

POWHATAN'S CHALLENGE AND OPECHANCAHOUGH'S ACTION

Two Powhatan brothers lived on Virginia's coastal plain at the time of the English arrival in 1607. One was the supreme chief of the entire Powhatan chiefdom at that time. The other would take his place within a little more than 10 years (not officially but in fact).

The elder brother, Wahunsonacock, sometimes called Powhatan, inherited the control of six tribes in the Tidewater area in the last quarter of the 16th century through his mother's hereditary line. He also began consolidating others through warfare or intimidation. By the time the English arrived, he loosely controlled over 30 tribal groups and had centrally located his headquarters at Werowocomoco on the York River. The initial reaction of some of his tribes to the English was to confront and attack the strangers. The newcomers were attacked upon the first day of their arrival, and soon after they had selected the site for their settlement and began building their fort. But Powhatan's response was to tell the tribal leaders to meet the English, wait and see what they planned to do and how long they intended to stay, and to report back to him. In John Smith's writings, he noted that Powhatan acted with dignity and wisdom.

When Smith was captured in December 1607 and brought to Powhatan's village, the supreme chief fed him, quizzed him, then gave him one of Powhatan's nearby towns in exchange for metal tools the chief wanted the English to make for the Indians. Powhatan offered to establish the English as a new "tribe" under his own command and equal with his other subject tribes. He then sent Smith back to Jamestown, asking to have some large guns and a grindstone sent to him. Powhatan wanted to see what he could get from establishing a tenuous relationship with the English through this leader, John Smith. He also planned to learn more about the English language and culture by sending a young Indian named Namontack to live with the English.

Powhatan was willing to trade and negotiate with the strangers, but he did insist they go to him, and he never came to Jamestown. When they forced him to accept a crown and promise that he would be subservient to their king, James I, and when, in 1609, they started using strong-arm tactics to get the food they needed, he started having second thoughts. Instead of fighting back, he retreated. In early 1609 he moved his capital far up the Chickahominy River to a place called Orapaks. Since Orapaks was on the fringe of his empire and not the best location for a large village, he left there and by 1614 had relocated to Matchcot far up the Pamunkey River. Interestingly, Powhatan's last headquarters was very near the town of Youghtanund, one of the towns ruled by his younger brother, Opechancanough.

During Powhatan's time at Orapaks, his warriors were engaged in numerous skirmishes with the English, but he himself was rather inactive. He may have thought that the English would starve and decide to leave. He had made the choices to accommodate and then to avoid the English. His inactivity gave Opechancanough the opportunity to gain power. By 1614 the English recorded that he already had "the command of all the people." The fighting stopped about the time that Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, was captured and held for ransom by the English. Her father still showed his dignity when he did not give in to all of the English demands, and his daughter remained with the settlers. But slowly, quietly, Opechancanough gained the allegiance of many Powhatan warriors.



Opechancanough encountered the English in their first year in Virginia. In December 1607 he was the one who captured John Smith when the Englishman was exploring up the Chickahominy River. At that point he treated Smith as an honored guest, entered into conversation and gave him good food. He determined, through his priests, that Smith was harmless, and allowed him to communicate with Jamestown. But he determined to carefully observe Smith. He led Smith around Powhatan's chiefdom, ending up at Werowocomoco. There the younger brother was forced to accept Powhatan's more peaceful policy of "wait and see," and he watched as Powhatan released Smith.

In early 1609 when a severe drought drove Smith into using strong-arm tactics to get food, he forced Opechancanough to sell corn to the English at gunpoint, an insult to the chief's dignity. Over the next few years Opechancanough may have vowed to take revenge. As the English spread deep into Powhatan territory, he quietly reorganized the chiefdom by strengthening the tribes and gathering in new ones such as the previously independent Chickahominies in 1616. He adopted a militant attitude toward the English, and became the "chief Captaine" and subsequently the acting supreme chief at Powhatan's death in 1618. His older brother, Opitchapam, was officially the supreme chief, but he was described as weak and lame.

In 1621, as a ruse to deceive the English, Opechancanough established peace with the colony's officials and told them the Powhatan Indians would adopt Christianity, lulling the colonists into complacency. He also took a new name, Mangopeesomon, which may have symbolized his final preparations to attack the colonists. A year later he led his warriors in a forceful, coordinated attack against the English, successfully eliminating about one-fourth of the settlers. Colonists from outlying areas were ordered into fortified settlements such as Jamestown. Severe food shortages resulted and contagious diseases spread. The settlers retaliated, burning Indian villages, taking their corn and killing the inhabitants. A decade of open warfare followed that included intermittent raids, kidnappings and ambush by both sides. This was followed by a decade of tenuous peace, while Opechancanough bided his time. But in 1644 his warriors struck the colony again. This time, however, the English far outnumbered the Powhatans, and the Indians were defeated. Opechancanough, now an old man, was captured and killed at Jamestown in 1646.

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