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Historic Narrative - Section 9

The End of Smith's Sojourn in Virginia

One benefit of the voyage for Smith's men was that they had avoided the worst of the sickly season at Jamestown, where disease and poor sanitation had taken its usual toll. When Smith was elected president on September 10, 1608, he instituted a campaign of cleanup and repair. He had the fort rebuilt and enlarged, and also ordered the construction of another fort on the south side of the James River. Earthen remnants of that stronghold—the oldest-surviving English structure in Virginia—are located in present-day Surry County, on a site open to the public called Smith's Fort Plantation.

The settlers anticipated the imminent arrival of the "second supply." The fleet, led by Christopher Newport, appeared in mid-October with seventy more colonists and provisions that Smith considered inadequate. In addition, Newport proposed to the council that he lead an expedition up the James River to look for mines in the land of the Monacans. Smith thought the time would be better spent in preparing for winter by gathering food stores and also in producing commodities for export to England. The council overruled Smith.

Newport also informed the council that the London Company had decided to stage a "coronation" ceremony for Powhatan at Jamestown, and had sent a large number of gifts for the chief in the name of the king. The purpose of the coronation was to recognize Powhatan's leadership of his own people as well as to symbolize his submission to King James I. Smith led a band of men to Werowocomoco to issue the invitation.

Smith found Powhatan absent, but the town's inhabitants entertained him and his party while they waited. When Powhatan arrived the next day, he scoffed at the invitation. According to Smith, Powhatan said, "If your king have sent me presents, I also am a king, and this my land, 8 daies I will stay [at Werowocomoco] to receive them. Your father [Newport] is to come to me, not I to him, nor yet to your fort." Powhatan then dismissed Smith.

Newport agreed to Powhatan's demands, and the gifts were carried to Werowocomoco. The ceremony proved a fiasco for the English. After presenting Powhatan with the gifts (copper, a basin and pitcher, and a bed and bedclothes), Newport attempted to get the chief to kneel to receive his crown. Powhatan refused, despite pleadings and demonstrations, but finally, with men "leaning hard" on his shoulders to bend him slightly, Newport got the crown on his head. In return, Powhatan gave Newport a pair of his old shoes and a cloak. He refused, however, to assist Newport in his expedition into Monacan country beyond sending a guide with him.

In this episode, Powhatan clearly showed his awareness of English strategy. He had made the English come to him, he had accepted the crown largely on his own terms, and he had accepted

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gifts as the tribute of the English. He had demonstrated that he was indeed the “king” in his own land.

Newport’s journey to the interior proved as frustrating as the coronation. He took a hundred and twenty men with him, leaving eighty with Smith at the fort. Newport marched some forty or fifty miles beyond the falls and visited a couple of Monacan towns, but he had no better luck at finding gold mines or the Northwest Passage than had Smith. When Newport returned, his men were out of food; Newport had not been able to trade for corn, either.

Meanwhile, Smith busied himself organizing the remaining men to produce export goods. A “Glasse House” had been constructed about a mile from Jamestown, where German and Polish artisans made samples of glass. Other men produced pitch, tar, soap ashes, wainscot, and clapboard. Smith also organized his own expedition to the land of the independent Chickahominy to trade for corn. The native people refused to trade until Smith threatened them with military force. Smith eventually obtained several hundred bushels of corn and returned to the fort.

Factional divisions had intensified since Newport’s arrival, and Smith gave his side of the story in a long letter that he sent to the London Company. According to him, Newport’s sailors were hoarding supplies intended for the colonists as well as carrying on private trade with the Powhatan. Newport and Ratcliffe were promoting dissention and undermining his presidency. The Company’s plans, too, were unrealistic. Although gold and other valuables might be discovered eventually, the colony needed to be seen as a long-term investment rather than as a get-rich-quick scheme. What was needed was large numbers of colonists to farm, build houses and towns, and secure territory from the native peoples. His voyages had proven to his satisfaction, he wrote, that Virginia had the advantage “over the most pleasant places of Europe, Asia, Africa, or America, for large and pleasant navigable rivers; heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for mans habitation being of our constitutions, were it fully manured and inhabited by an industrious people.” He also described the superabundance of natural resources and useful flora and fauna available for industrious settlers. Only a few thousand native people, he wrote, would have to share the resources. Commerce in goods other than gold or silver would be the salvation of the colony.

To accompany his letter, Smith enclosed the map he had been laboring over for months, which distilled the information he had gathered on his voyages from both his own observations and the descriptions given by local inhabitants. The map showed, as he wrote, the “way of the mountaines and current of the rivers, with their severall turnings, bayes, shoules, Isles, Inlets, and creekes, the breadth of the waters, the distances of places and such like.” Smith’s map would be published in 1612 and form the basis for his 1624 map as well. It established beyond challenge that the English had explored and “claimed” the Bay. It served the immigrants to come, helping them establish new colonies such as William Claiborne’s 1632 settlement on Kent Island and Lord Baltimore’s Maryland colony in 1634.

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Once Newport departed, Smith faced in December 1608 the problem of provisioning the colony for the winter. First, he took two boats to the Nansemond, but they agreed to trade for corn only when he threatened force. Next, he tried the upstream James River towns all the way to the Appomattox River, but found the towns virtually deserted and the people willing to trade only for small quantities of corn. Obviously, Smith concluded, Powhatan was trying to starve the colony and would have to be confronted. Powhatan sent word that he would provision the English if Smith would agree to build him an “English house” at Werowocomoco and visit him there, bringing a cannon, copper, beads, and swords and a grindstone as presents. Having no intention of arming Powhatan, Smith dispatched Richard Savage and four of the Germans overland to begin work on the house, and then followed with forty-six well-armed men, the shallop, and two barges on December 29.

By December 30, the party “lodged at Kecoughtan,” as Smith later recounted in *The Generall Historie*. Because a storm kept him and his men there for the next six or seven days, the English celebrated Christmas amid the hospitality of the native people, “where we were never more merry, nor fed on more plenty of good oysters, fish, flesh, wildfowl, and good bread, nor ever had better fires in England than in the dry, warm, smoky houses of Kecoughtan.” Thus Smith wrote in the first description of Christmas in English America.

The weather was bitterly cold, almost as chilly as the reception Smith received on January 12, 1609, at Werowocomoco after a two-week voyage down the James River and up the Pamunkey (York). Powhatan denied having sent for him and asked when he would leave. He looked with disdain on the trade goods Smith had brought and said that although he had no corn to spare, he would part with some at the exorbitant rate of one bushel per sword. Years later, when Smith reported the conversation between the two men, it was clear that Powhatan had finally discovered the truth: that the Englishmen intended to stay and take over his country. Smith, he said, had failed to acknowledge his authority even though the English had been incorporated into the Powhatan polity, and although they only survived because the Powhatan people fed them. He had treated Smith better than any of his other chiefs, and yet Smith refused to obey him, would not give him the arms he asked for, and had come to meet him with a party of armed men, not as a friend. Smith, who would hardly even obey Newport, told Powhatan that he could only subordinate himself to King James I. He could not be Powhatan’s subject but could be his friend—not that he needed to do so for food, for the English could always take what they wanted by force—but because he desired to live in peace. He said that as a sign of trust he would put his arms aside the next day and continue negotiations. Powhatan rose and left, and the two men never saw each other again.

Smith had been warned at Warraskoyack, where he and his men stopped en route to Werowocomoco, that Powhatan intended to kill him. He now concluded that the report was true. He decided to kidnap Powhatan the next day and escape with as much corn as he could carry. First, however, he had to force his way through a crowd that had formed around Powhatan’s residence (probably not the English-style house; it is not known whether it was ever completed).

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He then had to wait for the tide to turn. In the meantime, the people feasted him, gave him presents including some corn, and generally attempted to delay him. Smith had his men stay armed and alert until the time was right, and then the English departed.

Instead of returning immediately to Jamestown, Smith sailed upstream to Pamunkey territory, where Opechancanough, Powhatan's kinsman, was the leader. By the time he arrived, Opechancanough of course had heard all about what had transpired at Werowocomoco and had formulated a plan of his own. While trading with Smith for corn, he had several hundred men quietly surround the English. Smith responded first by challenging Opechancanough to single combat, then by grabbing his hairlock and holding a pistol to his chest while the Englishmen escaped to their boats. Once all were aboard, Smith released Opechancanough. Now all was clear: the alliance was dissolved and the English were at war with the Powhatan in the first of several bloody conflicts (this one continued until 1614).

Smith arrived at Jamestown with enough corn to sustain the colony for a while, but found that his friend Matthew Scrivener and several others had drowned when their boat overturned. The settlers were hungry, frightened, depressed, and on the verge of mutiny. Some had already mutinied. Two of the Germans assigned to build Powhatan's English house had gone over to the native people, relieving the fort of arms and other supplies in Smith's absence and encouraging several other colonists to join them. Smith tried to put everyone to work, declaring that "he that will not worke shall not eate," but some of the men refused to cooperate because planting and fishing were beneath their social status. They also knew that any surplus or profit from their labors would go to the investors in England.

Smith dispersed the settlers in the spring, sending almost half of them to various locations up and downstream. This move reduced the mortality rate that summer, although it exposed more colonists to attack by the Powhatan warriors. But the situation remained desperate, with the colony riddled with factions, with hunger still a problem, and with the native people uncooperative or hostile.

In England, meanwhile, the Virginia Company had absorbed Smith's letter as well as other reports and had arrived at a new, harsh policy regarding the native people. Seeing them as devil worshipers in thrall to their "priests" and as the downtrodden subjects of a despotic Powhatan, the Company decided that the religious leaders should be killed or imprisoned, the people converted to Christianity and transformed into farmers, and Powhatan overthrown and replaced with English rule. The native inhabitants would pay tribute to the English, and trade with the Powhatan and other polities was to be strictly regulated. In addition, the English settlers were to move inland as soon as possible.

On July 13, the Virginia colonists received some relief when Captain Samuel Argall arrived with a few supplies. Immediately behind him, however, came a Spanish scouting vessel. Its captain had sailed from Florida to determine whether the English had established a foothold in

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Spanish Virginia. Stopping at a native town on the Santee River in present-day South Carolina, at least three hundred miles south of Jamestown, the captain learned a great deal of accurate information about the colony. He was told of its location, that the colonists had allied with native people for food, that they spent more time on fortifying their island than on planting, and that vessels (probably the shallop and barges) went to and from the island frequently. When the Spaniard arrived in the Chesapeake Bay and spotted Argall's vessel at the mouth of the James River, he hesitated at first and then approached. After he saw smoke signals rising from various places along the shore, however, he knew he had lost the element of surprise and turned back for Florida. For the moment, the English colony was safe from Spanish attack.

Early in June, a large resupply fleet under Christopher Newport had departed Plymouth harbor for Virginia. Besides Newport, it also carried Sir Thomas Gates, the colony's interim governor pending the arrival of Governor Thomas West, baron De La Warr, later in the year. Sir George Somers, appointed admiral of Virginia, and other gentlemen who would play important roles in the colony, including John Rolfe, came as well. On July 24, about a week out from Cape Henry, the fleet encountered a ferocious hurricane that dispersed the ships hither and yon. The *Sea Venture*, carrying Newport, Gates, and Somers, almost sank but miraculously stayed afloat. It then struck rocks but remained upright just off one of the Bermuda islands—an adventure later transformed and immortalized in Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*. The rest of the fleet straggled into Jamestown beginning August 11.

Although Smith welcomed the supplies and the new colonists, the problems of infighting, jealousies, and wild charges of disloyalty threatened to rend the colony asunder again. Smith dispersed large numbers of colonists, both to break up the cabals and to save the rapidly dwindling food supply. He wanted the dispersed settlers to share dwellings and food with friendly inhabitants. Francis West led a hundred and twenty men to Powhatan town at the falls of the James River, while John Martin and George Percy took sixty to Nansemond. Martin and Percy tried to purchase land from the Nansemond chief but, when he refused to sell, burned the town and desecrated the temples where the remains of dead chiefs lay in honor. Soon their settlement was virtually under siege by the outraged Nansemond people.

Upriver, meanwhile, West began constructing a fort near the bank, which Smith thought liable to flooding; he ordered West to occupy the palisaded town instead. West and his men refused with such vehemence that Smith withdrew out of concern for his own safety. Later, he made another unsuccessful attempt to persuade them. When native men killed several of West's men in the woods, however, the remainder reconsidered. Smith arrived at the falls in West's absence and got them into the town after negotiating with Parahunt, Powhatan's son who was the chief there. When West returned—irate at what he considered Smith's interference—they all went back to the fort. Some of the men suspected that Smith had conspired with the Powhatan people to kill West and set himself up as a sort of king. Smith perhaps had wanted them to live in the town with the Powhatan to avoid the appearance of establishing a permanent settlement.

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Smith gave up and departed for Jamestown. As he slept in his boat, a lighted match “accidentally” ignited his gunpowder bag, which exploded, setting his clothes afire and burning his leg especially badly. Smith leapt into the river to extinguish the flames, and his crew returned him to Jamestown half-mad with pain. Smith later claimed that Martin, Ratcliffe, and Gabriel Archer plotted to murder him in his bed there, but instead they packed him off to England. They also sent a letter to the Company detailing several charges against Smith: ruling alone without the aid of the council, plotting with Powhatan to make himself a “king” and starving the men in order to force them to work. They also accused him of being too harsh in his treatment of the native people, an ironical assertion given what happened later. Smith arrived in London, slowly recovering from his injuries, late in November. Although the Company declined to pursue the charges against him, it never again sent him to the colony. John Smith’s Virginia adventure had ended.