

The Colonial Virginia Frontier and Native American Diplomacy

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TOP: John Smith's "A Map of Virginia: With a Description of the Countrey, the Commodities, People, Government and Religion" (1612). Image: Wikimedia. SECOND: Painting of "John Smith Saved by Pocahontas" by Alonzo Chappel, around 1865, currently on display in the Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, Virginia.

Telling the story of Native Americans and colonial Virginians is a complicated challenge clouded by centuries of mythology. The history of early settlement is dominated by the story of a preteen Pocahontas saving the life of a courageous John Smith, the English explorer who made his way to America to help govern the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia. Later, as a young woman, she is captured and held hostage by the English. This story ends with her becoming Christian, marrying English tobacco planter John Rolfe and traveling to England, where she died. Popular media portray Pocahontas as a fun cartoon character swimming in waterfalls, having conversations with animals, and becoming involved in a romantic relationship with the dashing John Smith. It is no wonder that Americans are uninformed about Virginia's indigenous people. Even when we try, it is nearly impossible to shed the preconceived notions that shape the way we tell these stories.

It is also important to understand that Virginia Native Americans were not all the same. Pocahontas, her father Powhatan, and her uncle Opechancanough figure so prominently in the Englishman's story of settling Jamestown and the wars of 1622 and 1644 (what the English referred to as "massacres"). They do not represent the rich cultural variety of Virginia's Native people, however. The coastal people we now call Powhatans were actually dozens of different peoples surrounded by more independent groups. The Native American nations who engaged with Virginians by the middle of the 18th century stretched from the Ohio River Valley to the western lands of Kentucky to the frontiers of the Carolinas. We often refer to these nations as tribes today, but each had independence. They dealt with other American Indian nations and with the European nations who were settling in North America. The story of the Native people who came in contact with colonial Virginians is a complicated and layered one.

Speeches by Native Americans reveal their story

A large part of the challenge we face in understanding it is due to the sources available to historians. Those sources are almost exclusively European documents. They tell us how Europeans interpreted American Indian actions, and they are clouded with the European assumption that Native society was savage and flawed. Increasingly, however, historians are uncovering the larger story of Native Americans and their way of life from the documents, particularly translations of Native American speeches. It is a story of varied peoples with different interests pursuing the political goals of their own nations.

Take for example the Brafferton Indian School in Williamsburg, Virginia. The institution was established so that "Western Indians" could study Christianity. The hope on the part of the founders was that the students would return to their nations and act as agents of "civilization" and Christianization among their people.

The English had trouble filling the school with students. Nevertheless, young men from many Indian nations attended. Some tribes sent children for a specific purpose. While the English hoped to create agents for change among the American Indians, the Indians hoped to develop go-betweens or mediators between their people and their white neighbors.

Student becomes negotiator for his people

One young man, who came to be known as John Nettles, was sent by the Catawba tribe to Brafferton in the 1760s. He seemed to be a model student, yet when he returned to his people, the English were disappointed to see him readopt the cultural ways of the Catawbas. Still, the Catawbas teased Nettles for his Bible reading, his preference for English clothes, and his love of European dancing. But Nettles and his English education served the Catawbas well. For nearly 40 years he was the Catawbas' translator, negotiator and go-between.

Such work was constant. The Nottoways, Iroquois, Cherokees, Catawbas and Shawnees sent frequent diplomatic missions to Williamsburg. In August 1751, for example, the Cherokees were in Williamsburg for at least a week negotiating a trade treaty with Virginia. The discussions went well, but rumors circulated that the Nottoways were seeking to ambush the Cherokees to take revenge for the murder of seven Nottoway young men years earlier.

The situation became tense toward the end of the Cherokee visit, when the Nottoways arrived in Williamsburg. On that morning, the Cherokees made preparations to arm themselves and meet their enemies, but several Virginia gentlemen apparently acted as mediators. The two groups met on the Market Square. After a series of negotiations, they concluded a peace agreement. The day that began with the threat of open conflict ended in peace.

War, relationships affect many tribal groups

These interchanges made for a constantly shifting landscape for American Indians. By the 18th century, trade goods were critical to Native culture. Diplomacy and negotiations made sure that guns, gunpowder, steel axes and knives, iron pots, blankets, cloth and other essentials were available to them. By controlling portions of that trade, a nation could make itself more powerful and influential than its neighbors.

These relationships became even more complicated during the 1750s, when the British and French vied with each other to dominate the Ohio River Valley. History books declare this a war against the French and the Indians, but there was not just one unified American Indian group. Diplomatic relationships stretched across many Native peoples. Each had their own set of policy objectives intended not to support one European nation or the other, but rather to improve the condition of their own particular nations.

It is also critical to understand that these relationships were personal. A story told by the Mingo tribal leader known to whites as Captain Logan describes the experience of Native Americans as well as European and African American settlers as they came in contact with each other on the frontier of Virginia. Logan fed and clothed white Virginians even during the French and Indian War. His affection for whites caused him to be singled out by his own people. When white settlers killed his family, however, he took his revenge by killing white settlers.

Betrayal, revenge undermine cooperation

Similar stories of frontier cooperation and betrayal were told over and over again among groups from 1607 into the 19th century. Sometimes it is an American Indian narrative. Sometimes it is a European or African American narrative. If we look carefully, Logan's story tells us a great deal about the experience on the colonial Virginia frontier. It shows that the relationships among people did not have to be hostile. Throughout the period,

people of various cultures lived close to each other. They helped each other, traded with each other, and forged advantageous alliances with each other. It was a relatively small world. People knew each other, called each other by name, and conducted personal relationships in a face-to-face world.

But Logan's revenge resulted in a crisis. Some Shawnees protected white traders living in their country. The Delawares living in the area owed their allegiance to the Six Nations of the Iroquois, and the Iroquois instructed the Delawares to leave and avoid the conflict. It was a clear statement to militant Mingos and Shawnees that there would be no help from the Iroquois or their allies.

Constant pressure from westward migration

The governor of Pennsylvania sent militia to attack Mingo and Shawnee villages in 1774. Virginia's colonial forces pressed into Shawnee territory until the Shawnees were forced to negotiate a peace. Among other things, the settlement required them to give up their hunting rights in Kentucky, revealing yet another consistent factor of the relationships between European and Native peoples: unrelenting pressure in the face of European migration and hunger for western lands.

It is easy to jump ahead in history to the early 19th century, when President Andrew Jackson and Americans forced the removal of American Indian nations. Today, it seems obvious that Indian removal was part of British and later United States Indian policy. But when we examine colonial Virginia, we must understand that the outcome was not obvious to the players at the time. The Native American nations tried to use personal and political negotiations to face the difficult challenges presented to them by European settlers.

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Quiz

- 1 The central idea of the article is developed by:
- (A) explaining why much of American history is told from the perspective of white settlers
 - (B) describing how white settlers attempted to build relationships with Native American tribes
 - (C) explaining who benefited from the interactions between the Native Americans and the European settlers
 - (D) describing different interactions between white settlers and various members of Native American tribes
- 2 Which of the following details from the article BEST supports the claim that Native Americans worked hard to negotiate with European settlers?
- (A) The hope on the part of the founders was that the students would return to their nations and act as agents of “civilization” and Christianization among their people.
 - (B) By the 18th century, trade goods were critical to Native culture. Diplomacy and negotiations made sure that guns, gunpowder, steel axes and knives, iron pots, blankets, cloth and other essentials were available to them.
 - (C) Throughout the period, people of various cultures lived close to each other. They helped each other, traded with each other, and forged advantageous alliances with each other.
 - (D) The Native American nations tried to use personal and political negotiations to face the difficult challenges presented to them by European settlers.
- 3 According to the article, many Native American tribes tried to do what was best for their own people. Which paragraph in the section "War, relationships affect many tribal groups" BEST supports the idea outlined above?

- 4 Which of these sentences would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) The English struggled to fill the Brafferton Indian School in Williamsburg, Virginia.
 - (B) Native Americans came to rely heavily on goods that were traded to them by European settlers.
 - (C) Retellings of relationships between Native Americans and Europeans is usually told from the perspective of the white settlers.
 - (D) John Nettles was teased for his enjoyment of the things he learned from white settlers when he returned to his tribe.