

War and Peace with Powhatan's People

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Print portraying Pocahontas intervening between her father, Chief Powhatan, and Captain John Smith. Photo: Kean Collection/Getty Images.

Many Native Americans lived in the area we now call Virginia before Captain John Smith became one of the first Europeans to settle there. About 12,000 Native Americans lived in the area that is now the coast of Virginia. They were part of a group of tribes called the Powhatan Confederacy.

The Confederacy was made up of 30 tribes. The tribes of the Powhatan Confederacy are called Algonquian because their languages were based on a large Native American language group called Algonquian. Their leader was Chief Wahunsonacock, sometimes spelled Wahunsunacawh. He was called Powhatan by Captain John Smith and he united the tribes to form the Confederacy.

Chief Powhatan was suspicious of the English settlers. He had been suspicious of the Spanish settlers before them. But the English had guns and powder. These items might just give him the advantage he needed to defeat surrounding tribes.

The English seemed so harmless at first. If it were not for the good nature of Powhatan's people, the English settlers never would have survived their first few seasons in the New World. Good relations with these new inhabitants might help forge a powerful alliance.

Plundering, peace and Pocahontas

Before long, Powhatan's hopes were dashed. During the "starving time," colonists ran out of food and took to raiding Native American food supplies. In retaliation, Powhatan ordered an attack.

War raged on and off for the next few years with unspeakable brutality committed by both sides. Unsuspecting colonists were riddled with arrows shot by Native Americans. Children of defeated tribes were drowned by the colonists in the James River.

In late 1607, Captain John Smith was captured by a group of Native Americans. He was taken to Powhatan and it is said that he threatened to kill Smith. But Powhatan's 12-year-old daughter Pocahontas intervened and saved his life. There are historians who question whether this event actually happened. What is known from Smith's written accounts is that he had a fondness for the Native American chief and his daughter.

Smith wrote about the experience in a letter to England's Queen Anne:

"So it is, that some 10 years ago being in Virginia, and taken prisoner by the power of Powhatan their chief King, I received from this great Salvage exceeding great courtesy, especially from his son Nantaquaus, the manliest, comeliest, boldest spirit I ever saw in a Salvage, and his sister Pocahontas, the King's most dear and well-beloved daughter, being but a child of 12 or 13 years of age, whose compassionate pitiful heart, of my desperate estate, gave me much cause to respect her..."

The fighting continues

Finally, in 1614, Powhatan accepted peace with the English. His daughter Pocahontas, after being kidnapped and ransomed, was married to John Rolfe, the first Virginia tobacco exporter, and taken to England. Unfortunately, she died of disease only three years later in 1617. Powhatan died in despair in 1618.

Powhatan's brother, Opechancanough, was determined to continue the fight. In 1622, he led an attack that nearly finished the Jamestown colony. Three hundred forty-seven settlers were killed before the situation stabilized.

Fighting continued between the Algonquian people and the English until 1645. Opechancanough was captured and executed. The English forced the tribes of the warring confederacy to surrender land and recognize English authority. Warfare and disease eliminated about 90 percent of the Native American population in Virginia within the first 60 years of English settlement.

No-man's land

The Native Americans and the colonists thought very differently about things like owning land. According to Powhatan's people, the land was owned by no one; rather, it was collectively used by the tribe.

Because land could not be owned, it could not be sold or yielded in treaty. Selling land was like selling air.

The English view of individual land ownership was completely foreign to the Powhatans. They could not understand being pushed off tribal lands so it could be sold to individuals. To the

Powhatans, the loss of their land was a matter worth fighting for.