CHAPTER 2

Beginnings of English America, 1607–1660

7. Exchange between John Smith and Powhatan (1608)

Source: John Smith, **The Generall Historie of Virginia . . .** *(London, 1624), pp. 74–76.*

When English colonists arrived in Virginia in 1607, they landed in an area inhabited by more than 15,000 Indians, members of some thirty tribes loosely united in a confederacy whose leader the settlers called Powhatan, the native word for both his tribe and the title of paramount chief. In a history written in 1624, the English leader John Smith recalled his exchange with Powhatan sixteen years earlier. Of course, Powhatan's words are filtered through Smith's memory. But the exchange seems to capture differences in outlook between the two leaders.

THE 12 OF JANUARY we arrived at Werowocomoco. . . . Quartering in the next houses we found, we sent to Powhatan for provision, who sent us plenty of bread, turkeys, and venison; the next day having feasted us after his ordinary manner, he began to ask us when we would be gone, saying he sent not for us, neither had he any corn; and his people much less, yet for forty swords he would procure us forty baskets. . . . The King concluded the matter with a merry laughter,

asking for our commodities, but none he liked without guns and swords, valuing a basket of corn more precious than a basket of copper, saying he would rate his corn, but not the copper.

Captain Smith seeing the intent of this subtle savage began to deal with him after this manner.

Powhatan, though I had many courses to have made my provision, yet believing your promises to supply my wants, I neglected all to satisfy your desire, and to testify my life, I sent you my men for your building, neglecting my own. What your people had you have engrossed, forbidding them our trade, and now you think by consuming the time, we shall consume for want, not having to fulfill your strange demands. As for swords and guns, I told you long ago I had none to spare, and you must know those I have can keep me from want, yet steal or wrong you I will not, nor dissolve that friendship we have mutually promised, except you constrain me by our bad usage.

The King having attentively listened to this discourse, promised that both he and his country would spare him what he could, which within two days they should receive. Yet Captain Smith, said the King, some doubt I have of your coming hither, that makes me not so kindly seek to relieve you as I would, for many do inform me, your coming hither is not for trade, but to invade my people, and possess my country, who dare not come to bring you corn, seeing you thus armed with your men. To free us of this fear, leave abroad your weapons, for here they are useless, we being all friends, and for ever Powhatan's. . . .

While we expected the coming in of the country, we wrangled out of the King ten quarters of corn for a copper kettle. . . . Wherewith each seemed well contented, and Powhatan began to expostulate the difference of Peace and War after this manner.

Captain Smith, you may understand that I having seen the death of all my people thrice, and not any one living of these three generations but myself, I know the difference of Peace and War better than any in my country. But now I am old and ere long must die, my

brethren, namely Opichapam, Opechancanough, and Kekataugh, my two sisters, and their two daughters, are distinctly each others successors. I wish their experience no less than mine, and your love to them no less than mine to you. But this [rumor] that you are come to destroy my country, so much frightens all my people as they dare not visit you. What will it avail you to take that by force you may quickly have by love, or to destroy them that provide you food? What can you get by war, when we can hide our provisions and fly to the woods, whereby you must famish by wronging us your friends. And why are you thus jealous of our loves seeing us unarmed, and both do and are willing still to feed you, with that you cannot get but by our laborers? Think you I am so simple, not to know it is better to eat good meat, lie well, and sleep quietly with my women and children, laugh and be merry with you, have copper, hatchets, or what I want being your friend, than be forced to fly from all, to lie cold in the woods, feed upon acorns, roots, and such trash, and be so hunted by you, that I can neither rest, eat, nor sleep, but my tired men must watch, and if a twig but break, every one cries there comes Captain Smith. Then I must fly I know not where, and thus with miserable fear, end my miserable life, leaving my pleasures to such youths as you. . . . Let this therefore assure you of our love, and every year our friendly trade shall furnish you with corn, and now also, if you would come in friendly manner to see us, and not this with your guns and swords as to invade your foes.

To this subtle discourse, [Smith] replied.

Seeing you will not rightly conceive of our words, we strive to make you know our thoughts by our deeds; the vow I made you of my love, both myself and my men have kept. As for your promise I find it every day violated by some of your subjects, yet we finding your love and kindness, our custom is so far from being ungrateful, that for your sake only we have curbed our thirsting desire of revenge, else had they known as well the cruelty we use to our enemies, as our true love and courtesy to our friends. And I think your judgment sufficient to conceive, as well by the adventures we have undertaken, as

by the advantage we have (by our arms) of yours, that had we intended you any hurt, long ere this we could have effected it.

Questions

1. What goods does each leader seek from the other?

2. How does the exchange illuminate some of the roots of conflict between settlers and Indians?