

we acknowledge the differences, instructive similarities remain that help to integrate natives more thoroughly into the story of early America. By carving a niche for themselves in response to drastically different conditions, the people who composed the Catawba Nation shared in the most fundamental of American experiences. Like Afro-Americans, these Indians were compelled to accept a subordinate position in American life yet did not altogether lose their cultural integrity. Like settlers of the Chesapeake, aboriginal inhabitants of the uplands adjusted to appalling mortality rates and wrestled with the difficult task of "living with death." Like inhabitants of the Middle Colonies, piedmont groups learned to cope with unprecedented ethnic diversity by balancing the pull of traditional loyalties with the demands of a new social order. Like Puritans in New England, Catawbas found that a new world did not arrive all at once and that localism, self-sufficiency, and the power of old ways were only gradually eroded by conditions in colonial America.

Cannibalism and Abundance in Colonial Jamestown

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When historians write about early colonial Virginia, they often mention cannibalism to illustrate the severity of the Starving Time during the winter of 1609–10. According to a college-level U.S. history textbook published in 2009, "A few desperate colonists were driven to cannibalism, an ironic situation since early explorers had assumed that only Native Americans would eat human flesh." In his canonical *American Slavery, American Freedom*, Edmund S. Morgan notes that the Starving Time offers "the only authentic examples of cannibalism witnessed in Virginia. One provident man chops up his wife and salts down the pieces. Others dig up graves to eat corpses. By spring only sixty are left alive."...

Historians generally take the case of cannibalism in Jamestown for granted; they usually assume that colonists practiced man-eating during that winter, and then they move ahead quickly to tobacco planting, sometimes pausing to discuss the Powhatan-English wars of the 1610s and 1620s. In fact the existence of cannibalism in Virginia is not easily verifiable. Early writers in colonial Virginia wrote about that winter with varying degrees of horror, remorse, and amusement, and they were influenced as well by their own fluctuating levels of personal interest in the colony's success. For too long historians have taken these writers at their word, without considering their motivations for publication. Cannibalism may or may not have taken place during 1609–10; some evidence exists to suggest that it did, whereas other accounts might be cited to argue that it did not. Ultimately, there is no way to answer this particular question definitively, nor is it the intent of this essay to do so. What historians can do is consider the various accounts together and acknowledge that cannibalism should no longer be stated as a bare fact in the

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chronology of early Jamestown.... The reports of that fateful winter reinforced—yet also modified—the concept of abundance in America, an idea that became ubiquitous in an emerging American mythology and persisted into the twenty-first century. Before the Starving Time, writers depicted America as an Edenic paradise where food was plentiful and required little labor. But the new, postlapsarian Virginia demanded hard work and perseverance to realize the land's bounty. Thus, in the 1610s and 1620s, colonial leaders enacted new laws about food production and consumption, in part because of the concomitant appearance of Starving Time accounts. Memories of the winter of 1609–10 acted as indispensable cautionary tales that shaped Virginia's future governance as well as settlers' sense of themselves and their colony. Jamestown became America's first real creation myth, which was a mixture of truth and fiction that chronicled Virginia's failures as well as its eventual triumphs. Fears about repeat periods of dearth and starvation created powerful motivations for developing a successful colony that would become the prototype for all other English "projects" in America....

When historians mention the Starving Time in Jamestown, they traditionally cite Captain John Smith's and George Percy's familiar accounts of cannibalism during that difficult winter of 1609–10. Three other English narratives survive from the first quarter of the seventeenth century: Thomas Gates's *A True declaration of the estate of the Colonie in Virginia*, the Virginia Assembly's "The Tragical Relation of the Virginia Assembly," and William Strachey's *A True Reportory*. Gates's 1610 refutation of cannibalism published for the Virginia Council came first, preceding the others by fourteen years. Gates became governor of Virginia after Percy's rule, but, delayed by a shipwreck in Bermuda, he did not set foot in the colony until May 1610. He arrived in the colony after the Starving Time when the worst of the winter was over and decided that returning to England was the only way to feed himself, his shipwrecked crew, and the original Jamestown colonists. On June 7, 1610, as the colonists were on their way down the James River, they ran into a longboat belonging to Thomas West's fleet, which had ample new supplies and an influx of men. The colony was saved, and West officially assumed rule of Virginia, leaving Gates free to return in July to England, where he published *A True Declaration*. Since scholars have long acknowledged *A True Declaration's* influence on William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, initially performed in 1611 and finally published in 1623, Gates's account presumably achieved wide circulation by the early 1610s. It would regain attention in 1625, when it was included in William Strachey's *A True Reportory*.

It is illuminating and important to recognize that all five accounts appeared and circulated during 1624–25....

Before the Starving Time of 1609–10, writers portrayed Virginia as a food-filled paradise where people did not have to labor to produce things to eat. That winter marked a turning point at which the characterization of New World abundance shifted from limitless to attainable only via hard work and strict regulations enforcing industrious behavior. The rumors of the Starving Time circulated by the pirates in Thomas Gates's account, by John Smith after his return to

England, and by the Spanish served to increase investors' worries about the colony. These stories provoked changes in laws pertaining to food supply and, consequently, Virginia's security....

Early explorers and writers described the New World as a paradise where food was readily available for virtually no work. These descriptions usually began with a listing of the land's merchantable or edible commodities. As early as the fourteenth century, Sir John Mandeville had promised abundance from new lands, and Richard Hakluyt was the first to do so specifically for English readers. One of the stories he quoted in his 1582 *Divers Voyages* promised spices such as cinnamon, cloves, mace, and nutmeg. The New World, he wrote, was "abounding in hony, venison, wilde foule, forests, [and] woods of all sortes." Abundance became one of the most useful and convincing keywords to describe the Americas.

Later travelers wrote glowing accounts of the country to prove that Virginia was a hospitable, fruitful, and boundless land. Writing in 1589, Arthur Barlowe observed, "The earth bringeth forth all things in abundance, as in the first creation, without toile or labour." Barlowe compared Virginia with the garden in Genesis, where Adam and Eve lived without having to work. He also compared the Virginia coast with other places, arguing, "in all the world the like abundance is not to be founde: and my selfe having seene those partes of Europe that most abound, finde such difference, as were incredible to be written." Virginia was exceptional, paradisaical; Europe offered no comparison with the ease of living in the New World.

Once Englishmen arrived in the Chesapeake, they quickly recited these earlier literary tropes and assumptions. One can almost picture early colonists wandering around the New World coast, putting various items into their mouths and rushing home to write about it. Smith wrote of rivers in the lands around Jamestown "so covered with swans, geese, duckes, and cranes, that we daily feasted with good bread, Virginia pease, pumpions, and putchamins, fish, fowle, and diverse sorts of wild beasts as fat as we could eat them." Smith noted the "great abundance" of birds, as well as numerous types of fish. Agriculture seldom played a role in these early accounts by colonial writers; rather, colonists ambled about, plucking game from the forests and fish from the sea.

Following the Starving Time, perceptions of abundance changed drastically. The early 1610s witnessed a spate of writing that referred to the colony's tribulations and acknowledged that optimistic appraisals of the country had led to disaster. Though some of these writers went so far as to call the Starving Time stories false or slanderous, they all agreed that the tales had injured Virginia's reputation. In 1611 Deputy Governor Thomas Dale, in a letter to Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury, referred to Virginia's early history, noting "some former slaunders yet upon itt (not removed)." In Alexander Whitaker's 1613 *Good Neues from Virginia*, the dedication by William Crashawe—an anti-Catholic preacher and investor in the Virginia Company—ridiculed "these idle and slanderous surmises" as well as "the calumnies and slanders, raised upon our Colonies, and the Countrey it selfe." When men mentioned these slanders, they probably referred to the cannibalism accusations spread by rumormongers. In Crashawe's

opinion these stories were “blowen abroad by Papists, Players and such like, till they have filled the vulgar eares.” Crashawe, then, attributed the rumors to the Spanish (the Papists) and, it would seem, to early enactments of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in other words, to the literary iteration of the Gates account. In 1615 Ralph Hamor, who sat on the Virginia Council and served as its secretary in 1611, published *A True Discourse of the Present State of Virginia*. He referred to the cannibalism stories by citing the “manifould imputations, & disgraces, which Virginia hath innocently undergon.” All these writers observed the damage that rumors of famine and cannibalism had done to the Virginia enterprise. They had their work cut out for them as they sought to turn the tide of public opinion.

Though historians have ascribed early failures in Virginia to any number of factors—exceptionally harsh winters, “unprecedented drought,” poor planning with regard to food supplies, disease, or salt poisoning—English observers at the time concluded that the causes of starvation boiled down to laziness, selfishness, and poor governance. As rumors about cannibalism during the winter of 1609–10 reached the metropole, colonial leaders in Jamestown began to fling accusations at each other and at the colonists. Leaders blamed each other for hoarding food. Such criticisms implied that there might have been enough food in Virginia, as Gates had suggested, but that leaders had allotted it unevenly, precipitating a Starving Time severe enough to prompt cannibalism rumors. The problem of greedy leaders went back to the colony’s first weeks. Smith did not hesitate to name names, citing President Edward Maria Wingfield as one of the guilty who ate from his private stores of “Oatmeale, Sacke, Oyle, Aquavitæ, Beefe, [and] Egges” while the rank and file starved during some of Smith’s earliest days in Virginia. For this reason Smith and other members of the council deposed Wingfield on September 10, 1607, and replaced him with John Ratcliffe. Even these actions, however, did not remedy food problems in a way sufficient to prevent famine in 1609–10.

Critics also decried the laziness of early colonists. In doing so writers implied that the problem was not Virginia but the people living there; in contrast, industrious men would prosper in the New World. Crashawe described the “base and idle lubbers, that come from thence.” Hamor suggested that if there had been a famine, it had resulted from indolence. He noted that he would “deterre all lasie, impotent, and ill livers from addressing themselves thither, as being a Country too worthy for them, and altogether disconsonant to their natures.” By claiming that only the most hardworking men deserved the New World, such writers reserved Virginia for the virtuous and blamed the earlier misery and death on the failings of indolent and selfish colonists as well as on the inadequate leadership of early governors. These writers argued that it was possible for investors and settlers to recoup their losses and start over; idleness was an easily remedied sin. By leveling these charges, writers suggested that the colony could still have a bright future.

New laws implemented in the second decade of the seventeenth century suggest that stories about cannibalism during the Starving Time functioned as a turning point in how colonists understood foodways in Virginia. In 1612 William Strachey published the *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall*, a compendium

of regulations for the colony first envisioned by Gates in May 1610, approved by Thomas West in June, and enlarged by Dale in 1611. Significantly, three of the men connected to cannibalism stories during the Starving Time—Gates and Strachey, in refuting rumors, and West, by virtue of having a brother responsible for the storytelling pirates—involved themselves directly in the lawmaking process undertaken to prevent starvation in the future. Even as they denied stories of cannibalism and famine, these men constructed regulations to control food supply and consumption.

Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall contained numerous rules dictating access to and control of food, manifesting a singular preoccupation with such matters. In fact, of the first thirty-seven articles, more than one-quarter dictated how people would eat: seven referred directly to food and three to provisions trading. Punishments for stealing and hoarding food were draconian. One would face execution if caught robbing provisions from the common store, “by water or land, out of boate, house, or knapsack.” Those daring to “spoil and wast or steale the same, or robbe any vineyard, or gather up the grapes, or steale any eares of the corne growing” would also “be punished with death.” Laws warned that bakers who employed weights to make their loaves heavier or used less flour or meal (presumably siphoning it off to hoard) would lose their ears for a first offense, be confined for “a yeare [in] the Gallies” for a second, and spend three years in prison for a third. Even colonists who owned their animals had to ask permission from those in charge before butchering them, perhaps to prevent colonists who did not own domesticated animals from killing those belonging to others. Those guilty of this crime “in the Principall” would die; those “in the accessory” would have their hands burned and ears lopped off, and those concealing the aforesaid crime would be whipped....

Not incidental to these rules about food and eating were warnings about gluttony as well as elements that might refer to the cannibalism stories. One of Strachey’s final observations for the common soldier cautioned, “He must not set his minde over-greedily upon his belly, and continuall feeding, but rest himselfe contented with such provisions as may bee conveniently provided, his owne labour purchase, or his meanes reach unto.” Though *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall* did not explicitly mention cannibalism, it instituted new laws against murder, except in self-defense. Perhaps Dale, Gates, Strachey, and West were thinking back to the case of the wife killer and hoped to forestall such excuses in the future.

At the same time, *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall* more directly implied that anthropophagy would be punished severely, even in desperate circumstances. Strachey took special care to warn against the especially heinous crime of a man committing murder “to satisfie his owne pleasure and appetite.” By 1612 “appetite” certainly connoted a desire for food, and a meaning propounded as early as 1366 indicated that the desire for food was natural. Lawmakers acknowledged that the need to feed oneself, even in the face of starvation, was a natural desire but indicated that cannibalism was still unacceptable. Given the prevalence of rumors about cannibalism, Strachey’s use of the word appetite must have given men pause; they were not to kill because they were hungry.

Men employing the starvation defense would be punished the same as those who killed in anger. Colonists contemplating such actions would do well to remember that “the life of a souldier, or a laborer, belongs to none to take away, but to the Lord Generall, Lieftenent General, Marshal, or their deputy or deputies.” One who killed a man to eat him would pay with his life. Colonial leaders may not have been willing to face the issue of cannibalism in overt terms or to answer the question of whether it had actually occurred, but they took extraordinary measures to prevent instances of man-eating in the future. By publishing *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall* in London, they did more than publicly pronounce new policies; they also offered reassurance....

After the implementation of William Strachey's *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall*, post-Starving Time accounts of the colony ensured that cannibalism would remain etched in colonial memory for a long time. These memories served two purposes in the 1610s and 1620s. They allowed colonists to see the Starving Time, even in all its gruesomeness, as a moment when colonists continued to observe English foodways. More importantly, they enabled writers to posit a sense of optimism about the future that, though more measured than Richard Hakluyt's early accounts, still fostered a sense of unity and possibility regarding the colony's development.

Memories of the Starving Time explained how colonists understood cannibalism within the cultural context of the Old and New World. Preconceived notions about Indian cannibalism as well as Indian methods of obtaining food shaped these perceptions. Long before English colonization began, fantasies of cannibals infused textual and visual representations of the New World. Travelers coming to America expected to encounter the practice because they had seen cannibals depicted on New World maps and read about cannibals in ancient mythology, in Sir John Mandeville's writings, and in more recent accounts of Spanish voyages by Christopher Columbus, writer-lawyer Hakluyt, and his cousin, Richard Hakluyt the Younger. Only years before, witch-hunters in Europe—especially in Germany—had accused suspected women of killing and eating babies. But the English were not averse to making use of human bodies for medical purposes. Doctors recorded treatments for epilepsy, vertigo, and other “lunatisms” that recommended eating dried placenta and powdered human skull, and these medical recipes, or receipts, made their way from pharmacopoeias into contemporary cookbooks. These examples are not to suggest that recipes reflect what everyone was eating or that medicinal cannibalism shocked patients in the same way as Hakluyt's account of European travelers shamefully admitting they had broiled and eaten meat “of such a mans buttocke”; rather, cannibalism could at times titillate and at other times represent conventional practices.

When the English arrived in Virginia, they were astonished to find that the Powhatans were not man-eaters. Robert Appelbaum has suggested that the English, finding the Indians were not cannibals, claimed cannibalism for themselves. In remembering cannibalism during the Starving Time, George Percy and John Smith portrayed it as a deliberately non-Indian practice that otherwise followed English foodways. Unlike Chesapeake Indians who, according to

incorrect European perceptions, adhered to a fast-and-feast cycle of eating, preferred their food raw, and did not preserve food, Englishmen refused to allow the natural absence of food to determine whether they would be allowed to eat. Once they acquired food, the eaters were restrained in their consumption; in Smith's account, the colonists took the time to prepare the body with roots and herbs, and Percy and Smith recorded the colonists eating only part of the corpses at once. The eaters employed salting to preserve what was left of the bodies, indicating a continuing concern with obtaining food. Such moves implied adherence to English foodways: even when starving, the English stored their food and ate it in moderation, allowing them to survive and maintain their Englishness in the most desperate of circumstances....

Memories of the Starving Time combined with the continued belief that cannibalism had occurred played important roles in creating the colonists' collective sense of themselves as hardworking laborers in the first half of the seventeenth century. Remembering the Starving Time fostered a growing sense of optimism that such tragedy would not occur again. Ralph Hamor asked in 1615, "why should any man (if he be industrious) mistrust starving?" In 1617 John Rolfe observed that the colony was "plentifully stoored with food and other commodities" and wondered incredulously whether it was possibly "the same still it was, when men pined with famyne?" His point was like that of the other writers: Virginia had not changed but its colonists supposedly had.

A quarter century later, cannibalism still lingered in Virginians' memory. In 1650 writer Edward Williams noted that "the incomparable Virgin hath raised her dejected head, cleared her enclouded reputation, and now like the Eldest Daughter of Nature expresseth a priority in her Dowry ... her unwounded wombe full of all those Treasures which indeere Provinces to respect of glory." He used the metaphor of a woman who had not yet given birth, which drew readers' attention to the potential inherent in Virginia. After a second Starving Time, colonial leaders had fought off rumors of laziness, squashed stories of cannibalism, and instituted stricter laws. And the colony was finally prospering, though from tobacco instead of any sort of food....

Cannibalism captured the early colonial imagination. The reiterations of tales describing cannibalism served as a turning point in Virginia's history. They enabled colonists to shift from envisioning the New World as a place of boundless abundance to one of more realistic and measured possibility. The Starving Time functioned as a fortunate fall that allowed leaders to reassert control over unruly settlers and to impose laws controlling food production, dissemination, and consumption. Tales from the time also dictated refined rules for future English settlement. Men settling in other parts of the New World would take note of Virginians' experiences. Unlike men in Jamestown, Plymouth settlers knew not to permit food hoarding. And though they also experienced a period of dearth, it was shorter than Jamestown's, and no one was accused of eating anyone else. Plymouth colonists agreed before departing England that for seven years "all profits and benefits that are got by trade, traffic, trucking, working, fishing or any other means of any person or persons, remain still in the common stock." After Jamestown future colonists instituted preventative measures to guard

against famine, most likely because accounts of the Starving Time had already served their purpose, warning of dangers involved in settling the New World.

The circulation of Starving Time accounts raised awareness about the possibility of famine and justified stringent measures for preventing repeat occurrences. Once the Starving Time was long enough past, it allowed colonists to reflect on how far they had come. The stories of that winter helped to create one of the first myths in American history: the myth of Jamestown's creation through the absence of food and settlers' efforts to overcome starvation. Whether people believed early colonials practiced cannibalism, the failures of the Starving Time enabled Virginians to realize that they could try again, that future starvation was not inevitable, and that the possibilities for future colonial endeavors were, in fact, abundant.



FURTHER READING

- Elaine G. Breslaw, *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies* (1997).
- Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (2004).
- Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial New England* (2002).
- Alison Games, *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* (1999).
- Joyce Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664–1730* (1992).
- Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (1999).
- Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (1981).
- Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985).
- Anthony S. Parent, Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (2003).
- Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (1991).

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