

## **Chanco, the Native American who saved the Virginia colony**

Even though Chanco, the Christianized Indian boy whose timely warning saved the Virginia colony' from almost certain destruction in the Indian massacre of 1622, is now almost forgotten, he deserves better treatment than he has formerly received to date from the chroniclers of the Old Dominion.

To background the events leading up to the massacre (which took place almost 370 years ago), an uneasy truce had existed between the Indians and the English settlers from the time of the marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe in 1614. This continued until Powhatan, Pocahontas' father and the chief ruler of the Powhatan Confederacy, died in 1618. Meanwhile, from 1607 on, those colonists who had survived the "seasoning period" and the terrible "Starving Time" of 1609-10 had made it evident that they intended to remain in Virginia to serve as a nucleus for England's first permanent overseas expansion.

For Powhatan's subjects, whom most of the arrogant English intruders regarded as barbarians and infidels, that meant a rapid loss of their traditional territories as well as the eventual obliteration of their age-old way of life. Cowed by the usurpers' more sophisticated weapons and technology, however, the Indians could only feign a friendliness for the overbearing English and hope for a leader from their own ranks who would turn their complaints into action. This desire was not long unfulfilled.

Opechancanough, Powhatan's younger brother and successor, was well aware of the desperate plight of his people, but was prevented from acting as long as the Peace of Pocahontas, which had been instituted by her father after her marriage to an Englishman, lasted. When Opechancanough learned belatedly that his niece, then Mrs. John Rolfe, had died in England in March 1617 while preparing to return to Virginia, he decided the time had come to secretly scuttle the humiliating truce and promote an all-out effort to drive the hated invaders from his peoples' hereditary hunting grounds.

By 1622, the year Opechancanough and his braves finally acted, the English had established themselves on small plantations and palisade settlements from the tip of the lower Virginia Peninsula to the falls of the James River. Trusting wily Opechancanough's assurance that "Sooner should the sky fall than peace be dissolved," the colonists continued their daily dealings with the Indians, little dreaming that a plot was being perfected around the smoldering campfires that, if successful, would wipe out the colony. A friendly Indian chieftain on the Virginia Eastern Shore sent a warning to the governor at Jamestown that serious trouble was brewing, but the admonition was ignored.

In the meantime, Opechancanough's warriors visited the far-flung settlements regularly on a friendly basis, borrowed the colonists' boats to ferry their forces to strategic points

from which the massacre could be more easily managed, and even slept in the houses of some of the unsuspecting settlers the night before the butchery.

Then, quite suddenly, at 8 in the morning on Good Friday, March 22, 1622, the Indians fell upon their victims along a front extending 150 miles along the James River, killing many of them with their own guns, axes and knives. By nightfall, 347 white men, women and children had been murdered, while their houses and tobacco barns had been torched by the rampaging savages. All of which brings us to the story of how Chanco, the Christianized Indian boy, risked the displeasure of his people to help his English benefactors.

Chanco, who lived with Capt. William Perry, an "ancient planter" who had come to Virginia in 1611, had been well treated by his employer, who had imparted the teachings of Christianity to his Indian servant. On the night before the massacre, Chanco was staying with Richard Pace at his plantation, "Pace's Paines," on the south side of the James River opposite Jamestown. Toward nightfall, Chanco was visited by one of his brothers, and shortly after they had gone to bed the latter informed Chanco of the plot, instructing him to murder Pace the next morning when the signal to begin the massacre was given.

According to a contemporary letter preserved in the British Library, "... it chanced in the place neare which the Governour himselfe lived, that an Indian youth asked another Indian youth (who was baptized & served an English Gentleman of the colonie & had bin in England) If he knew, what they must do at this feast? What saith the other? Why, quoth he, we must cutt all the English Mens throats, & I hope, thou wilt cutt thy Masters."

Instead of following his brother's instructions, however, Chanco went to Pace and revealed the plot. Heeding Chanco's warning, Pace dressed quickly, secured his house, and rowed across the river to Jamestown "before day" to spread the alarm. Stunned by Pace's communication, the governor sent out warnings to all of the settlements within reach. As a result, according to an account of the massacre written later by Capt. John Smith, thousands were saved "by this one converted Infidel."

Unfortunately, word of the impending danger could not be gotten to the outlying settlements in time, and the resulting carnage and property damage that took place the next morning came near bringing the Virginia experiment to ruin.

Chanco, who undoubtedly was regarded as a traitor by his own people, made one more appearance in recorded history. Since the letter quoted earlier stated he had already been in England, it is possible that he was one of the Indians who had accompanied Pocahontas and John Rolfe to London in 1616. Since this cannot be proved, however,

it is best to stick to the following fact which, until recently, has been overlooked by writers on early Virginia history.

In April 1624, according to the minutes of the London Company, when Chanco's benefactor, Capt. William Perry, was one of the petitioners sent from Virginia to England to seek relief for the colony after the massacre, he took Chanco along. On April 26, 1624, Perry brought Chanco to the attention of the directors of the company, at which time a motion was made to provide for his future maintenance "whereby to bring him up in the Christianitie and some good course to live by."

What happened to Chanco after that is unknown. But even at this late date it would be a graceful gesture if the Virginia Assembly honored his memory, since his loyalty to his employer made it possible for the Old Dominion to survive the carnage of that far-off Good Friday in 1622.