EARLY AMERICANS

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New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1981

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Bridenbaugh, Carl.
Early Americans.

1. United States—History—Colonial period, ca. 1600–1775—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Title.
E188.5.B74 973.2 80-26313
ISBN 0-19-502788-4

Printed in the United States of America

EARLY AMERICANS

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For
EDMUND
and
HELEN MORGAN

Preface

The following essays were written over nearly half a century. When they were brought together for this volume, I was surprised to find that, in one way or another, they all had to do with the comings and goings of colonial "chaps" which, the English insist, is what history is all about. Hence the title of this book: *Early Americans*. With two exceptions, the essays are reprinted as they appeared in several learned publications or magazines where, as Carl Becker once wrote appropriately, they had been so decently interred. The first chapter on Opechancanough and the fifth about Tom Bell have not been published before.

For permission always graciously accorded to republish articles that appeared first in their journals, I am grateful to Marcus A. McCorrison of the American Antiquarian Society, Nicholas B. Wainwright of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Louis L. Tucker of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the editors of the *William and Mary Quarterly*.

Providence C.B.
March 1, 1980

List of Plates

Captain Smith worked with Vaughan, who thereby was more accurate in his representations than most of the Europeans. Plate 1 was published in Germany and Plate 2 in England in 1624 and 1675. They reflect the Virginia scene as viewed and imagined by white men and, therefore, are not accurate likenesses. But they are the only visual records of actual events that we possess. Above all else, they testify to the fact that white men from overseas always looked at the native Americans through European spectacles. (Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library)

Showing the streams and inlets between the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays. (Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library)

As shown on *A New Map of East and West New Jersey Being an Exact Survey by Mr. John Worlidge* (London: John Thornton, *ca.* 1700). Reproduced in part by John E. Pomfret, *The Province of East Jersey, 1609–1702* (Princeton, 1962), from the original in the Library of Congress.

From Purdie & Dixon, *The Virginia Gazette*, July 18, 1766, p. 2. (Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library)

Contents

EARLY AMERICANS

Introduction

The writer's primary purpose—or hope—in reprinting the pieces that follow is to entertain thoughtful, general readers with a bent toward colonial history. Here are nine vignettes involving people individually or in groups in the American colonies of England over a period of more than two centuries. These essays were originally written to stress or describe in detail particular, underemphasized or unknown features in the growth of a kind of agricultural-commercial society that was, in many ways, radically different from the societies of the British Isles or Western Europe yet at the same time strikingly resembled them.

"Americans are always moving on," Stephen Vincent Benét has told us, and each of these essays bears out his pronouncement. In the seventeenth century (Chapters II–IV), we perceive that the majority of the colonists were immigrants, foreigners who had embarked on their peregrinations from across the great ocean. After 1700 this was less true, but the geographical stage on which the colonial travelers roamed was vast—from the Province of Maine overland to Georgia and by sea from the ports on the Atlantic coast to the British Caribbees.

The amount of intercolonial travel for business or pleasure is startling; small at first, it mounted progressively as the decades passed. The roads, though crudely built were passable, and the people who traveled on them were as motley a crew as Chaucer's

band of Canterbury pilgrims. The relative safety in which women, as well as men, could make their way through sparsely settled areas is amazing. As early as 1704 Madam Sarah Kemble Knight rode, unescorted for the most part, from Boston to New York and back without incident. In 1744, Dr. Alexander Hamilton and his body slave Dromo journeyed leisurely to and from Annapolis and Kittery in great safety. "The Father of His Country" seemed almost to have spent more time in the saddle during the 'fifties and 'sixties than out of it. The growing complexity of life in America and the surprising variety of colonists encountered on the move may be discovered from the journals of these and other travelers. A mounting internal migration of individuals was under way, and by 1760 there was taking place a remarkable mingling of the inhabitants of the thirteen colonies that was breaking down some of the provincialism and creating a human type that observers could recognize as American, not English any more.

The first four chapters of *Early Americans* deal with immigrants, most of them English and Irish, and their encounters with the native Americans, their initial struggles in building shelters and houses, and the founding of little settlements—in short, the forming of societies of the English type in the New World setting. Chapters V-IX treat important aspects of colonial life in the eighteenth century and the astonishing rapidity with which European, rather than just English, habits and new modes of living were imported and given a colonial twist. This was true of the *bad*, as well as the *good*, that the Old World had to offer. And one can begin to observe and understand the accelerated growth and rapid maturing of colonial America.

I

O-pe-chan-can-ough: A Native American Patriot*

History always affects present-day issues and events to some degree. The *Indian problem*, specifically the issues arising out of the claims to the Narragansett, Mashpee, and Passamaquoddy lands, is very much with us right now; and if we look backward to the very first accounts of the "tawny" native Americans with the white English invaders, we can see at once that the *Indian problem* arose long before the settlement of Jamestown in Virginia in 1607. It became, and remains, part of the national heritage.

The historian's great difficulty is that he has only the white men's accounts for use in any reconstruction of what happened in seventeenth-century Virginia, and these are fragmentary, biased, often inaccurate, and always inadequate. Very little new information has become available since 1900. Nevertheless, despite the deficiencies in the record, he must take a chance with such sources as he has. By a fresh reading of the known facts and a rigorous use of a disciplined historical imagination, one can construct a *plausible hypothesis* that will suggest what the Indian point of view was as well as that of the white man.[1]

The colonists who came to Jamestown in 1607 with the professed purpose of propagating the Christian religion and bringing

* Expanded from the Penrose Memorial Lecture delivered to the American Philosophical Society at Philadelphia, April 17, 1980.

the "savages" of Virginia to human civility had no idea that the natives had known white men over a long stretch of time and that they both mistrusted and feared them. Nor did the Englishmen ever really grasp the nature of the hazard inherent in the confrontation of the two races.

Within five years of the landing of the English, the secretary of the colony of Virginia, William Strachey, had made himself the best authority on the "naturals." He had found out, among other things, that members of the Algonkian tribes dwelling near Jamestown were known to speak frequently about CERTAIN PROPHECIES that, kept alive and circulated by their priests, profoundly affected Powhatan and his "kings" in their dealings with the English.* The first of these told that "from the Chesapeack Bay a Nation should arise which should dissolve and give end to his Empire." Just a short time before Captain Christopher Newport's shore party was attacked near Cape Henry on April 26, 1607, Powhatan's braves had wiped out the members of the Chesapeake Nation living in this region and with them, as Strachey learned, a number of white men from Raleigh's "Lost Colony" of Roanoke who had lived among the Chesapeakes for about two decades.[2]

A second prediction was that *twice* the Indians would defeat and drive away the strangers who would invade their territories and "labor to settle a plantation" in their midst, but the *third* time they themselves would be decisively conquered. Fear for their safety and future existence had impelled Powhatan and his chiefs to maintain an elaborate watch over every coming and going of the shiploads of white men landing upon their coasts, which were supplemented each year by "fresh troops." Strachey reported that "strange whispers (indeed) and secret at this hour run among these people and possess them with amazement" and apprehension. Assailed by doubts as to the proper course to pursue, Powhatan, "the great Tyrant," seems to have lost confidence in his wonted procedures, and the secretary concluded that, with "divine power" on their side, the English could effect mighty changes—"accidents," he called them—in Virginia.[3]

**Powhatan* was the native place of Wa-hun-son-a-cock, who, when he became the principal chief of many Algonkian tribes in Tidewater Virginia, took the name of the town. Succeeding chiefs were known as *the Powhatan*. Powhatan was also the name of the tribe. In this essay *Powhatan* will be used in all three senses, the particular meaning being indicated by the context.

Although William Strachey obviously regarded these prophecies as primitive myths, today we can look upon them as *oral history*, a means by which an illiterate but intelligent primitive people keeps the past alive to guide it in future action. From the evidence we have, it is clear that certain historical incidents justified the Indians' anxiety; and, moreover, the first prophecy turned out to be true. In addition to the legends and the suspicion that the English represented the *third invasion* by strangers, there was, behind it all, an almost incredible and fascinating story.

Ever since the year 1607, Powhatan, the despotic ruler of many tribes living about Jamestown, has been deemed by both the public and historians to be the foremost native leader in Virginia during the seventeenth century. Today we may consider not only whether an elder brother, *Opechancanough*, did not far surpass him in talents and capacity for leadership but also if Opechancanough does not deserve to rank high among the most famous American Indians—with Massasoit, King Philip, Pontiac, Logan, Joseph Brant, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Geronimo.

This brother was born in or about 1544, for in 1644 it was widely believed that he was more than a hundred years old. The longevity of the American Indians never ceased to amaze the English settlers, and this particular individual was far from unique.[4] Early in 1561 when he was sixteen or seventeen and already, by European standards, a very tall young man, two small Spanish ships commanded by the famous mariner Pedro Menéndez de Avilés discovered and entered Bahía de Santa María (Chesapeake Bay) on their way back to Spain from Havana. The "Admiral" was under orders from Luis de Velasco, Viceroy of New Spain, "to discover what ports there are at the Punta de Santa Elena [Parris Island, S.C.], and the coast for eighty or one hundred leagues from there on towards Los Baccalaos [Newfoundland]." As soon as the natives saw the vessels drop their anchors, they paddled out in their canoes and boarded Menéndez's flagship, where he generously fed them and gave them clothing. "Among these Indians came a chief who brought his son, who . . . was of fine presence and bearing." (Plates 1, 2) Immediately drawn to the youth, the Spaniard sought permission to take him to Europe "that the King of Spain, his lord, might see him . . . *He gave his pledged word to return him* with much wealth and many garments." The chief granted this, and his Excellency took him to Castile, to the court of