Two of the most devastating Native American attacks on whites in the history of North America occurred on March 22, 1622 and April 18, 1644. On each day, hundreds of English settlers died. The attacks were part of a pattern of conflict the first wave of Europeans in early Virginia experienced with the strong Powhatan confederacy along several of the major rivers feeding into Chesapeake Bay. Having constructed a formidable coalition of Native American groups around the Pamunkey tribe, both Wahunsenacawh, known as Powhatan to the English, and his brother Opechancanough had to determine how to interact with the first permanent European settlers in the future United States. After trying to incorporate them into his alliance system, Powhatan’s rule passed to his brother in 1618, who decided to meet increasing white demands for food and land with open warfare. Yet despite initial successes in 1622 and 1644, Opechancanough did not achieve his goal of forcing the English to consider Virginia an unacceptably costly place to settle and thus leave. Whites matched, and exceeded, the Powhatan level of violence in a series of raids and counter-raids lasting for years.

A number of English cultural assumptions underlay both their initial demands for land and their reaction after being attacked. Beliefs that Native Americans were not using land properly, had incorrect gender roles, and were uncivilized, non-Christian savages bolstered white confidence that they were entitled to increasing amounts of land in Virginia. In addition, the propagation of continuous warfare against the Powhatan benefited men of lower social status within Virginia who had previously not been able to gain access to the levers of power in the colony. Thus the 1622–1632 Second Anglo-Powhatan War and the 1644–1646 Third Anglo-Powhatan War, which along with the 1609–1614 First Anglo-Powhatan War constituted the Tidewater Wars, both stemmed from and subsequently reinforced white racial attitudes along a frontier of violence as well as revealed ways conflict along the frontier affected white society itself. The Tidewater Wars thus helped to enshrine racism as an element of white expansion during the very first decades of European settlement in what would become the future United States. In addition, the conflicts also revealed there was no hard and fast line separating the frontier region of a colony from the more settled and populated eastern portions, a pattern of interaction in the history of the frontier in America that would repeat in later episodes such as Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676 and the Whiskey Rebellion in the mid-1790s, when groups of armed white frontiersmen challenged the power structures within the more settled areas of white society.
The Powhatan Confederacy and the First Anglo-Powhatan War

During the decades before the arrival of whites in the Chesapeake Bay region, one Native American leader forged a strong alliance that would eventually threaten the very existence of European settlement in Virginia. Wahunsenacawh, or Powhatan as he was known to the English, led the strong Pamunkey tribe, named for the Pamunkey River, and had also extended his control over more than 30 other groups in the Chesapeake watershed during the late 1500s. Historian Edmund Morgan estimates that Powhatan had around 8,000 people under his rule. His area of control began near the Rappahannock River and extended 50 miles to the south, including the entire York and James River watersheds.¹ Powhatan had created his small empire through warfare, certainly, but also by arranging the marriages of his children to other chiefs or by arranging the marriage of his children to other chiefs or their children. He was also linked by ties of ethnicity or marriage to a number of other groups farther north along the Chesapeake and could often add their number to his own during times of war. In addition, in a usual Native American practice, he gave away much of the wealth he had accumulated through raids and warfare to his followers in gestures of generosity, therefore proving himself worthy of being followed and binding other Native American groups to his original Pamunkey tribe. He also allowed many of the chiefs allied to him, known as werowances, a considerable amount of local autonomy. They were only responsible for paying tribute and for following his lead on issues of foreign policy and war.² Thus when the first English settlers landed at Jamestown, they encountered one of the strongest Native American coalitions in the entire eastern part of North America.

Despite only landing at Jamestown in April 1607, the incessant demands of English settlers for gold and food quickly pushed Native Americans in the Chesapeake into open hostility. Compared to the devastating Powhatan attacks at the start of the Second and Third Anglo-Powhatan Wars, beginning in 1622 and 1644 respectively, the first conflict between 1609 and 1614 saw relatively few deaths on each side. Yet, as they killed each other, animosity obviously grew between the two sides until finally the English captured Powhatan’s daughter Pocahontas and he agreed to peace terms, which included the marriage of Pocahontas to the English leader John Rolfe in 1614. Powhatan also agreed to return any English he had captured as well as send maize to the English colony, which was often near starving in its early years. Merely two years after the arrival of permanent white settlers in what would later become the United States, open warfare had erupted with the indigenous population.

English Attitudes

Yet more than just concerns over land separated the two cultures and English misunderstandings of Powhatan practices both produced conflict initially and deepened it once begun. For instance, when Powhatan married Pocahontas to Rolfe, the Native American leader was trying to incorporate the English into his confederacy using ties of marriage. The English, as historian Richard Dent observes, either did not understand what Powhatan’s intentions for the marriage were or deliberately refused to become a Powhatan subsidiary.³ In addition, during 35 years of periodic brutal warfare between the Powhatan and the English, whites were often frustrated at the unwillingness of the Powhatan to engage in set-piece, European-style battles. The Powhatan were astute enough to realize the advantage in firepower lay with the English and their way of warfare differed from that of the English by centering on seizing crops and livestock or exhibiting acts of individual bravery during combat. The Powhatan cared little for European objectives of conquering territory and clearly defeating the enemy army in an open battle. Even
killing enemy combatants, at least when it came to warfare among Native American groups, was only a means to the end of obtaining goods or showing one’s courage. Consistent failure to find and engage a large group of Native American warriors often produced anger among the English and led them at times to attack Native American towns and groups who were not even allied to the Powhatan, thus causing the early conflicts in Virginia to spread beyond the Powhatan and their initial allies.

English gender, racial, and religious outlooks also helped produce a second conflict. Among whites, men performed work in the fields and women tended the home, or also a small garden near the home. Among Native Americans, however, women planted, tended, and harvested crops. While Native American men helped clear fields for planting, their most important roles revolved around hunting, fishing, and warfare. Thus, to whites, Native American men seemed lazy and unwilling to make productive use of the abundant land in North America. Therefore, went English logic, the land should be owned by a people who would farm it and use it to produce crops or, after the late 1610s, the cash crop tobacco. Thus, in addition simply to wanting additional land, English conceptions of gender helped to justify English expansion onto Powhatan land. In a related vein, the very way Native Americans used, or more accurately usually did not use, land for large-scale farming, grazing, or extraction of natural resources seemed to justify white expansion in English minds.

English attitudes on race also contributed to tension in Virginia. Such views had recently developed new strains amid conflicts with the Irish during the 1500s, adding to the general belief that whites were superior. For instance, as British control expanded over Ireland during the second half of the sixteenth century, the English came to see the Irish, in the words of historian James Horn, as “uncivilized, pagan, savage, barbarous, lascivious, treacherous, inconstant, bestial.” Such attitudes readily transferred to the English experience in the Chesapeake region. The consequence was that, as Horn points out, such views of the Powhatan “as subhuman liberated the English from adhering to European conventions governing warfare and legitimized any actions undertaken by settlers and soldiers against savages, from stealing corn to genocide.” Thus, regarding racial attitudes, English settlement along the Chesapeake was an extension of the English imperial conquest of neighboring Ireland. These views revealed how settlers conceived of the frontier in racial terms from the very beginning of white settlement in the future United States.

Finally, in the environment of the heightened, indeed almost existential in English minds, conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the seventeenth century for dominion in Europe and elsewhere, a deep sense of Christian identity existed among many English settlers. While not as adamant about spreading Christianity among the indigenous peoples in the Americas as the Spanish had been, English religious views still undergirded the expansion of white settlement. According to most English, Native American animistic religion was pagan and Native Americans needed either to be converted or pushed out of the way to make way for a “civilized” Christian society to expand. Such religious views even blended with English views on gender and the use of land, since many English believe the Bible taught that God had granted the use of the earth to mankind and thus man must use the earth for productive purposes such as growing crops and extracting resources. One Christian clergyman, George Thorpe, was able to obtain from the Virginia Company 10,000 acres at a site called Henrico (or Henricus in some accounts), which was ostensibly where Pocahontas had converted to Christianity, for a school in which to teach Native Americans about white culture and Christianity. Thorpe tried to emphasize Christian compassion toward Native Americans and tried to halt English encroachment against Powhatan land, but was largely unsuccessful. He and most of the rest of the settlers at Henrico subsequently died during
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the initial Powhatan attack in 1622. Overall, the white English settlers who landed at Jamestown and expanded into the Chesapeake region between 1607 and 1622 brought with them a number of gender, cultural, racial, and religious views that rapidly created friction and then outright hostility with the Powhatan, revealing the gendered and racial nature of the very beginning of the frontier in the future United States.

Proximate Reasons for War in 1622 and the Second Anglo-Powhatan War

In addition to the numerous English patterns of thought that produced conflict with Native Americans, a number of more immediate concerns led the Powhatan to attack in 1622. First, by the late 1610s, the English had realized that tobacco grew well in the climate of Virginia and was quite profitable due to high demand in Britain and Europe. Profits often exceeded the cost of production by five or ten times. English settlers, especially the wealthier ones, thus began to desire increasing amounts of land in order to make large profits off a newly discovered cash crop. Second, while hundreds of white colonists continued to die from disease and malnutrition during the early years of settlement, enough continued to arrive so that the overall population of Virginia grew, slowly but steadily, to somewhere between 1,200 and 1,600 by 1622. In addition, according to historian Camilla Townsend, a Powhatan named Uttamatomakin had gone with Pocahontas to London and returned in 1617 to describe the vast numbers of whites in England as well as their advanced technology. Therefore, Opechancanough, who ascended to leadership of his brother’s confederacy when the latter retired in 1618, accurately perceived that white numbers would only increase and thought that if enough English settlers died, perhaps the rest would leave and the Powhatan would avert the coming influx of even more whites. While this understanding of forcing an enemy out stemmed from the Native American experience of warfare and diplomacy, Opechancanough and the Powhatan tragically miscalculated the English response. A similar concern may have been that despite George Thorpe’s relatively conciliatory attitude toward Native Americans, his attempts at Christian conversion threatened Powhatan culture, especially by targeting the next generation of Powhatan youth.

Finally, one of the more immediate causes sometimes noted for the devastating March 1622 attack was the murder by English settlers of a famous Powhatan warrior and religious leader named Nemattanew, who had begun to preach that the Powhatan needed to resist white expansion. Nemattanew killed a white trader in either late 1621 or early 1622 and was then shot while being taken prisoner. Yet Opechancanough took time to prepare well for the 1622 attack and thus it occurred when he deemed he and his people were ready. As historian Helen Rountree notes, the attack came in early spring during “a season of dispersal of families, which would take Indian noncombatants out of the immediate reach of angry English survivors.” The combination of slightly warmer weather with the fact that Powhatan women and children had not yet gathered into large summer villages, which was part of the usual Native American pattern of seasonal dispersal and reunion, meant that late March was an ideal time to launch an attack on the English settlements in Virginia.

Indeed, the attack was very effective initially. During the previous months, Opechancanough had sought to calm English fears of any Native American attack in part by suggesting to Thorpe that he might become a Christian. In addition, on the morning of the attack the Powhatan and their allies approached settlements and farms in small groups with friendly demeanors, indicating they had arrived for trade or just to interact. None of the Powhatan carried any weapons, but when the time came to attack, they used the knives or farm implements of the settlers themselves. John Smith’s account of the devastating attack is generally taken as the most reliable count of
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The dead on March 22, 1622, which he numbered at 347. Thus between a fourth and a third of the English population in Virginia died that day. Thorpe and over 20 others were killed at and around the Henrico school and plantation. The largest loss of life occurred at a plantation only seven miles from Jamestown called Martin’s Hundred, where Smith reported 73 settlers died.\(^1\) Jamestown itself was spared due to the actions of a farmer named Richard Pace who heard of the attack from a Native American servant and rushed to the town. When some Powhatan arrived and found Jamestown closed and ready to repulse an attack, they left.\(^1\) In many other places, individual families were not so fortunate. After the attack, the English presence in Virginia temporarily contracted when the governor ordered all whites to retreat to Jamestown or to five fortified plantations nearby.\(^1\)

The attack constituted the most serious physical challenge to white settlement in the history of Virginia and shook the confidence of many English that they would be able to triumph over their “savage” Native American neighbors. Unfortunately for Opechancanough and the Powhatan, the English would not follow the normal Native American pattern of combat and simply leave the area after suffering such heavy losses. Weapons poured into Virginia and new settlers continued to arrive. As early as June the English mounted two raids against Native American towns, destroying or seizing crops.\(^1\) Raids and counter-raids by both sides followed. While historian David Price notes that malnutrition, disease, and Native American attacks killed additional hundreds of English colonists over the course of the next year, more whites continued to arrive.\(^1\) By 1624 English numbers even surpassed their March 1622 level and continued to grow.\(^1\) Savage attacks continued on both sides, as in May 1623 when the Powhatan agreed to a meeting to discuss a ceasefire and the English poisoned and slaughtered over 200 Native Americans.\(^1\) Despite periodic ceasefires, raids by both sides continued until an uneasy truce occurred in 1632. Unfortunately for Opechancanough and the Powhatan, even constant warfare could not stem the English tide. The inability of the Powhatan to replace their numbers as rapidly as the English could, as well as the high degree of vulnerability of Native American fields to English raids, meant the Powhatan could not sustain prolonged campaigns either in an individual year, due to the need to return and harvest crops, or over a span of several years, due to the loss of life and less dependable access to firearms compared to the English. The white way of total war on the frontier, consistently targeting civilian populations and crops and burning what they could not carry away, eventually produced victory.

Effects on Virginia

Internally, the attack and the subsequent frontier conflict produced two profound changes in Virginian society. First, due also to financial problems that had beset the Virginia Company for years, in May 1623 the English King James I established a commission to examine the company, determined it was quite faulty, and rescinded the company’s charter. In 1624 Virginia became the first royal colony in the future United States.\(^2\) Thus began the pattern of the crown taking control of previously private endeavors in North America. Of course, some later colonies explicitly began as crown colonies, but the question of whether or not English North America was to develop fully under the control of the English monarch or as a diverse set of proprietary and crown colonies seemed to lean toward the former process as early as 1624 in part due to the devastating Powhatan attack of March 1622. Second, the attack and subsequent decade of warfare contributed to the growing influence of men who were not from the upper social classes of English society. Governor Sir Francis Wyatt was forced to accept the increased stature of men who had prior military experience and who were able to lead effective raids against the Native Americans. As historian
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J. Frederick Fausz writes, these men and others created from the ranks of the settlers “private armies to raid, trade, and farm for their personal benefit” and “challenged the traditional belief that only high social status qualified men to govern by requiring military ability—not education, wealth, or pedigree—as the main criterion for leadership.” The violent frontier environment thus created social openings for several men of lower birth to gain both heightened social standing, due to their successful military exploits, and more wealth, due to the crops and other goods they seized as they led raids against Native American villages. Thus warfare on the frontier produced significant social changes in Virginian society.

While these newly influential leaders often simply sought to consolidate their newfound wealth and positions in society, their rise revealed one of the ways white interaction with Native Americans on the frontier could alter the social structures of white society itself. Those of lower social standing learned they could benefit from frontier conflict. Thus those outside of power, such as Nathaniel Bacon in 1676 who was wealthy yet not influential in the governing of Virginia, periodically realized they could use war on the frontier for their own ends within white society. In that conflict, when a frontier war began with the Susquehannock in 1675 and the Virginia governor would not aggressively pursue the war as Bacon and his followers demanded, in 1676 they marched eastward, burned Jamestown, and ruled the colony for several months. Likewise, historian Patrick Griffin has shown how racialized warfare with Native Americans on the frontier in the Ohio Valley before, during, and immediately after the American Revolution led white settlers to demand a stronger government presence as a way to achieve their ends of getting rid of Native Americans.

The Third Anglo-Powhatan War

During the 12 years between the Second and Third Anglo-Powhatan Wars, the English views outlined above continued to drive white expansion into interior areas and also farther up the Chesapeake. By the early 1640s, whites were in the vicinity of the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers, areas that were even beyond direct Powhatan control and populated by the Rappahancook and Susquehannock Native American groups. The English now controlled the important areas around the James and York Rivers and were expanding northwards toward the other two major rivers that emptied from the west into the Chesapeake. In addition, Protestants fleeing Catholic rule at the northern end of the Chesapeake in the colony of Maryland, officially created in 1632 and settled in 1634, had arrived on the Potomac River by 1640, thus creating a sense among the Powhatan that whites were advancing on the upper Chesapeake from two different directions. Such ongoing encroachment and residual bad feelings from the Second Anglo-Powhatan War led to a third and final major armed conflict between the Powhatan and the English in the Chesapeake watershed.

While the Third Anglo-Powhatan War was bloodier than the two previous conflicts, the white population in Virginia faced a much reduced threat of extermination compared to 1622. Opechancanough again planned well, and in secret, and on April 18, 1644 his Powhatan and allied warriors again fell on individual settlements and towns across the region. They killed even more colonists on that day than in 1622, between 400 and 500. Yet the white population had rapidly increased and was likely around 10,000 in 1644. Therefore, only around a tenth of the white population in Virginia died in April 1644, compared to anywhere from a fourth to a third in March 1622. In addition, white reaction was quicker and stronger than in 1622 and the English rapidly regained the advantage by attacking and burning Native American towns and fields as before. This time, the reduced numbers of the Powhatan led to a shorter conflict and the official
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end of the Third Anglo-Powhatan War occurred when in early 1646 the English finally captured Opechancanough. As historian Alan Taylor notes, the governor of Virginia wanted to show off Opechancanough in Jamestown, but a soldier killed him while he was in custody. 

Regarding the decline in the Native American population along the Chesapeake, Taylor claims, “Disease and war reduced the Virginia Algonquians [of whom the Powhatan were a part] from 24,000 in 1607 to only 2,000 by 1669.” Unable to replenish their numbers at the same rate as the English and vulnerable to European diseases, the Powhatan met their final defeat in 1646, 37 years after the initial outbreak of hostilities between the Powhatan and the English in 1609.

Beyond demographic trends, the results of the peace settlement between the remaining Powhatan and the English in 1646 were devastating to any lingering Native American hope of removing whites from Virginia. Opechancanough’s successor Necotowance signed a treaty that year in which the Powhatan recognized the English monarch as their ruler, began to pay a small tribute to the crown, voided any Powhatan rights to the land between the York and James rivers, agreed that no Powhatan would enter those areas, except as envoys, or face execution, and received an interior area to the north of the York as their specific preserve. While the actual word “reservation” was not yet used, as historian Wesley Frank Craven notes, “The purpose to set aside a reservation in which he [the Native American] would be free of the white man’s varied intrusions represents a turn of policy of first significance.” Previous English dealings with Native Americans always had the end result of either moving the Native Americans farther inland, killing them, or, more seldom, settling a few on a plantation such as that at Henrico in order to teach them Christianity. In 1646, however, the English created the first reservation in the future United States. Even today, the Pamunkey, the group at the core of the confederacy led by Powhatan and Opechancanough and to which they both belonged, have a small reservation on the upper Pamunkey River in Virginia that feeds into the York River. When Necotowance died at the end of the 1640s, or at least disappeared from the historical record as historian Helen Rountree notes, the Powhatan confederacy effectively ended, breaking up again into its constituent peoples.

Conclusion

After 1622 English settlement in Virginia would never face an existential threat such as that during the frightening days immediately after Opechancanough’s initial onslaught. White numbers continued to increase while those of the Powhatan decreased. The ongoing influx of immigrants combined with the biological impact of European diseases on Native American populations to produce English dominance around Chesapeake Bay by the mid-seventeenth century. Yet during the Second and Third Anglo-Powhatan Wars, simple numbers were not enough to triumph. The English needed to have the will to stay and to use those numbers in numerous, often ruthless, raids and counter-raids. They did so in large part due to their views of Native Americans as unable to use land properly, as possessing incorrect gender roles, and as non-Christian savages, which led to a determination to fight back and to continue to expand. Conflict on the frontier also caused changes within Virginia, including the collapse of the Virginia Company. In addition, the rise to prominence of several men of lower social standing, compared to the original leaders of the colony, revealed the interdependence of the frontier region and the rest of the colony. Thus the Tidewater Wars in early Virginia indicated both that racism would mark the frontier experience in the future United States from a very early period and that events on the frontier held implications for power structures within white society. Indeed, Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676 and the Whiskey Rebellion in the mid-1790s, both of which witnessed armed white forces marching back toward
more settled areas, demonstrated that the latter relationship held true throughout the colonial period and into the early history of the United States.

Notes


3 Dent, Chesapeake Prehistory, 273.

4 Taylor, American Colonies, 126.

5 Horn, Adapting, 132.

6 Ibid., 133.

7 John Grenier has provided a short, recent treatment on the Tidewater Wars in his larger work on American military strategy, but he argues that English racism did not form until the mid-1600s and he does not explore other motivations for English expansion or the resulting changes within Virginia as a result of the Tidewater Wars. His main concern is with examining the actual conduct of the English wars against the Powhatan and he emphasizes the conducting of total warfare, including the targeting of non-combatants and the seizure of food supplies, by whites. John Grenier, The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607–1814 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21–26.


10 Taylor, American Colonies, 134.


12 Helen C. Rountree, Pocahontas’s People: The Powhatan People of Virginia through Four Centuries (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 71–73.

13 Ibid., 73.

14 Price, Love and Hate, 203–204.


16 Price, Love and Hate, 207.

17 Ibid., 214.

18 Ibid., 214.

19 Ibid., 216.

20 Ibid., 219.

21 Ibid., 218.

22 Roper, English Empire, 88–89.


24 Taylor, American Colonies, 148–150.


26 Taylor, American Colonies, 135.

27 Horn, Adapting, 175.

28 Taylor, American Colonies, 135.
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29 Ibid., 135.
30 Ibid., 135.
31 Ibid., 136.
32 Rountree, Pocahontas’s People, 87.
34 Rountree, Pocahontas’s People, 256.
35 Ibid., 91.