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| **Women in Early Jamestown**Kathleen M. BrownAssociate Professor of HistoryUniversity of Pennsylvania |

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| In a newe plantation it is not knowen whether man or woman be more necessary.-Petition of the Virginia Assembly, 1619  |
| Early Virginia history has long been an important source of legends about the founding of the United States. Some of these legends feature women in starring roles, as in the case of Pocahontas, while others use women's victimization-as in the case of the wife who became a meal for her starving husband-as evidence of frontier adversity that would eventually be overcome by triumphant English settlers. In most accounts of early Virginia, however, Jamestown is depicted as a male domain in which women (by which is usually meant English women) had little or no historical significance-that is, their presence had little impact on the sequence of events or the subsequent history of the Virginia colony even if the conditions of their daily lives arouse our curiosity. |
| Like most European ventures to the New World, the English venture to Virginia was heavily dominated by men in its early years. All of the 104 settlers who sailed up the James River in 1607 were men. This initial group contained a disproportionate number of male adventurers, a handful of artisans, and only a small number of the agricultural laborers whose practical experience might have helped the fledgling settlement survive its first winter. The maleness of the landing party at Jamestown and the overwhelmingly male character of the settlement in subsequent years had a huge impact on relations with local Native Americans, who belonged to a military alliance overseen by the paramount chief, Powhatan. The small numbers of English women appear to have fanned Powhatan's hopes that the strangers might be absorbed into his chiefdom through adoption, hospitality, and the provision of food. Powhatan likely masterminded the capture and detention of English commander John Smith in 1608, which concluded with a ritual execution, seemingly stopped by Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas. Smith claimed that the Indian girl had saved his life and years later wrote an account of her intervention that became the basis for the Pocahontas legend. Powhatan also tried to create a father-son relationship with the recalcitrant Smith, reminding him of the privileges and obligations such a relationship conferred upon him. Powhatan probably also approved of the entertainment provided by Pocahontas's retinue of women, in which young women bedecked in ritual pocones (red paint) crowded John Smith, crying "Love you not mee." As long as the English remained within the protective palisade at Jamestown and Powhatan hoped to integrate them peacefully, war might be avoided. When individuals left the fort, however, they were subject to the tactics of local natives, which included female natives like Oppossunoquonuske using the possibility of sexual pleasure to lure unarmed English men into an ambush. |
| The imbalanced sex ratio and the lack of experienced agricultural laboring men left the English ill-prepared to deal with the day-to-day needs of a new settlement. This vulnerability also factored greatly in Anglo-Indian relations, driving the fledgling community alternately to negotiate, trade, or raid for the foodstuffs they so desperately needed. Soon after Captain John Smith's return to England to be treated for an injury in 1609, the settlement endured a winter of starvation and death. Having failed to plant or store grain sufficient for their needs and lacking supplies from England, the five hundred person settlement became desperate for food: “most miserable and poore creatures; and those were preserved for the most part, by roots, herbes, acornes, walnuts, berries, now and then a little fish: . . . 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 various others who boyled and stewed the dead native with roots and herbs: And one settler did kill his wife, powdered her, and had eaten part of her before it was knowne, for which he was executed, as he well deserved.Although the Council later claimed that the man had murdered out of hatred, not hunger, word of the cannibalism spread, provoking John Smith to joke that the dish of "powdered [salted or flour-dredged] wife" was unknown to him. |
| Disease also claimed many lives, as the estuarial conditions and undisciplined habits of settlers combined to turn the water into an unwholesome brew. They drank salty water filled with bacteria and human feces. Under John Smith, settlers risked Indian violence to live at a healthier distance from Jamestown. Following Smith's return to England, however, settlers returned to the compound and its unhealthful conditions, raising the death rate from disease. |
| Subsequent commanders De La Warr, Gates, and Dale created a set of strict laws and draconian punishments to try to prevent such terrible starvation and disease. A quick glance at the laws reveals their concerns:No man shall ravish (rape) or force themselves on any woma[n], maid or Indian, or other, upon pain of death. . . No man of what condition soever shall barter, trucke, or trade with the Indians, except he be thereunto appointed by lawful authority, upon pain of death.There shall no man or woman, Launderer or Launderesse, dare to wash any uncleane Linnen, drive bucks, or throw out the water or suds of fowle cloathes, in the open streete, within the walls of the fort, or within forty feet of the same, since by these unmanly, lazy, and loathsome modesties, the whole Fort may bee choaked, and poisoned with ill disease, and so corrupt …Every man shall have an especial and due care, to keepe his house sweete and cleane, as also so much of the streete, as lieth before his door. . .No man or woman, (upon paine of death) shall runne away from the Colony, to Powhathan, or any savage village else whatsoever.The laws leave the impression of a settlement in which women's labor, honestly and carefully performed, was in short supply. Unable to rely on a sufficient population of married English women to do domestic tasks out of loyalty or self-interest, the governors of the settlement turned to coercion to prevent further deterioration in the quality of life. |
| Filthy streets and surrounds, illicit trade with Indians, women and men running to the Indians to escape the sordid conditions and strict discipline, crooked laundresses pilfering the laundry they were engaged to wash-these were only some of the difficulties Sir Thomas Dale faced as deputy to the governor of the colony. Chronic shortages of food, fabric, clothing, bedding, household equipment, and tools are reflected in the details of other laws outlining stringent punishments for theft and illicit trade. Actual incidents of punishment inflicted suggest that the laws were not simply paper tigers. Although men were the vast majority of victims who suffered painful and disfiguring corporal punishments, disobedient women were also punished. When several women ordered to make shirts under the regime of Governor Dale dealt with the shortage of cotton thread by unraveling some of the shirting, they were whipped for failing to produce garments of the requisite length.  |
| Dale's laws present a grim picture of working life in Jamestown for the colony's female minority. With their rations tied to the performance of traditional female employments like sewing, laundering, cooking and cleaning, but lacking necessary supplies (adequate thread, wash basins, soap, brushes) or the assistance of female neighbors and kin, English women probably found little to be cheerful about in the New World. Although the sex ratio meant that even a woman with few marital opportunities in England might prosper through marriage in Virginia, such a lopsided ratio also might have increased the odds of being assaulted, kidnapped, raped, or pressed into early marriage. Such conditions persisted in the colony until at least the 1620s. |
| The suffering within Jamestown during its first decade corresponded with deteriorating relations with Native Americans without. One of the central disagreements concerned the Indian provision of corn to the English. Powhatan may have hoped to take advantage of the English desperation for food to establish his people's dominance, but the English viewed Indian corn as ripe for seizure if it was not given freely. One wonders, too, whether the fact that Indian women produced the vast quantities of corn stored for winter use did not add to the fury of the English at their complete dependence upon "savages." English chroniclers of native life, unwilling or unable to recognize the irony of the failure of their own "civilized" system of agricultural production, certainly spilled much ink descrying the assignment of agricultural labor to Indian women. Beginning in 1609, soon after Smith's departure, Jamestown was mainly at war with Powhatan, forcing the re-entrenchment of settlers within the fort. Allegedly in retaliation against Indian strikes, Commander George Percy led one infamous raid against the Paspahegh Indians in which he massacred Indian children and brought their females back to Jamestown for execution. |
| Percy's brutality towards Indian women and children points to the similarities in the ways the English treated Indians and their Irish subjects, whose women and children had also been massacred by English military commanders, a departure from the usual European code of warfare, under which civilians were understood to be off limits.  |
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| Pocahontas presents a special case of Indian womanhood reframed by the Anglo-Indian encounter. Early in the days of Captain John Smith's governance of Jamestown, Pocahontas was a frequent visitor to the fort. Smith credited her not only with saving his life, but with risking her father's displeasure to warn the English about an impending Powhatan attack. With Smith's return to England and the deterioration of Anglo-Indian relations into open warfare, Pocahontas seems to have played the role of cultural broker less frequently. Yet she remained important enough politically to both groups that Samuel Argall decided to kidnap her in 1613 and use her to ransom English prisoners and weapons. Powhatan responded slowly to English demands, embittering his daughter and probably facilitating her conversion to Christianity and marriage to John Rolfe. He never reconciled himself to her marriage, refusing either to set foot on English territory thereafter or to consent to another daughter's marriage to an Englishman. Despite its coercive foundation and Powhatan's sense of betrayal, Pocahontas's marriage to Rolfe brought about a peace in 1614 that survived longer than Pocahontas herself. Having adopted English clothing and converted to English religion, Pocahontas gave birth to a son and traveled to England to demonstrate the success of the Virginia Company's venture abroad. While in England, she met the king and queen and other members of the English aristocracy. She also crossed paths with John Smith, whom she apparently never forgave for his casual treatment of her father and herself. Ultimately, a respiratory disease prevented her from making the return trip to Virginia, and she died in Gravesend, England in 1617. Had she lived, she might have continued to be an important cultural broker and a mentor to her son, Thomas Rolfe. |
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| One of the women to cross the Atlantic under the Company's recruitment plan was Alice Richards, a twenty-five year old widow. Richards came highly recommended by the churchwarden of her London parish who claimed that, in the six years of her residence in St. James at Clarckenwell, "shee hathe demeaned herself in honest sorte & is a woman of an honest lyef & conversation." Richards was one of only three widows to arrive in this initial shipment of fifty-seven "maids." More typical of the age and experience of this pool of female migrants was Ann Jackson. Like many of the other women, Jackson was single and twenty years old. Born in Wiltshire, she was the daughter of a gardener and crossed the Atlantic in the company of her brother, John. Both Richards and Jackson likely began their lives in Virginia with clothing and bedding provided by the Company, including a petticoat, waistcoat, stockings, garters, smocks, gloves, a hat, an apron, two pairs of shoes, a towel, two head coifs, a crosscloth, a pair of sheets, and a rug. Both likely married within months of their arrival in autumn 1621, although it is not known whether either woman survived the Powhatan attack upon English settlements in 1622.  |
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