

Chief Eagle Plume Opencancanough



Born: 1564 Iroquois Nation, VA

Married: Cleopatra Scent Flower

Died: 1640 VA

Parents: Ensenore Running Stream & Scent Flower

Opechancanough. A Powhatan chief, born about 1545, died in 1644. He captured Capt. John Smith shortly after the arrival of the latter in Virginia, and took him to his brother, the head-chief Powhatan (q.v.). Some time after his release, Smith, in order to change the temper of the Indians, who jeered at the starving Englishmen and refused to sell them food, went with a band of his men to Opchancanough's camp under pretense of buying corn, seized the chief by the hair, and at the point of a pistol marched him off a prisoner. The Pamunkey brought boat-loads of provisions to ransom their chief, who thereafter entertained more respect and deeper hatred for the English. While Powhatan lived Opechancanough was held in restraint, but after his brother's death in 1618 he became the dominant leader of the nation, although his other brother, Opitchapan, was the nominal head-chief. He plotted the destruction of the colony so secretly that only one Indian, the Christian Chanco, revealed the conspiracy, but too late to save the people of Jamestown, who at a sudden signal were massacred, March 22, 1622, by the natives deemed to be entirely friendly.

In the period of intermittent hostilities that followed, duplicity and treachery marked the actions of both whites and Indians. In the last year of his life, Opechancanough, taking advantage of the dissensions of the English, planned their extermination. The aged chief was borne into battle on a litter when the Powhatan, on April 18, 1644, fell upon the settlements and massacred 300 persons, then as suddenly desisted and fled far from the colony, frightened perhaps by some omen. Opechancanough was taken prisoner to Jamestown, where one of his guards treacherously shot him, inflicting a wound of which he subsequently died.

More information:

- **Opechancanough**, brother of Powhatan, was " King of Pamunkey " when the English first landed in Virginia. He was born about 1552, and died in 1644. He first became known to the English as the captor of John Smith in the forest. Opechancanough would have killed him immediately, but for Smith's presence of mind. He drew from his pocket a compass, and explained to the native as well as he could its wonderful nature; told him of the form of the earth and the stars - how the sun chased the night around the earth continually. Opechancanough regarded him as a superior being, and women and children stared at him as he passed from village to village to the Indian's capital, until he was placed in the custody of Powhatan. Opechancanough attended the marriage of his niece, Pocahontas, at Jamestown. After the death of his brother (1619) he was lord of the empire, and immediately formed plans for driving the English out of his country.

Gov. Sir Francis Wyatt brought the constitution with him, and there was evidence of great prosperity and peace every-where. But just at that time a fearful cloud of trouble was brooding. Opechancanough could command about 1,500 warriors. He hated the English bitterly, and inspired his people with the same feeling, yet he feigned friendship for them until a plot for their destruction was perfected.

Believing the English intended to seize his domains, his patriotism impelled him to strike a blow. In an affray with a settler, an Indian leader was shot, and the wily emperor made it the occasion for inflaming the resentment of his people against the English. He visited the governor in war costume, bearing in his belt a glittering hatchet, and demanded some concessions for his incensed people. It was refused, and, forgetting himself for a moment, he snatched the hatchet from his belt and struck its keen blade into a log of the cabin, uttering a curse upon the English. Instantly recovering himself, he smiled, and said: " Pardon me, governor; I was thinking of that wicked Englishman (see ARGALL, SAMUEL) who stole my niece and struck me with his sword. I love the English who are the friends of Powhatan. Sooner will the skies fall than that my bond of friendship with the English shall be dissolved." Sir Francis warned the people that treachery was abroad. They did not believe it. They so trusted the Indians that they had taught them to hunt with fire-arms.

A tempest suddenly burst upon them. On April 1, 1622, the Indians rushed from the forests upon all the remote settlements, at a preconcerted time, and in the space of an hour 350 men, women, and children were slain. At Henrico, the devoted Thorpe, who had been like a father to the children and the sick of the natives, was slain. Six members of the council and several of the wealthier inhabitants were made victims of the treachery.

On the very morning of the massacre the Indians ate at the tables of those whom they intended to murder at noon. The people of Jamestown were saved by Chanco, a Christian Indian, who gave them timely warning, and enabled them to prepare for the attack. Those on remote plantations who survived beat back the Indians and fled to Jamestown. In the course of a few days eighty of the inhabited plantations were reduced to eight. A large part of the colony were saved, and these waged an exterminating war. They struck such fearful retaliating blows that the Indians were beaten back into the forest, and death and desolation were spread over the peninsula between the York and James rivers. The emperor fled to the land of the Pamunkeys, and by a show of cowardice lost much of his influence. The power of the confederacy was broken. Before the war there were 6,000 Indians within 60 miles of Jamestown; at its close there were, probably, not 1,000 within the territory of 8,000 square miles. The colony, too, was sadly injured in number and strength. A deadly hostility between the races continued for more than twenty years. Opechancanough lived, and had been nursing his wrath all that time, prudence alone restraining him from war. His malice remained keen, and his thirst for vengeance was terrible.

When, in 1643, Thomas Rolfe, son of his niece Pocahontas, came from England, and with Cleopatra, his mother's sister, visited the aged emperor, and told him of the civil war between the English factions, the old emperor concluded it was a favorable time for him to strike another blow for his country. He was then past ninety years of age, and feeble in body. He sent runners through his empire. A confederation of the tribes for the extermination of the English was formed, and the day fixed to begin the work in the interior and carry it on to the sea. Early in April, 1644, they began the horrid work. The old emperor was carried on a litter borne by his warriors. In the space of two days they slew more than 300 of the settlers, sparing none who fell in their way. The region between the Pamunkey and York rivers was almost depopulated. Governor Berkeley met the natives with a competent armed force, and drove them back with great slaughter. Opechancanough was made a prisoner, and carried in triumph to Jamestown. He was so much exhausted that he could not raise his eye-lids, and in that condition he was fatally wounded by a bullet from the gun of an English soldier who guarded him, and who had suffered great bereavements at the hands of the Indians. The people, curious, gathered around the dying emperor. Hearing the hum of a multitude, he asked an attendant to raise his eyelids. When he saw the crowd he haughtily demanded a visit from the governor. Berkeley came, when the old man said, with indignation, " Had it been my fortune to have taken Sir William Berkeley prisoner, I would not meanly have exposed him as a show to my people." He then stretched himself upon the earth and died.



Depiction of the capture of John Smith by Opechancanough