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# A VOCABULARY OF POWHATAN

compiled by  
Captain John Smith

With two word-lists of  
Pamunkey and Nansemond  
from other sources.



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## Preface to the 1997 Edition

The Powhatan Indians, a confederation of tribes known by the most commonly used name of their paramount chief, were the inhabitants of that part of Virginia first settled by the English colonists in 1607. Captain John Smith, widely known for his rescue by Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas, was one of the original colonists. He published several books on his travels (the 1986 edition of his works edited by Philip Barbour is the definitive edition); a brief vocabulary of the language with a few example sentences was given in the *Map of Virginia* (1612) and reprinted in the *Generall Historie* (1624). The *Generall Historie* includes much of his earlier publications as well as material that had not been published before.

The original manuscript sources for this vocabulary, like those for most of Smith's works, are not known to survive; the works are known from their published forms. Some modern scholars believe that Thomas Hariot, a scholar who went to what is now North Carolina as part of the expedition known as the Lost Colony, prepared a vocabulary of the language used there, a language related to Powhatan. There is no firm evidence to support this, but several Algonquian words were included in Hariot's report, published by Richard Hakluyt in 1588 and almost certainly available to Smith. Smith's relative ease in communicating with the Powhatans suggests some preparation in an Algonquian language, but this facility could also derive from the experiences of his life, which had de-

manded great adaptability (Barbour's 1964 biography remains the best source on Smith's life). It is also conceivable that individual Powhatans could have learned some English prior to 1607, through contact with earlier explorers, fishermen, or survivors of the Lost Colony, but again there is no evidence for such knowledge. Much like Smith, however, their prior experiences with culturally and linguistically different groups (including the Spanish, four decades earlier) would have encouraged flexibility in the development of communication skills, and in all likelihood Powhatans learned English more readily and quickly than the colonists learned Powhatan.

The Powhatan language was formerly classified with the Central Algonquian group of languages (e.g., Michelson 1933, Bloomfield 1946), a group that includes such well-known languages as Cree, Ojibwe, and Shawnee, but that classification has since been revised. Powhatan is now classified as an Eastern Algonquian language, a category that includes the physical and cultural neighbors of the Powhatans – the Delawares (or Lenni Lenape, speakers of Unami and Munsee) and Nanticokes – and the division between the eastern and central groups is thought to have considerable time-depth (Goddard 1978a, 1978b:586-87). There were several variant dialects of Powhatan (Gerard 1904; Siebert 1975:287-88, 195-96), but recorded information permits little more than their identification.

In working with the Smith vocabulary we are confronted with problems of orthography typical for the period. Vowels in period handwriting are often easily mistaken, even in the hands of professional copyists, and sev-

eral consonants can also be confused. This is true not just for modern readers, but also for their contemporaries; comparison of multiple copies of the same document will reveal many inconsistencies, and even whole words left blank to be filled in later. In addition to these difficulties with handwriting, spelling is inconsistent not only between individuals but even from one usage to the next within a document. While some of this variability may be attributed to attempts to record phonetic variation in pronunciation, much seems due to general laxity in spelling codes or even a fashion for individualized styles of writing.

These difficulties are compounded in the case of Smith by the fact that he was not an educated man, but a soldier. Even so, comparisons of Smith's vocabulary with other, better known Algonquian languages (e.g., Barbour 1971, 1972) suggest that he was surprisingly accurate; he even recorded the (often unstressed) initial vowels that are common in Powhatan, which were sometimes missed by others. He must be credited for having done an admirable job, under the circumstances, but his sometimes unwieldy vowel-strings and liberal use of end-of-syllable *gh* (the phonetic value of which is unclear) tell as much of his difficulties in trying to record the sounds he heard as they do of those sounds themselves.

There are several instances in this text in which the letter *v* appears as the first letter in a Powhatan word, or before a consonant. This represents one of the most common difficulties in works from this period, and results both from typographical usage and handwriting in which the two characters were used interchangeably. These appear-

ances of *v* should be read as *u*. In one word will be found the letter *ß*, which should be read as *ss*, as in modern German.

While there has been considerable scholarship on the Powhatan Indians in recent years (e.g., Rountree (1989, 1990), Feest (1990), and Gleach (1997)), there has been little new research on their language. This is partly due to changing academic interests, but largely because of an increased recognition of the limitations for linguistic analysis of such poorly recorded languages. At the turn of the century there were debates over classification and the meanings of individual words; there was a common feeling at the time that the reconstruction of meanings was possible if all available information could be brought together and subjected to the proper comparative analysis. The difficulties and dangers of such reconstruction became more clear as time passed, and today few are willing to even speculate on such matters when there is so much work to be done with languages that are still spoken, or at least are better recorded. Despite the limitations there are still possibilities for research on Powhatan, however, as Siebert's 1975 article demonstrated, and it is to be hoped that publication of this material will encourage such work.

Optimism concerning the reconstruction of meanings was tied to the ideas of salvage anthropology and linguistics early in this century; at least some Powhatan had still been spoken in the nineteenth century, and several small word-lists had been made in attempts to record what remained. The two word-lists of Pamunkey and Nansemond included in this volume are the best examples, and they



themselves are problematic. In both lists, the number one is the only word that can clearly be recognized as Powhatan (or even Algonquian), and most of the other words are completely unrecognizable. By the mid-nineteenth century Native people from several other nations, as well as non-Native people, had joined the Powhatan communities, and extensive language mixing –or even the creative generation of new words –is possible; when Frank Speck worked with the Powhatans in the 1910's and 20's he noted that most of the words he collected appeared to be Ojibwe. Unfortunately, few outsiders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had any serious interest in the remnants of eastern nations like the Powhatans, and we will never be able to reconstruct much of what transpired over that time. Thomas Jefferson's assessment, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, that the Powhatan languages were dead was not correct at the time, but given the neglect and marginalization of the Powhatan people it proved prophetic. While the Powhatan people survive today, their original language can be studied only through documents such as the one presented here.

—Frederic W. Gleach 1997