

The Starving Time

The first English colonists who were to establish a permanent home in the New World reached Virginia in 1607. Among them was Captain John Smith, who left us a detailed history of the early years of the colony. In his history, he included accounts by other colonists. In this excerpt, one of the colonists wrote about the hardships suffered during the winter after Smith had returned to England. Read the account and then answer the questions that follow on separate paper in complete sentences. Please use your own words! DO NOT simply recopy sentences from the passage!

Now we all found the loss of Captain Smith: yea, his greatest malingers could now curse his loss. As for corn provision and contribution from the savages, we had nothing but mortal wounds, with clubs and arrows. As for our hogs, hens, goats, sheep, horses, or what lived, our commanders, officers, and savages daily consumed them; some small portions we sometimes tasted, till all was devoured. Then swords, arms, pieces, or anything we traded with the savages, whose cruel fingers were so oft imbrued with our blood, that what by their cruelty, our governor's indiscretion, and the loss of our ships, of 500 within six months after Captain Smith's departure there remained not past 60 men, women, and children- most miserable and poor creatures. And those were preserved for the most part by roots, herbs, acorns, walnuts, berries, now and then a little fish. They that had starch in these extremities made no small use of it; yea, even the very skins of our horses.



Nay, so great was our famine that a savage we slew and buried, the poorer sort took him up again and ate him; and so did diverse one another boiled and stewed with roots and herbs. And one among the rest did kill his wife, powdered[salted] her, and had eaten part of her before it was known; for which he was executed, as he well deserved. Now, whether she was better roasted, boiled, or carbonadoed[broiled], I know not; but of such a dish as powdered wife I have never heard.

This was that time, which still to this day, we called the starving time. It were too vile to say, and scarce to be believed, what we endured; but the occasion was our own for want of providence, industry, and government, and not the barrenness and defect of the country, as is generally supposed. For till then in three years, for the numbers were landed us, we had never from England provision sufficient for six months.

[From Works 1608-1631, edited by Edward Arber. 1884.]

1. Why does the writer refer to the winter of 1609-10 as the "starving time"?
2. What are the causes of the suffering, according to the writer?
3. Do you think that the writer had an odd sense of humor? Explain your answer.