In 1844, a free black named Armstrong Archer had a small volume published in London titled *A Compendium of Slavery, as it exists in the Present Day in the U S of A*. As an introduction to this work, which consists primarily of collected descriptions of the conditions in which slaves were kept, Archer presented his family history. His mother was a Powhatan Indian, and as part of this text he recorded a story he had learned as a child of the 17th-century Powhatans. Not previously noted in the literature on the Powhatans, this is the only such story recorded, and offers an important perspective on the history of the Powhatans in both the 17th and the 19th centuries.¹

Armstrong Archer's father had been kidnapped along with his grandfather from Guinea sometime around 1784, at the age of 14. They were taken to St. Domingo, where they were both sold to the same master:

a Frenchman, of considerable wealth, both in slaves and landed property. Peace be to his soul, for he was kind and a humane friend to his African slaves. (Archer 1844:10)

¹This paper would not have been possible without the resources of the Newberry Library, where I located Archer’s work through their excellent card catalog. The assistance of Jay Miller, of the Newberry’s D’Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian, has been especially helpful. The staff of the Library of the American Philosophical Society was also of great assistance in working with Frank Speck’s papers; a Phillips Grant from the APS provided funding for my research there, for which I am most grateful. At the University of Chicago, Ray Fogelson has offered his generous support and guidance in this research, and conversations with Margaret Bender, Regina Harrison, Carine Howard, Larry Nesper and other students in the Department of Anthropology have been both helpful and enjoyable. Dan Mower and Robin Ryder, of Virginia Commonwealth University’s Archaeological Research Center, helped to shape my early interests in this research, and have continued to provide stimulating ideas.
After ten years with this master, the grandfather died (this would have been about 1795). As his last request, he had asked that his son should be given his freedom. This son, Armstrong’s father, concluded his story:

As we were both favourites of the master’s family, the prayers of my dying father were at once granted.

Immediately on my release from the bonds of servitude, I betook myself to the state of Virginia, in the United States. In the course of four or five years, being free, I accumulated some property. Finding myself somewhat comfortable in my circumstances of life, I married an Indian woman, one of the lineal descendants of king Powhatan, whose name was Tee-can-opee. (Archer 1844:10)

This would have been sometime around 1800. Armstrong Archer lived the first 25 years of his life in Virginia. He provided few other autobiographical details, but two letters of introduction published as “Testimonials” at the front of this volume provide a little further information. The first attests that he was ordained as a Baptist minister in New York City on January 30, 1837. The second, dated April 30, 1844, stated that he was travelling to Great Britain on business, the details of which were not known by the letter-writer. This business undoubtedly included the publication of this volume.

Armstrong Archer, then, was most likely born between 1800 and 1812, and lived with both parents long enough to learn some of the history of each. His father’s history I have summarized above. He also learned of the Powhatan Indians, and seems to have been proud of his relationship to them. In his introduction he recounts the historical stories of Powhatan, Pocahontas, and Captain John Smith, citing such sources as Smith’s own accounts (Smith 1819a, 1819b) and Stith’s History (1747). He then identifies the youngest daughter of Powhatan, whom Sir Thomas Dale had sought as a wife in 1614, as Powcanoe — an identification not made in his cited sources:

Such is a brief sketch of the history of the first colony in Virginia, and the famous Powhatan. The second daughter of the emperor, as he is generally styled by historians, was called Powcanoe, from whom many Indian families in Virginia have derived their descent. (Archer 1844:22)

Archer’s family history provides a personal illustration of the race relations present in late 18th- and early 19th-century Virginia, relations that have recently been recounted in detail by Helen Rountree in her history of the Powhatans (1990). Thomas Jefferson had written in the 1780s:

There remain of the Mattaponies three or four men only, and they have more negro than Indian blood in them. They have lost their language, have reduced themselves, by voluntary sales, to about fifty acres of land, which lie on the river of their own name, and have, from time to time, been joining the
Pamunkies, from whom they are distant but 10 miles. The Pamunkies are reduced to about 10 or 12 men, tolerably pure from mixture with other colours. The older ones among them preserve their language in a small degree, which are the last vestiges on earth, as far as we know, of the Powhatan language. They have about 300 acres of very fertile land, on Pamunkey river, so encompassed by water that a gate shuts in the whole. Of the Nottoways, not a male is left. A few women constitute the remains of that tribe. (Jefferson 1955:96–97)

This probably represents the view of the dominant white Virginia culture of the time, but is far from an accurate perception of the Powhatan peoples. James Mooney noted in 1907 of Jefferson’s description:

Both Mattapony and Pamunkey must have been much more numerous than represented, and with more speakers of the old language, while the Nansemond, and the considerable remnant still existing on the Eastern shore and in some of the tidewater “necks,” are not noted at all. The main reserve contains 800 acres instead of 300, as stated. (Mooney 1907:143)

In an earlier statement, prior to his fieldwork with the surviving Powhatan groups, even Mooney had essentially restated Jefferson’s assessment, demonstrating its widespread and continued acceptance:

The only Indians still recognized as such, living within this area, are two small bands, remnants of the once powerful Powhatans, residing on small reservations in King William county, northeast of Richmond. They have long since lost their language and now have probably as much negro blood as Indian, but still pride themselves upon their descent from the warriors of Powhatan. (Mooney 1890:132)

Even in his later description, Mooney would state: “They have entirely lost their aboriginal language and customs, if we except their devotion to the water, and differ but little from their white neighbors” (1907:146). Pollard concurred, in 1894:

Aside from their mode of subsistence there is nothing peculiar in the manners and customs of these people, except, perhaps, an inclination to the excessive use of gaudy colors in their attire. (Pollard 1894:12)

This attitude is also found in the published work of Speck (1925, 1928), despite his descriptions of traditional hunting and fishing techniques still in use, and of the importance of dreams in traditional curing, also still in use (1925:81).²

²Speck’s unpublished field notes, in the Library of the American Philosophical Society, include a number of further descriptions of superstitions, folk tales, and usages of medicinal plants, as well as several brief word lists, although he identifies most of these words as Ojibwa.
This perception — or lack of perception — of the Powhatans may be understood in terms of the changing implications of race in the 19th century. Armstrong Archer and his father demonstrate the openness of Powhatan society that still existed at the end of the 18th century. This societal openness seems to have been a long-standing and widespread tradition among American Indians; indeed the importation and adoption of outside knowledge, material goods, and people was an important part of establishing, maintaining, and increasing power for many Algonquian groups. By the end of the 19th century, however, laws had been passed by the Pamunkeys prohibiting them from marrying blacks (Pollard 1894:16). This reflects the change in position of free blacks in Virginia through the 19th century, and the increasingly prevalent discrimination against them and all other “people of color.” Free blacks early in the 19th century received a certain acceptance in society: they were able to own land, run their own businesses, and were generally tolerated (Ryder 1990, 1991). While there was rampant discrimination based on “blood” — skin color or other physical traits — this prejudice could be partly overcome through personal gains of a form recognizable to white society. The kinds of achievement for which blacks and Indians could be recognized were, of course, limited by the prejudice to which they were subject, so that advancement was a very slow and difficult process. Through the 18th and into the early 19th century, then, both free blacks and Indians had a relatively low profile in Virginia.

By the later 19th century, through Emancipation, all blacks had the legal potential for such interaction, in the personal, political, and economic spheres, and this potential was controlled by whites through increased prejudice and discrimination. In order to distance themselves from this discrimination insofar as possible, the Powhatans formally distanced themselves from blacks, turning from their tradition of openness. Pollard wrote:

No one who visits the Pamunkey could fail to notice their race pride. Though they would probably acknowledge the whites as their equals, they consider the blacks far beneath their social level. Their feeling toward the negro is well illustrated by their recent indignant refusal to accept a colored teacher, who was sent them by the superintendent of public instruction to conduct the free school which the State furnishes them. They are exceedingly anxious to keep their blood free from further admixture with that of other races. (Pollard 1894:10-11)

This distancing was probably accompanied by an emphasis of those of their cultural values that were closer to those of white society, by a decline in elements that would tend to mark them as different from whites, such as the use of the Powhatan language, and by an increasing use of visible markers that were identified as white, such as Euro-American-style houses. But at the same time less marked traditions, such as ways of hunting, fishing, and
curing, were maintained. Taking on as many traits of the white culture as possible while still maintaining their Powhatan identity would be seen as being in their best political interests.

This distinction is important: there was little desire on the part of the Powhatans to lose their Indian identity and fully join the white society, even had this been a more viable option. While evidence for this assertion is limited in the historical record, the continuing existence of a Powhatan community identity attests to its truth. While some individuals may have found it expedient to pass as white, if possible, and while white society became increasingly prejudiced against all people of color, the Powhatans continued to “pride themselves upon their descent from the warriors of Powhatan” (Mooney 1890:132).

Unfortunately, this culture-oriented definition of identity had come to have little value in a society where racial ascription based on superficial physical traits had become the sole criterion of cultural affinity. Even today a person’s status as Indian is frequently reckoned by relative proportions of “Indian blood”, leading to whites making the claim that their “grandmother was a Cherokee princess” to establish their Indian identity, and to confusion of identity for many Indians who had maintained a tradition of their heritage, but had abandoned many of their cultural practices in trying to conform to the norms of white society.

The lives of Armstrong Archer and his father provide personal illustrations of the possibilities available to persons of color within the cultural setting of the 18th and early 19th centuries; by the end of the 19th century his father’s success would have been difficult, and his marriage to a Powhatan woman would not have been allowed under Pamunkey law. It is notable, too, that Armstrong had moved to New York by the 1830s. The account of their lives is thus of value in understanding the history of race relations in 19th-century Virginia. In this account, however, Archer also presented a story he had heard as a youth of the 17th-century Powhatans, apparently only one from among many then current among the Powhatans, and the only such story recorded:

From this same tribe, among whom Powcanoe was married, I am lineally descended, according to their osmago, or tradition. The Indians of Virginia at the present day relate some curious and interesting stories concerning Manotee, the eldest son of Powcanoe. The substance of one of them is as follows:

— During a predatory excursion against the whites, Manotee, the grandson of Powhatan, conceived and executed a plan for taking a piece of cannon from the English colonists. In order to succeed in this attempt, he proposed to some twenty or thirty warriors that they should visit the white settlement and offer them presents of Indian corn, venison, fish, and deer-skin; at the same time they were to give every assurance of friendship on their part. As the colonists were frequently destitute of provisions, especially in the spring of the year, the presents were highly appreciated. Koriasko in return merely
requested that they would fire off one of their pieces of cannon. To this the English immediately agreed. During the firing of the big gun, the Indian chief watched and observed all their movements, so that he not only learned the manner of loading their guns, but marked particularly the place where they kept their ammunition, and likewise instructed his companions to make the same observation. Having fired four or five shots, which delighted rather than terrified the warriors, Manotee pretended to have some great secret to disclose, and led aside the governor for the purpose of apprising him of an imminent danger. During this interval the Indian warriors performed many ceremonies which excited a great deal of interest on the part of the whites. They covered their faces and eyes with their hands, as a sign of mourning, which they accompanied with shouts of lamentation. Without any delay the governor called his council, and gave them to understand that Manotee came to the settlement for the purpose of saving them from utter destruction, as a hostile tribe was encamped about three miles from the colony, and intended to commit a general massacre. As soon as Manotee saw them apprehensive of danger, he presented himself immediately before the council, and suggested the propriety of arming themselves, and starting in quest of the enemy. He likewise proposed that the governor and himself should command the expedition, while ten of his warriors should remain as protection for their wives and families. To this proposal the English at once consented, and set off instantly in pursuit of the hostile tribe. The Indian chief shrewdly led the armed colonists to the place where he and his companions had encamped the night before. On their arrival here, Manotee and his warriors showed, or at least pretended to show, a great deal of surprise and vexation at not finding the enemy. The English returned to their settlement, no less gratified at their safety than the Indians were, by having succeeded in securing the piece of cannon through this deception. Those Indians who had remained as a guard for the settlement had no sooner seen the whites depart, than they started off with a piece of cannon, ammunition, and two of their boats. Having arrived at the appointed place, they were soon rejoined by Manotee and his warriors. Although the English felt indignant at this stratagem, which threw them into the greatest consternation, and deprived them of the cannon and a considerable quantity of ammunition, the fraud turned out at last to be the means of saving the lives of several of the colonists, who had been out on a hunting excursion, and had wandered in the woods for many days, exhausted with fatigue and [hunger]. In this state of privation, they found themselves one day in the vicinity of an Indian settlement, by means of the report of the gun which had been stolen some few days before. They soon found themselves in the presence of Manotee and three or four hundred warriors, who were summoned to witness the novelty and curiosity of gunpowder. The chief candidly acknowledged the artifice which he had used in taking off the cannon; and, as a remuneration, he received the English with the most exemplary hospitality. After loading them with presents of provisions and other articles, he sent four Indians as guides, who should conduct them to the colony. This and many other stories about Manotee are still alive in the memories of the Indians of Virginia, the descendants of that noble chief. (Archer 1844:22–24)

This story is of interest on several levels. The survival of this and "many other stories" is testimony to the durability of tradition among
the Powhatans at that time, and further underscores the misrepresentation present in Jefferson's description. Belief in this misrepresentation was widespread, and has been maintained by most historians until recently. As Helen Rountree wrote, less than 20 years ago:

"It is commonly assumed that Powhatan society was extinct by 1700, and that remnants of their population were wholly assimilated into non-Indian society. This view is based both upon English people's wishful thinking about Indian people and upon the fact that documents about Indians in Virginia after 1700 are few and scattered. In actual fact, Indian society in Virginia was not extinct by 1700; in many ways it was not even much changed. (Rountree 1975:1)"

While that assumption is still common, Rountree's most recent work (1990) documents the cultural continuities (and changes) of the Powhatans in some detail; my own recent research (Gleach 1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1992) has also been focused on the meanings and implications of the tenacity of Powhatan culture. Archer's story provides yet another piece of evidence for these arguments.

Furthermore, while the historical veracity of the story may be questioned by Euro-American historical standards, it nevertheless can shed light on the relations between these two peoples. Certain elements of this story seem to conflict with other historical accounts. Since Powcanoe was in her early teens in 1614, and her son Manotee in this story must have been at least in his early teens, the story cannot be set prior to the late 1620s. The relationship expressed between the Powhatans and the English here, and the implied extent of English settlement, however, suggest a setting prior to 1612. There is also no record from the English of the Powhatans stealing one of their large guns, an event that should have elicited some comment either prior to 1612 or in the late 1620s, both of which were periods of some conflict between the two peoples. In the earliest years of the colony there were no wives and families among the English, and at neither time would they have been likely to have been left in the protection of a group of Indian warriors. Given the nature of this story as oral tradition and these inconsistencies between this account and the English histories, some might be tempted to dismiss it as apocryphal.

But even if it does conflict with history as recorded by the English, this story provides a different kind of historical insight: it documents the Powhatans' attitudes in several aspects of their relationship with the English, making clear several points that otherwise must be pieced together from a variety of passing references. The ease with which the English are duped in this story suggests the disdain, or even contempt, in which they were held by the Powhatans. They are presented as simple, easily deceived, unable to find their way home from a hunting excursion — ultimately, as
being dependent on the benevolence of the Indians for their salvation. While
they are capable of producing wondrous items like a cannon, they cannot
provide for themselves even in a land of plenty.

This story also illustrates what I have described as an Algonquian aes­
thetic of war, wherein there is a spirit of playful irony or wit that should be
brought to bear (Gleach 1990b, 1992). Overwhelming, crushing strength or
power is not sought; rather, the emphasis is on the application of cunning,
an attitude expressing one's superior knowledge of and ability to employ the
resources and situations in a particular exchange.3 Where European warfare
as practiced at this time had become a corporate activity, down-playing the
role of the individual, this Algonquian style in warfare emphasized individ­
ual expression, although it was an individual expression of knowledge of and
integration with natural and supernatural forces and resources. Deception
of the enemy reveals his inferior understanding and control of the situation,
and his need (or inability) to improve.

This de-emphasis of raw power might seem to be belied by the Indians' interest in and desire for a cannon, and firearms in general. Note, however,
that they were not terrified, but delighted, by the firing of the gun, and
that this stolen cannon was not used — nor apparently intended for use — in violent action against the English. The lost hunters who discovered
the Indians' possession of the gun were not killed or detained to keep the theft secret; rather, they were returned to the colony with gifts. Good will
on the part of the Powhatans towards the English seems to be in evidence here. Furthermore, the gathering of Indians the hunters witnessed was not
a demonstration of killing power, but simply of firing a cannon. The “novel­
ty and curiosity of gunpowder” (Archer 1844:24) the Indians had been summoned to witness suggests a much more abstract form of power, involv­
ing perhaps the noise and smoke of the firing, or perhaps simply Manotee's mastery of the gun. This mastery of a powerful object obtained from the	outside would be an appropriate chiefly action, a demonstration of one’s understanding of and ability to control a portion of the universe.

It might be argued against my interpretations here that these events never happened as told, and thus have no application to the understanding of 17th-century relations. The linkages with more traditionally-documented histories that I have alluded to here, however — reinforcing interpretations of Powhatan warfare and cultural perceptions derived from other sources — suggest that this story does, in fact, reflect the preservation of certain traditional attitudes within Powhatan culture at least into the 19th century. Larry Nesper's fieldwork with the modern Lac de Flambeau Ojibwas is

---

3 This is counter to the assertions of Fausz (1979) that this form of warfare is not indigenous and was, in fact, introduced by Europeans. The argument is more fully developed in my thesis (Gleach 1992), and is merely briefly sketched here.
providing striking examples of the ways in which traditional structures can be maintained despite drastic changes to the outward forms in which they are manifested (personal communication). This little story recorded by Armstrong Archer does the same for the Powhatan Indians of Virginia, demonstrating the continuity of their culture despite widespread changes and cultural mixing.

REFERENCES

Archer, Armstrong
1844 A Compendium of Slavery, as it Exists in the Present Day in the U S of A. London: J. Haddon.

Fausz, J. Frederick

Gleach, Frederic W.
1990b "Hatchets and Copper wee should make him": Powhatan's Constructions of the English in Early Virginia. Paper read at the American Society for Ethnohistory Annual Meeting, Toronto.

Jefferson, Thomas

Mooney, James

Pollard, Jno. Garland

Rountree, Helen C.
Ryder, Robin L.

1990 44PG317, the Charles Gilliam Site and 44PG208, the George Gilliam Site: Documentary and Archaeological Comparison of Two 19th Century Free Black Farmsteads in Prince George County, Virginia. Paper read at the Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Meeting, Tucson.

1991 "...an equal portion...": Archaeology of Susan Gilliam, a Free Mullato in Virginia, 1838-1917. Paper read at the Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Meeting, Richmond.

Smith, Captain John


1819b The True Travels, Adventures and Observations of Captaine Iohn Smith. Richmond: Franklin Press. [1629.]

Stith, William


Speck, Frank G.
