



# HORROR AT JAMESTOWN

Scientists find evidence that desperate people at the early American colony **ATE THEIR DEAD**

**WORDS TO KNOW**

- **anthropologist** (*n*): a scientist who studies human origins, beliefs, and cultures
- **New World** (*n*): a term in Europe around the 16th century for unexplored North and South America

**F**irst, someone chopped at the girl's forehead with "some type of cleaver or hacking implement," the scientist said. "Then the body was turned over, and there were four strikes to the back of the head [that] split the skull in half."

Finally, Douglas Owsley told *Smithsonian* magazine, a knife was used to "pry open the head and remove the brain." Why? To eat it, he said.

Recent architectural finds have shed light on one of the mysteries of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the Americas. Historians have long believed that some of its settlers engaged in cannibalism. Journals and letters from the winter of 1609-1610 describe how severe the food

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Hunger and disease wiped out hundreds of Jamestown settlers during the "Starving Time" of 1609-1610. Victims were buried at the fort—and some were dug up for food.



shortage was—and how desperate some people became.

But there was no proof until recently, when archaeologists excavating the remains of Jamestown's old fort found a human skull and leg bone in a trash pit. Scientists believe that they belonged to a girl of about 14, whom they've named Jane.

And what caused the hack marks on Jane's bones? Owsley, an **anthropologist** at the Smithsonian Institution who examined the remains, was pretty sure. "It's clear that this body was dismembered for consumption," he said.

### In the Wilderness

In April 1607, about 105 English settlers sent by the Virginia Company of London sailed into the Chesapeake Bay. Up a river they called the James they built a small fort they also named for England's King James I. Jamestown (see map, p. 12) was to be their foothold in a big section of the **New World** that England claimed as "Virginia."

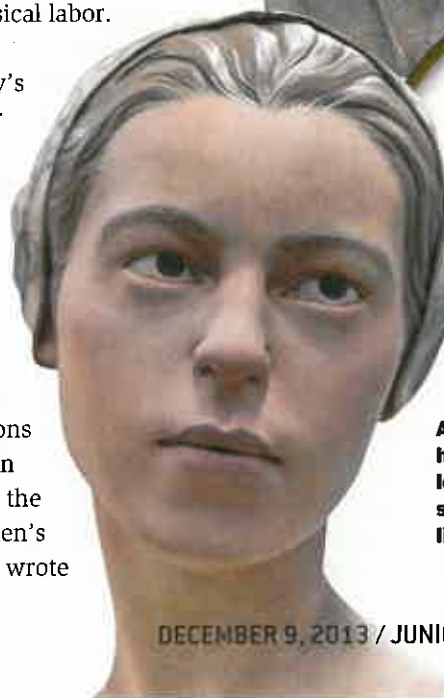
The settlers, however, had no idea how to live in the wilderness. First, they built their fort near a marsh, which was a source of infectious diseases. Worse, there were very few colonists who could do the building, planting, and hunting needed to keep a settlement going. And most of Jamestown's leaders—who described themselves as "gentlemen"—thought they were above such physical labor.

This attitude drove the colony's most able leader crazy. Captain John Smith was a veteran soldier and adventurer—a man of action. The *gentlemen* who mostly made the decisions about Jamestown expected "to get the fruits of other men's labors," he later wrote

scornfully. "[They] would gather their harvests before they have planted their corn."

Instead of concentrating on planting, the colonists sought to buy food from local Indians—especially the area's most powerful chief, Powhatan. "Powhatan was uncertain about the intentions of the colonists," says historian David A. Price. How long did these white people plan to stay? But he did agree to provide food to them—at first. "He hoped that he could

*continued on p. 12* →



**Jane's skull**

Artists reconstructed how Jane might have looked (left) from the skull found in a grave like the one above.

TOP TO BOTTOM: CHIP CLARK/NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION/AF PHOTO, CAROLYN MASTERS/AF PHOTO (2)

trade with them for their weapons and metal tools, and that he could make an alliance with them against other tribes," Price tells *JS*.

The colony relied on John Smith to deal with the proud and crafty Powhatan. The captain and the chief respected and feared each other. "Smith made the colonists appear stronger militarily than they actually were," Price says.

Smith in turn depended on the friendship and support of Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas, about 11 at the time. The heroine of one of the most famous legends in American history (*see sidebar*), the Indian princess repeatedly brought gifts of food to the hard-put settlers. Her aid helped get Jamestown through two hard winters. New arrivals from England helped the colony to grow.

But by September 1609, Smith was fed up with both Powhatan and the gentlemen. After he was severely burned when his gunpowder bag accidentally caught fire, he went back to England. Now another winter approached. With Smith gone, Pocahontas turned her back on the settlement. Jamestown was truly up a creek without a paddle.

### The Starving Time

The colony's president, George Percy, knew they were in trouble. Fourteen nets had been laid to catch fish, but "the colonists had carelessly allowed them to rot in the water," Price says. "Percy

had not set aside food for the winter. Instead, he had counted on the Virginia Company to send a supply." But week after week passed with no sign of aid from England.

"Most important," says Price, "the departure of John Smith led Chief Powhatan to conclude that he had nothing to fear from cutting off the colonists' food supply." By now, Powhatan wanted the settlers gone. His warriors laid siege to Jamestown, killing anyone who stepped outside the fort.

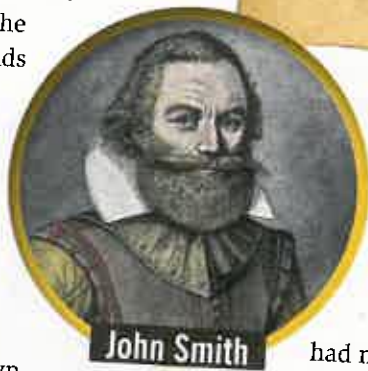
Survivors later called that winter the Starving Time. "Now all of us at James Towne began to feel that sharp

prick of hunger," Percy wrote. People began dying in alarming numbers. Frightened settlers ate their horses, then dogs and cats and rats, then their shoe leather. And then? Some resorted to "things which seem incredible, as to dig up dead corpses out of graves and to eat them," Percy wrote. "And some have licked up the blood which hath fallen from their weak fellows."

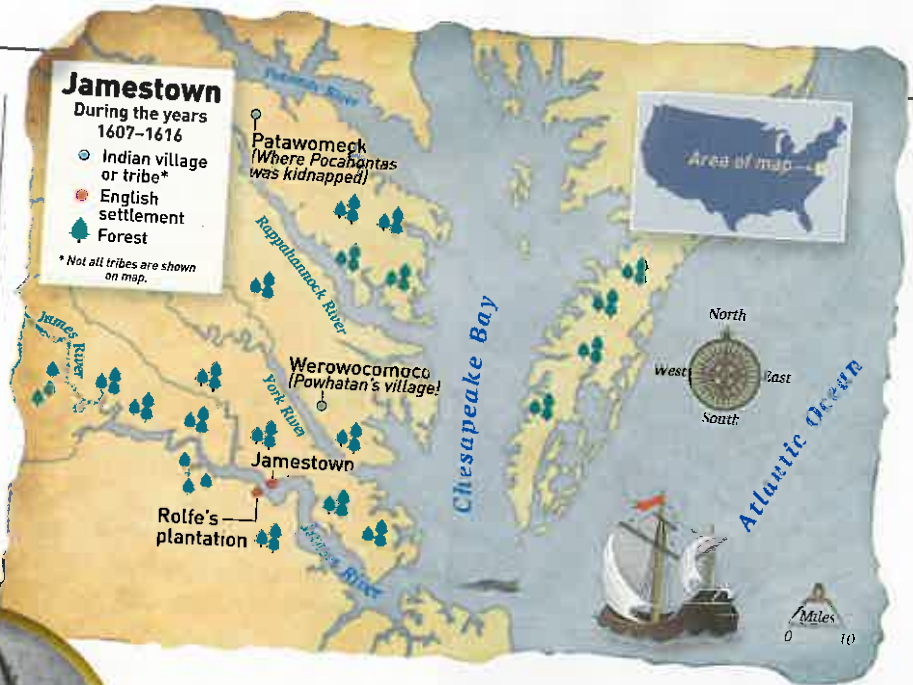
It got worse. According to Percy, one man even killed his wife in her sleep and "salted her for his food."

Jamestown was nearly wiped out. But in May 1610, two ships from England

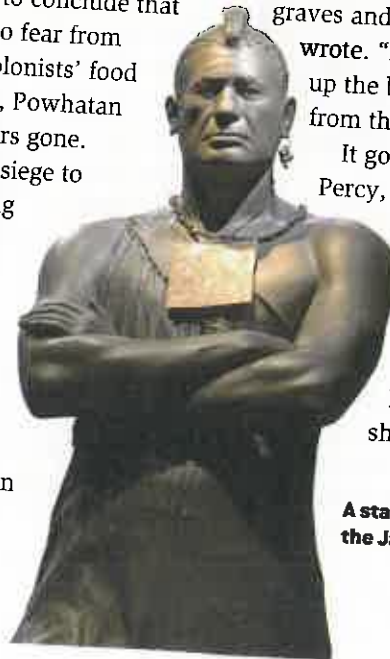
A statue of Powhatan at the Jamestown Museum



John Smith



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© NORTH WIND PICTURES (TOP); VISIONS OF AMERICA, LLC/ALAMY (BOTTOM); MAP: JIM MCMANON/MAPMAN; BASED ON JOHN SMITH'S 1612 MAP "VIRGINIA"

finally arrived, months late. The new arrivals discovered 60 living skeletons in the fort. They were all that was left of the 500 people who had started the winter there.

### “What Would I Do?”

Jamestown went on to survive and even thrive. The settler John Rolfe (later Pocahontas’s husband) introduced tobacco as a cash crop, which brought prosperity to the colony. In 1619, Jamestown became the site of the Virginia General Assembly—the first representative lawmaking body in the Western Hemisphere. That same year, the first black slaves in North America were brought to Jamestown from Africa.

Today, as the old fort continues to be excavated, historians expect to learn more about Jamestown,

### THINK ABOUT IT

What mistakes by the Jamestown settlers led to the Starving Time?

and that additional victims of the Starving Time will be found. Proving that they were eaten may not be easy, though.

“The other [bodies] might not have had the skeletal injuries that enabled the archaeologists to show that Jane was cannibalized,” Price says.

Is learning about cannibalism 400 years ago relevant to us? William Kelso, the chief archaeologist at Jamestown, believes so. As he told *The Washington Post*: “People will be able to empathize with the time and history and think to themselves, as I do: What would I do to stay alive?”

—Bryan Brown



# 5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT POCAHONTAS

## 1 POCAHONTAS REALLY DID EXIST.

The daughter of chief Powhatan was a real Indian princess, and apparently a free-spirited girl. Pocahontas was probably a nickname used by her family, and could be translated as “mischievous one.”

## 2 SHE MAY HAVE SAVED JOHN SMITH'S LIFE.

It's one of the great American legends. According to Smith, he was captured by Powhatan's warriors and brought before the chief. They seemed to be ready to kill him when suddenly Pocahontas intervened, begging for his life.

“Many historians believe that the event took place,” David A. Price says. Still, Smith may have misunderstood what was happening. Rather than his life being threatened, “historians believe Smith was being adopted into the Powhatan tribe.”



## 3 POCAHONTAS AND SMITH WERE FRIENDLY —BUT NOT THAT FRIENDLY.

Despite the romantic imaginings of the Disney movie, it is unlikely that the two were in love. Pocahontas was only 11 when they met! But she did make frequent visits to the fort, where she and the captain, fascinated with each other, formed a bond. There is evidence that this remarkable young woman took that relationship very seriously; she once warned Smith about an attempt on his life by her father.

## 4 THE INDIAN PRINCESS MARRIED AN ENGLISHMAN.

In 1613, the Jamestown settlers kidnapped Pocahontas, hoping to exchange her for guns and English prisoners. But after her father refused to bargain for her, she remained at Jamestown. In time, she converted to Christianity, was given the English name Rebecca, and married settler John Rolfe.

## 5 POCAHONTAS DIED AND WAS BURIED IN ENGLAND.

Rolfe took his wife with him back to England in 1616. Pocahontas was celebrated by the royal court and this portrait, the only certain image of her, was made. But she was stricken by disease—probably tuberculosis—and died a year later. She was buried in a churchyard, but the exact location of her grave has long been lost.

