

The Taking of the Land: The English Colonization of North America

An Exhibition in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

November 2021-June 25, 2022

I: Exhibition Summary

On May 14, 1607, one-hundred-and-four settlers sailing on the ships *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and *Discovery* landed on the banks of the James River. By June 15, they had established a fortified structure they named James Fort. Indigenous peoples had inhabited this region—known as Tsenacomoco by the political alliance of Algonquian-speaking Virginia Indians who occupied the area—for approximately fifteen thousand years. In the last millennium they developed systems of sustainable, domesticated agriculture featuring the three-sisters trilog (corn, beans, squash) and employed fishing and hunting strategies that had little long-term impact on the land and waterways.

The European settlers destroyed these sustainable systems within five decades of their arrival.

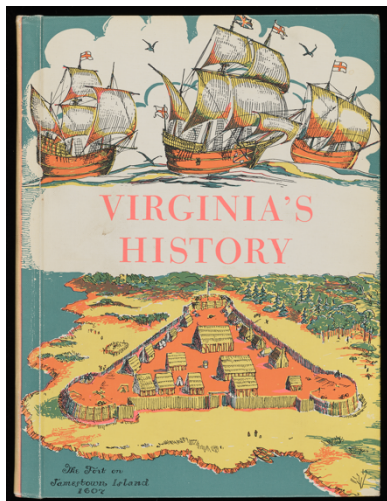
This exhibition offers an opportunity to counter the commonly accepted historical interpretations of the dominant Jamestown colonial narrative: that well-intended English colonists, seeking to make new lives in a new world, discovered land that was mostly unoccupied—and that its taking was righteous and justified. “Go and possess the land, it is a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey” preached Rev. Daniel Price at St. Paul’s Cross to settlers shortly before they departed on their resupply voyage on the *Sea Venture* towards Jamestown in 1609.



Nova Virginiae tabula. Willem Janszoon Blaeu. 1640.
(G3880 1640.B5, Gift of Paul Mellon)

II: Exhibition Curation: Collections and Partnerships

The Taking of the Land will feature ~75 rare or unique books, documents, maps, letters, and broadsides from the Tracy W. McGregor and Paul Mellon gift collections in the Small Special Collections Library. These objects were written from a settler colonial perspective for a European audience who shared that view. But more importantly, the exhibition will present them as outlandish propaganda: as a desperate attempt to attract new settlers, but more importantly, the exhibition will reveal how the English used Biblical text to justify the horrific actions involved in the taking of the land and the removal of the Indigenous peoples from territories they had inhabited for thousands of years.



To counter this traditional narrative, we are partnering with regional Indigenous tribal museums and cultural centers and Indigenous scholars to facilitate their curation of the history of the land, the environment, and the people who have inhabited Virginia from a time thousands of years prior to English contact to the present. We are working with our cultural heritage colleagues in the [Pamunkey Indian Museum and Cultural Center](#) to curate an exhibition section on the “pre-contact” history of the Algonquian-speaking Virginia Indians of Tsenacomoco. We will partner with Ashley Atkins Spivey ([Kenah Consulting](#)), an economic anthropologist and member of the Pamunkey Indian Tribe, to address the ways in which Indigenous experiences have been ignored or grossly mischaracterized. Dr. Spivey will contribute edits to the 1957 edition of *Virginia’s History*, a textbook that is well-known to an entire generation of Virginians (and [currently in the news](#)); we will present her mark-ups and edits to that history in the gallery.

We also plan to work with the living co-author of *The True Story of Pocahontas*, Angela Daniel, to [represent the Mattaponi oral tradition and an empathetic counter-narrative](#) to the colonial settler accounts represented by John Smith, John Rolfe, and others distinctly documented in our rare collections. The exhibition explores the practices of indentured servitude and enslavement, and where our collections are scant on the issues of Indigenous enslavement and empathetic indentured and enslaved narratives, we plan to borrow scholarship from Encyclopedia Virginia. Finally, as our collections document the colonial push westward towards central Virginia, we plan to partner with our cultural heritage colleagues in the Monacan Ancestral Museum to feature their curation documenting [the history of the Monacan Indian Nation](#) from the late colonial era through present day.

III: Exhibition Design, Devices, and Elements

Taking a cue from the National Museum of the American Indian, the exhibition will feature modern, high-contrast graphic design to reinforce the contemporary, inclusive narrative of the curation and counter the traditional, expected historical concepts and settler colonist-centered perspectives presented by the objects. Those objects will provide familiar images—de Bry's engravings; White, Smith, and Blaeu's maps; etc.—depicted in history textbooks that everyday visitors will recognize but likely have never seen in their original format (and, in some cases, as singular, unique objects held only in our repository). The modern graphic design coupled with curation from our Indigenous partner curators will let the visitor know that this is a counterstory to what has been traditionally presented, to the exclusion of many, as one of America's foundational origin stories.

The exhibition will open with a land acknowledgement at front and center, in a place of prominence above the exhibition title. Pops of color will be reserved to highlight the contributions of our guest curatorial partners, and we will cross-promote their organizations by featuring their logo and information on how to visit and support their cultural heritage efforts. Promotional materials for the exhibition, as well as large features in the exhibition gallery, will focus attention on visuals that honor the land—maps, engravings, landscapes.

IV: Exhibition Objectives and Audiences

The Taking of the Land offers the UVA Library the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to repairing as well as collecting, preserving, and making accessible the depth and diversity of the cultural record. We are both fortunate to hold and yet burdened by the legacy of many of our most traditionally prominent collections. We do not have holdings that represent the Indigenous perspective from the time of Jamestown and, in totality, our archives are near entirely “absent” of Indigenous voices.

Exhibition Objectives: what conceptual and institutional messages will this exhibition communicate?

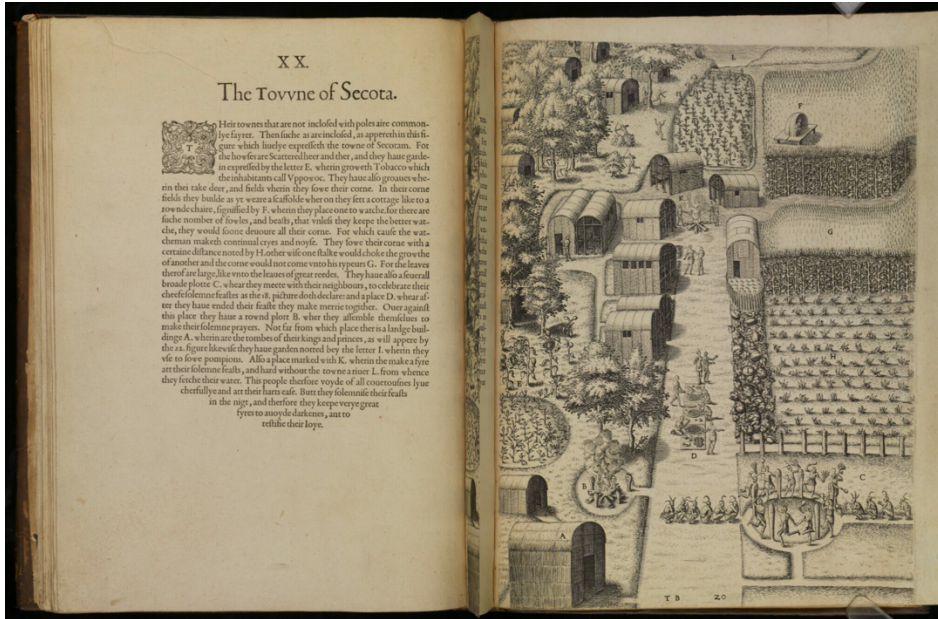
- The UVA Library is committed to repairing as well as collecting, preserving, and making accessible the depth and diversity of the cultural record.
- The UVA Library is committed to honoring the traditional, indigenous custodians of the lands on which it exists today, and those across Virginia whose history we collect and preserve
- Our rare and unique holdings chronicling the story of Jamestown form an unparalleled archive which we've never exhibited as an examination of the first British exploits of America (specifically Virginia)—and never in such a modern, reparative way
- Our desire to engage in new partnerships with local/regional communities and organizations by including them as exhibition curators, cross-promoting their tribal organization and efforts, and including them in outreach and events.
- Our commitment to supporting preservation of histories and of other ways of knowing held sacred within Indigenous communities.
- Our worthiness as an inclusive and responsible repository focused on a reparative collecting strategy to those communities whose collections we aspire to acquire

Call to action: what do we want our audiences to come away with, care about, or want to do after viewing the exhibition:

Had we offered this exhibition in 2007 at the quadricentennial anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, we would have presented a very traditional narrative. Likewise, we would have expected to attract and inform a much different audience. In just over a decade, we have significantly raised the bar on our organizational mission, our expectations for exhibition curation and community partnership, and our goal to educate and influence our audiences. *The Taking of the Land* presents the UVA Library with the opportunity to:

- Expose the average, everyday visitor to likely new and deeply empathetic themes from the story of Jamestown and the first colonies that centers the Indigenous perspective and impact
- In featuring guest curation from neighboring Indigenous tribes, cross-promote those partner organizations and lead visitors to related sites and exhibitions
- Appreciate that, though we are in the early stage of our reparative efforts, the UVA Library is committed to collecting, preserving, and making accessible the depth and diversity of the cultural record

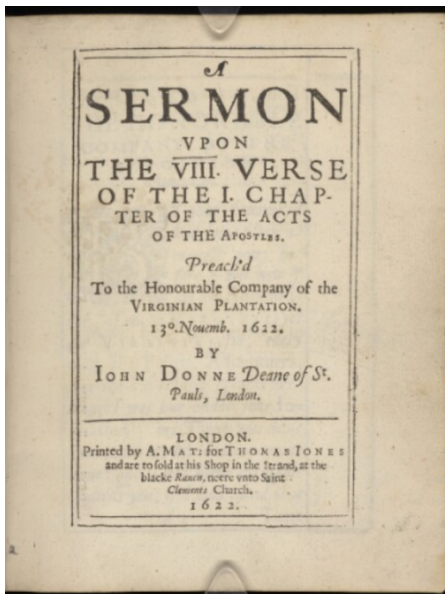
Select Objects from the Exhibition:



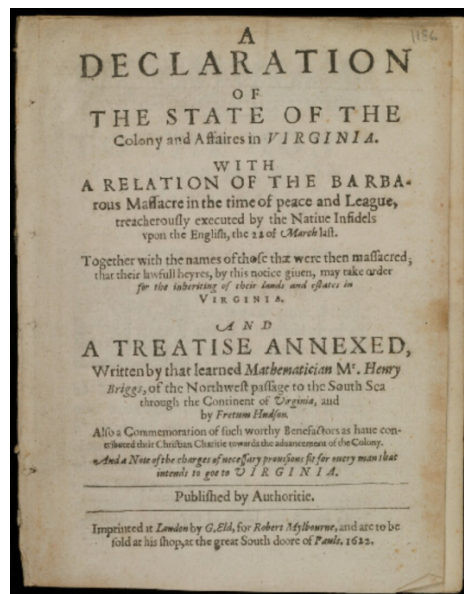
THOMAS HARRIOT. *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Lands of Virginia*. Typis Ioannis Wecheli, sumptibus vero Theodori de Bry anno MDXC. Venales reperiuntur in officina Sigismundi Feirabendii, 1590.
(Tracy McGregor Library, A1590 .B79 GE Pt. 1)



JOHN SMITH. *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*. London: Printed by I.D. [John Dawson] and I.H. [John Haviland] for Michael Sparkes, 1624.
(Tracy McGregor Library, A1624.S55)



JOHN DONNE. *A Sermon Vpon the VIII Verse of the I Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: Preach'd to the Honourable Company of the Virginian Plantation, 13th Nouemb. 1622*
(Tracy McGregor Library, A1622.D65)



EDWARD WATERHOUSE, HENRY BRIGGS. *A Declaration of the State of the Colony and Affaires in Virginia: With a Relation of the Barbarous Massacre in the Time of Peace and League, Treacherously Executed by the Native Infidels Vpon the English, the 22 of March Last*. Imprinted by G. Eld. for R. Mylbourne, 1622.
(Tracy McGregor Library, A1622.W37)

