‘Trusty Servants’ and ‘Converted Infidells’:
Cultural Intermediaries In Early Virginia

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The new colony at Jamestown in 1607 provided numerous opportunities for cultural interaction between the Powhatan Indians and the recently arrived English colonists. Some interactions were violent, taking the form of skirmishes and battles, while others employed more peaceful means of trade and the exchange of individuals who would live with the opposite cultural group.

The most well-known of the intermediaries who lived between two cultures was a favorite daughter of Powhatan, the supreme chief of more than 14,000 Indians in Tidewater Virginia at the time. This young girl, Pocahontas, is famous for her interactions with John Smith, John Rolfe and other colonists.

Pocahontas first met John Smith in December 1607 when he was captured and brought before her father Powhatan in his village at Werowocomoco, on the north side of the York River. Smith wrote that Pocahontas rescued him from death, but some historians speculate that he was part of a test her father used to assert his authority over the English in Virginia. Later, Pocahontas accompanied Indian emissaries to Jamestown with food. There she warned Smith of possible ambush.

After Smith left Virginia in Fall 1609, Pocahontas was not seen among the English. In 1613 Samuel Argall found her visiting the Patowomeke tribe on the Potomac River. He kidnapped her to hold her for ransom, hoping her father would return the weapons, tools and English prisoners he had taken. But he only partially complied with English demands, and Pocahontas was sent upriver to Henricus where the Reverend Alexander Whitaker taught her English manners and religion. There she met John Rolfe, the planter who introduced tobacco cultivation to the colony. In 1614 she was baptized with the Christian name Rebecca and married Rolfe. She then remained in the English world, having a son and traveling to England to promote the English colony. There she died in 1617.

While Pocahontas was moving between cultures, several boys and young men – Indian and English – also were serving as intermediaries and interpreters. Leaders from both cultural groups realized early on the value in trading young men to learn one another’s language and customs and to act as messengers.
Several Powhatans served as emissaries, willingly or unwillingly living with the English. In 1608 Powhatan gave “Namontacke his trusty servant” to Captain Christopher Newport. Newport took Namontack to England and introduced him as the son of “the emperor of Virginia,” and he returned to Virginia with greater knowledge of English culture.

Although the English hoped to entice Powhatans to send their children to the settlers to become acculturated, Powhatans were reluctant. Only a small minority were willing to live with settlers. These included Chanco, who lived and worked with an Englishman on the Pamunkey River, and an unnamed Indian boy who lived with a settler on the James River. The two Indians, seemingly converted to Christianity, warned the English about the upcoming 1622 Powhatan attack. Although essential to both cultures, these intermediaries were often mistrusted.

The first English intermediary was Thomas Savage, who was presented as a “gift” from Captain Christopher Newport to Powhatan in 1608, when Powhatan gave Namontack to Newport. Savage lived with Powhatan for two years, then continued to serve as an interpreter afterward. In 1608 Samuel Collier was left by John Smith with the Warraskoyack tribe to learn the language. Collier then lived with the English, surviving until 1623.

Henry Spelman arrived in Virginia in 1609 and was sent to live with the Powhatans to ensure good behavior from English colonists who had settled up the James River. He resided with Powhatan for several months and then lived for a year with the Patawomeke tribe on the Potomac River. There he moved freely, was treated as a special guest and recorded his observations of Powhatan life ways in his “Relation of Virginea.” He made several trips back to England, but returned to Virginia to serve as an interpreter until his death in 1623.

Robert Poole came in 1611 and was assigned to Opechancanough, Powhatan’s brother, as an interpreter in 1614. Poole and Savage eventually became wealthy through the Virginia fur trade. As with the Powhatan intermediaries, these interpreters were often mistrusted by both sides. Although the young English men remained loyal to English values, they were manipulated as pawns by Powhatan and English leaders in their struggle for power in Virginia.