Jamestown: An Unsettling Settlement

Jamestown was a place of many firsts - not all of them good. It was the first English settlement in America. (A settlement is a village built by people from another area.) It had the first representative government in the colonies. It was also the first English colony to use enslaved Africans for labor.

But Jamestown was not the first settlement in the place we call Virginia. The colony was built smack in the middle of an American Indian empire that had been around for a long time. Powhatan was chief of the empire. (An empire is a large holding of land and power.) He lived in the village of Werowocomoco. Around 15,000 American Indians farmed, hunted and traded across this wide area near the Chesapeake Bay.

The American Indians' land was fertile (good for farming). They grew corn, beans and squash. These foods were nicknamed the "three sisters." Young boys guarded the farm fields with bows and arrows to keep hungry deer from eating all the corn. The Powhatan people built homes among the trees and along the rivers. When crops stopped growing in the soil of one place, they packed up and moved to another. They also moved to find animals to hunt. The Powhatan were never too hungry. They had plenty of fish such as sturgeon and bass. They also had shellfish such as mussels and oysters. They also grew and ate many vegetables. They had plenty of deer, rabbit and turkeys. Life was good for the Powhatan.
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Until April 1607, that is. That's when the ships Susan Constant, Discovery and Godspeed landed with 104 English settlers. The Englishmen thought they had found the perfect spot to settle. The James River had deep water. It was close to the ocean and they could defend it easily. They decided to name it Jamestown, in honor of their king. They had no idea they were in the middle of territory that belonged to a very powerful American Indian nation. They didn't realize that the deep water was brackish (not fresh and partly salty). They also didn't realize that drought would cause big problems for them. Many of the settlers were English gentlemen who didn't want to work. They didn't really know how to do anything that would help the colony survive. They didn't think they should have to build homes and a fort. They weren't prepared to hunt, fish or grow crops. They weren't ready to fight natives or keep fires going. They were not ready to take care of the pigs, goats, cattle and horses they brought and... well, you get the picture. All of that was just too hard! They only came to the New World to grab as much gold as they could get their hands on. But they were out of luck. There was no gold in Virginia.

The colonists decided to try to make friends with the Powhatan. Things didn't go too well. Their best hope was when Captain John Smith became friends with Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas. (You've heard of her, of course.) In spite of the
friendship, the colonists and the Powhatan never quite trusted each other. The Powhatan captured Smith once but later let him go. Some say that Pocahontas saved him from being killed. Others don't believe the story is really true.

In 1609, Smith was badly burned in a gunpowder accident and had to return to England to get treatment. After Captain Smith left, things got worse for the Jamestown settlers. Many starved or died of disease during what became known as the "Starving Time." The colonists couldn't grow enough food to keep themselves alive and well. More than half of them died that winter.

The Powhatan didn't think very highly of the way the colonists did things. The colonists fenced their fields to keep deer out. They let their cattle and pigs roam free to eat or trample the crops in Powhatan fields. The colonists claimed plots of land permanently and built houses on them. The Powhatan could no longer move around as they pleased. Colonists started growing tobacco, which made the soil less fertile. Once tobacco became popular in Europe, the colonists cleared and plowed gigantic fields to grow more of this cash crop (a crop that is sold to make money). The money they made saved Jamestown, but the huge fields left even less land for the Indians to grow their corn, beans and squash.
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The Powhatan and the colonists began to fight. England sent more settlers to Jamestown every year. The new settlers brought more animals, more food, more supplies and more disease. The Powhatan outnumbered the colonists for a while, but American Indians had no resistance to European diseases, and thousands died. Smallpox, parasites and viruses were often deadly to the Powhatan. As Jamestown grew stronger, the Powhatan nation grew weaker and weaker.

More and more settlements began in Virginia, and over time it became one of the original 13 states in our country. Today, the Jamestown settlement is a popular tourist attraction in Virginia. There are still Powhatan people in Virginia, too, but not nearly as many as in the day of Pocahontas and Chief Powhatan.

So, do you think the English were settlers, or were they unsettlers?