



John Smith, "The Starving Time" (1624)

Captain John Smith quickly rose to become the leader of the colonists in Virginia based on his proven skills as soldier and explorer. Later in his life, Smith endeavored to write a history of the Virginia colony, of which this document is an excerpt. Specifically, this document is from a section titled "The Starving Time," which recounts the period after Smith returned to England in 1609.

It might well be thought, a Countrey so faire (as Virginia is) and a people so tractable, would long ere this have beene quietly possessed to the satisfaction of the adventurers, & the eternizing of the memory of those that effected it. But because all the world doe see a defailement; this following Treatise shall give satisfaction to all indifferent Readers, how the businesse hath bin carried; where no doubt they will easily understand and answer to their question, how it came to passe there was no better speed and successe in those proceedings.

...

The day before Captain Smith returned for England with the ships, Captain Davis arrived in a small Pinace, with some sixteene proper men more . . . for the Salvages no sooner understood Smith was gone, but they all revolted, and did spoile and murther all they incountered. Now wee were all constrained to live onely on that Smith had onely for his owne Companie, for the rest had consumed their proportions . . . Sicklemore upon the confidence of Powhatan, with about thirtie others as carelesse as himselfe, were all siaine, onely Jeffrey Shortridge escaped, and Pokahontas the Kings daughter saved a boy called Henry Spilman, that lived many yeeres after, by her meanes, amongst the Patawomekes...

Now we all found the losse of Captain Smith, yea his greatest maligners could now curse his losse: as for corne, provision and contribution from the Salvages, we had nothing but mortall wounds, with clubs and arrowes; as for our Hogs, Hens, Goats, Sheepe, Horse, or what lived, our commanders, officers & Salvages daily consumed them, some small proportions sometimes we tasted, till all was devoured; then swords, armes, pieces, or any thing, wee traded with the Saivages, whose cruell fingers were so oft imbrewed in our blouds, that what by their crueltie, our Governours indiscretion, and the losse of our ships, of five hundred within six moneths after Captain Smiths departure, there remained not past sixtie men, women and children, most miserable and poore creatures; and those were preserved for the most part, by roots, herbes, acornes, wainuts, berries, now and then a little fish: they that had startch in these extremities, made no small use of it; yea, even the very skinnes of our horses. Nay, so great was our famine, that a Salvage we slew, and buried, the poorer sort tooke him up againe and eat him, and so did divers one another boyled and stewed with roots and herbes: And one amongst the rest did kill his wife, powdered [salted] her, and had eaten part of her before it was knowne, for which hee was executed, as hee well deserved; now whether shee was better roasted, boyled or carbonado'd [grilled], I know not, but of such a dish as powdered wife I never heard of. This was that time, which still to this day we called the starving time; it were too vile to say, and scarce to be beleived, what we endured.