

Life at Jamestown – Period Quotes

First selection from George Percy's Observations Gathered out of a Discourse of the Plantation of the Southern Colony of Virginia by the English, 1608

The fifteenth day of June, we had built and finished our fort, which was triangle-wise, having three bulwarks at every corner like a half-moon, and four or five pieces of artillery mounted in them. We had made ourselves sufficiently strong for these savages. We had also sown most of our corn on two mountains. It sprang a man's height from the ground. This country is a fruitful soil, bearing many goodly and fruitful trees....

Monday, the two and twentieth of June, in the morning, Captain Newport in the admiral departed from James Port for England. Captain Newport, being gone for England, leaving us (one hundred and four persons) very bare and scanty of victuals, furthermore in wars and in danger of the savages. We hoped after a supply, which Captain Newport promised within twenty weeks. But if the beginners of this action do carefully further us, the country being so fruitful, it would be as great a profit to the realm of England, as the Indies to the King of Spain.

Captain John Smith's A True Relation.....

About the tenth of September there was about 46 of our men dead, at which time Captain Wingfield, having ordered the affairs in such sort that he was generally hated of all, in which respect with one consent he was deposed from his presidency, and Captain Ratcliffe according to his course was elected. Our provision now being within twenty days spent, the Indians brought us great store both of corn and bread ready made. And also there came such abundance of fowls into the rivers as greatly refreshed our weak estates, whereupon many of our weak men were presently able to go abroad. As yet we had no houses to cover us. Our tents were rotten and our cabins worse than nought. Our best commoditie was iron, which we made into little chisels.

Captain John Smith's A True Relation.....

As at this time were most of our chiefest men either sick or discontented, the rest being in such despair as they would rather starve and rot with idleness than be persuaded to do anything for their own relief, without constraint. Our victuals being now within eighteen days spent, and the Indians' trade decreasing, I was sent to the mouth of the river to Kecoughtan, an Indian town, to trade for corn, and try the river for fish.

George Percy's A True Relation.....

Now all of us at Jamestown beginning to feel that sharp prick of hunger, which no man truly describe but he hath tasted the bitterness thereof. A world of miseries ensued, as the sequel will express unto you, in so much that some to satisfy their hunger have robbed the store, for the which I caused them to be executed. Then, having fed upon horses and other beasts as long as they lasted, we were glad to make shift with vermin, as dogs, cats, rats, and mice. All was fish that came to net to satisfy cruel hunger, as to eat boots, shoes, or any other leather some could come by. And those being spent and devoured, some were enforced to search the woods and to feed upon serpents and snakes, and to dig the earth for wild and unknown roots, where many of our men were cut off and slain by the savages.

George Percy's Observations Gathered out of a Discourse.....

Our men were destroyed with cruel diseases as swellings, fluxes, burning fevers, and by wars, and some departed suddenly, but for the most part they died of meer famine. There were never Englishmen left in a foreign country in such misery as we were in this new discovered Virginia....Our food was but a small can of barley sod in water to five men a day; our drink cold water taken out of the river, which was at a flood very salty, at a low tide full of slime and filth, which was the destruction of many of our men. Thus, we lived for the space of five months in this miserable distress, not having five able men to man our bulwarks upon any occasion.

Lesson plans made possible by Archibald Andrews Marks.