

Winter is Coming: The Starving Time at Jamestown Fort in 1609

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Abstract

The Starving Time was a dark part of colonial American history made even more gruesome due to the discovery of a single skull in a trash-pit in 2012. “Jane” as she would come to be known was a teenage girl living in Jamestown (1607) and the scratch marks on her skull would bring to light just how dark and gruesome the winter of 1609 truly was. Men were dying from illnesses, contaminated water, attacks from Natives, but mostly from starvation, and while supply ships would come bringing more colonists they brought very few provisions. All of this, along with the combination of John Smith leaving and George Percy taking over as leader, led to one of the worst periods in Jamestown history, The Starving Time. Death, betrayal, harassment from Natives and eventually cannibalism would all become a dark and tragic part of American history.

Keywords

Jamestown, Starving Time, James Fort, English Colony, John Smith, Powhatan, George Percy

Introduction

In May 1607, 104 settlers, all of them male, established the first permanent English colony in Virginia that we now know as Jamestown. Within the first three months Jamestown lost 25 colonists with men dying from illness, contaminated water, attacks from Natives, but mostly from starvation (Percy, 1607). Supply ships would come at various times

bringing more colonists, but little provisions causing greater famine which would result in death. This cycle of an influx of people, a lack of food, and the loss of lives would repeat, eventually leading to one of the worst periods in Jamestown history. Although there were a number of factors that contributed, the combination of John Smith leaving the colony of Jamestown and with him any form of work ethic he enforced and George Percy, a weak man both physically and mentally, being made President, led to what is known as “The Starving Time” in the winter of 1609 - 1610. This period would profoundly shape the history of colonial Virginia and would act as both an example and a warning to future colonies.

During the years leading up to that fateful winter, leaders played favorites, made poor decisions, and distributed rations unfairly. Food stores were often very limited and were prone to rotting or becoming infested with rats. Colonists died due to various illnesses from the water, bugs or the environment, and Natives would murder others. Those in charge used death as a punishment for various crimes and many starved to death. First-hand accounts, while probably embellished, combined with archaeological evidence has shown that during the Starving Time the colonists at Jamestown were forced to feed on horses, dogs, cats, rats, snakes, and some were driven to the extreme of cannibalism (Percy, n.d.; Smith, 1624).

Various reports from the time that survived show many believed the colonists were lying in order to benefit themselves or to sell their publications. There is now archaeological evidence that supports the long disputed theory of cannibalism in America during colonial times, specifically at Jamestown, thanks to the Jamestown Rediscovery Archaeological Project led by William Kelso. In a cellar that became a “refuse pit by 1610” (Bower, 2013, 5) Kelso, who wrote *Jamestown: The Truth Revealed* (2017), and his team discovered a partial skull and right shin-bone. After careful examination they discovered that “clearly there were two or three chop marks to the back of the skull and four distinct cuts to the forehead, all signs of extreme trauma” (Kelso, 2017, 155).

Thanks to anthropologist, Dr. Douglas Owsley, and his forensic analysis, it was determined that these were the remains of a lower class, fourteen-year-old girl they named “Jane,” who probably arrived in Jamestown just months before The Starving Time. While we may never know her identity, her discovery helps us realize just how dire the situation was for the colonists at Jamestown.

Leaders & People

John Smith wrote about this period in his book, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, originally published in 1624, although it is probably embellished. In it, he tells how the “savages” would not trade nor help the colony, but instead would try to kill them if they left the fort, and would also kill the hogs, hens, goats and other animals. He also referenced the Starving Time: “So great was our famine, that the Salvage we slew, and buried, the poorer sort tooke him up againe and eat him” (Smith, 1624, 225), as well as “one amongst the rest did kill his wife, powdered her, and had eaten part of her before it was known” (Smith, 1624, 225). However, the most well known sentence in his book is where we get the name of this tragic period in our history, “this was that time, which still to this day we called the starving time” (Smith, 1624, 225). While Smith was not at Jamestown during that winter, George Percy was, and was president at the time.

Percy provides the only known first-hand account of the Starving Time and while his version is similar to Smith’s, it has more information on what they ate and the overall situation although is also probably embellished. He claims he sent Captain West to Potoamack with about thirty men to try to trade for food, but once West obtained food he set sail for England. People were executed for stealing food, killed by the Natives when they tried to forage, and after they ate their horses they turned to “vermine as doggs Catts Ratts and myce” (Percy, n.d., 4) and even “eate Bootes shoes or any other leather some colde Come by” (Percy, n.d., 4). When Percy speaks of cannibalism, he writes in detail how when they had nothing left to eat, they dug up the “corpses outt of graves and to eate them” (Percy, n.d., 4). Another account of cannibalism that is

similar to Smith's is when he states that "Thatt one of our Colline murdered his wyfe" (Percy, n.d., 4), and "salted her for his foode" (Percy, n.d., 4).

They rationed what little food they had poorly, and the colonists quickly ate or stole what did not rot. The Natives also constantly harassed and threatened the colonists to the point that they were afraid to leave the fort even to forage for food.

The colonists and the Natives mistrusted each other and were constantly fighting, but John Smith interacted with them more than most and even spoke their language. One of his earliest and most famous encounters was when Opechankanough, leader of the Pamaunkee and brother to Wahunsonacock, the Powhatan leader, took him prisoner. According to Smith, Opechankanough took him to Wahunsonacock, whom Smith refers to as simply, Powhatan. His account of what happened might have been a misunderstanding of some ritual that Powhatan performed with Smith in order to show that he was now part of his empire (Bernhard, 2011). It appeared to Smith that Powhatan was about to have him beaten to death, but Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, intervened and saved his life (Smith, 1624). Powhatan then declared Smith his son and sent him home with an escort of twelve guides, whom Smith sent back with presents and gifts (Smith, 1624). This encounter allowed Smith to trade with the Natives for food in a friendly a manner as was possible. As time went on Smith became more aggressive towards Powhatan and bullied him into trading with him for food. His methods of intimidation were, however, necessary to prevent the colonists' starvation.

Smith was a very clever man and his experience as a soldier, combined with his quick thinking, no doubt helped him in his dealings with the Natives, especially Powhatan, who tried to kill him or have him killed on several occasions. One of Smith's most notorious acts of aggression was also an act of self-defense. After a meeting with Powhatan he met with Opechankanough to try to trade for food, but when the king did show up he had, according to Smith, 700 men armed with bows and

arrows with him (1907). Smith once again shows his cleverness when he tells the king, “I see Opechancanough your plot to murder me, but I feare” (Smith, 1624, 191). After more words were exchanged, Smith acted quickly by grabbing the king by his topknot (hair worn high on the head and usually in a knot) and walking him out of the house to the group of armed natives waiting for them. His speech while he holds the king by his topknot is bold and without any of the patience he had shown them in earlier dealings. According to Smith, years after the events took place, he threatened, “You promised to fraught my Ship ere I departed, and so you shall, or I meane to load her with your dead carcasses, yet if as friends you will come and trade, I once more promise not to trouble you, except you give me the first occasion, and your King shall be free and be my friend, for I am not come to hurt him or any of you” (Smith, 1624, 192).

These events marked a huge change in the way the Natives viewed Smith and Jamestown. While Smith was president they did not openly attack Jamestown, however, the situation changed once he left for England, and the constant attacks on Jamestown could have been a result of his actions. The relationship between Jamestown and the Natives changed drastically when Percy became president. The colonists became so desperate for food that they went to Powhatan despite his resentment and risk to their lives. Jamestown would receive no help from Powhatan or his people.

Percy, sent Captain Ratliffe with about thirty men, according to Smith, or fifty men, according to Percy, to Powhatan to trade for food only to have them betrayed and slaughtered with only 16 returning to Jamestown (Smith, 1624; Percy, n.d.). He describes the events in gruesome detail as follows:

When the Slye owlde kinge espyed A fitteinge Tyme Cutt them all of onely surprysed Capte: RATLIEFE Alyve who he caused to be bownd unto a tree naked wth a fyer before And by woemen his fleshe was skraped from his bones wth mussell shelles and befre his face throwne into the fyre. And so for want of circum-spection miserably Pished (Percy, n.d., 4).

In fact during Percy's rule the Natives laid a constant siege on the colonists and attacked them whenever any went out to forage for food or to try to hunt. Percy set himself apart from Smith, although not positively, with his interactions with Powhatan and his people. The colony was run drastically different just before the Starving Time compared to during it. John Smith was in charge until he was injured and from the time he was in complete control until he left for England the colony went through a major transformation. After he had returned from bullying Powhatan and Openchankanough into giving him food, he found that the settlers had accomplished nothing more than eating the food. When he filled the storage with what food he had, the colonists, having little fear of starvation now, spent just part of the day working and the rest leisurely. Smith knew that some worked harder than others, but at this point he was alone in charge of the colony and told them "You see now that power resteth wholly in my selfe: you must obey this now for a Law, that he that will not worke shall not eate" (Smith, 1624, 199). He had to threaten people with hanging to stop them from running away to Newfoundland and was considered cruel for forcing the colonists to work. Furthermore, he claims to have told them, "he that gathereth not every day as much as I doe, the next day shall beset beyond the river, and be banished from the Fort as a drone" (Smith, 1624, 206). Although harsh, it was probably necessary if the colonists were even half as lazy as he says, which is still often debated.

The Councill of Virginia's document showed examples that supported Smith's thoughts that the colonists would rather trade everything away than work to survive, or that they were lazy. Smith writes that "the most part of our tooles, and a good part of our Armes conveyed to the Salvages" (Smith, 1624, 199), and in the *True Relation* document, it was written "they suffered fourteene nets (which was all they had) to rot and spoile, which by orderly drying and mending might have been preserved" (Councill of Virginia, 1610). If you consider the different versions are probably exaggerated, it still leaves the genuine possibility that the colonists would have instead traded their things away than work for food.

This is vastly different from when Smith was president. While Smith was in charge the colony had not only worked to provide food for themselves and those who were sick, they also built a clean water well, a blockhouse for trade that no one could pass through without permission from Smith, and about twenty houses. They repaired the Church, had nets and lines for fishing, planted thirty or forty acres of crop, increased the pigs from 60 to near 500, had chickens, and hogs. According to Smith, they accomplished all of this in three months (Smith, 1624). Although the colonists were now working, there were still food shortages due to the corn being found rotten or being infested with thousands of rats. Smith knew he would have to do something if he wanted the colony to survive and according to Virginia Bernhard in her book, *A Tale of Two Colonies : What Really Happened in Virginia and Bermuda?* (2011), she claims “Smith decided that his Jamestown people would imitate the Natives” (Bernhard, 2011, 70).

He sent Ensign William Laxon with about 60 or 80 men down the river to live on oysters and sent another 20 with Lieutenant George Percy (the future president) to Point Comfort to fish. Francis West was sent with another 30 men to the falls near present-day Richmond to forage and hunt. However, these did not work out how he had hoped and claimed that West could find nothing “but a few Acornes; of that in store every man had their equall proportion” (Smith, 1624,205). When he mentions Percy, Smith claims that “in six weekes they would not agree once to cast out the net, he being sicke and burnt sore with Gunpouder” (Smith, 1624, 205). Bernhard comments that Laxon “and his oyster hunters managed to sustain themselves, but they were not well fed and certainly not happy” (Bernhard, 2011, 70).

Meanwhile, the colonists had plenty of Sturgeon available to them and even roots to make bread and for a while they lived very well. The Council of Virginia also states that “there is a great store of Fish in the river, especially of Sturgeon; but our men provided no more of them, then for present necessitie, not barrelling up any store against that season the Sturgeon returned to the sea” (Councell of Virginia, 1610, 9). According to Bernhard, in reference to how the Natives were able to

feed them in Kecoughtan she also wonders “why Smith’s own people on the banks of the James could not fish, hunt, and feast in a like manner is a puzzle to this day” (Bernhard, 201, 62). Unfortunately for the colonists, Smith would not be president long enough to see if his methods would help Jamestown thrive.

Winter 1609 Begins

Smith had an unfortunate accident which could have been a deliberate attempt on his life, and as a result he had to leave Jamestown for England. George Percy, who was still sick and in fact had planned to sail for England on the very boat that took Smith, was now in charge. According to Bernhard “He was not physically strong, and it is now believed that he suffered from epilepsy” (Bernhard, 2011, 115). When Smith left the colony there was plenty of food that should have lasted while they acquired more. He reports leaving three ships, seven boats, things to trade, the harvest which was recently gathered but would have probably only brought “a harvest of about five hundred to eight hundred bushels of corn, enough to feed a few hundred people for a few months” (Bernhard, 2011, 116), and close to 500 people. Also, according to Smith, there were 300 muskets, curats, pikes, swords and soldiers who knew the language of the Natives, as well as 6 mares, 1 horse, 500 - 600 pigs, and “as many hens and chickens, some Goats, some sheep, what was 196 brought or bred there remained” (Smith, 1624, 219).

Percy in his document disagreed with these numbers and claimed there was only one boat, a canoe and “a poore allowanse of halfe a Cann of meale for A man A day Amownted unto thre monthes Pvissson” (Percy, n.d., 3). He also tried Smith’s plan of sending men up and down the river but this ultimately backfired as he lost two groups of men almost entirely.

Percy sent Ratliffe to trade for food, but he was horrifically tortured and killed, with all but 16 of his men slain as well. West and his group decided piracy was better than starving in Jamestown and pillaged and burned a Native village, killed its king and set sail for England. He

makes no mention of fishing, or foraging except to say that the Natives were not too far out and would pick off the few who left to find food. (Percy, n.d.). The colonists did not seem to have any respect for Percy and as a result of that and his incompetence, they would steal food and most likely traded their tools or weapons with the Natives. Several people went so far as to leave Jamestown to live among them. Percy punished those who stole food with death saying, “A worlde of miseries ensewed as the Sequell will expresse unto you in so mutche thatt some to satisfye their hunger have robbed the store for the wch I caused them to be executed” (Percy, n.d., 4). Percy makes no mention of sending anyone to retrieve or guard the hogs that were left or that anyone ate them, only that the stores decreased quickly. Even if the Natives took the hogs, there were reportedly 500 or 600 of them, so in that short of a time they could not have consumed all of them. According to the Council of Virginia’s document, “hee [Powhatan] and his people destroyed our Hogs, (to the number of about sixe hundred)” (Councell of Virginia, 1610, 9). Also, not mentioned by Percy are the rationing of any animals or food stores until it was almost too late. Even taking into account that both Smith and Percy were most likely exaggerating their versions in order to relieve themselves of any blame, it is still clear that the transition from strict management to a complete lack of management led to so many starving in the winter of 1609-1610.

When John Smith was the president he reshaped the colony for the better, and although they had some difficulties, especially in regard to food, he forced the colonists to work hard in order to obtain it. His ways were not always kind to the colonists or the Natives, but they were necessary for survival in a harsh and unforgiving new world. It is easy to assume the colonists were lazy, although for some it is more likely that they just never knew a hard day’s work.

Bernhard says “There were goldsmiths and glassblowers and tailors who disdained to chop down trees and till fields and catch fish” (2011, 68). These men knew a different type of work than what was needed at Jamestown and those “divers of you I know deserve both honour and

reward” (Smith, 1907, 199) were the farmers, carpenters, bricklayers, and blacksmiths who were familiar with hard work and probably did more than their share. Smith was able to put all the colonists to work and his now famous edict of “he that will not worke shall not eate” (Smith, 1624, 199) gave them plenty of motivation. Percy had no such law and indeed makes no mention of how he governed the colonists during that time. He did mention some colonists stole food and abandoned Jamestown, and claimed Natives slaughtered others that he sent for food. The colonists had no faith in him and daily feared an attack or death. Percy never took responsibility for the events of The Starving Time and while the Natives did play a role in creating it, Percy only ever complained about them but never said he did anything about them. Further, he never mentions “ALGERNOWNS Foarte” (Percy, n.d., 3), which he had built in the beginning of his rule until well after the situation at Jamestown was beyond dire.

When he finally decided to venture to the fort, he saw that the men were healthy and with plenty of food to feed both the fort and those at Jamestown. He took no responsibility for his part in the loss of so many colonists and instead blamed those at the fort for not having gone to Jamestown to aid them. He claimed the fort “concealed their plenty from us above att James Towne” (Percy, n.d., 5) and that “their intente was for to have kept some of the better sorte Alyve and wth their towe pinnesses to have Retourned for England nott Regarding our miserisand wantts at all” (Percy, n.d., 5). Bernhard supports the theory that Davis, who was in charge of the fort, purposely chose not to go to Jamestown during that winter stating that Davis was “secure in his fort with plenty to eat, [and] obviously made a decision to keep clear of Jamestown” (Bernhard, 2011, 126). On his way to England, West had told Captain Davis of the situation at Jamestown and how hostile the Natives were, and still Davis did nothing (Bernhard, 2011).

When the true horror of the situation at Jamestown was revealed Percy blamed Smith and Davis while Smith blamed Percy. Many today agree with Bernhard and blame “misgovernment by the commanders, by dissension and ambition among themselves, and upon the idleness and

bestial sloth of the common sort” (Bernhard, 2011, 115). Rachel B. Herrmann adds that the “English observers at the time concluded that the causes of starvation boiled down to laziness, selfishness, and poor governance” (Herrmann, 2011, 64). Poor governance was a theme in all accounts and theories as to why the colony was almost wiped out. Those in charge prior to Smith were not the best rulers and did not help relations with the Natives. Smith further aggravated an already angry people, bullied and humiliated the kings. If he had stayed they would have still been afraid of him and likely would have left the colony alone or even continued trading with them for food. Percy did not command such a presence and once the Natives knew Smith was gone they quickly became more aggressive. According to Alan Taylor in *American Colonies* “Pursuing a policy of containment rather than total war, Powhatan relied upon the tribe closest to Jamestown, the Paspahegh, to observe and harass the colonists” (2001, 132).

Conclusions

The aftermath of that horrible winter was brutal and swift, but ultimately resulted in the success of not only Jamestown, but of the colonization of New England. If Jamestown had failed, and all its people wound up dead or unaccounted for, there would most likely not have been another attempt. The Starving Time became a cautionary tale for future colonists as well as a powerful motivator. Although many denied or did not believe that cannibalism took place, the thought of being so starved as to even consider it was enough to create successful colonies after Jamestown. According to Historic Jamestown’s History Timeline on May 24, 1610, Thomas Gates wrote *For the Colony in Virginea Britannia. Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall, &c.*, a document that contained three sets of nearly 50 rules or laws each controlling what people ate, how they could trade, punishments, along with rules or laws for the soldiers and those in charge of them (Historic Jamestowne, n.d.). Herrmann states that “the first thirty-seven articles, more than one-quarter dictated how people would eat: seven referred directly to food and three to provisions trading” (Herrmann, 2011, 20) and the punishments “for stealing and hoarding food were draconian” (Herrmann, 2011, 20). It

was extreme, controlling everything and anything possible to prevent the events in Jamestown from happening again in other colonies. Previously it was considered acceptable for a baker to add something to the bread to save on flour, but after the laws were in place it became a crime punishable by death (Gates, 1612).

Several laws focused on interfering or trading with the Natives such as number 15 “No man of what condition soever shall barter, trucke, or trade with the Indians, except he be thereunto appointed by lawful authority, upon paine of death.” (Gates, 1612, 5). These laws even restricted people from keeping their own tools in their possession and instead forced them to keep them in the storehouse. If you owned livestock you could not kill any animal without permission upon pain of death. The beating of a drum told you when you had to start work and another when you were allowed to be done for the day with punishments for offenses ranging from losing pay to time in the galleys (Gates, 1612). Due to the laws enacted based on the history of Jamestown, future colonies in America were better able to succeed. In an article written in 1957 by Thomas, J. Wertenbaker he states “It is almost certain that had there been no Jamestown there would have been no Plymouth” (Wertenbaker, 1957, 369). Despite the horrible conditions, fighting with the Natives, and immense loss of life, Jamestown persisted and eventually became a successful English colony. When those first colonists built the fort at Jamestown they could not have anticipated the trouble that was ahead of them.

Plagued from the beginning by a lack of water, starvation, disease, and fights with the Native Americans, Jamestown did not live up to the image the colonists were told awaited them across the ocean. The publication, *Nova Britannia: Offering Most Excellent fruites by Planting in Virginia. Exciting all such as be well affected to further the same* by R. I., whom I believe is Robert Johnson, described Virginia as an “earthly Paradiſe” (1609) and Henry Spellman said “water they have plentifull, they have marish ground and smale fields, for corne, and other grounds wher on ther Deare, goates, and stages feadeth” (Spellman, 1613, 3). This document said that the Natives were primitive and essentially harmless, and it was

the colonists' duty to help them find God. It was meant to portray Virginia as a land with an abundance of food, water and opportunity, but all it brought was misery, suffering and death.

Although the document did not outright lie, those that took up the offer did not find any of this. Instead, they found starvation, war, disease, bad luck and misery in abundance. In an article titled *Ruins of Jamestown* written by Julia King, she says “the hardships experienced by the colonists are almost inconceivable - disease, starvation, early death, and even cannibalism” (King, 2019, 15). The colonists were partially at fault and to this day scholars argue that they were lazy or could have done more. If the records are to be believed even partially, they should have been able to sustain themselves. It took a leader with enough of a commanding presence to keep a chief from attacking, and to make any number of people work, let alone work under poor conditions while they were constantly afraid of attack. Smith had this presence, but unfortunately Percy did not. While a number of events, such as bad fortune and illness contributed to it, ultimately it was the combination of John Smith leaving and George Percy becoming President that led to the loss of nearly all the 300 colonists in the winter of 1609 - 1610.

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