

**John Smith,  
General History of Virginia  
(1624 – modernized spelling)**

*Of the manner of the Virginians Government*

Although the Country people are very barbarous, yet have they amongst them such government, as that their Magistrates for good commanding, and their people for due subjection, and obeying, excel many places that would be counted very civil. The form of their Commonwealth is a Monarchical government, one as Emperour ruleth over many Kings or Governours. Their chief ruler is called *Powhatan*, and taketh his name of his principal place of dwelling, called *Powhatan*. But his proper name is *Wahunsonacock*. Some Countries he hath which have been his ancestors', and came unto him by inheritance, as the Country called *Powhatan*, *Arrohatack*, *Appamatuck*, *Pamankey*, *Youghtanund*, and *Mattapanient*. All the rest of his Territories expressed in the Map, they report have been his several Conquests.... He is of personage a tall well proportioned man, with a sour look, his head somewhat gray, his beard so thin, that it seemeth none at all, his age near sixty; of a very able and hardy body to endure any labour. About his person ordinarily attendeth a guard of 40 or 50 of the tallest men his Country doth afford....

A mile from *Orapakes* [Powhatan's village] in a thicket of wood, he hath a house in which he keeps his kind of Treasure, as skins, copper, pearl, and beads, which he stores up against the time of his death and burial. Here also is his store of red paint for ointment, bowes and arrows, Targets [shields] and clubs. This house is fifty or sixty yards in length, frequented by Priests. At the four corners of his house stand four Images as Sentinels, one of a Dragon, another a Bear, the third like a Leopard, and the fourth like a giantlike man, all made well favouredly, according to their best craftsmanship.

He hath as many women as he will, whereof when he lies on his bed, one sitteth at his head, and another at his feet, but when he sitteth, one sitteth on his right hand and another on his left. As he is weary of his women, he bestoweth them on those that best deserve them at his hands. When he dineth or suppeth, one of his women before and after meat, bringeth him water in a wooden platter to wash his hands. Another waiteth with a bunch of feathers to wipe them instead of a Towel, and the feathers when he hath wiped are dyed again. His kingdoms descend not to his sons nor children, but first to his brethren [brothers], whereof he hath 3, namely *Opitchapan*, *Opechancanough*, and *Catahugh*, and after their decease to his sisters. First to the eldest sister, then to the rest, and after them to the first male or female of the elder sister, but never to the heirs of the males.

He nor any of his people understand any letters, whereby to write or read, only the laws whereby he ruleth is custom. Yet... his will is law and must be obeyed: not only as a King, but as half a God they esteem him. His inferiour Kings whom they call *Werowances*, are tied to rule by customs, and have power of life and death at their command in that nature. But this word *Werowance*, which we call and construe for a King, is a common word, whereby they call all commanders: for they have but few words in their language, and but few occasions to use any

officers more than one commander, which commonly they call *Werowance*, or *Caucorouse*, which is Captain. They all know their several lands, and habitations, and limits, to fish, fowl, or hunt in, but they hold all of their great *Werowance Powhatan*, unto whom they pay tribute of skins, beads, copper, pearl, deer, turkeys, wild beasts, and corn. What he commandeth they dare not disobey in the least thing. It is strange to see with what great fear and adoration, all these people do obey this *Powhatan*. For at his feet they present whatsoever he commandeth, and at the least frown of his brow, their greatest spirits will tremble with fear: and no marvel, for he is very terrible & tyrannous in punishing such as offend him. For example, he caused certain malefactors to be bound hand and foot, then having of many fires gathered great storm of burning coals, they rake these coals round in the form of a cockpit, and in the midst they cause the offenders to broil to death. Sometimes he causeth the heads of them that offend him, to be laid upon the altar or sacrificing stone, and one with clubs beats on their brains. When he would punish any notorious enemy or malefactor, he causeth him to be tied to a tree, and with mussel shells or reeds, the executioner cutteth off his joints one after another, ever casting what they cut off into the fire, then does he proceed with shells and reeds to [flay] the skin from his head and face; then do they rip his belly and so burn him with the tree and all... Their ordinary correction is to beat them with cudgels. We have seen a man kneeling on his knees, and at *Powhatan's* command two men have beat him on the bare skin, till he hath fallen senseless in a sound, and yet never cry nor complained. And he made a woman for playing the whore, sit upon a great stone, on her bare breech twenty-four hours, only with corn and water, every three days, till nine days were past, yet he loved her exceedingly: notwithstanding there are common whores by profession.

In the year 1608, he surprised the people of *Payankatank*, his near neighbours and subjects. The occasion was to us unknown, but the manner was thus. First he sent diverse of his men as to lodge amongst them that night, then the *Abuscadoes* [ambushing raiders] environed all their houses, and at the hour appointed, they all fell to the spoil, twenty four men they slew, the long hair of the one side of their heads, with the skin [flayed] with shells or reeds, they brought away. They surprised also the women, and the children, and the *Werowance*. All these they presented to *Powhatan*. The *Werowance*, women and children became his prisoners, and do him service. The locks of hair with their skins he hanged on a line between two trees. And thus he made ostentation of his triumph at *Werowocomoco* [*Powhatan's* capital], where he intended to have done as much to me and my company.