Another Origins Debate: Settler Colonialism in Early Virginia History

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Abstract. *William and Mary Quarterly* recently initiated an origins debate concerning settler colonialism in America in their discussion of the applicability of that framework to early America. Settler colonialism is a type of colonialism, specifically characterized as dispossession of indigenous people of their land. In respect to British North America, the beginnings of settler colonialism originate in Virginia, where British colonists came into conflict with native people over land not long after their arrival.

In July 2019, *William and Mary Quarterly*, a journal of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, published 11 essays as a forum entitled “Settler Colonialism in Early American History.” Studies of settler colonialism have been developed by scholars of other fields such as Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini. According to their formulation, “settler colonialism” is not necessarily a sub-category of “colonialism,” and can even be considered an anti-category. To explain, ordinary colonialism says “work for me,” but settler colonialism says “go away.” In other words, while colonialism generally exploits labor and resources of the local people, settler colonialism is centered on the desire for land.¹ As Jeffrey Ostler and Nancy Shoemaker mentioned in the introduction of the forum, early Americanists did not welcome settler colonial studies but soon became unable to ignore the invasion of the settler colonial studies into their field. Thus, the forum

¹ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 16–17; idem, “Introducing: Settler Colonial Studies,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1–12.

dealt with “when,” “where,” “who,” and “what” questions—when and where did settler colonialism begin, and who started it in early America? How, when, and where did settler colonialism transpire and in what ways were different people’s histories affected by it in the world?² The forum resembles an origins debate—one that usually questions the beginnings of slavery in early American history.³ This paper briefly reviews the forum and points out that settler colonialism had already emerged in early Virginia.

The forum’s general stance toward settler colonialism framework is one that neither completely rejects nor entirely accepts it. The authors hesitated to strictly obey Wolfe and Veracini’s formulation. Early America is a period in which indigenous people maintained their presence but gradually lost it. As Ostler believed, settler colonialism may be more applicable to the early republic and antebellum era than the other periods preceding it.⁴ Thus, Ostler and Shoemaker did not leave intact Wolfe’s stable formulation that settler colonialism is “a

² Jeffrey Ostler and Nancy Shoemaker, “Settler Colonialism in Early American History: Introduction,” [Forum: Settler Colonialism in Early American History] *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 362–64, 368.

³ Rebecca Anne Goetz, Rethinking the “Unthinking Decision”: Old Questions and New Problems in the History of Slavery and Race in the Colonial South,” *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (August 2009): 599–612; Alden T. Vaughan, “The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97, no. 3 (July 1989): 311–354; Madoka Sato, “The First Africans’ Arrival in Virginia: The Recent Scholarship and New Explanations,” *Otsuma Journal of Comparative Culture* 21 (2020): 43–65 [in Japanese]. I also learned a great deal about African Americans in early America from my friend: Tagen Haga, “Image of “Black” in the 17th Century Virginia: A Case Study from Northumberland County,” *ICU Comparative Culture* 51 (2019): 33–52 [in Japanese].

⁴ Jeffrey Ostler, “Locating Settler Colonialism in Early American History,” [Forum: Settler Colonialism in Early American History] *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 446.

structure not an event,” but rather amended it as “a process, not a structure or an event.”⁵ Susanah Shaw Romney also wrote that “[i]nvestigating the long, complex genealogy of settler colonialism, rather than expecting to find the perfected form” may be most rewarding for early American history.⁶

In contrast to Ostler’s optimism that the settler colonialism framework “provides an opportunity, not a burden to early Americanists,” Samuel Truett showed a most cautious attitude. He pointed out that it has “problems of structure, Eurocentrism, binaries, and teleology” and runs the risk of spoiling a recent accumulation of borderlands studies that clarified Native–European relations in “multidirectional” and “multifaceted” perspectives. He continued, “[w]ell into the nineteenth century, it was hard to predict whose rules, stories, entanglements, and sense of power or sovereignty would prevail, whether continentally, regionally, or locally.”⁷ This phrase, “whether continentally, regionally, or locally,” might be misleading because, as Ostler acknowledged, settler colonialism actually progressed in the “Eastern Seaboard” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁸

Veracini’s explanation of settler colonialism as an anti-type of colonialism is another issue the early Americanists paid attention to. Nancy Shoemaker already

⁵ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, 163; idem, “Structure and Event: Settler Colonialism, Time, and the Question of Genocide,” in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York: Berghahn, 2008), 102–32; Ostler and Shoemaker, “Settler Colonialism in Early American History,” 364.

⁶ Susanah Shaw Romney, “Settler Colonial Prehistories in Seventeenth-Century North America,” [Forum: Settler Colonialism in Early American History] *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 382.

⁷ Ostler, “Locating Settler Colonialism in Early American History,” 450; Samuel Truett “Settler Colonialism and the Borderlands of Early America,” [Forum: Settler Colonialism in Early American History] *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 436, 438.

⁸ Ostler, “Locating Settler Colonialism in Early American History,” 448.

noted this point in her October 2015 essay and listed various forms of colonialism: settler colonialism, planter colonialism, extractive colonialism, trade colonialism, transport colonialism, imperial power colonialism, not-in-my-backyard colonialism, legal colonialism, rogue colonialism, missionary colonialism, romantic colonialism, and post-colonial colonialism. Among these, for example, “planter colonialism” refers to colonizers producing a single crop, such as cotton, at a large scale, while “extractive colonialism” describes the acquisition of a raw material such as beaver fur. She further explained that these “different forms of colonialism might coexist or morph into each other.”⁹ In this forum, Stephanie E. Smallwood wrote that “the binary opposition advanced by Wolfe, positing *either* expropriation of Indigenous land or expropriation of Indigenous labor, belies the complexity of European colonizing across the hemispheric Americas.”¹⁰ Ostler, in his concluding essay, raised the issue of “how it [settler colonialism] intersected with other forms of colonialism.”¹¹ Therefore, different types of colonialism are not exclusive of each other in colonization processes, and the question of when settler colonialism began is not relevant to whether other types of colonialism existed at that time. Below is a study of settler colonialism in the early period of Virginia colonization.

On April 10, 1606, a royal charter was issued that aimed to build two colonies in America. One in the north and the other in the south; the latter succeeded as the Virginia colony. The charter licensed Thomas Gates, George Somers, Richard Hakluyt, Edward Maria Wingfield, and others “to make habitation [and] plantation and to deduce a colony of sundry of our people into that part of America” (spellings are modernized, the same hereinafter). As for Native Americans, the charter contained only one large reference on “so noble a work” of “propagating

⁹ Nancy Shoemaker, “A Typology of Colonialism,” *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* 53, no. 7 (October 2015).

¹⁰ Stephanie E. Smallwood, “Reflections on Settler Colonialism, the Hemispheric Americas, and Chattel Slavery,” [Forum: Settler Colonialism in Early American History] *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 413.

¹¹ Ostler, “Locating Settler Colonialism in Early American History,” 450.

of Christian religion.”¹² Although Alan Greer stated in the *WMQ*’s forum that “colonial charters [...] were more likely to suggest the incorporation than elimination of indigenous peoples,” this Virginia charter apparently has the characteristics of settler colonialism.¹³

With this license, approximately 100 English people, the first colonizers, landed in the Chesapeake Bay area, Virginia, on April 26, 1607. They sailed up the James River (known by the Native Americans as the Powhatan River), where they first encountered native peoples: the Kecoughtans, Paspaheghs, Rappahannocks [or Quiyoughcohannocks], and Appamattucks. Records indicate that they “entertained” the colonists “very kindly,” preparing feasts and performing acts of singing and dancing. The colonists also “made signs of peace.” Native–colonizer relations in the first several days, in general, looked peaceful and friendly, although, as colonists such as George Percy acknowledged in his writings, oral communication was difficult: “we knew little what they meant.”¹⁴

¹² Letters patent to Sir Thomas Gates and others, April 10, 1606, in *The Jamestown Voyages under the First Charter, 1606–1609: Documents relating to the foundation of Jamestown and the history of the Jamestown colony up to the departure of Captain John Smith, last president of the council in Virginia under the first charter, early in October 1609*, ed. Philip L. Barbour (1969; Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1976), 24–25, or in *The Three Charters of the Virginia Company of London with Seven Related Documents; 1606–1621*, ed. Samuel M. Bemiss (Williamsburg: Virginia 350th Anniversary Celebration Corporation, 1957), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36181/36181-h/36181-h.htm>.

¹³ Allan Greer, “Settler Colonialism and Empire in Early America,” [Forum: Settler Colonialism in Early American History] *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 386.

¹⁴ George Percy, “Observations gathered out of a Discourse of the Plantation of the Southerne Colonie in Virginia by the English, 1606,” in *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes: Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and others*, ed. Samuel Purchas (1625, reprint, 20 vols., Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1905–7), 18: 407–12. This source was

On May 14, the colonists began the “fortification” of Jamestown settlement. Jamestown was located on a peninsula within the territory of the Paspahegh people. On May 18, the Paspahegh chief came with “one hundred Savages armed, which guarded him in a very warlike manner with bows and arrows.” The natives requested the colonists to put down their arms, but the colonists refused. After that, according to Percy, the native chief “made signs that he would give us as much land as we would desire to take.” Then, one of the natives “stole” a hatchet and the English took it back “by force.” Another native, seeing that, came “fiercely” “with a wooden sword,” intending to beat out his brains. The English prepared to fight and the natives left “in great anger.”¹⁵ In this paragraph of Percy’s writings, the three parts ([1] Paspahegh’s armed party’s arrival, [2] granting of land, and [3] alleged stealing and tension) do not seem to connect well with each other. As aforementioned, it was difficult for the colonists to understand natives’ speech. Scholar Helen C. Rountree pointed out that the Paspahegh chief had likely told the settlers that this place was inside their territory.¹⁶ Only a few weeks after the settlers’ late April disembarking, a native–settler conflict over land as the distinct nature of settler colonialism had already begun.

After that, the English people were more cautious in their dealings with the Paspahegh nation. On May 19, when the English walked in the woods, they met several Paspahegh people. The English observed strawberries and other fruits and various trees. “[I]n the meantime,” the colonists saw one of the natives come running with his bow and arrows through woods. Percy “began to mistrust some

also published in some collections: Barbour, *Jamestown Voyages under the First Charter*, 129–46 and James Horn, ed., *Captain John Smith: Writings with Other Narratives of Roanoke, Jamestown, and the First English Settlement of America* (New York: Library of America, 2007), 920–34.

¹⁵ Percy, “Observations gathered out of a Discourse,” 412–13.

¹⁶ Helen C. Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 57.

villainy” and hastily returned home.¹⁷ On the next day, the Paspahegh chief sent 40 of his men to deliver a deer to Jamestown. However, Percy thought that “they came more in villainy” than “love.”¹⁸

On May 21, an English party, including Christopher Newport and John Smith, went exploring along the banks of the James River. According to Smith, “the people in all places [were] kindly entreating [i.e., treating] us, dancing and feasting us with strawberries, mulberries, bread, fish, and other their country provisions.” In return, Newport gave them “bells, pins, needles, beads or glasses,” and the native people were so content that Newport’s “liberality made them follow us from place to place, and ever kindly to respect us.” After having experienced peaceful exchanges for some time, however, Smith felt a sense of unease while visiting a Weyanock town. The native people there “seemed kindly to content us,” but Smith perceived “many signs of a more jealousy in them” and feared that “some mischief” might be happening at Jamestown. The English party returned and found that 400 natives had attacked the colony on the previous day. During this assault, one English boy had been slain, and many men hurt.¹⁹

This assault did not escalate into outright war, but Powhatan natives continued to warily watch the colonists. In December 1607, when Smith was taken captive and brought before the Powhatan chief, he was questioned as to why the English had landed and how long they intended to stay. Smith replied, “being in fight with the Spaniards our enemy, being overpowered, near put to retreat, and by extreme weather put to this shore, [⋯ and] our pinnace being leak we were enforced to stay to mend her, till Captain Newport my father came to conduct us

¹⁷ Percy, “Observations gathered out of a Discourse,” 413–14.

¹⁸ Percy, “Observations gathered out of a Discourse,” 414.

¹⁹ John Smith, *A True relation of such occurrences and accidents of note, as hath hapned in Virginia, since the first planting of that Collony, which is now resident in the South part thereof, till the last returne* (1608), in *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580–1631)*, ed. Philip L. Barbour (3 vols., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 1: 29–33.

away.”²⁰ Powhatan might have been temporarily convinced by this answer, but his doubt became clearer by January 1609. At this time, in his conversation again with Smith, Powhatan articulated his concern that the English had come to Virginia “not for trade, but to invade my people, and possess my Country”; in other words, “to destroy my Country.”²¹ Later, in 1617 in England, Powhatan’s daughter, Pocahontas, also offered the criticism to Smith that the English were “not afraid to come into my father’s country, and caused fear in him and all his people.”²²

In addition to Jamestown, the English people tried to construct other settlements beginning in the summer of 1609. Smith sent Percy and John Martin down the James River to the Nansemonds, an indigenous people that had settled on one of its tributaries. They had hoped to negotiate with the tribe to purchase an island in their territory; however, during that process, two anonymous English messengers were “sacrificed” by the natives and “their brains were cut and scraped out of their heads with mussel shells.” Percy and Martin launched an assault. The English “beat the Savages out of the island[,] burned their houses[,] ransacked their temples[,] took down the corpses of their dead kings from of [sic] their tombs[,] and carried away their pearls[,] copper[,] and bracelets, wherewith they do decore their kings funerals.” After this temporary military success, Percy quickly returned to Jamestown, as did Martin, who felt it necessary to abruptly leave for “his own safety.” Other English who remained in Nansemond territory,

²⁰ Smith, *True relation*, 53–55.

²¹ William Symonds, ed., *The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia since their first beginning from England in the yeare of our Lord 1606, till this present 1612, with all their accidents that befell them in their Journies and Discoveries* (1612), in *Complete Works of Captain John Smith*, 1: 246–47; John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles: with the names of the Adventurers, Planters, and Governours from their first beginning. An: 1584 to this present 1624* (1624), in *Complete Works of Captain John Smith*, 2: 195–96.

²² Smith, *Generall Historie*, 261.

at least 17 men, fell victim to the angry natives.²³

This hostility was one of the initial battles of the First Anglo–Powhatan War. Stories of the deteriorating relations between Powhatan natives and English colonists after this period have been well documented by J. Frederick Fausz and many other researchers. During the war, Paspahegh natives, after confronting the English attack, abandoned their homelands and migrated to the territory of fellow natives. During the first half of the seventeenth century, three Anglo–Powhatan Wars occurred, during which period the English territory was continuously enlarged while the Powhatan territory shrank, a pattern that would repeat for many years to come.²⁴ In any case, what is important here is that the colonial founding of Virginia, even in its early stage, caused land conflicts with the local natives. Although there were other and intersecting factors such as gift giving and trading, land was a significant factor of their conflicts.²⁵ This simple point is

²³ George Percy, “A Trewe Relacyon of the procedeings and ocurrentes of Momente which have hapned in Virginia from the Tyme Sir Thomas Gates was Shippwrackte uppon the Bermudes Anno 1609 untill my departure owtt of the Cowntry which was in Anno Domini 1612,” *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 3 (1921–22): 262–65. Percy’s “Trewe Relacyon” was also published in Horn, *Captain John Smith*, 1093–1114 and Mark Nicholls, “George Percy’s “Trewe Relacyon”: A Primary Source for the Jamestown Settlement,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 3 (2005): 242–63.

²⁴ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 153–54; J. Frederick Fausz, “An “Abundance of Blood Shed on Both Sides”: England’s First Indian War, 1609–1614,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 98, no. 1 (January 1990): 3–56; Alfred A. Cave, *Lethal Encounters: Englishmen and Indians in Colonial Virginia* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011) ; Hiroyuki Tsukada, “A Ground Model and Opechancanough's Peace,” SocArXiv, October 29, 2020, doi:10.31235/osf.io/a7t3s; Martha W. McCartney, *Virginia Immigrants and Adventurers, 1607–1635: A Biographical Dictionary* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub., 2007), 33–74.

²⁵ Martin H. Quitt, “Trade and Acculturation at Jamestown, 1607–1609: The

enough for us to conclude that British North American settler colonialism began at the same time the Virginia colonization commenced. The colonial charter of 1606 clearly intended that the people build settlements and the English colonizers demanded that the native people “go away.”

Limits of Understanding,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 52, no. 2 (April 1995): 227–258; Seth Mallios, *The Deadly Politics of Giving: Exchange and Violence at Ajakan, Roanoke, and Jamestown* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006).