

THE STORY OF VIRGINIA: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A Long-term Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

<http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/contact.htm>

Contact and Conflict

Although there were cultural misunderstandings, competition for land was the main cause of conflict between the English and the Indians. The American Indians needed the land to maintain their political and cultural independence. The English needed it to achieve the goal of economic independence that had drawn them here. When the English discovered that tobacco was as good as gold, they brought enslaved Africans to Virginia to work the fields seized from the Indians. After three wars, they confined the Powhatans to the first American reservations.

But why did the English come? They did not come, at first, for political or religious freedom. From the outset Virginia was an establishment colony in both church and state, unlike later-settled dissident Massachusetts. Rather, Virginia was conceived in the 1580s by English merchants, mariners, and gentlemen-at-arms who wanted to build an empire in America. They thought the New World's lands and riches would enable England to become a world power. They sought gold and precious gems, a passage to China and the Indies, and a base for preying on treasure-filled Spanish galleons. They also hoped to convert the native peoples to Protestantism and challenge the ambitions of Catholic Spain and France.

Virginia's Namesake

These Englishmen called their dream Virginia after [Elizabeth I](#), their virgin queen. But Virginia was an idea rather than a place. The first man to make the dream a reality was Sir Walter Raleigh. In 1585 this adventurer and favorite of Queen Elizabeth founded a military base on Roanoke Island in Pamlico Sound, between what today is mainland North Carolina and its Outer Banks. In 1587 Raleigh tried to convert Roanoke—as it became known—into a self-sustaining colony. But war with the Spanish Armada in 1588 cut off communications with England, and in 1590 a relief expedition found the colony mysteriously abandoned. The “Lost Colony” of Roanoke failed, but the idea of Virginia lived on.

Twenty years later the idea was revived, but in a different form. In 1606 the Virginia Company of London—an investment scheme—was granted the right to settle those parts of North America's mainland not already occupied by Spain or France. The Virginia Company focused its attention on the promising Chesapeake Bay region. In December 1606, the ships *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and *Discovery*, carrying 104 passengers, set sail from England. Sixty miles from the capes of the Chesapeake Bay, up a river they named the James after their king, they found an easily defensible peninsula with good anchorage on May 13, 1607. They called it Jamestown.

Conflict

Wahunsenacawh, the [Powhatan](#) leader, was ambivalent about these strangers. Like the Spanish who had come more than thirty years earlier, they might present a danger. Yet he recognized the value of their trade goods and thought they might make useful allies against other tribes. In 1608 the English at Jamestown traded away nearly all their tools for food. That same year, Powhatan sent food in exchange for a grindstone, fifty swords, some guns, a cock and hen, copper and beads, and an English-style house. Within a few years, however, the Indians had become more dependent on the English than vice versa. The Powhatans wanted guns and ammunition, metal knives and tools, warm woolen clothes and blankets, and durable metal pots. In the Anglo-Powhatan wars that followed, the English found that a trade embargo was among their most effective weapons. They also used the promise of trade to enlist the Powhatans' Indian enemies as allies.

The Powhatans became hostile as soon as they thought that the English had come, in the words of their leader, "not for trade but to invade my people and possess my country." To the Indians, open land was a source of food and materials to be shared by all. The idea of individual ownership of land was foreign to them. To the English, however, the land of Virginia seemingly unoccupied apart from the Indian villages themselves was there for the taking. Once tobacco proved profitable, increasingly they took it.

The Powhatans had grown a native variety of tobacco. But the strain that became the cash crop of Virginia (*Nicotiana tabacum*) was introduced from the West Indies by John Rolfe, who is best remembered by history as Mr. Pocahontas. His marriage to [Pocahontas](#) and their trip to England in 1616 seemed to hold out the promise of peaceful relations.

Pocahontas

Pocahontas, meaning "playful one," was the nickname of Matoaka, the daughter of the Powhatan leader. As a child she was sent as an emissary to Jamestown. She befriended the colonists and risked her life on several occasions to warn them of Indian attacks. The most famous incident was her intervention to save the life of [Captain John Smith](#). She probably did it for humanitarian reasons rather than the romantic ones of legend, because she was only twelve at the time. In 1613 the English [kidnapped her](#), but her father refused their demand for ransom. Left to live with the English, she adopted many of their ways. In 1614, at the age of nineteen, she married John Rolfe.

Baptized a Christian, and taking the name Rebecca Rolfe, she was regarded as an example of the possibilities of converting the Indians. In fact, she was almost the only Indian ever converted, and nothing but total immersion in English culture brought it about. But in their day Rebecca and John Rolfe and their infant son seemed the perfect family to promote Virginia in England. They were entertained as celebrities in London. He sought to relieve fears about disease, the climate, and Indian hostility in Virginia. She impressed Londoners with her grace, intelligence, and competent English. She was touted as a princess, a European misconception about Indian society that persists to this day. She died suddenly—possibly of tuberculosis or smallpox—as she prepared to return to Virginia. She was just twenty-two, and Anglo-Powhatan relations deteriorated soon afterward.

The Anglo-Powhatan Wars

In the three Anglo-Powhatan wars, the English had two principal advantages. One was firepower. The other was a secret weapon unknown even to themselves—European (and later, African) diseases to which the Indians had no immunity. Germs killed far more Indians than guns. Within forty years of Jamestown's founding, the Powhatans had been defeated by warfare, smallpox, and measles. Their empire disintegrated, and its people were forced to live on disconnected pieces of tribal territory far from traditional hunting and fishing grounds.

As early as 1646 the Virginia General Assembly reported that the Indians were “so routed and dispersed that they are no longer a nation.” By 1677 all the Indians of eastern Virginia accepted the status of vassals of the English king. They paid tribute for the small reservations allowed to them. Their numbers had plummeted from perhaps 20,000 to fewer than 3,000. After 1677 their numbers continued to dwindle, and in 1705 the size of their reservations was halved. The Rappahannocks and Chickahominies lost their reservations entirely by 1718. The Nansemonds sold their last remnant in 1792. By that time the only Indians officially recognized were a small group on the Eastern Shore and the Pamunkeys and Mattaponis on their reservations. Those who lived off reservations, or whose tribes no longer had one, were absorbed into the ranks of slaves or the lower parts of English society as squatters on poor land.

Until the mid-1700s Indians on reservations were able to live a semi-traditional lifestyle, hunting deer for skins to trade rather than for food, and collecting bounties from the English for killing wolves. But by 1800 virtually all Virginia Indians spoke only English, dressed like their white neighbors, and had become Christians, their native religion having become extinct.

The Tobacco Boom

Much of the land taken from the Indians went to grow tobacco, which was not only a way of making money, but also served as money itself to pay salaries and wages. However, tobacco farming required not only land, but also backbreaking labor. When the tobacco boom gained momentum, white indentured servants were brought in to cultivate the crop; but Virginia's precarious society did not stabilize until Africans were brought in to work the fields. The labor of these servants and slaves, and Europe's insatiable demand for tobacco, made Virginia an economic success at last.

Virginia Becomes a Colony

Of the 8,500 colonists sent to Jamestown by the Virginia Company, only 1,218 were left by 1624. Some had returned to England, but most had died of starvation, disease, oppression by their own leaders, or Indian attacks. In the great 1622 Powhatan uprising alone, 347 colonists were killed. The company came under increasing criticism. Finally, King James I revoked its charter and declared Virginia a royal colony—England's first. Its appointed royal governor, elected assembly, and established church became the model for English royal colonies throughout America.

The elected legislature or House of Burgesses had begun in 1619. Its powers were ill-defined, but at least the principle of some representation by the people in their own government was recognized. It was the first such representative body in the New World.

Africans Arrive in Virginia

The year 1619 also is famous for being the first in which we have written evidence of the presence of Africans in Virginia. In August a Dutch man-of-war carrying Africans dropped anchor near Hampton. Probably these were indentured servants rather than slaves. But from the outset they were regarded as a separate, degraded class, and often were held in a form of lifetime service little different from slavery.

Historians argue over why Europeans enslaved Africans. Did they do it because of inherent prejudice against the color black, which they associated with evil, darkness, and the devil? Did they do it because some African groups enslaved members of neighboring groups, giving rise to a degraded view of all Africans? In any case, establishment of the tobacco plantation system as the economic mainstay of Virginia, and the reality that slave labor produced the greatest tobacco profits, transformed an inconsistent prejudice into chattel slavery—a rigid system of perpetual racial bondage. Beginning in 1661, Virginia codified slavery into [laws](#) that were copied throughout the later British colonies.