

## The Powhatan Indian Attack of March 22, 1622

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Indian Attack of 1622

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[Robert Beverley's description of the attack from 'Historie and Present State of Virginia,' 1705](#)

The Indian attack of March 22, 1622, constituted a watershed in history of the Jamestown settlement. Earlier, beginning in 1618, a faction in the company led by the treasurer Sir Edwin Sandys had steered the company in the direction of integration of Indians into English settlements. Families received houses in the settlements and funds were established for a college for Indian youth to Christianize and civilize them. Most assumed that Opechancanough and the Powhatan nation shared the ideal of an integrated society. Not only had the Indians not agreed to cultural suicide, but as George Thorpe, a supporter of the new policy of integration, observed, most of the English settlers still harbored their contempt for Indians. "There is scarce any man among us," he reported, "that doth soe much as afforde them a good thought in his hart and most men with their mouthes give them nothinge but maledictions and bitter execrations."

The silence of the Indians in the face of daily insults of occupation and verbal abuse the English mistook for subservience. By 1622 it was apparent to the Indians that the colonists intended to expand their holdings in Virginia. This physical expansion threatened the Indian way of life. Of even greater concern, perhaps, were the renewed colonial efforts to convert and educate the "savages." Opechancanough's response to the threat of cultural deconstruction was to plan and stage a massive attack on the English settlement as a demonstration of Indian power and in an attempt to drive off the English for good.

According to English accounts, Opechancanough planned to attack the Jamestown fort as well as the outlying settlements. But a young Indian boy who had been Christianized by the settlers forewarned the inhabitants. The news did not spread fast enough, however, to save the English living in the settlements.

On the day prior to the attack, the Indians came bringing gifts of meats and fruits and shared them with the settlers, thereby disguising their intentions. The following morning they circulated freely and socialized with the settlers before suddenly seizing their own work tools to attack them (See Robert Beverley's Description of the 1622 Attack). The Indians killed families in the plantation houses and then moved on to kill servants and workers in the fields. The Powhatans killed 347 settlers in all - men, women, and children. Not even George Thorpe, a prominent colonist well known for his friendly stance towards the Indians, was spared. The Powhatans harsh treatment of the bodies of their victims was symbolic of their contempt for their opponents. The Indians also burned most of the outlying plantations, destroying the livestock and crops.

The colonists in Jamestown were in an uproar, stunned by the massacre. The settlers immediately withdrew to the fort and to other easily defensible locations. In addition to the loss of life, the colonists also lost valuable crops and supplies necessary to survive the winter. Ironically, during the winter of 1622-23 the colonists were forced to trade with the Indians for corn and supplies and even with these provisions many went hungry. The mortality rate during the winter of 1622-23 climbed due to malnutrition and disease - over four hundred settlers died.

News of the killings did not reach England until mid-June. The Virginia Company responded by sending more supplies and weapons. King James also contributed weapons. Captain John Smith, safe in London, avowed revenge and threatened to destroy the Indians himself if necessary.

The colonists in Jamestown retaliated with treachery of their own and numerous attacks to avenge the losses. All restraints were released and men used the massacre as an excuse to wreak havoc on Indians wherever they found them. They feigned peaceful relations, let the Indians plant their corn wherever they chose, and then, just before the crop was ready for harvest, they attacked them, killing as many as they could and burning their crops. English armies destroyed entire villages. Captain William Tucker threatened to kill Opechancanough on several occasions but proved unable to fulfill his boast.

Meanwhile within the Virginia Company a debate ensued over enslavement versus extirpation with integration now in full retreat. Since the Indians were better woodsmen and could not be easily caught, putting them to work in the mines and fields of the English would not be a simple task. Events overtook the discussion as swiftly as passion overcame reason. Virginians had given their answer in the forms of burning Indian villages, destroyed crops, and other measures of retribution. Within a couple of years, they had avenged the 347 deaths many times over. The new policy of the Virginia Company ended in failure. In 1624, the company was dissolved and the king placed Virginia under his own control.

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