



## *Henry Spelman*

Henry Spelman was born in England in 1595. When he was 14 years old he left his home in Norfolk, England and sailed to Virginia as a boy laborer. Arriving at Jamestown in 1609, Henry soon traveled with Captain John Smith, President of the Virginia Council in Jamestown, on an expedition up the James River to the falls.

Due to a shortage of food at Jamestown, Smith had sent 120-140 colonists to settle here, near an Indian town called Powhatan. The town was ruled by Parahunt, son of Powhatan, the paramount chief of all the Indians in Tidewater Virginia. When Smith's expedition arrived, they found that Indian attacks on the new English settlement had been constant.

When Smith and Parahunt met, Parahunt agreed to move his people in exchange for copper and English protection from the Monacans, their enemies to the west. At this meeting, it was decided that Henry would stay with the Powhatan Indians. Parahunt treated Henry well, but war soon broke out between the English and the Indians in the Tidewater region. About this time, John Smith was injured and returned to England. Henry wanted to return to the English and soon made his way back to Jamestown.

Henry was not at Jamestown long before four or five Powhatan Indians came to the James Fort with venison. With them was Thomas Savage. Thomas Savage was another English boy who had gone to live with the Indians. The exchange of young boys between the English and the Powhatan people was not uncommon. The boys would learn the language and culture of the other group and serve as messengers between them. Captain Percy, who was now in charge at Jamestown, told Thomas Savage he had to return with the Indians, but Thomas did not want to go back alone. Henry was chosen to go with Thomas. Henry was more willing to go now, because food was very scarce at Jamestown, and he knew the Indians had food. Henry took a hatchet and some copper with him and gave it to Powhatan. Powhatan was pleased and treated the boys kindly for awhile.

Henry spent a total of about a year and a half with the Indians, learning the Algonquian language and their way of life. He acted as a messenger and interpreter between the Powhatan people and the English, arranging for the two groups to trade with one another. He also witnessed hostilities between them which made him feel uneasy. He had been living with the Indians for several months when a local chief of the Patowomeck, a tribe living on the south side of the Potomac River, came to visit Powhatan. When the local chief was leaving, Henry, Thomas and another boy named Samuel decided to go with him, without telling Powhatan. On the journey, Thomas had second thoughts and decided to return to Powhatan. Chief Powhatan sent a message that the other two boys should return too. When they did not, one of Powhatan's men killed Samuel. Afraid for

his life, Henry ran away but finally made his way to the Patowomeck. Henry lived with them for about a year. There he moved freely and was treated as a special guest. Henry recorded his observations of Powhatan life.

Henry wrote that the greatest town of the Powhatan people had about 20 – 30 houses. These houses were made like ovens with a little hole as a door. They were spacious inside and had a hole in the middle of the house for smoke to go out. Houses of the chief were broader and longer and had dark windings and turnings before coming to the room where the chief was. The Powhatan women made the houses and covered them with mats while the men hunted. In the fall some 200-300 men would join together to hunt, each with bow and arrows and a “fire stick.” They would make a very large circle and set fire to the grass with their “fire sticks.” The deer within the circle would run to a narrow opening in the circle to escape, and here the Indians killed them with their bows and arrows. Henry also wrote about Powhatan weddings, burials, government, planting methods and other activities.

In September 1610, Captain Samuel Argall, an Englishman on a trading mission, found Henry living with the Patowomeck. With his knowledge of the Indian language and culture, Henry helped the English trade copper for valuable supplies such as corn. He also helped them form an alliance with these northern Indians that would be important for the future of Jamestown. The local chief helped Captain Argall kidnap Pocahontas in 1613 when she was visiting there. This led to a temporary peace with Powhatan. Henry now worked as an interpreter for the English, mixing with both English and Powhatan leaders.

Henry made several trips back to England but returned to Virginia to serve as an interpreter, rising to the rank of Captain. In 1619, a rival interpreter, Robert Poole, accused Henry of speaking badly against the Governor to Opechancanough, who was now the chief of the Powhatan people. If found guilty of treason, Henry could have been executed. Instead, he was found guilty of a lesser crime. He lost his rank of Captain and was sentenced to serve the Governor for seven years as an interpreter.

In 1622 Opechancanough tried to drive the English out of Virginia by attacking the settlers and killing almost a third of the colonists. Henry survived the attacks and was called upon to renew the English alliance with the Powhatan Indians along the Potomac River. The English needed corn and lands to build safe settlements. The renewed alliance improved English chances for success in the war with Opechancanough.

In the spring of 1623, Henry volunteered to take a group of 19 men north to the Potomac River, away from the fighting near Jamestown, to barter for food. There on March 23, 1623 Henry’s party was attacked by 60 canoes full of Indians. At age 28, after providing much good service as an interpreter, Henry died as he had lived – among the Indians.

***Historical background materials made possible by Archibald Andrews Marks.***



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