



Successful European Colonies in the New World

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Framing Question

Why did some European attempts to establish colonies in the New World succeed while most failed?

Understanding

Early European colonies in the New World succeeded only if local Indians allowed them to and if they were lucky. When European settlers arrived in the New World, they often placed their colonies among people who had established complex webs of political relationships that included both alliances and rivalries. If Indians tolerated settlements they could easily have wiped out, they may have done so not because they were afraid of the settlers or kindly disposed to them or militarily weak but rather because they saw them as useful adjuncts in their own internal power struggles.

Text

George Percy, [*Observations Gathered out of a Discourse of the Plantation of the Southern Colony in Virginia by the English, 1608*](#). (excerpts)



Virginia, 1624, detail: Jamestown and Pasahegh (to the west) on the James River

Background

These excerpts from Percy's *Observations* chronicles the first six months of Jamestown's existence, from April to September, 1607, a period during which the colony survived only because the Indians allowed it to. Luck played its role in 1610, when all the remaining colonists, fleeing the utter failure of Jamestown in four small boats, encountered, at the mouth of the James River, a re-supply fleet headed their way. On board were three hundred new settlers and a new governor, Lord De la Warr, who ordered the fleeing boats to turn around. With fresh manpower Jamestown began the slow painful process of establishing itself as a profitable agricultural colony.

At the time of Jamestown's founding George Percy was just one of several noblemen among the colonists. He later served as governor of the colony. The original manuscript of his *Observations* has been lost. It was published in 1625 as part of a larger collection of accounts of travel in the Americas. When analyzing any primary document, it is important to consider the author's motives in writing it. Apparently, Percy wrote *Observations* simply to record

his experience in Virginia. It seems to have been intended for readers interested simply in learning more about the fascinating “new world.” What matters here is what Percy was **not** doing: he was not trying to recruit settlers, nor was he trying to raise money to support Jamestown. How might these considerations shape our interpretation of his *Observations*?

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

The Indians Percy and his fellow settlers encountered were well-organized politically under the leadership of Chief Powhatan. He commanded about thirty tribes, yet each local tribe had its own chief or *werowance*, who was subordinate to Powhatan and who had to pay him tribute. Percy and the settlers traveled from town to town meeting these chiefs. Like most seventeenth-century peoples, the Indians believed they were the center of the world. To them, the English newcomers were needy itinerants, not colonizers, and they expected to call the shots.

Text Analysis

Excerpt 1

[I]f the beginners of this action [the Virginia Company] do carefully further [support] us, the Country being so fruitful, it would be as great a profit to the Realm of England, as the Indies to the King of Spain. If this River which we have found had been discovered in the time of war with Spain, it would have been a commodity [profit] to our Realm, and a great annoyance to our enemies.

1. What do Percy's words here tell us about English reasons for founding Jamestown?

2. What do you think he thought of the Spanish?

3. Judging from Percy's statement, what role do the Indians who inhabit the region play in the plans of the English?

Excerpt 2

April 1607 (soon after arrival)

[1] At night, when we were going aboard, there came the Savages creeping upon all fours, from the Hills, like Bears, with their Bows in their mouths, [who] charged us very desperately in the faces, hurt Captain Gabriel Archer in both his hands, and a sailor in two places of the body very dangerous. After they had spent their Arrows, and felt the sharpness of our shot, they retired into the Woods with a great noise, and so left us.

[2] We marched some three or four miles further into the woods, where we saw great smokes of fire. We marched to those smokes and found that the Savages had been there burning down the grass, as we thought either to make their plantation there [to clear the land for farming], or else to give signs to bring their forces.

[3] Thirtieth day, we came with our ships to Cape Comfort; where we saw five Savages running on the shore. Presently the Captain caused the shallop [small open boat] to be manned; so rowing to the shore, the Captain called to them in sign of friendship, but they were at first very timorous, until they saw the Captain lay his hand on his heart; upon that they laid down their Bows and Arrows,

and came very boldly to us, making signs to come ashore to their Town, which is called by the Savages Kecoughtan [“great town,” commanded by a son of Powhatan]. We coasted to their Town, rowing over a River running into the Main[land], where these Savages swam over with their Bows and Arrows in their mouths.

4. What does this passage tell us about how well the English understand the Indians?

5. Why would the English expect the Indians to attack them?

Excerpt 3

[4] When we came over to the other side, there was a many of other Savages which directed us to their Town, where we were entertained by them very kindly. When we came first a Land they made a doleful noise, laying their faces to the ground, scratching the earth with their nails. We did think they had been at their Idolatry [worship]. When they had ended their Ceremonies, they went into their houses and brought out mats and laid upon the ground: the chiefest of them sat all in a rank; the meanest [lowest, poorest] sort brought us such dainties as they had, and of their bread which they make of their Maize or Gennea [Guinea] wheat. They would not suffer [allow] us to eat unless we sat down, which we did on a Mat right against them. After we were well satisfied they gave us of their Tobacco, which they took in a pipe made artificially of earth as ours are, but far bigger, with the bowl fashioned together with a piece of fine copper. After they had feasted us, they showed us, in welcome, their manner of dancing, which was in this fashion. One of the Savages standing in the midst singing, beating one hand against another, all the rest dancing about him, shouting, howling, and stamping against the ground, with many Antic tricks and faces, making noise like so many Wolves or Devils.

6. How might you account for the hospitality shown the English by Powhatan’s son only days after Indians attacked the settlers?

7. How might the tribes in the Powhatan Confederation interpret the fact that one of Powhatan’s sons entertained the English?

8. What does this passage tell us about European perceptions of Indians and their understanding of Indian culture?

Excerpt 4

May 1607

[5] The fourth day of May, we came to the King or Werowance of Paspithe [Paspahagh]: where they entertained us with much welcome. An old Savage made a long Oration, making a fowl noise, uttering his speech with a vehement action, but we knew little what they meant. While we were in company with the Paspithes, the Werowance [leader] of Rapahanna came from the other side of

the River in his Canoe. He seemed to take displeasure of our being with the Paspiehes. He would fain [gladly] have had us to come to his Town. The Captain was unwilling. Seeing that the day was so far spent, he returned back to his ships for that night.

[6] The next day, being the fifth of May, the Werowance of Rapahanna sent a Messenger to have us come to him. We entertained the said Messenger, and gave him trifles [trinkets] which pleased him. We manned our shallop with Muskets and Targatiers [foot soldiers armed with shields] sufficiently: this said Messenger guided us where our determination was to go. When we landed, the Werowance of Rapahanna came down to the water side with all his train [followers]... playing on a Flute made of a Reed.... He entertained us in so modest a proud fashion, as though he had been a Prince of civil government, holding his countenance [keeping his bearing] without laughter or any such ill behavior.

9. What does the scene in the Paspie village — an entertainment with “much welcome” interrupted by an “old Savage’s” rant — suggest about the Paspie’s response to the arrival of the English? Compare the Paspie’s welcome with that which the English received in the village of Kecoughtan (see paragraphs 3 and 4) and in the Raphanna village.

10. What does the response of the Rapahanna’s chief to the presence of the English among the Paspie suggest about relations between the two tribes?

11. Why might the Raphanna chief have been displeased that the English visited the Paspie village before visiting his?

12. Why might it have been advantageous to Powhatan to permit rivalries among the tribes in his confederation?

Excerpt 5

[7] The eighth day of May we discovered [explored] up the River. We landed in the Country of Apamatica. At our landing, there came many stout and able Savages to resist us with their Bows and Arrows, in a most warlike manner, with the swords at their backs beset with sharp stones, and pieces of iron able to cleave a man in sunder [cut a man in two]. Among the rest one of the chiefest, standing before them cross-legged, with his Arrow ready in his Bow in one hand, and taking a Pipe of Tobacco in the other, with a bold uttering of his speech, demanded of us our being there, willing us to be gone. We made signs of peace, which they perceived in the end, and let us land in quietness.

13. Why, after some Indians entertained the English cordially, would the Apamatica confront them “in a most warlike manner”?

14. What do the Apamatica demand of the English?

15. What might the English have signaled through their “signs of peace” that convinced the Apamatica to let them land?

Excerpt 6

[8] The thirteenth day, we came to our seating place [Jamestown] in Paspahas Country, some eight miles from the point of Land, which I made mention before: where our ships do lie so near the shore that they are moored to the Trees in six fathom water.

[9] The first night of our landing, about midnight, there came some Savages sailing close to our quarter. Presently there was an alarm given; upon that the Savages ran away, and we [were] not troubled any more by them that night. Not long after there came two Savages that seemed to be Commanders, bravely dressed, with Crowns of colored hair upon their heads, he came as Messengers from the Werowance of Paspiahae, telling us that their Werowance was coming and would be merry with us with a fat Deer.

16. How might the establishment of Jamestown in the Paspie’s country affect that tribe’s attitude toward the English?

17. What does the “alarm” suggest about the Indian’s approach to the English settlement?

Excerpt 7

[10] The eighteenth day, the Werowance of Paspiahae came himself to our quarter, with one hundred Savages armed, who guarded him in a very warlike manner with Bows and Arrows, thinking at that time to execute their villainy [make their deceitful attack]. Paspiahae made great signs to us to lay our Arms away. But we would not trust him so far. He seeing he could not have convenient time to work his will, at length made signs that he would give us as much land as we would desire to take. As the Savages were in a throng in the Fort, one of them stole a Hatchet from one of our company, which spied [noticed] him doing the deed: whereupon he took it from him by force, and also struck him over the arm. Presently another Savage seeing that, came fiercely at our man with a wooden sword, thinking to beat out his brains. The Werowance of Paspiahae saw us take to our Arms, went suddenly away with all his company in great anger.

[11] The twentieth day of Werowance of Paspiahae sent forty of his men with a Deer, to our quarter: but they came more in villainy than any love they bare us. They faine would have lain in our Fort all night, but we would not suffer them for fear of their treachery.

18. How do these encounters with the Paspiahae differ from the earlier “entertainment” the Paspiahae provided the settlers? (See paragraph 5.) What might account for the difference?

19. How do these encounters with the Paspihae differ from the settlers' encounters with the Rapahanna? (See paragraph 6.) What might account for the difference?

20. Why might the English suspect villainy on the part of the Paspihae?

21. Why might the Paspihae werowance offer the English as much land as they wanted? Can we be sure that he actually made that offer?

22. Why would an Indian be interested in stealing a hatchet? What might the hatchet represent?

Excerpt 8

[12] The four and twentieth day we set up a Cross at the head of this River, naming it Kings River, where we proclaimed James King of England to have the most right to it. When we had finished and set up our Cross, we shipped our men and made for James Fort. By the way, we came to Pohatan's Towre [*sic*], where the Captain went on shore suffering none to go with him. He presented the Commander of this place, with a Hatchet which he took joyfully, and was well pleased.

[13] But yet the Savages murmured at our planting in the Country, whereupon this Werowance made answer again very wisely of a Savage, Why should you be offended with them as long as they hurt you not, nor take any thing away by force. They take but a little waste ground, which does you nor any of us any good.

23. How do you think the Indians might have interpreted the English cross planting ceremony?

24. What implications does the ceremony hold for the Indians?

25. Why might it have mattered to the Indians that the captain went onshore alone?

26. How valuable would the gift of the hatchet be to the chief? What might it suggest to him about the English and the potential of an alliance with them?

27. What reasons might local tribes in the Powhatan Confederation have had for befriending the English? Might they be seeking allies? Why would they need allies?

28. Why would local Indians be concerned that the English were planting?

29. What does the werowance's reply tell you about debates that were going on among the Indians who met the English?

30. How does the werowance's characterization of the site of Jamestown as "waste ground" reflect upon the Paspihae's offer to give them as much as they want?

Excerpt 9

June/July 1607

[14] The seven and twentieth of July, the King of Rappahanna demanded a Canoe, which was restored [given], lifted up his hand to the Sun (which they worship as their God), besides he laid his hand on his heart, that he would be our special friend. It is a general rule of these people, when they swear by their God which is the Sun, no Christian will keep their Oath better upon this promise.

31. Compare the Englishmen's relationship with the Rappahanna to their relationship with the Paspie.

Excerpt 10

August/September 1607

[15] It pleased God, after a while, to send those people which were our mortal enemies to relieve us with victuals, as Bread, Corn, Fish, and Flesh [meat] in great plenty, which was the setting up of our feeble men, otherwise we had all perished. Also we were frequented by divers [visited by many] Kings in the Country, bringing us store of provision to our great comfort.

32. Percy believed that the Indians spared Jamestown because God put a terror into their hearts. What other reasons might they have had?

33. Would you have predicted in 1607 that Jamestown would be a success?

34. At several points, the colony almost failed, whether because of starvation or sporadic war with the Indians. But ships with food and settlers arrived each time the colony was nearly empty, and over time diseases that were previously unknown in the Americas dramatically decreased the Indian population. Jamestown was eventually abandoned, but the colony of Virginia thrived with the adoption of tobacco agriculture and slavery. Why, on the whole, did Virginia survive?

35. Would you call Jamestown a successful colony? Why or why not?

Activity: Settlement – Two Different Views

Compare the conflicting views of Native Americans and Europeans regarding the early English colonies in the New World.



Glossary

timorous: fearful, shy

doleful: sad, mournful

vehement: intense, passionate

treachery: betrayal, disloyalty

Text

George Percy, *Observations Gathered out of a Discourse of the Plantation of the Southern Colony in Virginia by the English*, 1608 in Lyon Gardiner Tyler, ed., *Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606–1625* (New York: Scribner's, 1907); full text online at American Journeys: Eyewitness Accounts of Early American Exploration and Settlement (Wisconsin Historical Society), <http://www.americanjourneys.org/aj-073>.

Image

John Smith, *Virginia / discovered and discribed by Captayn John Smith, 1606*, map, London, 1624 (detail). Library of Congress, Geography & Map Division, Call No. G3880 1624. S541 Vault. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.