

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 from Library of Congress.

Long before the arrival of Captain John Smith to Virginia, about 12,000 Native Americans, part of the Powhatan Confederacy, lived along the coastal plains. The Confederacy was composed 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, Chief Wahunsonacock, or Wahunsunacawh, called Powhatan by Captain John Smith, united the tribes to form the Confederacy.

Chief Powhatan regarded the English settlers suspiciously, as he had previously regarded Spanish settlers. 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 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. Children of defeated tribes were drowned 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 his 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.

"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..." – John Smith, "Letter to Queen Anne regarding Pocahontas" (1616)

Powhatan's brother continues the fight

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

Powhatan's brother, Opechancanough, was determined to continue the fight. On Good Friday 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 peoples 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

Many cultural differences separated the Native Americans and the colonists. The most important contrast was each side's differing view of land ownership. 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, who 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.

Quiz

- 1 Why does the author include the section "No-man's land"?
- (A) to explain the contrasting beliefs that caused the English and Native Americans to fight
 - (B) to describe how the English defeated the Native Americans and took over their land
 - (C) to reveal the reasons why the settlers did not want to share land with Native Americans
 - (D) to provide reasons to support the claim that Native Americans were suspicious of the English
- 2 What is the connection between the article's introduction [paragraphs 1-3] and the final section, "No-man's land"?
- (A) The introduction describes the organization of the Native American tribes; the conclusion describes the organization of the settlers' colonies.
 - (B) The introduction describes the initial relationship between the English and the Native Americans; the conclusion explains why there was conflict between them.
 - (C) The introduction describes the reasons the Native Americans and English fought; the conclusion explains the results of the war between the two groups.
 - (D) The introduction describes how the English met the Native Americans; the conclusion explains the reasons the two groups went to war.
- 3 According to the article, which of the following people would MOST likely have perspectives in AGREEMENT with one another?
- (A) John Smith and Chief Powhatan
 - (B) Pocahontas and Opechancanough
 - (C) Queen Anne and John Smith
 - (D) Opechancanough and Chief Powhatan

4 Complete the sentence.

The author of the article is MOST concerned with _____

- (A) convincing the reader that the English were to blame for weakening Native American tribes.
- (B) describing John Smith's positive and negative experiences with Native Americans in the New World.
- (C) educating the reader about interactions between settlers and Native Americans.
- (D) revealing the true relationship between Captain John Smith and Pocahontas.