

# WHAT HAPPENED TILL THE FIRST SUPPLY

*from*

THE GENERAL HISTORY OF VIRGINIA  
1607–1614

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*John Smith*

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In May 1607, three boatloads of English settlers sponsored by the Virginia Company of London anchored near the swampy shores of Chesapeake Bay. Among these 104 men and boys were aristocrats and craftspeople, but few farmers or others with skills crucial to survive in the wilderness. Captain John Smith, a leader among these earliest Jamestown settlers, held an interest in the London Company. Smith was an aggressive self-promoter who wrote and published a history of the Virginia colony in 1624.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Distinguishing Fact from Opinion**

At what points does Smith rely on facts, and at what points does he appear to offer more opinion than fact? Does this evaluation affect the value of this text as a historical document? Why or why not?

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[June 1607–January 1608]

Being thus left to our fortunes, it fortuned that within ten days scarce ten amongst us could either go or well stand, such extreme weakness and sickness oppressed us. And thereat none need marvel, if they consider the cause and reason, which was this.

Whilst the trading ships stayed, our allowance was somewhat bettered by a daily proportion of biscuit, which the sailors would pilfer to sell, give, or exchange with us for money, sassafras, furs, or love. But when they departed, there remained neither tavern, beer house, nor place of relief but the common kettle. Had we been as free from all sins as gluttony and drunkenness, we might have been canonized for saints. But our President would never have been admitted, for engrossing to his private [use] oatmeal, sack, oil, aqua vitae, beef, eggs, or what not—[all] but the [common] kettle. That, indeed, he allowed equally to be distributed, and that was half a pint of wheat, and as much barley boiled with water for a man a day. And this having fried some twenty-six weeks in the ship's hold contained as many worms as grains, so that we might truly call it rather so much bran than corn. Our drink was water, our lodgings castles in the air.

With this lodging and diet our extreme toil in bearing and planting palisades so strained and bruised us and our continual labor in the extremity of the heat had so weakened us as were cause sufficient to have made us as miserable in our native country or any other place in the world.

From May to September those that escaped lived upon sturgeon and sea crabs. Fifty in this time we buried....

But now was all our provision spent, the sturgeon gone, all helps abandoned. Each hour [we were] expecting the fury of the savages, when God, the patron of all good endeavors, in that desperate extremity so changed the hearts of the savages that they brought such plenty of their fruits and provisions that no man wanted.

And now, where some affirmed it was ill done of the Council [in England] to send forth men so badly provided, this incontradictable reason will show them plainly they are too ill advised to nourish such ill conceits. First, the fault of our going was our own. What could be thought fitting or necessary we had; but what we should find or want or where we should be we were all ignorant. And supposing to make our passage in two months with victual to live and the advantage of the spring to work, we were at sea five months, where we both spent our victual and lost the opportunity of the time and season to plant by the unskillful presumption of our ignorant transporters that understood not at all what they undertook.

Such actions have ever since the world's beginning been subject to such accidents, and everything of worth is found full difficulties, but nothing so difficult as to establish a commonwealth so far remote from men and means and where men's minds are so untoward as neither do well themselves nor suffer others. But to proceed....

[While exploring up-river in a desperate attempt to find an Indian village with a supply of food, John Smith was captured by the Indians.] The manner how they used and delivered him is as followeth:

The savages having drawn from George Cassen whither Captain Smith was gone, prosecuting that opportunity they followed him with three hundred bowmen, conducted by the king of Pamunkey, who in divisions searching the turnings of the river, found Robinson and Emry by the fireside. Those they shot full of arrows and slew.

[When the Indian party began to surround Smith, he defended "...himself with the aid of a savage, his guide, whom he bound to his arm with his garters and used him as a buckler."'] Then finding the captain, as is said, that used the savage that was his guide as his shield (three of them being slain and diverse others so gauld [frightened]) all the rest would not come near him. Thinking thus to have returned to his boat, regarding them as he marched more than his way, [he] slipped up to the middle in an oozy creek and his savage with him. Yet durst they not come to him till being near dead with cold he threw away his

arms. Then according to their composition they drew him forth and led him to the fire, where his men were slain. Diligently they chafed his benumbed limbs.

He, demanding for their captain, they showed him Opechancanough, king of Pamunkey, to whom he gave a round ivory double compass dial. Much they marveled at the play of the fly and needle, which they could see so plainly and yet not touch it because of the glass that covered them. But when he demonstrated by that globe-like jewel the roundness of the earth and skies, the sphere of the sun, moon and stars, and how the sun did chase the night round about the world continually; the greatness of the land and sea, the diversity of nations, variety of complexions, and how we were to them antipodes, and many other such like matters, they all stood as amazed with admiration.

Notwithstanding, within an hour after they tied him to a tree and as many as could stand about him prepared to shoot him. But the king holding up the compass in his hand they all laid down their bows and arrows and in a triumphant manner led him to Orapaks, where he was after their manner kindly feasted and well used....

Not long after, early in a morning a great fire was made in a long house and a mat spread on one side, as on the other. On the one they caused him to sit and all the guard went out of the house, and presently came skipping in a great grim fellow, all painted over with coal mingled with oil; and many snakes' and weasels' skins stuffed with moss and all their tails tied together, so as they met on the crown of his head in a tassel; and round about the tassel was a coronet of feathers, the skins hanging round about his head, back, and shoulders, and in a manner covered his face; with a hellish voice and a rattle in his hand. With most strange gestures and passions he began his invocation, and environed the fire with a circle of meal. Which done, three more such like devils came rushing in with the like antique tricks, painted half black, half red; but all their eyes were painted white, and some red strokes like mustachioes along their cheeks. Round about him those fiends danced a pretty while, and then came in three more as ugly as the rest, with red eyes and white strokes over their black faces. At last they all sat down right against him, three of them on the one hand of the chief priest and three on the other. Then all with their rattles began a song; which ended, the chief priest laid down five wheat corns, then straining his arms and hands with such violence that he sweat and his veins swelled, he began a short oration. At the conclusion they all gave a short groan, and then laid down three grains more. After that began their song again, and then another oration, ever laying down so many corns as before, till they had twice encircled the fire. That done, they took a bunch of little sticks prepared for that purpose, continuing their devotion, and at the end of every song and oration they laid down a stick betwixt the divisions of corn. Till night neither he nor they did either eat or drink; and then they feasted merrily with the best provisions they could make. Three days they used this ceremony, the meaning whereof they told him was to know if he intended them well or no. The circle of meal

signified their country, the circles of corn the bounds of the sea, and the sticks his country. They imagined the world to be flat and round, like a trencher, and they in the midst....

[Smith was exhibited in various Indian villages, and] At last they brought him to Werowocomoco, where was Powhatan, their emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim courtiers stood wondering at him as [if] he had been a monster, till Powhatan and his train had put themselves in their greatest braveries. Before a fire upon a seat like a bedstead he sat covered with a great robe made of raccoon skins, and all the tails hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench of sixteen or eighteen years, and along on each side the house two rows of men. And behind them as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red, many of their heads bedecked with the white down of birds but everyone with something, and a great chain of white beads about their necks.

At his entrance before the king all the people gave a great shout. The queen of Appomattoc was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers instead of a towel to dry them. Having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held. But the conclusion was: two great stones were brought before Powhatan, then as many as could laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head. And being ready with their clubs to beat out his brains, Pocahontas, the king's dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms and laid her own upon his to save him from death. Whereat the emperor was contented he should live to make him hatchets and her bells, beads, and copper; for they thought him as well of all occupations as themselves. For the king himself will make his own robes, shoes, bows, arrows, pots; plant, hunt, or do anything so well as the rest.

Two days after, Powhatan having disguised himself in the most fearful manner he could, caused Captain Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods, and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone. Not long after from behind a mat that divided the house, was made the most doleful noise he ever heard. Then Powhatan, more like a devil than a man, with some two hundred more as black as himself, came unto him and told him now they were friends and presently he should go to Jamestown to send him two great guns and a grindstone, for which he would give him the country of Capahowasick, and forever esteem him as his son Nantaquaus.

So to Jamestown with twelve guides Powhatan sent him. That night they quartered in the woods, he still expecting (as he had done all this long time of his imprisonment) every hour to be put to one death or other, for all their feasting. But Almighty God (by His divine providence) had mollified the hearts of those stern barbarians with compassion. The next morning betimes they came to the fort, where Smith, having used the savages with what kindness he could, he showed Rawhunt, Powhatan's trusty servant, two demi-culverins

[small cannon] and a millstone to carry Powhatan. They found them somewhat too heavy. But when they did see him discharge them, being loaded with stones, among the boughs of a great tree loaded with icicles, the ice and branches came so tumbling down that the poor savages ran away half dead with fear. But at last we regained some conference with them, and gave them such toys and sent to Powhatan, his women, and children such presents as gave them in general full content....

Now, every once in four or five days, Pocahontas with her attendants brought him so much provision that saved many of their lives, that else for all this had starved with hunger.

His relation of the plenty he had seen, especially at Werowocomoco, and of the state and bounty of Powhatan (which till that time was unknown) so revived their dead spirits (especially the love of Pocahontas) as all men's fear was abandoned.

Thus you may see what difficulties still crossed any good endeavor, and the good success of the business being thus oft brought to the very period of destruction. Yet you see by what strange means God hath still delivered it....

Source: *Captain John Smith's History of Virginia* by David Freeman Hawke.  
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