
Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview

Through primary sources, this unit explores the founding and early development of Jamestown and the relationship between the colonists and the indigenous people. Although the colony was established by the Virginia Company of London in the hope of making a profit by finding gold, locating a trade route to Asia, or harnessing the labor of the natives, only the discovery that tobacco could be profitably raised permitted the colony's survival. The colonists' first years were marked by disease, disaster and death brought about largely by inappropriate expectations, poor planning and an inability to adapt to the unfamiliar world in which they found themselves. During this same period, the foundations of Anglo-Indian relations in Virginia were also being laid. The helplessness of the colonists to secure their own survival led them to establish an intimate relationship with the Indians of the Chesapeake. While this relationship was not the one originally desired by either people, the Indians were the ones who ultimately lost.

Students need to understand how very tenuous England's early efforts at colonization actually were. They need to learn how the haphazard and ill-considered decisions of the first English colonists had a profound impact on Anglo-Indian relations. Finally, this unit should allow students to experience history in a way that lets them see the past not as a series of inevitable events, but as the meandering record of human choices, some good, some bad, but all leading to the world of today.

II. Unit Context

This unit should be taught after studying Pre-Columbian Indians and the Age of Exploration and prior to studying late colonial America and the American Revolution. It is essential that students have a sense of what native American cultures were like before European contact. Prior to this unit, students should already have some feel for the relationship between environment and culture, as well as an appreciation of the richness, complexity, and diversity of native American cultures. It would also be helpful if students were familiar with the Spanish model of colonization.

Contrasting the colonization of Jamestown with the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Quakers of Pennsylvania would be an excellent way to show that there were different approaches to colonization. Understanding how different these three regions were in their beginnings would help students understand the abiding regional differences that mark American history.

III. Correlation to National History Standards

Early Jamestown provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for United States History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 1**, “Three Worlds Meet,” and **Era 2**, “Colonization and Settlement.” Lessons specifically address **Standard 1A** in **Era 1**, “Patterns of change in indigenous societies in the Americas” and **Standards 1B** and **3A** in **Era 2**, which calls for student understanding of how English settlers interacted with Native Americans and the development of economic systems in colonial Virginia.

Lessons within this unit likewise address a number of specific Historical Thinking Standards. Students are challenged to reconstruct the literal meaning of historical passages; compare and contrast different sets of ideas, values, and behaviors; employ quantitative analysis to explore migration patterns; and, evaluate alternative courses of action.

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To study historical documents in order to experience history as a dynamic discipline which studies, interprets, and debates the meaning of human artifacts and, through those, humanity’s collective past.
2. To explain how the hard times experienced by Jamestown settlers were the result of the peculiar mix of people who emigrated to Virginia, their inappropriate expectations, and their difficulties in adapting.
3. To understand the interaction between the early settlers of Jamestown and the native Americans.
4. To appreciate that human choices determine much of what happens to people and that these choices are subject to different interpretations.

V. Introduction to Early Jamestown

The English settlement of North America began in earnest on April 26, 1607, when three small ships sighted what is now Cape Henry, Virginia. On board were 104 adventurers who hoped to emulate Spanish conquistadores like Cortez and Pizarro. After several weeks spent exploring the Chesapeake Bay, they settled on the site that would become Jamestown and began erecting a fort and dwellings.

From the beginning, English colonization in North America was essentially different from the Spanish model. Spanish colonization was capitalized, organized, and operated by the crown; the Jamestown settlement was funded by a private joint-stock company, the

Virginia Colony of London, founded by merchants. Despite featuring the Christian conversion of natives prominently in its charter, the Company's real aim was profit. The Virginia Company hoped to find gold or other valuable minerals, locate a Northwest passage to Asia, trade with the indigenous population, and, if feasible, harness them into a pliant labor force as the Spanish and Portuguese had done. But the conditions of Virginia, the lack of precious minerals and a less dense, more broadly dispersed population, made the Spanish model inappropriate. Moreover, Spanish imperialism was supported with funds and soldiers from the government and hundreds of priests from the Catholic church. The Virginia Company did not have such resources.

For many years, the extraction of wealth, rather than settlement, remained the principal goal of the adventurers who came to Jamestown. There were no women among the first settlers, and for decades after its founding women were greatly under-represented. Even into the eighteenth century, a hundred years after the founding, there were three men for every two women.

Among the first three groups from England to arrive in Jamestown, gentlemen comprised a third of the number, a proportion six times greater than in England. By definition, gentlemen had no manual skills and could not be expected to do ordinary labor. Their class background and education prepared them only for service in the military or legal professions. But because the military and legal professions were already overrepresented in the colony, many gentlemen were unemployed and resorted to squabbling, gaming or drinking. This was not an ideal situation for the rigors of colonization, but the Company had little choice except to take such people; they were the ones who wanted to come and could afford to pay their way.

The curious mix of settlers, with notions of colonization unsuitable for the land and resisted by the people they found in Virginia, meant that for many years Jamestown's survival was extremely precarious. Unwilling to farm or do the other mundane physical tasks essential for survival, these soldiers of fortune relied on England and Indians for food. But the supplies from England were often spoiled or hoarded, and obtaining food from the Indians was contingent on the extremely variable state of Indian-settler relations. Aware that the colonists could not survive on their own, Smith had sought to force trade with the Powhatans by intimidation. At times raiding and destroying their fields and villages to extort food and supplies, Smith engaged in practices which had the same adverse impact on the English settlers as on the Powhatans. Combined with often foul, brackish drinking water, an unfamiliar climate, and marshy terrain, these self-defeating behaviors led to a staggering mortality rate. Of the over 900 European settlers to arrive between 1607 and 1609, only 59 survived to the spring of 1610.

If Captain John Smith had not taken command of the settlers and established a sort of military regimen requiring that settlers work for food, the colony might well have failed.

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After Smith left, his example was followed by others who established strict laws to regulate conduct. But even this order imposed upon the settlers would not have preserved England's first colony had not some sort of profit making venture been found.

A host of different enterprises had been unsuccessfully undertaken before John Rolfe managed to raise a West Indian strain of tobacco. In 1614 he laid the basis for a viable economy and began the English-Virginian tobacco trade by sending four barrels of tobacco to England. By 1624 Virginia was annually exporting 200,000 pounds of tobacco, and by 1638 the amount had risen to 3,000,000 pounds. Despite James I's attempts to discourage the use of tobacco, its popularity gave Virginia a period of sustained growth.

In 1618 it was still not clear to the London Company that tobacco would be a profitable commodity for trade. As the company teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, it tried to entice new settlers to Virginia by offering 50 acres to anyone who paid his own way or the way of anyone else. The company also tried to improve Virginia's government in 1619 by adopting English common law and a more representative resident government. Thus was born the House of Burgesses. Even when in 1624 the crown seized the London Company's charter, and the new king Charles I proclaimed Virginia a royal colony, Virginia continued to be governed in accordance with procedures set up by the company.

Because culturing tobacco was extremely labor intensive, Virginia needed an abundance of cheap labor. Planters recruited workers primarily from the armies of displaced peasants and destitute city dwellers in England and Ireland. Thousands of desperate people sold themselves into servitude for three to seven years in order to secure passage to the New World. Since they were mostly young, between the ages of 15 and 24, and almost three-fourths male, they hoped that after their servitude they could establish their own farms. But for most, this hope was never realized. Of the 9,000 immigrants who voyaged to Virginia between 1610 and 1622, only 2,000 survived the period. As few as one in 20 of these people, called indentured servants, managed to achieve freedom and acquire land. Not only were these servants subject to the same malarial fevers and dysentery that depleted the ranks of planters, they were also subject to harsh work routines by masters who treated them with little regard to their humanity. The brutal treatment of indentured servants anticipated, and partially prepared society for, the eventual transition to slave labor.

While tobacco gave the colony an economic basis for survival, it sharpened the already abrasive relations between European colonizers and the Powhatan tribes of the Chesapeake. From the beginning, relations between the colonizers and Native Americans were marked by ambivalence, suspicion, and frequent violence. Continuous contact did not bring understanding. The English were inclined to see their technological advan-

tages as proof of their inherent superiority, while the Indians found the Europeans extremely militaristic.

But this very quality inspired Powhatan, the canny leader of several dozen of the 40 small tribes in the Chesapeake region, to propose an alliance with the English. He saw in the English a potential ally who could help him retain and extend his control in the tidewater area and limit the threat of his western enemies. For this reason he repeatedly provided crucial relief for the English during their initial years of struggle. Yet the Indians of the Chesapeake were also aware of the English designs on their land. The economic success of tobacco brought increasing pressure for land. In 1617, when Opechancanough replaced Powhatan as head of the Chesapeake tribes, he concluded that the English encroachment must be halted. An epidemic which decimated the Powhatan tribes between 1617 and 1619 added to his sense of urgency, as did the English murder of a Powhatan religious leader. On March 22, 1622 Opechancanough launched a well-planned attack on the English of Virginia which resulted in the death of nearly a third of the immigrants. But the Indians, with their numbers reduced by disease, were no match for the English. Despite a recognition by many of the settlers of the causes of Indian hostility, this massacre provided the motivation to wage a ruthless war of extermination against the Indians. Although there was nothing inevitable about the course of Indian-settler relations in Virginia, the English land-hunger was a major contributing factor to recurrent hostilities.

VI. Lesson Plans

1. The Powhatans
2. The First Settlers of Jamestown
3. Starving Time in Jamestown
4. Tobacco Comes to Virginia
5. Indian Hostility and White Revenge

Dramatic Moment

In January, 1609, the colony of Jamestown was starving. The famine forced Captain John Smith to seek the aid of Powhatan and his people. Relying on his fierce will as much as his intelligence and experience, Captain Smith commanded the quarrelsome settlers of Jamestown, England's only colony. Until he had taken charge, Jamestown had teetered on the brink of destruction. Even with his leadership, the colony's problems remained serious.

Since their arrival in 1607, the settlers had always depended on the natives for food. But the unpredictable and often violent behavior of the English had caused Powhatan, the powerful chief of over two dozen tribes, to forbid his people from trading with the invaders. Although Smith desperately needed the Indians' corn, he stood before Powhatan not as a beggar but as someone who had been wronged by a friend. After arguing that Jamestown's settlers had not grown their own food only because they had been promised food by Powhatan, Smith claimed that the swords and guns the Indians wanted in exchange for food could not be spared. Then Smith ended his speech with a quiet threat, "The weapons I have can keep me from want: yet steal, or wrong you, I will not, nor dissolve that friendship we have mutually promised, unless you force me."

Powhatan's reply, as recorded by Smith, showed his subtle understanding of English intentions: "Yet, Captain Smith some doubt I have of your coming hither, that makes me not so kindly seek to relieve you as I would: for many do inform me, your coming is not for trade, but to invade my people and possess my country. My people dare not come to bring you corn, seeing you are thus armed with your men. To clear us of this fear, leave your weapons at home; for here they are useless, we being all friends."

After long negotiations and despite Powhatan's doubts, he promised to give the English what food his people could spare. His decision profoundly affected both peoples--white and red.



Captain John Smith

Dictionary of American Portraits
Dover Publications, Inc., 1967

Reprinted from *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith, President of Virginia, and Admiral of New England, 1580-1631*. Vol 1. Ed. Edward Arber, Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910.