

## **How the Spanish Colonization Model Nearly Destroyed Early Jamestown: Misguided Views about American Indians**

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### **Abstract**

The English arrived in the New World during the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, fairly late compared to other European colonial powers. The Spanish empire was at the height of its glory, thus providing England with an attractive and enviable model. This paper will examine how the Spanish model influenced English colonization attempts in Jamestown, Virginia. Additionally, this paper argues that there were three essential ingredients for success based on the Spanish model: search for gold, conquer an American Indian “empire,” and protect the “naïve savages” from the brutal Spanish conquistadores. However, these goals were more detrimental than helpful to Jamestown and as a result, the colony almost didn’t survive. That conclusion will be drawn by analyzing a broad range of primary source material, including the manuscripts of English colonization supporters Sir Walter Raleigh, both Richard Hakluyts, and the Virginia Company, as well as the published essays of early Jamestown leader Captain John Smith. This paper contributes to two major shifts in recent scholarship on early Jamestown.

First, there has been a flood of knowledge in the last two decades regarding the understanding of Powhatan socio-political structure and culture compared to the ignorant attitudes of early historians towards American Indians. This meant that however much the English thought they could dominate the native people upon their arrival, the reality of their situation was quite different. Second, there has finally been recognition from scholars that the English were unable to emulate the Spanish model for the simple reason that the English landed in the Chesapeake Bay. The eventual success of Jamestown was not based on the Spanish model of conquest and mining gold, but on a different path of colonization which enabled the English to establish a permanent residence for their colonists.

**Keywords: Jamestown, American Indians, English**

### **1. Introduction**

The English arrived in the New World during the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, fairly late compared to other European colonial powers. The Spanish empire was at the height of its glory, thus providing England with an attractive and enviable model. The Spanish model influenced English colonization attempts in Virginia by providing three essential ingredients for success: to search for gold, conquer an American Indian “empire,” and protect the “naïve savages” from the brutal Spanish conquistadores. However, these goals were more detrimental than helpful to Jamestown because the Chesapeake Bay lacked gold mines, the Powhatan American Indians were not an established and centralized empire, and they already had prior knowledge of Europeans. Due to these unrealistic expectations, the colony suffered immensely and almost failed. An analysis of the manuscripts of English colonization supporters Sir Walter Raleigh and both Richard Hakluyts show how exactly the English tried to implement an imitation of the Spanish model. A number of recent scholars have also examined the English replication of the Spanish model. James Horn and April Lee Hatfield in particular have proven that the English were ultimately unsuccessful due to

their complete misunderstandings of the Powhatans. Lastly, Captain John Smith provided a counter-model in his writings, being one of the first to believe that the Spanish model could not work in Jamestown.

Two major shifts in recent scholarship on early Jamestown have taken place. First, there has been a flood of knowledge in the last two decades regarding the understanding of Powhatan socio-political structure and culture in comparison to the ignorant attitudes of early historians towards American Indians. This showed that however much the English thought they could dominate the native people upon their arrival, the reality of their situation was quite different. Second, there has finally been recognition from scholars that the English were unable to emulate the Spanish model for the simple reason that the Chesapeake Bay does not have the same resources as Central and South America. The eventual success of Jamestown was not based on the Spanish model of conquest and mining gold. Rather, the English needed to forge a different path of colonization which enabled them to establish a permanent residence for their colonists that was agrarian based.

## **2. The Spanish Model**

English misconceptions of the New World began with their perusal of Spanish conquistador literature. By the early 17th century, when England was eager to begin their exploration of the Americas, Spain had already been settled there for a century. This provided a model of colonization which English noblemen were very interested in trying to imitate. As historian April Lee Hatfield explains, “The Englishmen involved in the Virginia colony knew that when the Spanish had colonized the Caribbean, Mexico, and Peru, they found Native American systems for channeling labor and goods to indigenous leaders that the Spanish co-opted to their own advantage.”<sup>1</sup> It is easy to see why, based on such literature, potential English explorers had a preconceived notion of how to build an English colony based on New Spain. The conquistadores essentially arrived, deposed the native leaders, and installed Spanish governors, keeping the Indian tributary and political system intact. The Spanish model seemed appealing because it was simple and generated vast amounts of wealth for the Spanish king.

Unfortunately for the English, although the Spanish model was very appealing, it would prove to be nearly impossible to implement, largely due to misconceptions about the nature of the American Indians living in Virginia. The English had gone to Jamestown expecting to emulate and transplant the Spanish method of colonization in North America. They would come, conquer a large Indian empire (as the Spanish had done with the Aztecs and Incas), incorporate them into English society, use these Indians for labor and survival, and get filthy rich from all the natural resources present in their colony. Hatfield paints the following picture of what they expected to find: “English Virginians who read Spanish accounts, studied the Spanish use of Indian political and economic systems, and believed Chesapeake and Latin American Indians to be similar were prepared to find evidence of such indigenous empires in the Chesapeake.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, when the English colonists arrived, they brought their inaccurate ideas with them.

## **3. English Views on the Powhatan American Indians**

English assumptions then fell into two categories: that the Powhatan American Indians were the “empire” that they needed to conquer as the Spanish had or that the Powhatans were actually far less advanced than the English had expected and even rather “barbaric.” Either view pretty much neglected any attempt to really comprehend the Powhatan socio-political system. In fact, no clear understanding of the Powhatan political system and their social hierarchy would be fully examined by scholars until the 20th century. An examination of the views of the second camp of Englishmen who saw the Powhatans as “savages” is very useful in pointing out the contradictions of the first group who thought the Powhatan “empire” was the path to riches.

The Englishmen who disregarded the Powhatans as being uncivilized neglected to take note of their culture or socio-political structure, making premature judgments on their character. For example, Arthur Barlowe, a member of the original English expedition to Roanoke in 1584, wrote the following about the Algonquians he encountered: “Wee found the people most gentle, loving, and faithfull, void of all guile and treason...”<sup>3</sup> Barlowe described the Indians as naïve and peaceful, almost child-like in lacking the ability to bring harm to others. The truth was that the Chesapeake Bay Algonquians were an intelligent and fully war capable people. In fact, the Powhatans that the Jamestown settlers encountered were twice able to launch attacks on the English that were extensive enough to cause widespread injuries and deaths. The first attack on the Jamestown fort crippled English defenses for a long period of time, showing the strength and organization of the Indians.

Not only did the English settlers in the Chesapeake misjudge the Indians they met, but they were also completely ignorant of their culture and lifestyle. Gabriel Archer, one of the original colonists sent to Jamestown in 1607, wrote of English encounters with the Indians. However, his account was very selective and historians are unsure of the accuracy of his tale. For example, Archer insisted that the English met with the Powhatan, the leader of the Algonquian group of the same name, when in reality it was the chief's brother they met. Archer also spoke at length about the Indians' food and described how an Indian guide "led us to their houses, shewed us the growing of their Corne & the maner of setting it, gave us Tobacco, wallnutes, malberyes, strawberries, and Respises."<sup>4</sup> This description, while very interesting, highlights the selective nature of Archer's work because he talks about food for ages, but doesn't mention, for example, the details of the discussion between the Englishmen and Powhatan's brother.

This perception of the American Indian as a "naïve savage" carried over from the written accounts of the men who lived in Jamestown to American historians for over two centuries. American Indians were for many years ignored in scholastic writing and when they were mentioned, their complex culture was disregarded. After the eventual success of Jamestown as an English colony in the 1620s, scholars paint us a picture of colonial life without any American Indian contributions. The clearest example of this is in W.W. Henry's essay from 1894, where the Powhatans are not mentioned at all in a piece of literature describing the earliest English colonial life in Virginia.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, we see that writers during the 17th to 19th centuries fail to portray the complexity of Powhatan life or even describe them beyond English perceptions. Early American history specialist James Merrell, comments on the lack of scholarship regarding American Indian history as well as the inaccuracy of the description of Indians in the annals of early American history. He tells us, for example, that many authors wrote about the "wilderness" ruled by "Powhatan... [the] leading sachem of the many small tribes of the Chesapeake Bay area."<sup>6</sup> The term "wilderness" suggests that Virginia was still uninhabited by people, although the American Indians had been living and farming the land of the Chesapeake for centuries. We know today that the Powhatan of the Chesapeake Bay Algonquians was as powerful as any European monarch, especially in military matters, showing us the ignorance of early writing on American Indian socio-political structure.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Modern Scholars Begin to Write a Proper History of the American Indians**

Beginning in the 20th century, we see more of an interest in American Indian history from some scholars, although their numbers are small and they are limited to anthropologists such as James Mooney and William Fenton. Mooney's seminal work, "The Powhatan Confederacy," published in 1907, is crucial in examining the shift in how historians have viewed Powhatan socio-political structure. He uses specific figures from Captain John Smith and William Strachey, two important men who settled in Jamestown during its initial period under the Virginia Company, to describe the extent of the Powhatans' villages. Mooney explains that the various Algonquian groups in the Chesapeake Bay region were ruled by the Powhatan, Wahunsonacock, who was a "chief of chiefs," in a confederate system put in place not too long before the arrival of the English. His view on this political structure is essentially that "the Powhatan confederacy was founded on conquest and despotic authority."<sup>8</sup> Mooney's importance lies in his recognition of an actual political organization in Powhatan life whereas previous early American historians had dismissed the "bands of Indians" as lacking structure. However, a further examination later will show how Mooney's reference to a "Powhatan confederacy" was still a perpetuation of English misconceptions based on the ever attractive Spanish model. Mooney's other important contribution was in his acknowledgment of the prior knowledge the Powhatans had about the Europeans. The English were not the first Europeans that these Indians had encountered.<sup>9</sup>

Although Mooney began a move toward an analysis of the Powhatans' political atmosphere, there was still a lot of to be done in writing an unbiased and accurate history of the socio-political conventions of this unique group as shown in William Fenton's work. Published in 1953 and titled "American Indian and White Relations," Fenton's call to arms asked early American scholars to piece together a history of the American Indians, including the Powhatan people. He marks a difference from previous generations of scholars because he specifically emphasized a focus on "Indian-white relations in eastern North America before 1830."<sup>10</sup> This ultimately set the stage for anthropologists and historians to begin writing the story of the Powhatans by studying their socio-political system and institutions.

A history of the Powhatan people really began to gain momentum in the 1980s with the work of scholars such as Helen Rountree and much more about their socio-political organization was finally uncovered. In *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia* published in 1989, Rountree goes much further in depth than Mooney did in "The Powhatan Confederacy," dedicating more than half the book to describing their family life, social structure, and political

system. In fact, she directly disputes Mooney's work by saying that "Powhatan's organization was a paramount chiefdom, not a confederacy." This meant that each Powhatan village was not loosely allied with one another, supreme in their own paramount sovereignty, but rather they all answered to the Powhatan ruler, Wahunsonacock. Although each Indian town had a leader called a werowance, they all were under the jurisdiction of Wahunsonacock. Rountree explains that the werowances had autonomy in their villages, such as the power to punish criminals, so long as they paid a tribute to Wahunsonacock and followed his rules. His power was not absolute, but it was still immense. For example, Rountree describes how Wahunsonacock would strategically uproot and move entire Powhatan villages if he felt it would benefit him. She gives the example of a conquered people forced to relocate closer to the Powhatan's town so he could more easily ensure their obedience.<sup>11</sup> Here, an in-depth analysis of Powhatan political customs is finally analyzed. Yet the complete picture of the Powhatan socio-political system won't be painted until the 21st century.

The full complexity of Powhatan socio-political structure is finally explored in the 21st century with scholars such as James Horn and Martin Gollivan. Gollivan continues the exploration of political complexity in his essay "Powhatan's Werowocomoco," published in 2007. He continues the argument started by Rountree about the local political sovereignty of the werowance by stating that they "dominate political relations by controlling military power, surplus state production, exchange, and ideology." Gollivan then elaborates on Wahunsonacock's power specifically, which had been dismissed earlier by previous scholars, explaining that "by 1607 [his] influence was felt across an area stretching from the James to the Potomac and from the Fall Line to the Eastern Shore."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the modern criteria used to evaluate states are applied to the Powhatans. They had a government consisting of a powerful central authority, borders marking their territory from that of their enemies, a legal system, and a justice system to punish those who broke the rules.

In Horn's *A Land As God Made It*, published in 2005, the social hierarchy of the Powhatans is fully explored. Not only did the Powhatans have an advanced political structure, but there was a class system in place in their society. Their social classes and distinctions were shown in the way they dressed and wore their hair as well as where they lived in town. We know that Powhatan himself ranked at the top of the social pyramid and directly under him were the various local werowances. Right under the werowances, were priests or shamans: men who held considerable power due to a culture that was very superstitious and placed emphasis on reading omens. Under the priests were warriors, who were the able bodied males of the town that had undergone a maturation ceremony.<sup>13</sup> Women and children were assumed to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy because they didn't have any outright political authority, although they could influence their male relatives.

## **5. The Effects of English Misconceptions on Scholarly Writing**

These details about the social hierarchy of the Powhatans and the political authority of Wahunsonacock and his various werowances were only fully explored within the last five decades. This means that up until recently, a number of false assumptions that the English at Jamestown made about the Powhatans continued to perpetuate into our society. The most notable of these would be the misguided belief that the "Powhatan Confederacy" was one to rival the Aztec and Incan empires in the south. We have already seen how the English lacked a clear understanding of the Powhatans' socio-political structure, but they also extrapolated their own hopes onto the Indians. As Hatfield explained, "English hopes of finding an exploitable tribute system in North America encouraged them to accept Powhatan's boasts uncritically rather than recognize them as a familiar diplomatic tool."<sup>14</sup> Here, Hatfield was describing the English acceptance of Wahunsonacock's claims to power and authority throughout Virginia without really examining the issue. Certainly, Wahunsonacock was a powerful Indian king who did hold authority over a large number of groups, but the truth was that he was far from the Aztec ruler Montezuma.

The English hope of finding an Indian empire to conquer and exploit spilled over into historians' accounts for years to come, as exemplified in Mooney's coining of the term "the Powhatan Confederacy." Mooney's choice in words might have stemmed from earlier English colonial attempts at seeing Wahunsonacock as more than he really was. "Confederacy" implied that there were many different groups of Indians besides the Powhatans who lived under the protection of Wahunsonacock by paying him large tributes in copper or corn. While modern historians have confirmed the tributes paid to the Powhatan king, it is doubtful that they were as high or as exploitative as the ones that the Aztec emperor demanded during the time shortly before the arrival of Hernan Cortes and his conquistadores. A number of differences between the Powhatans and the Aztecs should have stood out right away to the English. The Carolina Algonquians were not nearly as centralized and as well organized as the Aztecs. Wahunsonacock's tribute system was not one intended to be a "redistributive chiefdom" with "regular and fairly frequent collection and distribution of food and valuables by a chief," as the Aztecs had.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, slavery was

not widespread in Virginia like it was in the Aztec empire; instead, labor in the Powhatan groups was mainly divided among family and village units.

The reason behind the Spanish success in conquering the Aztec and Inca empires rested heavily on the organization and advancement of these two powerful American Indian groups as well as the numerous mineral resources available in their lands. Hatfield explains this best in saying, "Because the Aztec and Inca empires were highly centralized, by conquering their political and economic cores, the Spanish had been able to use existing political and economic structures to gain control over large numbers of people and their labor."<sup>16</sup> The Spanish colonies were so successful in part because they were able to subdue an Indian population that was fairly advanced in its socio-economic structure. Thus, the Spaniards had all of their necessities provided for and a group of Indian laborers to produce goods. And of course, Central and South America were densely populated with gold, silver, and other mineral wealth. A large part of Spanish success came from forceful and violent take-over of Indian towns and using the natives as slaves to mine gold and silver.

## 6. "Gold Rush Fever"

Due to the appeal of gold, the English had "gold rush fever," mistakenly believing that somewhere in the Chesapeake Bay region, there just had to be gold that was waiting to be found. Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the first Englishmen to really drum up interest in the colonization venture, genuinely thought that the mineral wealth of Peru and Mexico would translate into all of the Americas. He spoke of an elaborate plan to mine incredible amounts of gold, silver, and pearls in the New World, which would greatly enhance the English Royal Treasury. Raleigh's obsession led him to wrongly assume that because the Spanish had found gold in Peru, the English were also bound to find gold in Guiana.<sup>17</sup> Another of the early Englishmen who supported an effort to establish a colony in the New World was Richard Hakluyt the Elder (also known as the lawyer). He wrote of gold, silver, copper, and iron in his essay, suggesting that members of the Virginia colony be assigned to the task of mining these minerals.<sup>18</sup> However, despite the hopes and dreams of these English colonizers, Jamestown did not have the gold and silver reserves that were present in Central and South America.

The English did not find out about the lack of mineral wealth in the Chesapeake Bay until after their arrival, but they continued to actively seek it. This desire to find gold was encouraged by the Virginia Company, which ran the English colonization expedition, and had a lot to lose if there were no valuable revenues to be made on the Jamestown settlement. Many investors in the colony expected a good return so it was no surprise that the Virginia Company was profit driven as seen from the instructions it gave to its leaders in 1609. The Records of the Virginia Company show that it gave four ways to enrich the colony: "the first was to discover the south sea or royal mines, the second was by trade, the third was by tribute, and not until the fourth and final method did they mention the labor" of Jamestown's residents.<sup>19</sup> It was highly possible that knowledge of the Spanish model motivated the first method encouraged by the Virginia Company to obtain wealth. The South Sea was a reference to the long sought after route to the Far East that would have given the English access to the silk, spices, and porcelain available in Asia. Most notably, a majority of the Jamestown colonists did not contribute to the work that needed to be done to keep the colony running (such as planting and harvesting crops and fixing buildings). Rather, many were "slaves in hope of recompences; there was no talke, no hope, no worke, but dig gold, wash gold, refine gold, loade gold, such a bruit of gold."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, this desperate search for gold led to the colonists loading "a drunken ship with so much gilded durt" and sending that to England, hoping that there was a bit of gold amongst the pile of soil and ore.<sup>21</sup>

However, despite repeated failures to find gold, the English continued to try to adhere to the three lessons learned from the Spanish in order to build their colony. They did not give up their hope for gold or their belief that once they subdued and conquered the Powhatans, they'd have an Indian empire to exploit. The first Englishman to see that a different track needed to be tried in Virginia was Captain John Smith, who wanted to produce a self-sufficient colony starting in Jamestown. Smith alone, of the original Virginia Council, sought to diverge from the Spanish model after discovering the lack of gold and observing the political structure of the Powhatans. He wrote an angry letter to the Virginia Company when they sent Captain Christopher Newport back to Jamestown to return with gold as an ultimatum. Smith believed that the Company was wasting time and the valuable resources of the colony in searching for something which a number of English colonists now confirmed did not exist in Virginia. In the same piece of writing, Smith urged the focus of the Company to shift to planting and producing cash crops for England.<sup>22</sup>

## 7. The Contributions of Captain John Smith

Smith was also the only colonist to write about the Powhatan culture in terms of its socio-political structure and he provided many of the details which have allowed historians today to be able to reconstruct an accurate picture of Chesapeake Algonquian life. He included a section titled, "Of the manner of the Virginians Government," which explained how the many Algonquian groups lived under the rule of the Powhatan. In this section, Smith described how Wahunsonacock ruled as well as his laws and punishments.<sup>23</sup> By looking at how Smith wrote about the Powhatans, differences between them and the Aztecs and Incas become apparent. For example, Wahunsonacock did not rule as the emperor Montezuma did. He lacked that type of absolute authority and the tributes that the smaller Algonquian tribes paid to him were certainly not of the same variety as that of the Aztecs. If the English had successfully conquered the Powhatans, it did not mean that neighboring Indian tribes would necessarily also submit because Wahunsonacock did not have that much power.<sup>24</sup>

Smith stood out as the first to realize that the English could not follow the Spanish model to either search for gold, conquer an Indian "empire," or win the Indians over to join English society. England had unfortunately landed in an area where there was no gold to be found, where the Indian king did not maintain a huge and wealthy empire, and the natives already knew of Europeans. He explained in *The Generall Historie*:

It was the Spanyards good hap to happen in those parts where were infinite numbers of people, who had... victualls at all times... they had the use of gold and silver... so that, what the Spanyard got was chiefly the spoyle and pillage of those Countrey people and not the labours of their owne hands.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the Spanish model worked because of one prerequisite: their explorers had landed in an area ripe with gold and an Indian empire that once conquered could be easily exploited to channel this mineral wealth into Philip II's coffers.

So Smith offered an easy solution to the Virginia Company and its investors to ensure the success of Jamestown. Firstly, everyone needed to realize that "we chanced in a Land even as God made it, where we found onely an idle, improvident, scattered people, ignorant of the knowledge of gold or silver, or any commodities." The English needed to realize that they did not land in the Chesapeake Bay, not Mexico and Peru, and the Spanish model was of little use there because of the distinct differences in resources and people. Secondly, the Powhatans needed to be "subdued" and the colonists had to "first make provision how to live of themselves, ere they can bring to perfection the commodities of the Country."<sup>26</sup> Here, Smith suggested that the colonists learn how to become self-sufficient in producing their food and other necessities, as well as learn how to deal with the Indians.

Much like the younger Hakluyt, Smith championed the building of industries, specifically manufacturing commodities to be exported, to bring in revenue to Jamestown. He listed "pitch, tarre, sope-ashes, Rosen, Flax, Glasse, and such like... Iron and Copper... Wine, Canvas, and Salt... Silkes and Velvets."<sup>27</sup> He likely based these ideas on Hakluyt, who suggested that even if the settlers could find gold, Jamestown would be more valuable if luxury commodities could be produced there and then shipped back to England. This would save on costs and help build up the English economy.<sup>28</sup> Smith also grew increasingly frustrated with the "gentlemen" in Jamestown who were incapable of farming. In his letter to the Company, he pleaded for them to send over "Carpenters, husbandmen, gardiners, fisher man, blacksmiths, masons, and diggers of trees, roots," instead of more young noblemen who could not be induced to get their hands dirty and grow some corn.<sup>29</sup> Had the Virginia Company taken these suggestions into consideration instead of blindly searching for gold to the extent that they were collecting "gilded durt," the inhabitants of Jamestown might not have suffered as much as they did.

## 8. Conclusion

It was clear after a short period of time that the English settlers at Jamestown could not successfully follow the Spanish model of colonization. Yet they continued to hope that they could emulate New Spain. The Virginia Company also continued to foolishly search for gold and the South Sea so they could reach Asia. Rather than establishing a self-sufficient settlement, the colonists continued to exploit the Powhatans for food, believing that the Indians were too naïve to understand how unequal the trade terms were. Several periods of starvation and countless deaths plagued Jamestown for years because the English were desperately trying to copy the Spanish model. However, the differences between the economies and Indians of the two regions should have signaled to the English that a different form of colonization had to be implemented for Jamestown to succeed.

Smith said as much in his criticisms of the Virginia Company, “if in the search of those Countries we had hapned where wealth had beene, we had as surely had it as obedience and contribution, but if we have overskipped it, we will not envie them that shall find it.”<sup>30</sup> Here, Smith was arguing the foolishness of the Company’s refusal to see that they had not chosen a location brimming with gold or an easily exploitable American Indian population. Rather, they had landed in an area suitable for agriculture and other types of production. Smith believed that the English needed to utilize that, start farming, and realize that the Indians could not be exploited forever. Eventually, some of Smith’s ideas were adopted and revised by later governors, notably Thomas Dale and Lord de la Warr. However, Jamestown’s salvation ultimately lay in the growth of tobacco as a cash crop by John Rolfe.<sup>31</sup> And even that was not enough – by 1625, just eighteen years after the Virginia Company had landed its first ships in the Chesapeake Bay, their charter was revoked and Jamestown became a royal colony under the control of the British crown. More than one half of the original inhabitants from the colony were dead due to disease, starvation, or American Indian attacks. Perhaps the fate of the initial Jamestown settlement would have been different if the English had understood earlier that the Spanish model was impracticable in their situation.

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