

John Smith on the Powhatans, 1607–1616

BE SURE TO READ THE INFORMATION ON POWHATAN HISTORY in this book's introduction before reading this document. After three failed attempts to found a colony at Roanoke (near the present-day border between North Carolina and Virginia), English settlers founded Jamestown in 1607, on Powhatan Indian land in the Chesapeake Bay region. At first, the Powhatans fed the newcomers, but the Indians soon grew tired of the settlers' inability to feed themselves. This account comes from the English captain John Smith, a leader of Jamestown and the colony's main negotiator with the Powhatans. He begins by describing those Indians' political system.

Although the country people¹ be very barbarous, yet have they among them such government, as that their Magistrates for good commanding, and their people for due subjection, and obeying, excel many places that would be counted very civil. The form of their Common-wealth is a Monarchical government, one as Emperor rules over many Kings or Governors. Their chief ruler is called *Powhatan*, and takes his name of his principal place of dwelling called *Powhatan*. But his proper name is *Wahunsonacock*.² Some Countries he has which have been his ancestors', and came unto him by inheritance, as the Country called *Powhatan*, *Arrohateck*, *Appamatuck*, *Pamunkee*, *Youghtanund*, and *Mattaponient*. All the rest of his territories expressed in the Map, they report have been his several conquests. . . .

His will is a law and must be obeyed: not only as a King, but as half a God they esteem him. His inferior Kings whom they call *Werowances*, are tied to rule by customs, and have power of life and death at their command. . . . They

all know their several lands, and habitations, and limits, to fish, fowl, or hunt in, but they hold all of their great Werowance Powhatan, unto whom they pay tribute of skins, beads, copper, pearl, deer, turkeys, wild beasts, and corn. What he commands they dare not disobey in the least thing. It is strange to see with what great fear and adoration, all these people do obey this Powhatan. For at his feet they present whatsoever he commands, and at the least frown of his brow, their greatest spirits will tremble with fear: and no marvel, for he is very terrible & tyrannous in punishing such as offend him.

[In December 1607, Smith is taken prisoner by the Powhatans and held for six or seven weeks. The next section is written in the third person rather than the first person. Smith is still the author, but he apparently drew on others' notes to assist his recollection.]

At last they brought him to Werowocomoco, where was Powhatan their Emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim Courtiers stood wondering at him, as he had been a monster; till Powhatan and his train had put themselves in their greatest braveries.³ Before a fire upon a seat like a bedstead, he sat covered with a great robe, made of Rarowcun⁴ skins, and all the tails hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench of 16 or 18 years, and along on each side the house, two rows of men, and behind them as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red; many of their heads bedecked with the white down of birds; but every one with something: and a great chain of white beads about their necks. At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The Queen of Appamatuck was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, instead of a towel to dry them. Having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan. Then as many as could laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beat out his brains. Pocahontas the King's dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms, and laid her own upon his to save him from death. Whereat the Emperor was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper; for they thought him as well of all occupations as themselves. For the King himself will make his own robes, shoes, bows, arrows, pots; plant, hunt, or do anything so well as the rest. . . .

Two days after, Powhatan having disguised himself in the most fearful manner he could, caused Capt. Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods, and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone. Not long after from behind a mat that divided the house, was made the most doleful noise he ever heard; then Powhatan more like a devil than a man with some two hundred more as black as himself, came unto him and told him now they were friends,

and presently he should go to Jamestown, to send him two great guns, and a grindstone, for which he would give him the Country of Capahowosick, and forever esteem him as his son Nantaquoud. So to Jamestown with 12 guides Powhatan sent him. That night they quartered in the woods, he still expecting (as he had done all this long time of his imprisonment) every hour to be put to one death or other: for all their feasting. But almighty God (by his divine providence) had mollified the hearts of those stern Barbarians with compassion.

[After Smith's return to Jamestown, Pocahontas and her attendants regularly bring them food. In 1609, Smith sails for England. In 1613, the English at Jamestown kidnap Pocahontas, in an attempt to gain leverage over her father. In a diplomatic marriage approved by the Powhatans and the English, she marries John Rolfe in 1614. In 1616, they and their young son travel to England, where she is received at court and meets Smith for the first time in seven years.]

Hearing [Pocahontas] was at Branford⁵ with divers⁶ of my friends, I went to see her: After a modest salutation, without any word, she turned about, obscured her face, as not seeming well contented; and in that humor her husband, with divers others, we all left her two or three hours, repenting myself to have written she could speak English. But not long after, she began to talk, and remembered me well what courtesies she had done: saying, "You did promise Powhatan what was yours should be his, and he the like to you; you called him father being in his land a stranger, and by the same reason so must I do you," which though I would have excused, I durst not allow of that title, because she was a King's daughter; with a well set countenance she said, "Were you not afraid to come into my father's country, and caused fear in him and all his people (but me) and fear you here I should call you father; I tell you then I will, and you shall call me child, and so I will be for ever and ever your countryman. They did tell us always you were dead, and I knew no other till I came to Plymouth; yet Powhatan did command Uttamatomakkin to seek you, and know the truth, because your countrymen will lie much."

This Savage,⁷ one of Powhatan's Council, being among them held an understanding fellow; the King purposely sent him, as they say, to number the people here, and inform him well what we were and our state. Arriving at Plymouth, according to his directions, he got a long stick, whereon by notches he did think to have kept the number of all the men he could see, but he was quickly weary of that task: Coming to London, where by chance I met him; having renewed our acquaintance, where many were desirous to hear and see his behavior, he told me Powhatan did bid him to find me out, to show him our God, the King, Queen, and Prince, I so much had told them of: Concerning God, I told him the best I could, the King I heard he had seen, and the rest he should see when he would; he denied ever to have seen the

King, till by circumstances he was satisfied he had: Then he replied very sadly, "You gave Powhatan a white Dog, which Powhatan fed as himself, but your King gave me nothing, and I am better than your white Dog."⁸

From John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles with the names of the Adventuerers, Planters, and Governours from their first beginning Ano 1584 to this present 1624* (London, 1624), 37–38, 47–49, 122–23.