

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH'S TALE

Captain John Smith left a remarkable history of the early years of the English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia. These are condensed excerpts from his account.

The temperature of this country agrees well with the English, being once seasoned to the country. The summer is as hot as in Spain, the winter as cold as in France or England. The winds here are variable, but with thunder and lightning I have seldom either seen or heard in Europe.

There is but one entrance by sea into this country, and that is at the mouth of a very goodly bay, 18 or 20 miles broad. Heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation, were it fully inhabited by industrious people. Here are mountains, hills, plains, valleys, rivers, and brooks, all running most pleasantly into a fair bay.

Virginia does offer many excellent plants and living creatures, yet grass there is little or none, for all the country is overgrown with trees. The wood that is most common is oak and walnut, and many of the oaks are so tall and straight that they will bear good timber 20 yards long.

Of beasts, the chief are deer, nothing differing from ours. Their squirrels are near as great as our smallest sort of wild rabbits. Their bears are very little in comparison with those in parts of Europe.

Concerning the entrails of the earth [minerals and precious metals like gold], little can be said for certainty.

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 5,000 people, but of able men fit for their wars scarce 1,500.

The people differ very much in stature, but are generally tall and straight, of a comely

[attractive] proportion, and of a color brown. Their hair is generally black, but few have any beards.

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. They are crafty and very ingenious. Some are of disposition fearful, some bold, most cautious.

For their apparel, they are sometimes covered with the skins of wild beasts, which in winter are dressed with the hair, but in the summer without.



The better sort use large mantles [cloaks] of deer skins, some embroidered with white beads, some with copper, others painted after their manner. But the common sort have scarce to cover their nakedness but with grass, the leaves of trees, or such like.

Their houses are built of small young trees bowed and tied, and so close covered with mats, or the bark of trees very handsomely, that they are as warm as stoves, but very smokey, yet at the top of the house is a hole made for the smoke to go into right over the fire.

While Virginia appeared ideal to Smith for settlement, the attempt to start an English colony at Jamestown claimed hundreds of lives in the first few years. In just the first six months, nearly half the first group of 104 colonists died. The account below starts after the colonists' largest ship left Jamestown to sail back to England.

Being thus left to our fortunes, it fortun'd that within ten days scarce ten amongst us

could either go, or well stand, such extreme weakness and sickness oppressed us. And none should marvel at this, if they consider the cause and reason, which was this:

While our ships stayed, our ration was somewhat bettered by a daily proportion of biscuit which the sailors would pilfer [swipe] to sell, give, or exchange with us for money or furs. But when they departed, there remained neither tavern, beer-house, nor place of relief but the common kettle [the shared supply of food].

That was half a pint of wheat and as much barley boiled with water for a man a day, and this, having been some twenty-six weeks in the ship's hold, contained as many worms as grain. Our drink was water, our lodgings castles in the air [nothing but plans].

With this lodging and diet, our extreme toil in bearing and planting palisades [log fences] so strained and bruised us, and our continual labor in the extremity of the heat had so weakened us, as to have made us miserable.

From May to September [1607], those that survived lived upon sturgeon [a fish] and sea crabs. Fifty in this time we buried.

The disease faded away, and the colonists were saved when Indians brought food to Jamestown at harvest time. But relations with the Indians were never certain, and at times became hostile.

Smith himself was captured in December 1607 during an exploring trip. The Indians took their captive to Chief Powhatan. Historians still debate whether Smith's account of being saved by Pocahontas is fact, fiction, or a mixture of both.

At last they brought him to Werowocomoco, where Powhatan, their Emperor was. Before a fire upon a seat like a bedstead, he sat covered with a great robe made of raccoon skins and all the tails hanging by.

At his entrance before the King, all the

people gave a great shout. The Queen of Appomattoc 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 [Smith], dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head.



They being ready with their clubs, to beat out his brains, Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no entreaty [pleas] could prevail, got his head in her arms, and laid her own upon his to save him from death.

Chief Powhatan released Smith, and he returned to Jamestown. He was elected leader of the colony in 1608 after a period of chaos and bickering among the settlers. His strict rule for "idle loiterers" was: "He that will not work shall not eat."

A gunpowder explosion injured Smith in 1609, and he returned to England. That winter, hundreds of settlers died in what was soon called "the starving time."

Pocahontas, who often helped the colonists, later married one of the settlers. She died on a visit to England in 1617.

Group Discussion: *What did Smith think of Virginia as a location for the English to settle? Why? What impressions did Smith have of the Native Americans? What were the biggest problems the settlers faced as they tried to start their colony?*