

## The Change in Colonial-Indian Relations in the Early 17th Century

In the early seventeenth century, English-Powhatan relations shifted dramatically, as recorded in English documents (even if sometimes not fully understood by their authors). Three documents from this era can demonstrate as much: Henry Spelman's *Relation of Virginia*, John Smith's *A True Relation* and Edward Waterhouse's *A Declaration of the State of the Colony and Affaires in Virginia*. All three documents reveal English attitudes toward the Powhatans, but they also track the polarity shift in indigenous policy toward the colonists. They further reveal the rise and fall of the English notion of dominion and civility. Inadvertently, the English documents also highlight the concept of Native Ground.

Before analyzing these documents it is helpful to consider the authors, their messages and their biases. Spelman was only fourteen when he came to Virginia. His *Relation of Virginia* details Powhatan life and customs because the Virginia Company deliberately entrenched him in the "local" culture to facilitate trade. By contrast, Smith was an adult at the time of his journey and had more decision-making power than Spelman, although he initially was not the leader at Jamestown. Given Smith's more violent and "heroic" tendencies, *A True Relation* serves as a self-aggrandizing piece to demonstrate that he should have control. Edward Waterhouse also had a higher position, as secretary of the Virginia Company. The document gathers colonial accounts of a Powhatan attack in the spring of 1622 and mixes in religion to assert a new policy of extermination. *A Declaration* maintains an underlying boosterism such as the beginning list of commodities attached to their European exporters "...Furres, Cordage, and othe Commodities, which with difficulty and danger are now drawn from Russia, will be had in Virginia... the Masts, Plancks, Boards, the Pitch and the Tarre... which now are fetched from Norway, Denmarke, Poland, and Germany will there be had in abundance... The Wines, Fruits, and Salt

of France and Spaine: the Silkes of Persia and Italy will be had also in Virginia.”<sup>1</sup> Waterhouse lists goods that come out of the Mediterranean as well as other parts of Europe to assert England’s best option: mercantilism, a system whereby a country’s colonies produce and trade with only the mother country to drive its economy. The Virginia Company had to convince investors and potential settlers that the colony was still a worthy investment in the face of an offense that killed a quarter of the colonists, so long as there was a change in colonial-Indian policy.

English opinion of the Powhatans as subordinate binds the three documents together, but the specific things they choose to be derisive about reveal how the colonists’ way of dealing with the natives was changing. Firstly, Spelman’s derisive tone and filtering of information shows powerful bias. He mentions things that he finds brutal or different from English life even if he does not fully understand them or even if they really happened, such as polygamy, brutality and public execution.<sup>2</sup> Such language and anecdotes portray the Powhatans as savage, which relates directly to the concepts dominion and civility; the notion that the English would civilize the indigenous people and in the process establish control over the continent. A crucial part of dominion and civility was religion, specifically the conversion of natives to Protestantism. Spelman’s account speaks to this idea almost immediately in the first titled section of the document “Of their service to their gods,” he wrote:

“TO GIVE [sic] some satisfaction to my friends and contentment unto others which wish well to this viage [voyage], and are desirious to hear the fashions of that country, I have set down as well as I can what I observed in the time I was among them. And therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Waterhouse, Edward. "A Declaration of the State of the Colony and Affaires in Virginia." *American History & Culture Online: Sabin Americana, 1500-1926*.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Spelman, "Relation of Virginia," 1872, in *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony, the First Decade, 1607-1617*, by Edward Wright Haile (Champlain, Va.: RoundHouse, 1998), 486-492.

first, concerning their gods you must understand that for the most part they worship the devil...”<sup>3</sup>

Spelman’s time among the Powhatans overlaps with the Reformation, a schism of Protestantism from the Roman Catholic Church that represented not only a split between religions but a war between them and an overall struggle of the Christian faith. This backdrop colored colonization with a religious tone. Spelman knew that an advertised advantage of colonization was a pocket of easily-convertible people who would help push out the “Antichrist” (Catholicism). He saw native spirituality through the lens of conversion, so what he reported was that they were utterly lost and needed to be set on the righteous path.

He also implies dominion and civility in other contexts, like the Algonquian way of harvesting corn. “And all this [the harvest] is chiefly the women’s work. For the men do only hunt to get skins in winter, and do tew, or dress, them in summer.”<sup>4</sup> English gender roles dictated that men were responsible for farming, which meant Powhatan men seemed lazy. They exploited their wives while they hunted (an elite recreational activity in England). It reinforced the English notion that they needed to save the Indians by civilizing them with English customs. In the process they would set up a mercantilist economy in the New World.

Smith’s writing reveals similar attitudes, but reveals much greater distrust of Powhatans because of their power. Smith’s gun-slinging account of his journey through Tsenacommacah involves his adoption as a lower-level Weroan as well as meetings with several Powhatan leaders. Kekataugh, for example, invites Smith to shoot his gun at a far-away target, one of many Native attempts to evaluate the technology, about which he wrote “The king with forty bowmen to guard me entreated me to discharge my pistol, which they there presented me with, a mark at

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 486.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 493.

sixscore to strike therewith. But to spoil the practice I broke the cock, whereat they were much discontented, though a chance supposed.”<sup>5</sup> Though Smith does not acknowledge it, his writing affirms the concept of Native Ground: the idea that Native Americans established the parameters of interactions with Europeans instead of the usual narrative of colonial streamrolling.

Kekataugh wanted to gauge the limits of English firearms for multiple reasons. He knew that such power could make the English good mercenaries to use against enemies of the Powhatan chiefdom, expanding a polity already at its zenith<sup>6</sup>. He also wanted such power for his own people and needed to know more about its usefulness. Lastly, Kekataugh knew that the cooperation between the English and the Powhatans might not last, so he needed to know how to best fight against guns in war. Smith was well aware of Powhatan curiosity, but rather than seeing their strategy, he depicts himself as a cunning hero who duped simple people. It degrades the Powhatans through selective absence of information, although it also reveals his own paranoia over Native power. It reinforces that the colonists were wary of Powhatans from the beginning. They knew they had entered into an Indigenous world.

Indigenous support was integral to English success. Waterhouse, on the other hand, turned against this narrative portraying the English as benefactors and the natives as traitors of their good graces. He includes an anecdote about George Thorpe, who went to teach Powhatans the English religion, spending a considerable amount of time with the local “king”. He included a derogatory anecdote about the Weroan, portraying him as dumb and uncivilized because of his

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<sup>5</sup> John Smith, "A True Relation," 1608, in *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony, the First Decade, 1607-1617*, by Edward Wright Haile (Champlain, Va.: RoundHouse, 1998), 160.

<sup>6</sup> Helen C. Rountree and E. Randolph Turner III, "On the Fringe of the Southeast: The Powhatan Paramount Chiefdom in Virginia," in *The Forgotten Centuries: Indians and Europeans in the American South, 1521-1794*, ed. Charles Hudson and Carmen Chaves Tesser (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, n.d.), 365.

fascination with a door lock<sup>7</sup>. Afterwards, Waterhouse writes about the leader's thoughts on Protestantism. He wrote "...the Pagan confessed, moved by naturall Principles, that our God was a good God, and better much then [sic] theirs, in that he had with so many good things above them endowed us. Hee told him, if hee would serve our God, hee should bee partaker of all those good things wee had..."<sup>8</sup> Waterhouse projected an image of Powhatan willingness to convert, but most of all he asserts that they had all of the necessities to civilize themselves in order to show that they did not. He willfully projected such an image, but Waterhouse provided more insight into the Powhatans unintentionally. He revealed their strategy. By lying about a willingness to convert to Protestantism, the Powhatans managed to lure them into a false sense of security until they decided to make their next move, a violent one. About which Waterhouse wrote "...but all was little regarded after by this Viperous brood, as the sequell shewed: for they not only willfully murdered him [Thorpe], but cruelly and felly, out of the devillish malice, did so many barbarous despights and foule scornes after to his dead corpse, as are unbecoming to be heard by any civill eare."<sup>9</sup> He depicted the English as innocent and benevolent saviors to further dramatize the "massacre." In fact, Waterhouse made an almost Jesus-like character out of Thorpe, who was simply trying to set the Indians on the right path before they brutally killed him and mutilated his body. By doing such, Waterhouse reverses notions of dominion and civility and suggests that the English have a religious mandate to wipe out Powhatans.

Colonial history across the continent helps to show the shift in European treatment of the Indigenous peoples. Before the English launched colonizing missions in Virginia, the Spanish had been exporting tons of gold and silver as well as other commodities out of their more southern colonies, and like at Jamestown, the Spanish colonists encountered native polities, like

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<sup>7</sup> Waterhouse, *A Declaration*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 17.

the Aztecs. The Spanish treated them horribly. The conquistadors carved a murderous path and sold those surviving into a native slave trade, but the Aztecs did not capitulate to the Spanish. They fought violently. This narrative traveled to Europe, taking on dark religious implications as well as the pseudonym “The Black Legend.” The Black Legend demonized Spanish Catholicism for its treatment of the native peoples in the colonies, but it also shaped English policy towards any Indigenous people they might have found: dominion and civility. The English believed that because the Spanish had treated the Aztecs so horribly and that because Protestantism was the righteous path that any native people would flock peacefully to the English. Yet by 1622, dominion and civility had declined, and what the English had vilified the Spanish for became their exact policy: extermination. The hypocrisy demonstrates how necessary Waterhouse believed war to be if he was willing to align Protestantism with the crimes Catholicism had committed years before. In fact, it is ironic to consider the fact that the Spanish also attempted conversion as well before degenerating to genocide. Both timelines match up with the English being no better than the Spanish.

Reading through English biases, these documents offer insight into how Powhatans saw the colonists. They show a contradictory policy of curiosity and interest in making the English subordinate allies as well as encroaching enemies in need of a demonstration of Indian dominance. Spelman’s account reveals the former quite well. During his stay with Powhatans he was left with the wives of an Indian leader, one of whom told Spelman to go with her on a day’s journey carrying her baby. “...I [refused], she struck me 3 or 4 blows... Afterward, when the king came home, in their presence I acquainted him how they had used me. The king without further delay took up a couwascohocan, which is a king of paring iron, and struck at one of them with

such violence as he fell'd her to the ground, in manner dead."<sup>10</sup> Here again historians are provided with a look into English opinion of the natives with Spelman's churlish actions, yet his account offers additional insight into native opinion of the English. Powhatans rejected corporal punishment of women. For this reason, Spelman's words must be further analyzed. It is unclear if the wives really did hit him, although they may have treated him differently because he was not a member of the polity. The second incident of physical violence, however, is more explainable. The native policy towards the English at the time was trade, and the king did not want to sour that possibility, so he used similar physical means to demonstrate that Spelman was to be treated as an envoy who would open up trade between the tribe and the colonists. Outside of what he stated in his account, Spelman returned to England without injury. Captain Argall heard of an English boy living with the Patomecke's, sought Spelman out and paid the king for him with copper.<sup>11</sup> After trade opened between the two groups, however, it grew more apparent to the Indians that the colonists could be useful for other reasons.

Smith's *A True Relation* also offers insight into the dichotomous diplomatic policy. The first encounters between Smith and various Powhatans were mixed. While some villages launched attacks on the English, others offered diplomatic gifts of corn.<sup>12</sup> The reactions show the recognition of danger, but also the idea that the English could make useful subordinate allies. In fact, the Powhatans tested just that by sending the colonists to the borders of the chiefdom in search of various things like people who were supposedly clothed like the English, in essence unbeknownst to Smith<sup>13</sup>. One party of colonists travelled to the outskirts of the chiefdom with a guide, eventually coming to the Chikamanias, who believe Smith has come to fight them on

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<sup>10</sup> Spelman, "Relation of Virginia," 489.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 486.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, "A True," in *Jamestown Narratives*, 147.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

Powhatan's behalf. He wrote in his account that "[t]hese presumptions induced me to take any occasion ... to try the honesty ... of these cunning tricks of their Emperor of Powhatan..."<sup>14</sup>

Attacks and trade fit with the historical concept of Native Ground, and while the Powhatans definitely knew at the time that they were dictating their encounters, it is not obvious the English did until Smith admitted it. The colonists entered a world about which they knew almost nothing, yet the Powhatans knew everything. They knew the physical and geopolitical geography, and they also knew that the English did not. Sensing their advantage, they used the colonists as subordinate allies, even mercenaries, for the chiefdom's gain. From the other party's perspective, Smith's statement of distrust tracks the changing English opinion of the Powhatans. Spelman's portrayal of them as dumb and uncivilized transforms into Smith's realization that the native people were more complex and dangerous than boosters let on. The play between these two evolving policies as the colonies expanded pushed both groups towards the idea of war as is depicted in Waterhouse's publication.

The Virginia Company's publication offers perhaps the most explicit statement of shifts in English-Powhatan relations. By 1622 the situation in North America had changed in ways that Powhatans found extremely problematic, and Waterhouse unknowingly addressed facets of that change. Waterhouse described the Jamestown colony's structure when he wrote "By which assurance of securitie, the Plantations of particular Adventurers and Planters were placed scatteringly and straglingly as a choyce veynce of rich ground invited them, and the further from neighbors held the better"<sup>15</sup> By the 1610s English expansion picked up because of tobacco, a highly profitable if environmentally dangerous crop. Because tobacco was the first real profit to come out of English colonies, its plantations caused an influx of colonists, required acres of land

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>15</sup> Waterhouse, *A Declaration*, 12.



and drove farming to a new level with appreciable amounts of livestock. In short, tobacco expanded the colonial landscape with large-scale farms complete with livestock. As Waterhouse mentions, these farms sprawled away from the Chesapeake Bay. It drove Powhatans to a policy change: the colonist had overgrown their welcome, especially with unfenced English livestock running rampant in their crop fields. After leading the English into a false sense of security for a period of years, the Powhatans responded violently, an attack which Waterhouse describes with much invective to justify total war. Beyond the rhetoric, however, the document provides insight into the native side of the attack. Waterhouse described the attack: "...they [the Indians] also flew many of our people then at their severall workes and husbnadries in the fields, and without their houses, some in planting Corne and Tobacco, some in gardening, some in making Bricke, building, fawing, and other kindes of husbandry, they well knowing in what places and quarters each of our men were, in regard of their daily familiarity..."<sup>16</sup> The Powhatans knew the English well. They knew what they were doing, where they were doing it and when they were doing it, and they used this information to their advantage. Such a demonstration of force was bold, and it illustrated how powerful Powhatans remained. They made their message clear not just by murdering the colonists, but by burning tobacco fields and slaughtering livestock, the two biggest points of expansionary tension. In addition, their tactics demonstrate Native Ground. Unlike seventeenth century English combat, Powhatans employed guerilla-type tactics. The sixteenth-century attack revealed a complex people capable of understanding when the colony's hindrances had outweighed its advantages.

Relations between the English colonists and the Powhatans were dynamic, and change through time powerfully emerges from primary source documents. Though these documents are all English, Indigenous opinions and strategies can be taken out of them as well, even if their

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 14.

authors were not consciously aware of them. From Spelman's account of his teenage years as an envoy, it is obvious that both sides were curious and saw the other as potential sources of trade. From Smith's journey, a complex relationship emerges in which Powhatans wanted to turn the colonists into subordinate allies and use their technology while the English grew even more paranoid. Lastly, Waterhouse documents the rejection of dominion and civility as the two parties go to war.

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