

Native Peoples Module

Early Contact

Powhatan, the paramount chief or political leader of this area, has an idea when the English arrive, too. Which is, “here’s another tribe; maybe I can add them to the group of tribes with whom I’m allied and to whom I give protection and they will pay me tribute.”

So his notion is they may be a useful additional group. They have iron goods. They have guns. They have some really useful things that would make you want to ally with them. They have copper, which is a beautiful good and a good material for making pots that last longer than earthenware. It’s what anthropologists called a “prestige good.” It makes clear that you have access to powers far away. It’s really the same as the Queen of England wearing beaver coats, which show that she has connections and control over the New World.

So from the Powhatan point of view, here’s these new people and they’re kind of interesting. They seem odd because they don’t seem to have any women. It’s hard to understand groups that don’t have women.

But I think it’s quite intriguing to think of John Smith on the one hand thinking, “all right, how do I get control of Powhatan and his empire.” And Powhatan thinking on the other hand, “how do I get control of John Smith and his people.” And recognizing that they need help. These are explorers; they’re not farmers. They certainly don’t know how to grow the kind of corn that is grown in North America. The main thing they know how to do is fight and draw maps and explore. The English absolutely need the Indians to help them out.