

JAMESTOWN: 1609-10: “STARVING TIME”



GEORGE PERCY _____ A TRUE RELATION

of the Proceedings and Occurances of Moment
which have happened in Virginia from the Time
Sir Thomas Gates shipwrecked upon the Bermudes
anno 1609 until my departure out of the Country
which was in anno Domini 1612

London: 1624 ❖ Excerpts

George Percy was one of the wealthy “gentlemen” among the 144 men who settled Jamestown in 1607. He served as president of the colony during the “starving time” of 1609-1610 when more than 400 colonists died, leaving only sixty survivors. He wrote *A True Relation* in 1624, partly to justify his leadership during this period.



If we truly consider the diversity of miseries, mutinies, and famishments which have attended upon discoveries and plantations in these our modern times, we shall not find our plantation in Virginia to have suffered alone.

Laudonnière had his share thereof in Florida, next neighbor unto Virginia, where his soldiers did fall into mutinies and in the end were almost all starved for want of food.¹ The Spaniards’ plantation in the River of Plate and the Straits of Magellan suffered also in so much that having eaten up all their horses to sustain themselves withall, mutinies did arise and grow among them for the which the general Diego Mendoza caused some of them to be executed, extremity of hunger in forcing others secretly in the night to cut down their dead fellows from of the gallows and bury them in their hungry bowels.² The plantation in Cartagena was also lamentable, that want of wholesome food wherewith for to maintain life were enforced to eat toads, snakes, and such like venomous worms, such is the sharpness of hunger.³

To this purpose many other examples might be recited but the relation itself being brief I have no intent to be tedious but to deliver the truth briefly and plainly . . .

AUGUST – SEPTEMBER 1609

After I had been president some fourteen days I sent Captain Ratcliffe to Point Comfort for to build a fort there, the which I did for two respects — the one for the plenty of the place for fishing; the other for the commodious discovery of any shipping which should come upon the coast,⁴ and for the honor of Your Lordship’s name and house I named the same Algernon Fort.⁵

A fleet of nine ships arrives in Jamestown carrying needed food, supplies, and about 400 new settlers, including women and children, increasing the colony’s population to 504. When Capt. John Smith is burned in a gunpowder accident, his rivals use the opportunity to force his return to England. Percy is named to succeed Smith as president of the council.

Excerpted, spelling and punctuation modernized, and images added by the National Humanities Center, 2006: www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm. In Lyon Gardiner Tyler, ed., *Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606-1625* (New York: Scribner’s, 1907); full text online in Virtual Jamestown at etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/jamestown-browsemod?id=J1063. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Laudonnière’s French Huguenot colony of Fort Caroline in Florida, destroyed by the Spanish in 1565.

² Spanish colony in southern South America [Rio do la Plata].

³ Spanish colony on the coast of Colombia [Cartagena].

⁴ particularly Spanish ships

⁵ Percy’s Relation is addressed to Sir Algernon Percy, a relative.



Not long after, Captain Martin whom I left at the island did come to James Town pretending some occasions of business, but indeed his own safety moved him thereunto, fearing to be surprised by the Indians who had made divers [several/various] excursions against him so that, having left Lieutenant Sicklemore to command in his absence, among whose company shortly after did grow a dangerous mutiny, in so much that divers of his men to the number of seventeen did take away a boat from him perforce and

went therein to Kekowhatan pretending they would trade therefore victuals, but they were served according to their deserts, for not any of them were heard of after. And in all likelihood were cut off and slain by the savages and within [a] few days after Lieutenant Sicklemore and divers others were found also slain with their mouths stopped full of bread, being done as it seems in contempt and scorn that others might expect the like when they should come to seek for bread and relief among them. . . .

Also within a short time after Capt. West did come down to us from the Falls [up the James River near Powhatan], having lost eleven men and a boat at Arsetock, besides those men he lost at the Falls, so our number at James Town increasing and our store decreasing, for in charity we could not deny them to participate with us. Whereupon I appointed Captain Tucker to calculate and cast up our store, the which at a poor allowance of half a can of meal for a man a day amounted unto three months provision, yet Captain Tucker by his industry and care caused the same to hold out four months.

But having no expectation of relief to come in so short a time, I sent Captain Ratcliffe to Powhatan to procure victuals and corn by the way of commerce and trade, the which the subtle old fox at first made good semblance of, although his intent was otherwise only waiting a fitting time for their destruction, as after plainly appeared. The which was probably occasioned by Captain Ratcliffe's credulity for having Powhatan's son and daughter aboard his pinnace [small boat], freely suffered them to depart again on shore, whom if he had detained might have been a sufficient pledge for his safety. And after not keeping a proper and fitting court of guard, but suffering his men by two and three and small numbers in a company to straggle into the savages' houses when the sly old king espied a fitting time, cut them all off, only surprised Captain Ratcliffe alive, who he caused to be bound unto a tree naked with a fire before, and by women his flesh was scrapped from his bones with mussel shells and before his face thrown into the fire. And so for want of circumspection miserably perished.

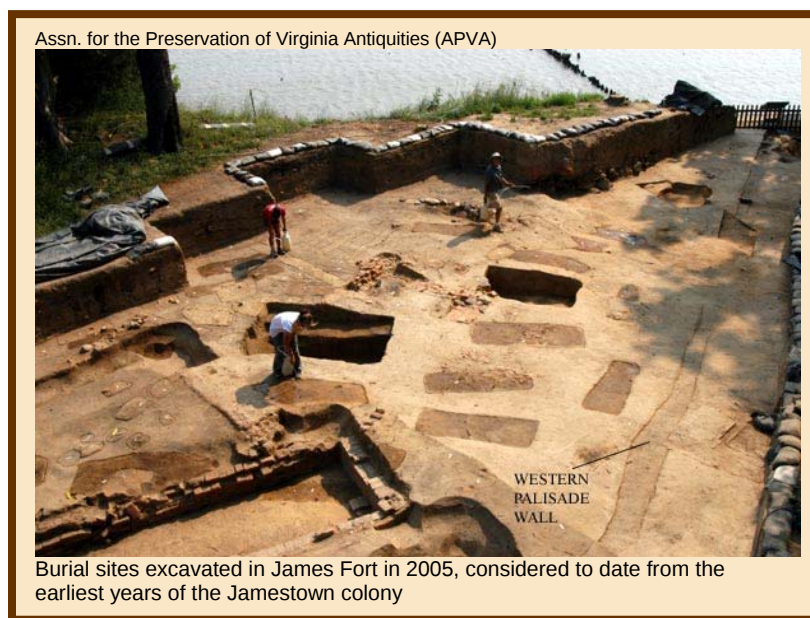
In the meantime Captain William Phetiplace remained in the pinnace with some few men and was divers times assaulted by the Indians, but after divers conflicts with the loss of some of his men, hardly escaped and at length arrived at James Town only with sixteen men, the remainder of fifty . . .

Upon which defeat I sent Captain James Davis to Algernon Fort to command there in Captain Ratcliffe's place, and Captain West I sent to Potoamack with about thirty six men to trade for maize and

grain, where he in short time loaded his pinnace sufficiently, yet used some harsh and cruel dealing by cutting of two of the savages' heads and other extremities. And coming by Algernon Fort Captain Davis did call unto them, acquainting them with our great wants, exhorting them to make all the speed they could to relieve us, upon which report Captain West, by the persuasion or rather by the enforcement of his company, hoisted up sails and shaped their course directly for England and left us in that extreme misery and want.

WINTER 1609-1610__The "Starving Time"

Now all of us at James Town, beginning to feel that sharp prick of hunger which no man truly describe but he which has 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 of and slain by the savages. And now famine beginning to look ghastly and pale in every face that nothing was spared to maintain life and to do those things which seem incredible as to dig up dead corpses out of graves and to eat them, and



some have licked up the blood which has fallen from their weak fellows. And among the rest this was most lamentable, that one of our colony murdered his wife, ripped the child out of her womb and threw it into the river, and after chopped the mother in pieces and salted her for his food. The same not being discovered before he had eaten part thereof, for the which cruel and inhumane fact I adjudged him to be executed, the acknowledgement of the deed being enforced from him by torture having hung by the thumbs with weights at his feet a quarter of an hour before he would confess the same. . . .

By this time being reasonable well recovered of my sickness, I did undertake a journey to Algernon Fort, both to understand how things were there ordered, as also to have been revenged of the savages at Kekowhatan who had treacherously slain divers of our men. Our people I found in good case and well, liking having concealed their plenty from us above at James Town, being so well stored that the crab fishes where with they had fed their hogs would have been a great relief unto us and saved many of our lives. But their intent was for to have kept some of the better sort alive and with their two pinnaces to have returned for England not regarding our miseries and wants at all, wherewith I taxed Captain Davis and told him that I had a full intent to bring half of our men from James Town to be there relieved and after to return them back again and bring the rest to be sustained there also. And if all this would not serve to save our men's lives I purposed to bring them all unto Algernon Fort, telling Captain Davis that another town or fort might be erected and built but men's lives once lost could never be recovered.

MAY 1610

Only sixty colonists have survived the winter when Sir Thomas Gates, the new governor of the colony, arrives with supplies and 100 new settlers.

Our miseries now being at the highest, and intending as I formerly related unto you to remove some of our men to Algernon Fort the very next tide, we espied two pinnaces coming into the bay not knowing as yet what they were but keeping a court of guard and watch all that night. The next morning we espied a boat coming of from one of the pinnaces. So standing upon our guard we hailed them and understood that Sir Thomas Gates and Sir George Somers were come in those pinnaces which by their great industry they had built in the Bermudes with the remainder of their wrecked ship and other wood they found in the country, upon which news we received no small joy, requesting them in the boat to come ashore, the which they refused and returned aboard again, for Sir Thomas Gates, having no knowledge of any fort to be built there, was doubtful whether we were friends or no, but being possessed of the truth he and Sir George Somers, which divers others did come ashore at Algernon Fort. And the next tide went up to James Town where they might read a lecture of misery in our people's faces and perceive the scarcity of victuals and understand the malice of the savages who knowing our weakness had divers times assaulted us without the fort. Finding of five hundred men we had only left about sixty, the rest being either starved through famine or cut of by the savages, and those which were living were so meager and lean that it was lamentable to behold them, for many, through extreme hunger, have run out of their naked beds, being so lean that they looked like anomalies, crying out "we are starved, we are starved"; others going to bed as we imagined in health were found dead the next morning. And among the rest one thing happened which was very remarkable wherein God showed his just judgment, for one Hugh Pryse being pinched with extreme famine, in a furious distracted mood did come openly into the market place blaspheming, exclaiming, and crying out that there was no God, alleging that if there were a god he would not suffer his creatures whom he had made and framed to endure those miseries and to perish for want of foods and sustenance. But it appeared the same day that the Almighty was displeased with him for going that afternoon with a butcher, a corpulent fat man into the woods to seek for some relief, both of them were slain by savages. And after being found God's indignation was shown upon Pryse's corpse which was rent in pieces with wolves or other wild beasts, And his bowels torn out of his body, being a lean spare man. And the fat butcher not lying above six yards from him was found altogether untouched only by the savages' arrows whereby he received his death

JUNE 1610

Gates orders the abandonment of Jamestown. As the departing ships sail down the James River, they encounter the fleet of Lord De La Warr bringing supplies and 150 new settlers. All return to Jamestown, where Gates establishes martial law.

These miseries considered, it was resolved upon by Sir Thomas Gates and the whole colony with all speed to return for England, whereupon most of our men were set to work, some to make pitch and tar for trimming of our ships, others to bake bread, and few or none not employed in one occasion or another. So that a small space of time four pinnaces were fitted and made ready, all preparing to go aboard, and if Sir Thomas Gates had not labored with our men, they had set the town on fire using these or the like words unto them, my masters let the town stand we know not but that as honest men as ourselves may come and inhabit here. Then all of us embarking ourselves, Sir Thomas Gates in the *Deliverance* with his company, Sir George Somers in the *Patience*, myself in the *Discovery*, and Captain Davis in the *Virginia*, all of us sailing down the river with a full intent to have proceeded upon our voyage for England, when suddenly we espied a boat making towards us wherein we found to be Captain Bruster sent from my Lord La Warr who was come unto us with many gentlemen of quality and three hundred men besides, great store of victuals, munition, and other provision, whereupon we all returned to James Town again where my Lord shortly after landed and set all things in good order, selecting a Council and making captains over fifty men a piece. Then Sir Thomas Gates, being desirous for to be revenged upon the Indians at Kekowhatan,

did go thither by water with a certain number of men and among the rest a taborer with him being landed, he caused the taborer to play and dance thereby to allure the Indians to come unto him, the which prevailed. And then espying a fitting opportunity fell in upon them, put five to the sword, wounded many others, some of them being after found in the woods with such extraordinary large and mortal wounds that it seemed strange they could fly so far. The rest of the savages he put to flight. And so possessing himself of the Town and the fertile ground thereunto adjacent, having well ordered all things he left his lieutenant Earley to command his company, and then returned to James Town again and shortly after did take his voyage for England. . . .

AUGUST 1610

Gates orders Percy to lead an attack on the Paspahugh Indians.

My Lord General, not forgetting old Powhatan's subtle treachery, sent a messenger unto him to demand certain arms and divers men which we supposed might be living in his country, but he returned no other then proud and disdainful answers.

Whereupon my Lord being much incensed caused a commission to be drawn wherein he appointed me chief commander over seventy men and sent me to take revenge upon the Paspahans and Chiconamians, and so shipping myself and my soldiers in two boats I departed from James Town the 9th of August 1610 and the same night landed within three miles of Paspahas town. Then drawing my soldiers into battalion, placing a captain or lieutenant at every file, we marched towards the town having an Indian guide with me named Kempes whom the provost marshal led in a handlock. This subtle savage was leading us out of the way, the which I misdoubting bastinated him which my truncheon and threatened to cut off his head, whereupon the slave altered his course and brought us the right way near unto the town. So that then I commanded every leader to draw away his file before me to beset the savages' houses that none might escape with a charge not to give the alarm until I were come up unto them with the cullers. At my coming I appointed Captain William West to give the alarm, the which he performed by shooting of a pistol. And then we fell in upon them, put some fifteen or sixteen to the sword and almost all the rest to flight, whereupon I caused my drum to beat and drew all my soldiers to the cullers, my lieutenant bringing with him the queen and her children and one Indian prisoner for the which I taxed him because he had spared them, his answer was that having them now in my custody I might do with them what I pleased. Upon the same I caused the Indians' head to be cut off. And then dispersed my files appointing my soldiers to burn their houses and to cut down their corn growing about the town. And after we marched with the queen and her children to our boats again, where being no sooner well shipped my soldiers did begin to murmur because the queen and her children were spared. So upon the same a council being called it was agreed upon to put the children to death, the which was effected by throwing them overboard and shooting out their brains in the water, yet for all this cruelty the soldiers were not well pleased, and I had much to do to save the queen's life for that time.

Then sailing some two miles down the river I sent Captain Davis ashore with most of my soldiers, myself being wearied before and for my own point but an easy foot man Captain Davis at his landing was

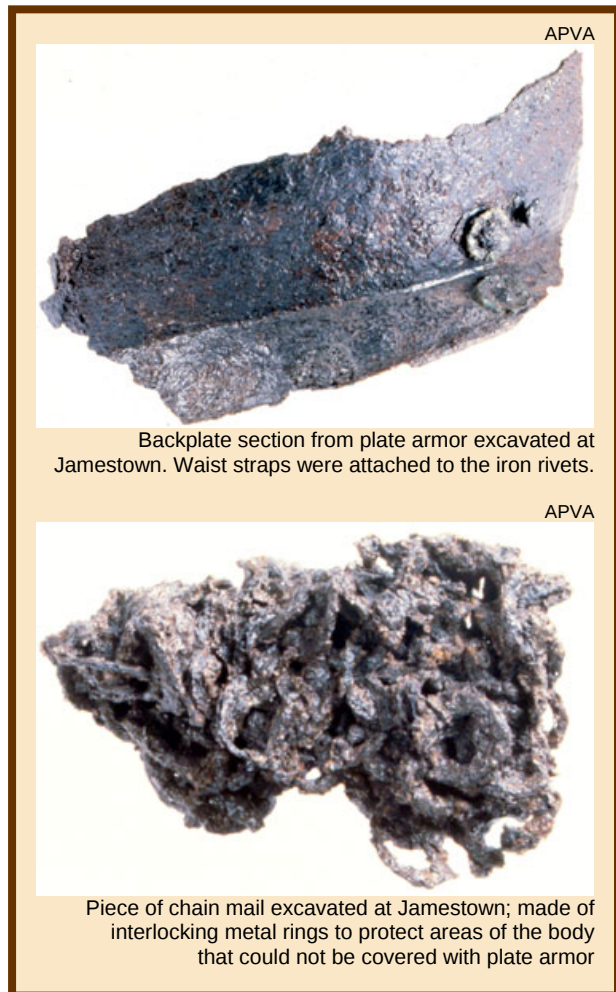


appointed by some Indians who spared not to send their arrows among our men but within a short time he put them to flight and landed without further opposition, marching about fourteen miles into the country, cut down their corn, burned their houses, temples, and idols, and among the rest a spacious temple clean and neatly kept, a thing strange and seldom seen among the Indians in those parts. So having performed all the spoil he could, returned aboard to me again and then we sailed down the river to James Town.

My Lord General not being well did lie ashipboard to whom we rowed, he being joyful of our safe return yet seemed to be discontent because the queen was spared, as Captain Davis told me, and that it was my Lord's pleasure that we should see her dispatched, the way he thought best to burn her. To the first I replied that having seen so much bloodshed that day now in my cold blood I desired to see no more and for to burn her I did not hold it fitting but either by shot or sword to give her a quicker dispatch. So turning myself from Captain Davis he did take the queen with two soldiers ashore and in the woods put her to the sword and although Captain Davis told me it was my Lord's direction yet I am persuaded to the contrary.

SEPTEMBER 1610

. . . In short time after Captain Adams did come into our bay in a ship called the *Blessing* with fresh supply both of men and victuals, giving us notice that Sir Thomas Dale was to come shortly after with a greater supply, the which proved true for within two months after he arrived in Virginia and brought with him three hundred men besides great store of armor, munition, victuals, and other provision. And being landed he ordained new laws set down, good articles which were well observed, all our men being set to work, some to plant, some to sow corn, and others to build boats and houses, most men employed in one thing or another. All things in time being well settled and ordered, Sir Thomas Dale made preparation and went against the Nance-mondies with a hundred men in armor where he had divers encounters and skirmishes with the savages both by land and water, divers of his company being wounded. . . In these conflicts many Indians being also slain and wounded. And not being acquainted nor accustomed to encounter with men in armor, much wondered thereat especially that they did not see any of our men fall as they had done in other conflicts. Whereupon they did fall into their exorcisms, conjurations, and charms, throwing fire up into the skies, running up and down with rattles and making many diabolical gestures with many ungrammatical spells and incantations, imagining thereby to cause rain to fall from the clouds to extinguish and put out our men's matches and to wet and spoil their powder, but neither the devil whom they adore nor all their sorceries did anything avail them, for our men cut down their corn, burned their houses, and besides those which they had slain brought some of them prisoners to our fort.



- For information on the Jamestown archaeological excavations, see Jamestown Discovery (Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities) at www.apva.org/jr.html, and Virtual Jamestown: Artifacts, at www.virtualjamestown.org/images/artifacts/jamestown.html.
- For information on the Werowocomoco excavation, see Werowocomoco Research Project at powhatan.wm.edu/index.htm.