

3 The First Virginians



The Powhatan had about 9,000 subjects; his land stretched from what is now Washington, D.C., to northern North Carolina.

When English parents told stories to their children, they often spoke of monsters, trolls, wild beasts, and witches. Those were savage stories, strange and disturbing. Since everyone knew there was a savage side to life, the stories had a kind of realness to them, even when they were make-believe.

But those weren't the only stories they told. There were tales of splendor and goodness, too. Every child heard the Bible's first story, which is of a Garden of Eden. Eden was a place of great beauty, a paradise. Many of the goodness stories were about sweet,

simple people who lived in harmony with nature. And those stories seemed real, too, because there was much goodness in the world.

Did you know that the stories you read in childhood stay with you all your life? They influence adults more than most of them realize. So when English men and women learned of a land of great beauty, where people lived close to nature, many of the English thought of that land as paradise. They called the natives "savages," but meant the word kindly. The first English visitors to the New World described the Indians as "courteous" and "gentle" and "great."

But, later, when others met those great savages, they found they didn't always act as people do in storybooks. Soon some were calling them worse names than "savages." They called them "beasts." Some said they were servants of the devil. Others said they were part animal and part human.

But those people—the Indians—were just real people, like the English. They lived in families, in towns, governed by leaders. They farmed, hunted, played games, and fashioned beautiful objects.

Earthly Paradise

We have discovered... the goodliest soil under the cope of heaven, so abounding with sweet trees, that bring such sundry rich and pleasant gums, grapes of such greatness, as France, Spain, nor Italy have no greater... the continent is of huge and unknown greatness, and very well peopled and towned, though savagely, and the climate so wholesome, that we had not one sick since we landed here.

It was letters like this one, written by Ralph Lane in 1585, that made people want to go to the New World. Lane was a member of Raleigh's Roanoke Colony.

An *estuary* (ESS-tew-air-ee) is the body of water where the mouth of a river meets the sea.

The bear grease that the Indians rubbed on their bodies made their brown skin shine with a reddish glow. Europeans thought it really was red, and that was how the name "red-skin," which many Europeans once used for Native Americans, came to be. It's based on a *mis-perception*, which is an error in the way things are seen.

Remember, horses first came to America with the Spanish conquistadors. Even 100 years later they were still a rarity.

Some of them were wise and some were foolish. Some were kind and some were mean. But most were a bit of all those things.

One of the most interesting Indians the English would meet was the Powhatan, the ruler or emperor of eastern Virginia. His real name was Wahunsonacock, and he had inherited an empire of five tribes. Through daring, strength and leadership, Powhatan soon held sway over dozens of villages and thousands of Indians. The English would call the Indians of his empire Powhatan Indians.

They were Woodland Indians, who spoke Algonquian (al-GON-kwee-un) dialects and hunted, fished, and farmed in a region of great abundance. The area surrounded the Chesapeake Bay and went west to mountain foothills and south to what would someday be North Carolina's border. It was a land of rivers, bays, and estuaries; of ducks, geese, wild turkeys, and deer; of fertile soil, fish, and shellfish; of wild berries, nuts, and grapes.

Powhatan's people raised vegetables—corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins—which was more than half the food they ate. Because they farmed, they lived in settled villages. Corn was their most important food. They ground it and made it into flat pancakes that served as bread or rice does in many other cultures. Aside from corn, the food they ate changed with the seasons: fresh vegetables in summer and fall; game in winter; and fish, stored nuts, and berries in the spring. (Spring was when corn supplies ran low and they sometimes went hungry.)

There was much small game in the region: raccoon, opossum, squirrel, turkey, and rabbit. But it was deer these Indians relied on most for food and clothing. Unfortunately, like people elsewhere, they overhunted; deer became scarce. And they knew if they roamed outside the Powhatan's territory—looking for better hunting grounds—they risked war with other tribes.

It was the men who hunted, fished, and fought. Women farmed. Men and women had set roles in this society and rarely changed them. Children helped their parents, played, and didn't go to work until they were young adults.

The boys often played in scarecrow houses that stood in the middle of the fields. From there they threw stones at rabbits or other animals that might nibble on the crops. It trained their throwing arms, and that helped when they became hunters. Little girls played with clay, made pots, and helped their mothers plant and cook. Boys and girls played running games. There were no horses (they hadn't arrived in this part of the New World yet), so fast runners were prized. Sometimes they would dress up like their parents—painting their bodies and wearing necklaces and bracelets of shells and beads and animal bones.

MAKING THIRTEEN COLONIES

Men and women tattooed beautiful designs all over their bodies. Men sometimes hung animal claws, birds' wings, bats, even live green snakes around their necks. They rubbed themselves with bear grease—it repelled mosquitoes, kept them warm, and made their skin glisten in the sunshine. Most of the year these Indians needed little clothing, although in winter they wore deerskin garments and, sometimes, cloaks of feathers or fur.

Captain John Smith would never have been able to make this map of Virginia without help from the local Algonquian Indians, the Powhatans. You'll hear more about John Smith in Chapter 5.

