



Henry Spelman: The Powhatan Indians' English Boy

Subject: English, Grade 6
Skills: Reading comprehension, Writing
Strategies: Understanding background research, constructing a narrative from historical research, writing process
Time: 3 to 4 class periods

Objectives: SOL English 6.5, 6.6, 6.7
Students will:

1. read and demonstrate comprehension of a variety of informational selections
2. write narratives
3. edit writing for correct grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure

Background: In June 1606, King James I granted a charter to the Virginia Company, a group of London entrepreneurs, to establish a settlement in the Chesapeake region of North America. By December, 108 settlers sailed from London to settle Virginia in an effort to find gold and a water route to the Orient. Life in the new colony proved harsh. These settlers were often plagued with hunger and hostile encounters with the native people. Some scholars believe these initial colonists were ill-suited for the task at hand as they were “gentlemen” who knew nothing of taming the wilderness. Other scholars, however, believe these gentlemen, along with the many artisans, craftsmen, and laborers who accompanied them, made a valid effort to build a new colony. Among the laborers were young boys who came with the original settlers or later on supply ships. Henry Spelman was one of those boy-laborers.

Procedure:

1. Discuss with students the elements of narrative writing.
2. Discuss the genre of historical fiction where the author carefully researches the period of history relevant to her/his piece of fiction.
3. Activate students’ prior knowledge of Jamestown.
4. Ensure students’ comprehension of the harsh conditions experienced by the English settlers in their new world.
5. Have the students read the biographical information on Henry Spelman.
6. Ensure students’ comprehension of the reading material.

7. Have students write a narrative piece on Henry's experiences—either in part or in total—using the research provided for a factual basis and imagination for rich imagery and dialogue.
8. Review and have students complete the writing process complete with peer editing and final revisions.

The following information was compiled from two sources: The Virginia Adventure by Ivor Noel Hume and Relation of Virginia by Henry Spelman.

Thirteen-year-old Henry Spelman, “being in displeasure of my friends, and desirous to see other countries,” sailed to the new Virginia colony at Jamestown as a boy-laborer. He was sold to Powhatan's son, Parahunt, by Captain John Smith for a piece of land. Smith wanted to expand the area in which some colonists would settle. Living with the Powhatan Indians, Spelman learned their language and their ways. He also witnessed many hostile encounters between the English and Powhatan Indians.

A young Henry kept a diary of his adventures in the new Virginia colony. After a time with the Powhatan Indians, Henry asked Parahunt if he could return to the English settlement. “I desired to see our English, and therefore made signs unto him to give me leave to go...which he agreed unto...” wrote Henry. His return to the English, however, was not long since food among the settlers was scarce. Therefore, when the president of the colony ordered another boy-laborer named Thomas Savage, who had been “given” as a “son” to Chief Powhatan to return to his “father,” Henry went also. “I was to go [back], which I the more willingly did by reason that victuals were scarce with us...”

As hostilities grew between the English colonists and the Powhatan Indians, Henry witnessed some horrific events. One such incident occurred when Captain Ratcliff paid a visit the Powhatan to trade English goods (usually copper, beads, and other items) for corn. When Ratcliff and his men noticed how the Powhatans raised the bottom of their measuring baskets to hold less corn, they accused the Powhatans of deception and took the correct amount of corn for which they had traded. In the meantime, the Powhatans lay in wait for the English who were returning to their ship. An ambush ensued and Ratcliff's men were killed. According to Henry's diary, Ratcliff was then taken to a tree, tied up naked, had a fire set at his feet and his skin flayed by razor-sharp mussel shells.

After this event, Henry, his friend Thomas Savage, and Dutchman named Samuel who also lived with the Powhatans began “to fear the worst.” Henry wrote, “And now having been with [Parahunt] about 24 or 25 weeks...the King of Patawomeke came to visit the great Powhatan; where being awhile with him, he showed such kindness to Savage, Samuell, and myself as we determined to go away with him.” As the Patawomeke Indians departed, the three followed, but suddenly Savage decided to return to the Powhatans and tell how Samuell and Henry fled with the Patawomeke. The Powhatans, therefore went after the two whereby “one of them, finding opportunity...struck Samuell with an ax and killed him; which I seeing ran away...” Henry eventually made his escape to the Patawomeke community where he lived for three years.

Henry Spelman was returned to the colonists at Jamestown by Captain Samuel Argall who visited the Patawomeke on a trading trip. Henry eventually returned to England only to go back to Jamestown some years later as an adult. Ironically, Spelman was killed by the Patawomeke with whom he lived and whose king had been so kind to him.