LESSON PLAN
A Crown for Powhatan: looking for historical perspectives

Level:
Upper Elementary, Middle

Objective:
Students will recognize how historical events can be interpreted from different perspectives. They will gain familiarity with the Powhatan culture and their interaction with the English during the early years of contact through analysis of primary source images and documents.

Standards of Learning:
Virginia SOLs: VS.1a, c, d, g, h, VS.2a, b, c, e, VS3a, b, g, USI.1a, d, e, USI.3b
National Standards for History: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

Materials Needed for Activity:
Educational Adventures video, Discovering Jamestown: The Powhatan Indians
Copies of the graphic Chickahomines Become New Englishmen
Picture Analysis worksheet – Comparing Cultures
Excerpt – As recorded by John Smith in General History, 1624

Additional background readings for the teacher:
Essays – Living With the Indians; Powhatan’s Challenge and Opechancanough’s Action

Additional teacher resources:
Jamestown Chronicles: Tomocomo
Jamestown Chronicles: James I

Teacher Background:
When the English arrived in the Chesapeake area in 1607 they unknowingly settled in the heart of a powerful paramount chiefdom, headed by Wahunsonacock (also known by the title Powhatan). During the prior decades he established some degree of control over about 32 tribes, either through inheritance or by conquest and intimidation, and was the supreme leader of about 14,000 people living in the Tidewater region of Virginia.

The relationship between the English and the Powhatans was very tenuous in the first years, with both peaceful interaction and open hostility occurring. The Virginia Company initially instructed the settlers to “have great care not to offend the naturals (Indians)” as they anticipated the need for Powhatan food and information about the area’s geography and resources to assist with establishing an English colony. Much suspicion existed among the Indian population concerning the motives of the colonists, and among the English as to how they were being received.
When Christopher Newport returned to Jamestown with supplies and new colonists in the fall of 1608, he also brought gifts for Powhatan from the Virginia Company leadership. The English gifts included a bed, a basin and ewer (large jug), scarlet cloak and other clothing, along with a copper crown. These gifts were presented in an effort to make an ally of the indigenous ruler, effectively bring him under the authority of King James I and by association, the Virginia Company. John Smith was present at Werowocomoco, Powhatan’s seat of power on the York River, to witness and record the ceremony as it unfolded. His words clearly convey Powhatan’s unfamiliarity with English customs and unease with the activities. According to Smith, Powhatan earlier declined the request to travel to Jamestown to receive his gifts, instead giving Newport a timeframe to deliver the items to Werowocomoco, which necessitated shipping the goods by barge about 100 miles down the James River and up the York River.

Procedure:
Step 1: Begin a discussion on cultural awareness by asking students to share some examples they have of encountering people from different cultures. What clues did they have that the person was from another culture? How did they feel about the differences?

Step 2: Show students the Educational Adventures video Discovering Jamestown: The Powhatan Indians (8 minutes).

Review what students learned from the video about the organization of the Powhatan chiefdom and their use of local resources. Ask them to make predictions about how the English settling in Virginia will affect the Indians’ way of life.

Step 3: Students will study primary source writing by John Smith looking for different cultural perspectives. Distribute copies of As recorded by John Smith in General History, 1624. Read the description aloud, defining the unfamiliar vocabulary words as needed and noting that spelling and punctuation were not standardized as they are today. Ask the class the following questions after reading the document.

1. What was the purpose of this ceremony?

2. Why do you think the English chose those presents?

3. Why did they have trouble putting the crown on Powhatan?

4. What does a crown symbolize? Is this a part of the Indian’s culture?

5. What do you think Powhatan thought of this ceremony? What clues in the description support that conclusion?

6. Do you think this ceremony accomplished what the English intended?

Step 4: Students will study a period image to continue building information about cultural interaction between the English and the Indians. Introduce students to using...
images to look for historical information, just like you would read a book to find evidence about what people did in the past, and why they did it. Primary sources lay the groundwork to draw conclusions about the past, but historians must take into consideration more than one source of information and the biases of the person recording the information.

Distribute copies of Chickahominees Become New Englishmen and the Picture Analysis worksheet- Comparing Cultures to each student or have them work cooperatively in groups of 4 or 5. Ask them to carefully look at the action in the picture and answer the questions on the worksheet. Allow 5-10 minutes for students to gather and record information. Share their results as a group.

Use their questions to continue a discussion of how the two cultures will interact. This image shows a very peaceful, cooperative encounter. Ask the students what they think is being depicted in this image. After they have contributed their hypotheses, share that the caption to the picture describes Captain Argall taking fifty men upriver to meet with leaders of the Chickahominy Indians to conclude peace negotiations. The author says that the Chickahominy were willing to “forever be called Englishmen and be true subjects to King James and his deputies.”

The crowning ceremony took place in 1608 and the graphic depicts an event in 1614. Both times the Indians are being asked to come under English rule. Ask the students to speculate on why the results of the encounters are so different. Remind them that the marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe occurred earlier in 1614 and have them access prior knowledge to reason why some Indians might choose to ally themselves with the English after seven years of their presence in Virginia (for example- the increasing permanence of the English colony especially with tobacco cultivation starting, more knowledge of the threat of powerful weapons and deadly diseases, desire for English trade goods).

Summary Activities:
- Have students act out the crowning ceremony based on what they read in this passage. John Smith could read the passage as a narrator, while Christopher Newport and several soldiers bring the gifts (use everyday objects and clothing from your classroom). Powhatan and several of his councilors can receive the English delegation.
- The Jamestown Chronicle videos Tomocomo and James I provide first person narratives from different cultural perspectives. Assign students to watch these videos and record what expectations each group has of the other based on what they hear.