely dressed in the English style of the period, according to their status. This would include such dress as woolen jerkins, breeches, stockings and low-heeled shoes. In addition, because of the military nature of the early years of settlement, each man was required to serve in the militia. For that reason, men were armed with a sword, a matchlock musket and bandolier, some type of armor and a helmet. This was in great contrast to the clothing worn by the Powhatan Indians.



What kind of environment did the Englishmen encounter upon reaching their destination?

In April of 1607, the Englishmen sailed into the Chesapeake Bay, a body of salt water from the Atlantic Ocean that meets fresh water flowing from the Potomac, Rappahannock, York and the James rivers. These tributaries are tidal estuaries with tides being felt upstream almost as far as Richmond. After planting a cross at Cape Henry, thanking God for their safe voyage, the 104 English men and boys along with the ships’ crew sailed up the James River, which they named after their King. After exploring up and down the James River for two weeks, they arrived at a point that seemed to fit the instructions they’d been given for selecting a place to settle. Thus, the three ships -the Discovery, the Godspeed and the Susan Constant - completed their journey of 144 days.

Because one of the goals of the English voyage was to find a “Northwest Passage” to Asia, several men, including John Smith and Christopher Newport, continued sailing up the James River. They discovered they could not go further when they encountered the fall line where the area we know as the Piedmont begins. Here, the rapids flow over the hard rocks of the Piedmont region, marking the natural end of navigation in the rivers.

The Powhatan people occupied the Coastal Plain or Tidewater region of Virginia, which includes the area east of the fall line and the area we know today as the Eastern Shore. They lived on high ground overlooking the many waterways, their main form of transportation. The mixed forests provided an abundance of plant and animal life. The Powhatans hunted and fished, with fish and shellfish in plentiful supply in the waters. The soil beneath the forest was rich and appealing to those who wished to farm.

The climate encountered by the English differed slightly from the climate we know in Virginia today, because in 1607 the Northern Hemisphere was experiencing a slightly cooler period known as the “Little Ice Age.” Winters were more severe and had fewer frost-free days per year in which to cultivate crops.

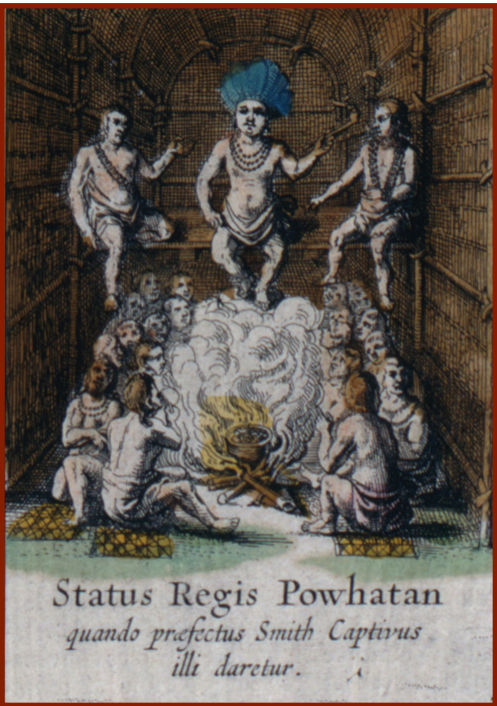
Even so, there were many plants and roots available for gathering and rich soil, which made cultivation of crops possible.

In 1606 King James I granted the first of three Royal Charters to the London Company, giving it legal rights to plant a colony along the east coast somewhere between 34 degrees and 41 degrees North Latitude. Instructions were to go inland and find a suitable place for their colony. The English were especially concerned about attacks from the Spanish. The site the settlers chose for their settlement was almost an island, connected to the mainland only by a narrow sandbar. Because deep water touched the land, however, they could sail right up to the site and secure their ships to the many trees that filled the land. These geographical features also made it easier to defend from the Spanish. While these were positive features for the land they named Jamestown, in honor of their King James, there were also some very negative features of this environment including swampy land and brackish water from the James River. By the end of the summer, half the colonists had died, and many of those remaining were sick with various diseases such as dysentery and typhoid. Since the planting season had ended before the colonists had finished building their houses, they were unable to plant a crop and soon were very short of food. By the time the first supply ship from England arrived in January 1608, only 38 colonists were still alive to greet it. The environment proved to be one of the greatest challenges faced by the colonists.



Who were the Powhatan Indians and how did they live?

The Powhatan Indians were a group of Eastern Woodland Indians who occupied the coastal plain of Virginia. They were sometimes referred to as Algonquians because of the Algonquian language they spoke and because of their common culture. Some words we use today, such as moccasin and tomahawk, came from this language. At the time the English arrived in 1607, ancestors of the Powhatans had been living in eastern Virginia for thousands of years. The paramount chief of the Powhatans was Wahunsonacock, who ruled over a loose chiefdom of approximately 32 tribes. The English called him “Powhatan” and the people he ruled the “Powhatans.” The tribes had their own chiefs called werowances (male) and werowansquas (female), who lived in separate villages but shared many things in common, such as religious beliefs and cultural traditions. Everyone paid tribute taxes, such as deerskins, shell beads, copper, or corn, to the local ruler; the local chiefs paid tribute to Powhatan. In return, they received Powhatan’s protection. Succession of political positions was matrilineal, with kinship and inheritance passing through the mother or female line. This was how Powhatan came to his position as paramount chief.



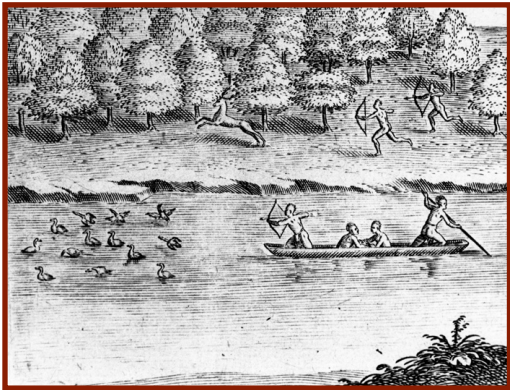


Powhatan villages were located along the banks of larger rivers or major tributaries. A Powhatan house was called a yehakin (not a wigwam) and was made from natural materials found in the surrounding environment. Its framework was made from saplings of native trees such as red maples, locusts and red cedar. The framework was then covered with either bark or mats made from marsh reeds. Houses were located near the planting fields, which was important because the Powhatans likely had to move whenever their fields were no longer fertile due to weeds, insects or leaching. The Powhatan lifestyle was heavily dependent upon a seasonal cycle. Their planting, hunting, fishing and gathering followed the rhythm of the seasons. They raised vegetables, such as corn, beans and squash, with corn being the most important. They ground corn and made it into flat cakes or boiled it in stews with beans, squash and wild game or fish. The

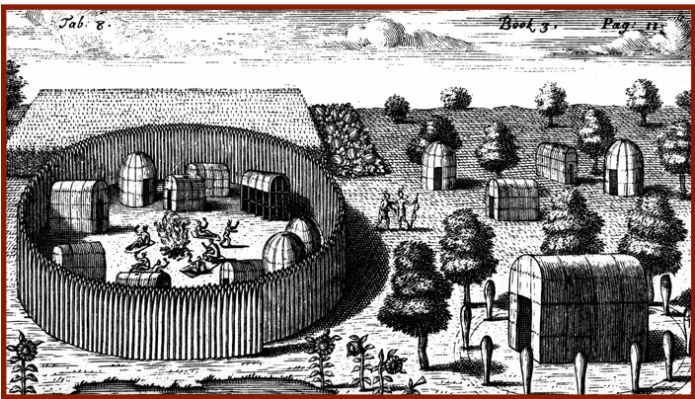


Powhatan ate fresh vegetables in the summer and fall and fish, berries and stored nuts in the spring. Fishing was a spring and summer activity. When other food resources became low, they could gather oysters and clams. Food was most scarce during late winter through early summer when the stores of corn from fall were gone and berries had not yet ripened. During the winter season when brush cover was sparse, the Powhatans hunted and ate game. There was a lot of game in the area: raccoon, deer, opossum, turkey, squirrel and rabbit, among others. Some of

these, such as the opossum and raccoon, were strange and unfamiliar to the English, so they adopted the Powhatan names for them. Of all the game hunted, deer was the most important because it was used for food, clothing and tools.



Although all of the Powhatan Indians used basic tools, it generally was the men who hunted, fished, made tools and, most likely, cleared the land for gardens, as this was very arduous work. The women typically did the farming, gathered firewood, made clothing, and prepared and served meals. The children helped their parents. Girls weeded gardens and boys learned to fish and hunt. They played games, such as running games. Since there were no horses in this part of America yet, fast runners were important to the tribes. Young children may also have been placed in small houses in the middle of fields to act as ‘scarecrows’ to keep the crows and other animals from eating the corn crop. Everything they used came from their environment. Both men and women painted their bodies, using paints from oils, bloodroot and animal fats. They rubbed themselves with bear fat to repel mosquitoes and to keep them warm during the cold months. Women pierced their skin to make tattoos of various animal and floral designs. As a mark of wealth and status, the Powhatans wore necklaces and ear ornaments made from materials such as shells, copper and freshwater pearls. In the winter, they wore deerskin with the fur toward their skin. Often, depending upon the season, they wore only deerskin or woven grass garments around their waists. Powhatan children did not typically wear clothing prior to adolescence. The Powhatans probably appeared rather scantily clad to the Englishmen who appeared on their shores in 1607.



Who were the Africans who came to Jamestown?

The year 1619 is an important date in Virginia’s history. Even though women were in Jamestown prior to that time, this was the year the English decided to send a large group of women to become wives and make homes in Virginia – a clear signal that the English intended a permanent settlement. It was also the year a group of representatives called burgesses was elected to make laws – a first for this part of the world. But it was a ship flying a Dutch flag, the White

Lion, which arrived that same year bringing a group of West Central African captives to Jamestown, that would affect a labor change at Jamestown and other colonies for years to come.



Evidence shows that the Africans who arrived in Virginia were captured as slaves during the Portuguese wars in West Central African Angola during the previous year. They were most likely Kimbundu-speaking peoples from the kingdom of Ndongo and from a heavily-populated area in Angola, which included the royal capital, Kabasa. This means many could have been from an urban area and may have been familiar with European languages, trade items, clothing and customs. They may also have been introduced to Christianity, because Portuguese law required all slaves to be baptized before arriving in America.

The civilization that the 1619 West Central Africans left behind in Angola was highly developed and included both walled urban centers and rural regions. The Angolans brought useful skills and knowledge to the Jamestown colony, including farming. They may have known how to grow crops such as tobacco. Because tobacco agriculture in Virginia demanded much labor, this made the Africans a useful addition to the colony, as it made possible the expansion of the tobacco economy.



In Angolan society, women were often in charge of raising the crops, very much like the women in Powhatan society. Like Powhatan men, Angolan men were also hunters. Some Angolan men may also have had experience tending herds of cattle, goats, chickens and guinea fowl. Unlike the Powhatans, the Angolans produced iron tools and weapons. They wove cloth from materials such as tree bark and cotton. This cloth was used for decorative purposes, as well as for clothing. Like English and Powhatan fashions, dress was one way that Angolans could communicate status and social role to one another. Angolans dressed in different styles depending on their status.

The Angolans who were transported to Virginia most likely arrived with nothing more than the clothes they wore, their knowledge, skills and customs. They were probably expected to adopt the English manner of dress to suit their new roles. They did not speak the language of the colonists or the Powhatan, and their culture had no tradition of written language. However, if members of the original group who arrived in 1619 came from the same general region of Angola, they probably had little difficulty communicating with each other. Some may have had knowledge of Portuguese from their contacts with traders in their homeland and may have heard other European languages spoken aboard the ships that transported them from Africa. When Virginia became more involved in the slave trade later in the 17th century and the numbers of Africans transported to the colony increased, many more African regions and language traditions were represented. These later arrivals may have encountered as much difficulty communicating with each other as they did with the English and the Powhatans.

What happened when the three cultures made contact at Jamestown?

Lack of communication among people places all parties at distinct disadvantages. This was certainly true of the attempts at communication between the local Indian population and the English. The Powhatan language was a derivative of the Eastern Algonquian group of languages, which contained many dialects and no written form of communication. Much suspicion existed among the Indian population concerning the motives of the colonists, and among the English as to how they were being received. This was verified by the attack on the colonists shortly after their arrival at Jamestown, during which, according to John Smith, 17 were wounded and one killed. This attack quickly reinforced the need for stronger fortifications, leading to the building of a fort. At almost the same time as this attack, a group of 23 men were on a voyage of discovery up the James River to explore for the Northwest Passage, following prior instructions from the Virginia Company Council, the governing body in England. During this voyage, the exploratory party was met all along the river by friendly Indian groups who were eager to trade. This dichotomy was representative of what lay ahead in the relations between these two groups.



The third group, the Africans, who arrived against their will in 1619 at Point Comfort (modern-day Hampton, Virginia), had no choice other than to adapt to the conditions in which they found themselves. This included learning new English customs and language and having their own traditions ignored or discouraged by those around them. Though Portuguese slavers had initially taken the Africans from what is present-day Angola, it is not clear whether the Africans were treated as servants or slaves upon their arrival at Jamestown. Whatever their status, it is clear, according to a Virginia Company report in 1620, that they were not completely free. They were in a condition of forced servitude in which the English extracted their labor and demanded their absolute obedience.

Few in number and living on isolated plantations, Africans were surrounded by English customs and language, to which they adapted by necessity. During the early years of settlement, it was possible for some Africans to obtain their freedom. Some free Africans bought land, purchased servants and even African slaves, farmed tobacco or raised livestock such as cattle or hogs. Anthony and Mary Johnson, who arrived in 1621 and 1622, gained their freedom and had a large farm on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. In 1677, one of the Johnson’s grandsons purchased land in Maryland and named it “Angola.”

What were some of the conditions that affected the early relationships between the English and the Powhatan?

From the time of their arrival, the English settlers at Jamestown faced food shortages and even starvation, due in part to the new climate and their lack of experience and manpower to grow crops in Virginia. Recent scientific investigation has yielded evidence to show that there also may have been a period of severe drought around the time of settlement, which could have affected the ability of both the colonists and the Powhatans to grow food. Other sources indicate it was the drinking brackish river water (a mixture of fresh and salt water), which caused them to be more susceptible to illnesses such as typhoid and dysentery that proved to be the principal cause of the settlers’ sicknesses and death. Before the end of September 1607, an epidemic swept the settlement and left almost half of the 104 men and boys dead. By January 1608, fewer than forty survived.



The colony was on the brink of collapse. In addition, two of their leaders, Captain Newport and Bartholomew Gosnold were gone, Newport having sailed for England in June and Gosnold having perished in August. During this time, there were no further Indian attacks. Not only were there no further attacks, the neighboring Indians brought food to the dwindling population in the fort. This turn of events, in all likelihood, saved the depleted and sickly Englishmen from perishing.



The years that followed were filled with similar hardships for the settlers, who were still trying to adapt to their new environment. They were also characterized by overtures from the Powhatans, who periodically shared their agricultural methods and assisted them through trade of food supplies. The winter of 1609-10, known as “the starving time”, was especially harsh, and relations between the English and the Powhatans were strained. The Powhatans had literally laid siege to the fort, which made it impossible for the settlers to find food other than what provisions they had within the fort. In May 1610, when two English ships arrived at Jamestown, only 60 people were still alive. This was all who were left of the approximately 350 present the preceding October. Once again, the English had survived a near-disaster.

The interdependence of the English and the Powhatans many times seemed one-sided when the English were in desperate need of food and that provided by the local Indians was the only thing between their survival and their demise. The Powhatans’ understanding of the environment and geography was also very important to the Jamestown settlers in mapping the region. For their part, the Powhatans, though wary of the motivations of the English, were very interested in barter, especially in acquiring guns, hatchets, lead musket balls, metal tools and European copper. In addition to the corn they needed from the Indians, the English later came to desire local animal furs, especially beaver pelts, which were then exported to England for use in felt hat production. The colonists learned that the Powhatans wanted English cloth, especially wool, because they did not have comparable materials from which to make clothing and blankets. The Powhatans were accustomed to using traditional stone, shell or bone tools, but soon found that English-made metal tools were more durable and held a sharp edge longer. The strong desire for trade on the part of both parties fueled the off-and-on relationship for years to come. The Indians and settlers understood each other’s needs and desires well enough for successful barter in small-scale items, but their ideas about land ownership and use posed more significant obstacles. The Pow-



hatans did not interpret the concept of “selling” land in the same way as the English purchasers. When the Powhatans continued to hunt on land that the English considered their possession, conflict was a common result. Captain John Smith had much success initially in obtaining food, farming advice, and geographical knowledge from the Powhatans. Indeed, the fact that the colony managed to survive at all was in large part due to the ability of Smith to speak and negotiate with the Indian tribes. However, by early 1609, his tactics became more aggressive and his tenure with the colony was not long, as an injury sustained in a gunpowder explosion caused him to return to England in the fall of 1609. After his departure, hostility grew between the English and the Powhatans. With the development of new settlements over the next four years, the English began pushing the Powhatans off their land, which fronted the rivers. Fighting between the groups was common, with raids on each other’s land and kidnappings. As more plantations were established along the James River after 1616, relations continued to deteriorate, with both cultures claiming use of the land.



What were some of the conditions that affected later relationships between the English and the Powhatans?

Almost from the first interactions between the two cultures, both groups used hostages or sent intermediaries to learn one another’s languages in order to serve as interpreters. It was hoped that this would encourage “good behavior” on both sides. Nothing seemed to work for very long. The 1613 kidnapping of Pocahontas, a daughter of Wahunsonacock, her baptism as “Rebecca” and her eventual marriage to John Rolfe in 1614 are perhaps the most famous of these interactions. A period of relative calm between the English and the Powhatans did occur after these events.



After Wahunsonacock died in 1618, his brother Opechancanough became ruler. Opechancanough worked to win the trust of the settlers, entering into agreements for land and reciprocal defense, among other things. In reality, Opechancanough believed that the English had treated his people like a subjugated nation – collecting payment of tribute in corn and, in some cases, reducing them to dependence by removing them from their lands. Opechancanough was patient and waited until the time was right. In 1622, he led the first coordinated attack on several English plantations, killing more than 300 of the 1,200 colonists. Jamestown was warned and escaped destruction. This led to a decade of open warfare, culminating in a treaty in 1632. A decade of tenuous peace followed.



Prior to these attacks in 1622, the Virginia Company had dramatically increased the number of colonists sent to Virginia every year, and the population had tripled within three years, threatening Powhatan territory between the York and James Rivers. By 1622, Indians were forced to move inland away from their traditional river valley homes. The lack of communication that existed between the two groups in 1607 did not improve sufficiently to bridge cultural differences as deep and sensitive as land ownership. As a result of the treaty in 1632, the English tried to limit contact between the Indians and the colonists, including limiting trade. In 1646, after a second Indian uprising and the death of more than 400 colonists, the Powhatans suffered a final defeat and signed a formal peace treaty with the Virginia government. This treaty barred the Indians from traveling on the James-York peninsula.

By mid-century, the Powhatans were confined to land north of the York River, without access to their traditional hunting and fishing grounds. Smaller tribal groups merged with larger ones, losing their independent identity. In spite of this, the Powhatan Indians overcame many obstacles, including years of discrimination, and learned to adapt in order to survive. Most importantly, they maintained their cultural pride and an Indian presence in Virginia that continues to the present day with eight recognized tribes in Virginia. These

include seven Powhatan tribes – Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Nansemond, Pamunkey, Rappahannock and Upper Mattaponi – and the Monacan Nation.

What conditions contributed to the changing relationships between the Africans and the English?

Africans in seventeenth-century Virginia were separated from the English majority by race and culture, and ultimately by law. In Virginia during much of the early seventeenth century, the supply of English indentured servants was such that finding workers was not a problem. Initially, the first Africans were probably servants and lived much like white indentured servants did; indeed, Africans sometimes lived with white servants. Some eventually won their freedom and acquired their own land and servants. Until the late seventeenth century, there were no special legal restrictions on free Africans in Virginia, though they were usually poorer on average than other free persons.



As the demand for labor increased, especially for tobacco growing, planters began acquiring African servants and holding them for life, creating a system of slavery in Virginia. By the 1660s, there was a clear demand for slaves, and slave ships began to arrive in Virginia more frequently. From the 1660s through the 1680s, laws were passed by the Virginia General Assembly, which further codified slavery in the colony and continued to affect change in relationships between the English and Africans. For example, one act passed by the General Assembly in 1667 stated that, “... the conferring of baptism doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedome...” Thus, Virginia planters were able to rationalize slave-owning as basic to the plantation economy and no longer felt obligated to try to Christianize their slaves.

Another change occurring in the late 1670s had great implications for the African-American culture, which gradually developed from its beginnings at Jamestown. Prior to this time, the enslaved Africans had come to Virginia from the area we know today as Angola in west central Africa. By the 1670s, Europeans were taking slaves from different parts of the African continent, with slave traders operating from the coast of West Africa. Many of these Africans were from the Akan culture, an ancient group known for their gold working skills and rich spiritual tradition. This infusion of diverse African cultures set the stage for the emergence of today’s African-American culture.

What is the legacy of Jamestown?

In spite of the many obstacles of poor communication, environmental challenges, disputes over land, and conflicting cultural traditions and beliefs, the colony at Jamestown survived to become the birthplace of our nation. The Powhatans, the English, and the Africans struggled through indescribable hardships and difficult interactions, as each played a unique role in the colony’s survival.

The colony at Jamestown laid the foundation for our system of free enterprise. Colonists came to Virginia to make a profit. They tried many things, including glassmaking and silk production. Nothing worked well for them until 1613, when John Rolfe cultivated a sweeter brand of tobacco and made it profitable for the company. It became profitable because it met the needs and wants of the Europeans for a better tasting tobacco. Tobacco served as money at Jamestown and was used to pay salaries and wages. However, most of the land required to grow tobacco was taken from the Powhatans. Dependence upon this cash crop became the key to survival for the colony.

At the same time, tobacco growing could not have succeeded without the labor force the Africans provided.



Another legacy of Jamestown is the right of individuals to own property. In 1618, the Virginia Company gave colonists the right to own land. Until then, the company had owned all land in Virginia. This right to acquire land offered opportunities for upward economic and social mobility. Free Africans were also allowed to possess their own land. This concept of private ownership of land became the major source of conflict between the English and the Powhatans, but it was a major factor in America’s growth as a nation.

In 1619, another modest beginning gave birth to what would become the political character of the colony and an enduring American tradition. On an unbearably hot day in July, two burgesses selected from each of the seven plantations and four boroughs traveled to Jamestown to represent the interests of the colonists in the General Assembly. Prior to this time, the Virginia Company had appointed the governor and his council of advisors as the governing body for the colony. Even though the governor and his council would continue to be present at all meetings, thereby stifling some freedom of debate, this meeting in the church at Jamestown in 1619 was the first step toward representative government in America, which in time would grow to inspire people and nations all over the world.



The interaction of the Powhatan, English and Africans at Jamestown laid the foundation for an American society built by people of diverse cultures, traditions and beliefs. Throughout history these cultural interactions have included conflict, hardships, negotiation and compromise. As a result of English settlement, the Powhatans were forced to live on reservations located on less than desirable tracts of land. Africans were transported to Virginia against their will and forced into slavery for years to come. From its inception in seventeenth-century Virginia, slavery was rationalized as an economic necessity – first with tobacco and later with cotton. Tragically, during the eighteenth century, the institution of slavery took root in the American colonies. Eventually, it would tear the nation apart during the Civil War, which brought about the end of slavery. Over time, the United States has made great strides in civil rights, but continues to be challenged by the effects of the institution of slavery and the wrongs suffered by America’s original inhabitants. Yet, without the exchange of knowledge and skills of the English, the Powhatans and the Angolans, Jamestown would not have survived.

Jamestown’s legacy, including free enterprise, private ownership of land, representative government and our rich cultural diversity, came from the sacrifices and relationships forged by these three groups of people – Powhatan, English and African. ■



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