

POCAHONTAS AND THE ENGLISH BOYS

Caught Between Cultures
in Early Virginia

KAREN ORDAHL KUPPERMAN

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Reading Guide

Karen Ordahl Kupperman shifts the lens on the well-known narrative of Virginia's founding to reveal the previously untold and utterly compelling story of the youths who, often unwillingly, entered into cross-cultural relationships—and became essential for the colony's survival. Their story gives us unprecedented access to both sides of early Virginia.

Here for the first time outside scholarly texts is an accurate portrayal of Pocahontas, who, from the age of ten, acted as emissary for her father, who ruled over the local tribes, alongside the never-before-told intertwined stories of Thomas Savage, Henry Spelman, and Robert Poole, young English boys who were forced to live with powerful Indian leaders to act as intermediaries.

Pocahontas and the English Boys is a riveting story of intrigue and danger, knowledge and power, and four youths who lived out their lives between cultures. Written by an expert in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Atlantic history, *Pocahontas and the English Boys* unearths gems from the archives—Henry Spelman's memoir, travel accounts, letters, and official reports and records of meetings of the governor and council in Virginia—and draws on recent archaeology to share the stories of the young people who were key influencers of their day and who are now set to transform our understanding of early Virginia.

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INTRODUCTION

When English colonists chose a site up the James River for their Jamestown settlement in 1607, they intruded on land governed by Wahunsenaca. The English called the land Virginia, but its true name was Tsenacomoca. Wahunsenaca's title was Powhatan, which is what the English called him, and the people were known by their tribal names and collectively called the Powhatans. The Powhatans and their neighbors along the coast all spoke Algonquian languages.

Because the English assumed they would be confronted by hostile people, the first colonists were men led by military veterans. Less well-known is that the Jamestown venture included several boys, and these boys were put to a variety of tasks. Many of the boys sent on the ships were not even named, but the three in this story—Thomas Savage, Henry Spelman, and Robert Poole—played essential roles. At the age of 13 or 14 they were sent to live with Powhatans so they could learn the language and culture from the inside and become translators and go-betweens in the future. Powhatan gave young men of his own in return with the same goal. Young Pocahontas came to Jamestown accompanying her father's men on embassies. The English thought she was 10 or 11 in 1607, and her presence indicated that they came in peace.

The intertwined stories of Pocahontas, Thomas, Henry, and Robert tells a very different tale from the standard one of swaggering English officers and crafty and hostile Native leaders. Instead, in this account we see youths being thrust into situations where adults could not go. Leaving adolescents in foreign lands to learn as much as they could about the other was standard practice. Leaders around the Atlantic understood that young people would be accepted where adults would be too threatening. Youths were flexible and able to adapt, and they could learn new languages. They were also, for the Europeans, expendable.

Powhatans and the English had very different ways of incorporating boys and girls into their societies as they emerged from childhood. In England you left home at around 13. Some fortunate boys went into higher education, but most boys and girls became servants in another family's home. They were at an in-between stage called nonage—no longer children but not yet adults. Servants often changed masters annually and after a decade or so they were supposed to have learned a trade and sufficient skills to set up on their own.

Powhatan children assumed adult roles when they entered their teen years. Girls joined the women in the agricultural fields, and engaged in food preparation and home maintenance. Boys, along with the men of their village, worked to make equipment for fishing and hunting and participated in those activities. So Thomas, Henry, and Robert went from simply following orders to being treated as full members of Powhatan society

and they lived in the chief's household. They were not in control of their own lives, but they were welcomed into families and treated as sons, not as expendable baggage. And, Pocahontas was there to help them adjust to the many unfamiliar situations they faced.

Acting as translators must have been one of the most difficult things these young people were required to do. English and Powhatan culture were so completely different that finding words to express concepts in one language that would allow hearers in the other to really get what was meant must have been nearly impossible. And that was especially the case for people so young themselves that they might not have known the full meaning of words and concepts in their own culture.

Discussion Questions

1. How are young teenagers prepared for integration into adult society in our time? How does this phase of life today compare to early seventeenth-century practices of both the English and the Chesapeake Algonquians?
2. What does it tell us about English culture of that time that boys and girls, were sent away from home, never to return, when they became adolescents?
3. What does the fact that Powhatan leaders treated the English boys as sons and welcomed them tell us about Chesapeake Algonquian culture and its view of outsiders? How does their treatment correspond to the way American Natives are seen in popular culture in our day?

CHAPTER ONE

Settling In

Jamestown's first colonists faced a steep learning curve. They were a century behind Portuguese and Spanish efforts in setting up a permanent American presence. Previous attempts, such as the Roanoke colony on the Carolina Outer Banks two decades earlier, had not succeeded, but the new Jamestown colony built on knowledge gained by that earlier colony in choosing the site on the James River that flows into Chesapeake Bay. But they had no idea how to feed themselves, or how to approach the Powhatans. Their fears made them feel like prisoners in the fort.

Captain John Smith made an early exploring expedition up the James in December 1607 and he and his party were captured. The men with him were killed in the exchange, but Smith was taken prisoner. He was paraded around several villages and then taken to Powhatan's capital city, Werowocomoco, just north of Jamestown on the York River. After several days of religious ceremonies, he was brought into the great Powhatan's presence. Just when he thought men with clubs were about to beat out his brains, Pocahontas came forward and put her head on his in what was probably an adoption ceremony. Powhatan's strategy was to bring Smith and the English colony into his government system like the other tribes in his domain.

After that, Pocahontas began coming to Jamestown with Powhatan's embassies, and her presence lifted the spirits of the depressed colonists. Thomas Savage arrived in January 1608 and Captain Christopher Newport, the Virginia Company admiral, presented him to Powhatan. Newport made his gift sound grander by telling Powhatan that Thomas was his son, so the Powhatans called him Thomas Newport. Thomas had to go through dramatic lifestyle changes as a Powhatan youth. He went from wearing elaborate clothes and heavy shoes to donning a loincloth and mocassins, so his body was much more exposed. He also had to join the people in going into the streams to bathe in the morning, which must have been very strange because English people did not bathe. But he had much more appealing fresh food, a welcome change from the dire conditions in Jamestown.

Powhatan and the people he ruled became tired of the colonists' constant demands for food. This was especially true because the region was in the midst of a disastrous seven-year drought, so the Powhatans themselves were on short rations. The English men's inability to feed themselves made Powhatan move his capital away from Werowocomoco to Orapax at a much more distant and hard to reach location. Pocahontas quit visiting Jamestown and Thomas had no choice but to go with his hosts to Orapax.

Discussion Questions

1. Powhatan adopted Capt. John Smith as his son and Capt. Christopher Newport told Powhatan that Thomas Savage was his son. Soon Powhatan called Thomas his son. What did it mean to imagine people from the other culture as family members? Capt. Newport was trying to magnify the significance of his gift by his lie, but was Powhatan enacting a normal Powhatan practice or was this a strategy on his part? How did these strategies or practices affect future events?
2. Can you imagine what Pocahontas thought of Jamestown and the colonists when she began to visit?
3. What do you think was the most difficult adjustment Thomas Savage had to make when he became a Powhatan?

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER TWO

New Realities

In 1609, despite two years of discouraging reports from Virginia, the Virginia Company, who sponsored the colony decided to reinforce its efforts. With a new royal charter, they assembled a large fleet with hundreds of new colonists to start anew. Unfortunately the fleet confronted a huge hurricane as they neared the American coast and, amid many days' battering, the fleet was broken up. The *Unity*, the ship that carried 14-year-old Henry Spelman, did finally limp into the colony along with most of the others. But the flagship carrying the new government and the most important colonists was wrecked on Bermuda, which was uninhabited at that time. Food was plentiful in Bermuda, because previous Spanish ships had dropped off pigs to breed on their own there, and birds and fish were available. It was a year before the shipwrecked colonists were able to build ships to carry them to Jamestown. William Strachey, one of those stranded on Bermuda, wrote an account of the storm that inspired the storm with which Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* opens, and the play's theme of shipwreck and creation of new societies echoes the Bermuda experience.

Meanwhile in Jamestown the colonists suffered their worst winter in 1609-1610, which became known as the "starving time". Even though most of the fleet did come to Virginia in 1609, the food and supplies they carried had been ruined by the seawater that flooded the ships. So the colony had more people and less food, and the Powhatans no longer responded to their pleas for help.

After Henry Spelman had been in Virginia a few weeks, Thomas Savage came to Jamestown accompanying an embassy from Powhatan. He said he did not want to go back to Orapax alone, so Henry Spelman was sent to accompany him. He had surveyed the situation in the fort and realized how miserable the coming winter was going to be, so he was glad to go with Thomas.

Life was uncomfortable at Orapax for the two boys, especially because Powhatan was no longer interested in building a relationship with the English and they were competing for the leader's favor. While they were there, a Patowomeck chief named Iopassus visited Orapax and he invited the boys to go up to the Potomac River with him. They accepted, but after they had traveled a short distance, Thomas thought better of the plan and returned to Powhatan with news of what was going on. Powhatan sent men after the absconders to bring them back. One man, a German carpenter sent to build a house for Powhatan, was killed. But somehow Henry Spelman made it up to the Potomac; Capt. John Smith wrote that Pocahontas had intervened on his behalf. Soon after this, Powhatan cut his ties with the English. He sent Thomas back to Jamestown and he arranged a marriage for Pocahontas to a man named Kocoum. Henry Spelman lived with Iopassus for almost two years. He lived as a member of the chief's family, and Iopassus spoke of his love for Henry. Then in 1611 Capt. Samuel

Argall brought a ship to the Potomac searching for food they could not get on the James River. He learned that Henry was living there and gave Iopassus copper in exchange for the boy. Argall carried Henry back to England, where he stayed until early 1612.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Thomas and Henry's age affect how they interpreted what they experienced? Or might they have understood some things better because of their youth? Did they have access to aspects of Chesapeake Algonquian life that adult European men would not have seen?
2. How different was life at Orapax for Thomas and Henry from life at Werowocomoco? What changed for them? How would they have felt when fighting broke out between the English and the Powhatans.
3. Why would Pocahontas intervene to save Henry Spelman's life when he was running away to go to the Potomac? Was she defying her father? Could she have been acting on instructions from her father?
4. The Patawomekes were not part of Powhatan's chiefdom, but they and the Powhatans were friendly. Why do you think Iopassus issued his invitation to Thomas and Henry?

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER THREE

Knowledge Sought and Gained

Henry arrived back in London just before the first performance of Shakespeare's *Tempest* and William Strachey, whose report inspired some of the play's themes, was there as well. Virginia and the Bermuda exile were the talk of London. Strachey was engaged in writing a compilation of reports from travelers and he interviewed Henry for his book. While he was in London, Henry also prepared a long description of his life with the Powhatans and Potomacs. He was the nephew of the noted historian and member of Parliament, Sir Henry Spelman, and it was probably Sir Henry who urged him to write everything down. Henry discussed all aspects of daily life. He wrote about meals, and how food was grown and prepared, and about houses, marriage, child-rearing, religion, warfare, and even games. He described the great dignity of chiefs and of the huge respect their people showed them even though they did not live differently from everyone else. This is the only document from this early period of English colonization that was written with an insider's knowledge and point of view. English scholars wanted to know as much as possible about the land and its people, so Henry's work was very important to those who got to read it. Because of scholars' thirst for knowledge, some made the voyage to Virginia themselves and brought back plants, especially ones that appeared to have medicinal properties. Their ability to confer with knowledgeable Powhatans through Thomas and Henry enriched their collections.

Spanish authorities, who claimed the entire east coast of North America, also wanted to know what was going on in Jamestown. They contrived a plan to plant a spy, Diego de Molina, inside the fort. English leaders allowed him to send letters to the Spanish ambassador in London as long as they were unsealed so they could be read before being handed over. But, unbeknownst to Jamestown authorities, he also contrived to send out secret missives informing his countrymen about the real situation in the English colony. Diego lived in Jamestown for five years.

Discussion Questions

1. What aspects of Henry Spelman's knowledge were most valuable to English readers? What kind of people would be interested in what he had to say?
2. Would you have expected Henry to try to go back to life with Iopassus when he returned to Virginia? What do you think his life would have been like if Captain Argall had not found him?
3. How would English people compare the image of the New World in *The Tempest* to that presented in Henry Spelman's *Relation of Virginia*?

4. Why did the Spanish care about Jamestown's condition and what was happening there? How accurate were Diego de Molina's reports?

CHAPTER FOUR

Pocahontas Becomes Rebecca Rolfe

Henry Spelman returned to the Chesapeake in 1612, so he was present as over the next few years, the colony's situation changed dramatically. Change began in 1613 when Capt. Samuel Argall, again looking for food on the Potomac, heard that Pocahontas was there with an embassy. He decided to capture her and bring her with him to Jamestown, and he threatened Iopassus with war if the chief did not help him. So Pocahontas returned to Jamestown as a prisoner. Argall thought she could be exchanged for several English men Powhatan was holding.

The plan for Pocahontas changed very quickly. The young puritan minister Alexander Whitaker began to teach her about Christianity and John Rolfe, also a puritan, fell in love with her as she was being instructed. Whitaker wrote home about her baptism, stressing that accepting Christianity as her faith was her choice. Her baptismal name was Rebecca and she and John married, so she became Rebecca Rolfe, and they had a son named Thomas.

Meanwhile, Powhatan moved his capital still farther away. Some English embassies went to his new capital and Thomas Savage acted as interpreter. Among the English, Pocahontas made an extremely important contribution; she taught John Rolfe how to grow tobacco. Rolfe and others had been trying to grow and process the crop for years without success, partly because tobacco cultivation was very different from familiar European crops. Now, with Pocahontas's knowledge, Rolfe grew and cured tobacco that European buyers wanted.

Tobacco soon became established as Virginia's crop and it was the foundation of the English colony's economic success. Henry, meanwhile, was uncomfortable with his position in Virginia and wrote a letter home about it to his influential uncle Sir Henry Spelman asking to be brought home. In 1616 the Virginia Company decided to bring the Rolfes to London to show them off and Henry went along as interpreter, so his problem was solved. Diego de Molina sailed with them.

Discussion Questions

1. How would Pocahontas have felt as she became a captive in Jamestown?
2. Iopassus on the Potomac considered himself a friend of both the Powhatans and the English. How would he have felt about the English after they forced him to betray Pocahontas?
3. How would the doctrines of Christianity have sounded to Pocahontas?

CHAPTER FIVE

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English Experiences

Pocahontas and her party's arrival in London created a huge sensation. Other American Natives had been in London and they had been treated as exotic specimens. They were put on display in their Native garb, and curious onlookers made drawings of them. Pocahontas was quite different. She was presented as the ultimate English gentlewoman. She was the first Christian convert for the English and the Powhatan mother of a Christian baby. In order to stir up maximum interest the Virginia Company circulated an engraving of her in fashionable clothes.

Pocahontas's adjustment to life in London was extremely difficult. The clothes she had to wear were supremely uncomfortable, and the food was awful. The part of London she and her party lived in, just outside Ludgate and near St. Paul's Cathedral, was full of commerce and foot traffic, so they got full exposure to the city's culture as well as its noise, smells, and dirt. It was quite a contrast to Powhatan's capital.

On her engraved portrait, Pocahontas was identified as the daughter of an emperor, and she was treated as visiting royalty. She was formally received by the bishop of London, and was a guest at a court masque in the royal palace with King James I and the queen. Masques were extremely lavish entertainments meant to celebrate the monarch and show off his wealth.

The visitors included Pocahontas's sister and her husband, Uttamattomakin, the Powhatan's chief priest. As with Henry Spelman's memoir, English scholars wanted to know as much as possible about this previously hidden culture, so he was invited to a seminar of scholars who were eager to talk with him about his religious knowledge. These conversations went on over several evenings, and Henry acted as interpreter.

Pocahontas may have encountered Squanto, the man who helped the Pilgrims establish their New England colony; he had also been captured and was living in London at the same time.

Ultimately, the Powhatan party moved out of London to Brentford to the west. The move meant that they were away from London's pollution and the Virginia Company saved money on their upkeep. Capt. John Smith, who had not been allowed to visit Pocahontas in London, made several visits while they were in Brentford. In March 1617, the Powhatan party planned to return to Virginia. As they moved down the Thames on the return trans-Atlantic voyage, Pocahontas sickened and died; she is buried at Gravesend. John Rolfe was concerned that their son Thomas was too sickly to survive the Atlantic crossing, so he left Thomas to be raised by his brother in Norfolk.

Discussion Questions

1. Would Pocahontas have been impressed by what she saw in London, or would she have been appalled?
2. How would Pocahontas have reacted to the huge status differences between the poor who lived in the streets and the enormous wealth and lavish lifestyles of the English elites?
3. Why were English intellectuals so interested in Powhatan life and especially their religion?
4. How might Powhatan and his people have reacted when the envoys returned without Pocahontas and Thomas Rolfe?

CHAPTER SIX

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Virginia's Transformation

When the returning party arrived in Virginia, they found dramatic changes. One was the retirement of Powhatan; he had relinquished his authority to Opechancanough. Robert Poole, an English boy who had arrived with his brother and father in 1611, had been sent to live with Opechancanough in 1614, so he was now the colony's principal interpreter. Henry Spelman was not sure of his position now that Robert Poole mainly acted for colonial leaders. Thomas Savage had formed firm friendships with the Accomacs on the Eastern Shore across Chesapeake Bay, and focused his attention increasingly there.

With tobacco established as a cash crop to support the colony, the issue now was to bring over colonists to develop the land and grow tobacco. The Virginia Company realized that the way to get people to make the voyage was to give them land of their own, to encourage women to emigrate to allow family formation, and to allow colonists some self-government. With these incentives in place by 1619, young men and women began to choose life in Virginia. That same year, an English ship that had captured some enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, came into Chesapeake Bay looking for food. The ship's captain exchanged the Africans for the food they needed, so these young enslaved people joined the growing population from across the Atlantic.

The new representative assembly met in 1619 and Robert Poole brought treason charges against Henry Spelman. The tangled testimony suggested that Henry, frustrated by being shut out of his former roles, had gone privately to Opechancanough and had demeaned the colony's governor by warning him about an impending change of regime in Jamestown. He was convicted and sentenced to servitude. His sentence shows the difficulty of colonial leaders' relationships with the Powhatans. The English considered Henry a traitor, yet put him in charge of some of their communications and interactions. The trial raised larger issues for everyone in charge: was it possible that the boys had come to know the Algonquians so well that they now had divided loyalties? Soon leaders developed similar concerns about whether Robert had "turned heathen." The boys were now adults and Jamestown's leaders had to devise new ways of dealing with them.

As the colony grew and tobacco culture spread westward, the Powhatans were denied access both to the land they had cultivated for generations and to the rivers, which were the region's highways. Hostilities grew to a point where Opechancanough planned a mass attack on all the plantations simultaneously in 1622. Esmy Shichans, the Accomac chief, told Thomas Savage about Opechancanough's plan, but Jamestown's leaders ignored Thomas's warning and the attack killed hundreds of colonists and plantations. Henry Spelman was killed on the Potomac the following year as fighting continued, and John Rolfe died in a "general sickness" that spread in the aftermath

of the attack.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the relationship among Thomas Savage, Henry Spelman, and Robert Poole change as they grew into men? How did Jamestown's leaders regard them as adults who were no longer under leaders' direct control?
2. What motivated hundreds of young English men and women to come to Virginia under the new plan?
3. How did the growing plantations and population of English people affect the Powhatans? How did they respond?
4. Most of the new immigrants had to serve out terms of servitude and work on the land. How did their situation differ from what newly arrived Africans experienced?
5. What motivated Henry Spelman go to Opechancanough and tell him that Jamestown's government was going to change?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Atlantic Identities

Thomas Savage moved permanently to the Eastern shore where he received thousands of acres from Esmé Shichans. He married one of the English women who had come under the new plan, and he and his wife Hannah had a son named John. Plantations on the Eastern Shore grew food for other colonies as far north as New England and south into the Caribbean, so Thomas and Hannah avoided the extreme ups and downs of the tobacco trade. Robert lived on his own in Newport News. Neither man was completely free of their obligations to the Jamestown leadership, and Thomas suffered extreme abuse from a criminally brutal man named Thomas Eppes. Both Thomas Savage and Robert Poole continued to serve the colony through their involvement in the fur and other trades in the northern part of Chesapeake Bay.

Thomas Rolfe returned to the Chesapeake in 1635 to live on the lands his father had left to him. He asked for permission to visit his mother's relatives, but we do not know if that happened. In any case, he lived entirely within the English community. A second great Powhatan attack in 1644 ended with the capture and death of Opechancanough.

Questions about the go-betweens' loyalties continued. Ironically, the more they knew, the less those in charge of the Virginia colony trusted them. Leaders could not believe that they continued to be completely English in their identities after being immersed in another culture for so long. They doubted their information, and feared that someone like Esmé Shichans might be trying to manipulate the English rather than warning them about potential threats. The Pilgrims in New England had similar doubts about Squanto, who was their main go-between with neighboring Native communities. Colonial leaders made grave mistakes because because they would not trust those they had specifically trained to give them the kinds of access and knowledge they desired.

Europeans had seen many instances of people living between cultures at home and had seen how they were mistrusted. Contemporaries put Thomas Savage, Henry Spelman, and Robert Poole in the context of concerns at home about people who had been captured in the Mediterranean and who were thought to have "turned Turk," or converted to Islam. Similar concerns focused on the danger posed by those who appeared to have converted to the Church of England, but who were really crypto-Catholics and ready to betray the country. These concerns focused especially on Jesuits, who, they believed, had the Pope's permission to lie to serve the greater good. They also feared Jews who had converted to Christianity, but whose inner consciousness was unknowable. And all European governments relied on double agents, whose loyalty was always questionable. No one knew which side they truly served.

Such concerns have surfaced in modern times in episodes such as the

internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. In the Cold War that followed, Senator Joe McCarthy's campaigns arguing that Communists had infiltrated the State Department and Hollywood contributed to broader concerns over brainwashing and hidden Communists.

Discussion Questions

1. Was Thomas Savage smart to move away from Jamestown and become a provisions planter?
2. Why did Jamestown's leaders doubt the loyalty of the go-betweens? How would Thomas, Henry, and Robert have felt as conflict became the norm?
3. How does the story of youths such as Pocahontas, Thomas, Henry, and Robert change our understanding of early Virginia and the founding of English colonies in America?
4. Do we have echoes today of doubting the loyalty of certain people? How would modern instances compare to the boys' experiences?

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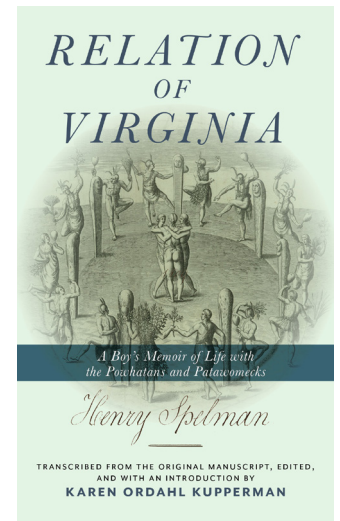
Relation of Virginia

A Boy's Memoir of Life with the Powhatans and the Patawomecks

BY HENRY SPELMAN

EDITED BY KAREN ORDAHL KUPPERMAN

A memoir of one of America's first adventurers, a young boy who acted as a link between the Jamestown colonists and the Patawomecks and Powhatans.



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“Being in displeasure of my friends, and desirous to see other countries, after three months sail we come with prosperous winds in sight of Virginia.” So begins the fascinating tale of Henry Spelman, a 14 year-old boy whose mother sent him to Virginia in 1609. One of Jamestown’s early arrivals, Spelman soon became an integral player, and sometimes a pawn, in the power struggle between the Chesapeake Algonquians and the English settlers.

Shortly after he arrived in the Chesapeake, Henry accompanied another English boy, Thomas Savage, to Powhatan’s capital and after a few months accompanied the Patawomeck chief Iopassus to the Potomac. Spelman learned Chesapeake Algonquian languages and customs, acted as an interpreter, and knew a host of colonial America’s most well-known figures, from Pocahontas to Powhatan to Captain John Smith. This remarkable manuscript tells Henry’s story in his own words, and it is the only description of Chesapeake Algonquian culture written with an insider’s knowledge. Spelman’s account is lively and violent, rich with anthropological and historical detail.

A valuable and unique primary document, this book illuminates the beginnings of English America and tells us much about how the Chesapeake Algonquians viewed the English invaders. It provides the first transcription from the original manuscript since 1872.