

Module 02: Unthinking Decision? Why Did Slavery Emerge in Virginia?

Evidence 1: Generall Historie of Virginia

A

Introduction

John Smith may be the most well-known of the early settlers of Virginia, but he remained in the colony only a few years. Smith wrote one of the first accounts of English settlement there, entitled *Generall Historie of Virginia* and published in 1624. In the excerpt below, Smith describes the Powhatan Indians.

Questions to Consider

- How does Smith characterize the Powhatan Indians? Does he describe them as more or less civilized than the English?
- What does Smith suggest about the Indians' moral worth?
- How might an English planter respond to the possibility of using Indian labor in his fields?

Document

The land is not populous, for the men be few; their far-greater number is of women and children. Within 60 miles of Jamestown, there are about some 5000 people, but of able men fit for their wars scarce[ly] 1500. To nourish so many together they have yet no means, because they make so small a benefit of their land, be it never so fertile.

Six or seven hundred have been the most [that] hath been seen together, when they gathered themselves to have surprised me at Pamunkey, having but fifteen to withstand the worst of their fury. As small as the proportion of ground that hath yet been discovered, is in comparison of that yet unknown: the people differ very much in stature, especially in language, as before is expressed.

Some being very great as the Susquiehannocks; others very little, as the W'ighcocomocos: but generally tall and straight, of a comely proportion, and of a color brown when they are of any age, but they are born white. Their hair is generally black, but few have any beards. The men wear half

their beards [heads] shaven, the other half long; for barbers they use their women, who with two shells will grate away the hair, of any fashion they please. The women['s hair is] cut in many fashions, agreeable to their years, but ever some part remaineth long.

They are very strong, of an able body and full of agility, able to endure to lie in the woods under a tree by the fire, in the worst of winter, or in the weeds and grass, in ambush in the summer.

They are inconstant in everything, but what fear constraineth them to keep. [They are] crafty, timorous, quick of apprehension, and very ingenuous. Some are of disposition fearful, some bold, most cautelous [cautious], all savage. Generally [they are] covetous of copper, beads, and such like trash. They are soon moved to anger, and so malicious, that they seldom forget an injury: they seldom steal one from another, lest their conjurers should reveal it, and so they be pursued and punished. That they are thus feared is certain, but that any can reveal their offenses by conjuration I am doubtful. Their women are careful not to be suspected of dishonesty without the leave of their husbands.

Each household knoweth their own lands, and gardens, and most live of their own labors.

For their apparel, they are sometime[s] covered with the skins of wild beasts, which in winter are dressed with the hair, but in summer without. The better sort use large mantles of deer skins, not m differing in fashion from the Irish mantles. Some tare embroick with white beads, some with copper, other[s] painted after their n ner. But the common sort have scarce to cover their nakedness, but grass, the leaves of trees, or such like. We have seen some use mantles made of turkey feathers, so prettily wrought and woven with threads that nothing could be discerned but the feathers. That was exceding[ly] warm and very handsome. But the women are always covered about their middles with a skin, and very shamefaced to be seen bare.

They adorn themselves [most]ly with copper beads and paintings. Their women, some have their legs, hands, breasts, and face cunningly embroidered [tattooed] with divers works, as beasts, serpents, artificially wrought into their flesh with black spots. In each ear commonly they have 3 great holes, whereat they hang chains, bracelets, or copper. Some of

their men wear in those holes, a small green and yellow colored snake, near[ly] half a yard in length, which crawling and lapping [it]self about his neck oftentimes familiarly would kiss his lips. Others wear a dead rat tied by the tail. Some on their heads wear the wing of a bird, or some large feather with a rattle. Those rattles are somewhat like the shape of a rapier but less, which they take from the tail of a snake. Many have the whole skin of a hawk or some strange fowl, stuffed with the wings abroad. Others a broad piece of copper, and some the hand of their enemy dried. Their heads and shoulders are painted red with the root puccoon [bloodroot] brayed [beaten] to powder, mixed with oil, this they hold in summer to preserve them from the heat, and in winter from the cold. Many other forms of paintings they use, but he is the most gallant that is the most monstrous to behold.....

[Of their religion:]

There is yet in Virginia no place discovered to be so savage, in which they have not a religion, deer, and bow and arrows. All things that are able to do them hurt beyond their prevention, they adore with their kind of divine worship; as the fire, water, lightning, thunder, our ordnance, pieces [firearms], horses, &c.

But their chief god they worship is the Devil. Him they call Okee, and serve him more of fear than love. They say they have conference with him, and fashion themselves as near to his shape as they can imagine. In their temples they have his image evil favoredly carved, and then painted and adorned with chains of copper, and beads, and covered with a skin, in such manner as the deformity [moral ugliness] may well suit with such a god.

By him is commonly the sepulcher of their kings. Their bodies are first bowelled, then dried upon hurdles till they be very dry, and so about the most of their joints and neck they hang bracelets, or chains of copper, pearl, and such like, as they use to wear; their inwards they stuff with copper, beads, hatchets, and such trash. Then lap they them very carefully in white skins, and so roll them in mats for their winding sheets. And in the tomb which is an arch made of mats, they lay them orderly. What remaineth of this kind of wealth their kings have, they set at their feet in baskets. These temples and bodies are kept by their priests.

For their ordinary burials, they dig a deep hole in the earth with sharp

stakes, and the corpse being lapped in skins and mats with their jewels, they lay them upon sticks in the ground, and so cover them with earth. The burial ended, the women being painted all their faces with black coal and oil, do sit twenty-four hours in the houses mourning and lamenting by turns, with such yelling and howling, as may express their great passions.

In every territory of a Werowance is a temple and a priest, two or three or more. Their principal temple or place of superstition is at Uttamussak at Pamunkey, near unto which is a house, temple, or place of Powhatan's.

Upon the top of certain red, sandy hills in the woods, there are three great houses filled with images of their Kings, and Devils, and tombs of their predecessors. Those houses are near[ly] sixty feet in length and built arbor[like], after their building. This place they count so holy as that [none] but the priests and Kings dare come into them; nor the savages dare not go up the river in boats by it, but they solemnly cast some piece of copper, white beads, or puccoon into the river, for fear their Okee should be offended and revenged of them....

In this place commonly are resident seven priests. The chief differed from the rest in his ornaments, but inferior priests could hardly be known from the common people, but that they had not so many holes in their ears to hang their jewels at.

The ornaments of the chief priest were certain attires for his head made thus. They took a dozen, or 16, or more snakeskins and stuffed them with moss, and of weasels and other vermin skins a good many. All these they tie by their tails, so as all their tails meet in the top of their head like a great tassel. Round about this tassel is as it were a crown of feathers, the skins hang round about his head, neck, and shoulders, and in a manner cover his face.

The faces of all their priests are painted as ugly as they can devise, in their hands they had every one his rattle, some bass [in tone], some smaller. Their devotion was most[ly] in songs, which the chief priest beginneth and the rest followed him: sometimes he maketh invocations with broken sentences by starts and strange passions; and at every pause, the rest give a short groan...

[Of the manner of the Virginians' government:]

Although the country people be very barbarous, yet have they amongst 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 commonwealth is a monarchical government, one as emperor ruleth over many kings or governors. Their chief ruler is called Powhatan, and taketh his name [from] his principal place of dwelling called Powhatan. But his proper name is W'ahunsonacock. Some countries he hath which have been his ancestors', and came unto him by inheritance, as the country called Powhatan, Arrohattoc, Appomattoc, Pamunkey, Youghtanund, and Mattapanient. All the rest of his territories. . .they report have been his several conquests.

In all his ancient inheritances, he hath houses built after their manner like arbors, some 30, some 40 yards long, and at every house provision for his entertainment according to the time. At Werowocómoco on the north side of the river Pamunkey, was his residence, when I was delivered him prisoner, some 14 miles from Jamestown; where for the most part, he was resident, but at last he took so little pleasure in our near neighborhood, that he retired himself to Ova paks, in the desert betwixt Chickahominy and Youghtanund.

He is of personage a tall, well proportioned man, with a sour look, his head somewhat gray, his beard so thin, that it seemeth none at all, his age near sixty; of a very able and hardy body to endure any labor. About his person ordinarily attendeth a guard of 40 or 50 of the tallest men his country doth afford. Every night upon the four quarters of his house are four sentinels, each from other a flight shoot [bow shot], and at every half hour one from the corps du guard doth hollow [call], shaking his lips with his finger between them; unto whom every sentinel doth answer round from his stand: if any fail[s], they presently send forth an officer that beateth him extremely.

A mile from Orapaks in a thicket of wood, he hath a house in which he keepeth his kind of treasure, as skins, copper, pearl, and beads, which he storeth up against the time of his death and burial. Here also is his store of red paint for ointment, bows and arrows, targets, and clubs. This house is

fifty or sixty yards in length, frequented only by priests. At the four corners of this house stand four images as sentinels, one of a dragon, another a bear, the third like a leopard, and the fourth like a giant-like man: all made evil favoredly, according to their best workmanship.

He hath as many women as he will, whereof when he lieth on his bed, one sitteth at his head, and another at his feet; but when he sitteth, one sitteth on his right hand and another on his left. As he is weary of his women, he bestoweth them on those that best deserve them at his hands.

When he dineth or suppeth, one of his women, before and after meat, bringeth him water in a wooden platter to wash his hands. An-other waiteth with a bunch of feathers to wipe them instead of a towel, and the feathers when he hath wiped are dried again.

His kingdoms descend not to his sons nor children, but first to his brethren, whereof he hath 3, namely, Opitchapam, Opechancanough, and Catataugh, and after their decease to his sisters. First to the eldest sister, then to the rest, and after them to the heirs male or female of the eldest sister, but never to the heirs of the males.

He nor any of his people understand any letters, whereby to write or read, only the laws whereby he ruleth is custom. Yet when he listeth 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 in that nature. But this word Werowance, which we call and construe for a King, is a common word, whereby they call all commanders: for they have but few words in their language, and but few occasions to use any officers more than one commander, which commonly they call W'erowance, or Caucorouse, which is Captain.

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 commandeth 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 what-soever he

commandeth, and at the least frown of his brow, their greatest spirits will tremble with fear: and no marvel, for he is very terrible and tyrannous in punishing such as offend him.

Source:

John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (London, 1624), original. Text above scanned from John Lankford, ed., *Captain John Smith's America: Selections From His Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).