The “tragical historie”:
Cannibalism and Abundance in Colonial Jamestown

Rachel B. Herrmann

Nay, so great was our famine, that a Salvage we slew, and buried, the poorer sort tooke him up againe and eat him, and so did divers one another boyled and stewed with roots and herbs: And one amongst the rest did kill his wife, powdered her, and had eaten part of her before it was knowne, for which hee was executed, as hee well deserved; now whether shee was better roasted, boyled or carbonado’d, I know not, but of such a dish as powdered wife I never heard of. This was that time, which still to this day we called the starving time.¹

These are they, that roared out the tragical historie of the man eating of his dead wife in Virginia; when the master of this Ship willingly confessed before 40 witnesses, that at their comming awaie, they left three moneths victuals, and all the cattell living in the Fort: sometimes they reported that they saw this horrible action, sometimes that Captaine Davies sayd so, sometimes that one Beadle the Lieutenant of Captaine Davies did relate it, varying this report into diversitie of false colours, which hold no likenesse and proportion.²

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² Virginia Council, A Trve declaration of the estate of the Colonie in Virginia, With a confutation of such scandalous reports as haue tended to the disgrace of so worthy an enterprise (London, 1610), 38.
When historians write about early colonial Virginia, they often mention cannibalism to illustrate the severity of the Starving Time during the winter of 1609–10. According to a college-level U.S. history textbook published in 2009, “A few desperate colonists were driven to cannibalism, an ironic situation since early explorers had assumed that only Native Americans would eat human flesh.” In his canonical *American Slavery, American Freedom*, Edmund S. Morgan notes that the Starving Time offers “the only authentic examples of cannibalism witnessed in Virginia. One provident man chops up his wife and salts down the pieces. Others dig up graves to eat corpses. By spring only sixty are left alive.” A history by James Horn, published in 2005, describes how “some of the colonists, who died in their beds or were killed seeking relief beyond the palisade, were taken up and eaten by those who found their bodies. Neither were the dead the only victims of cannibalism. The famished looked hungrily on those alive who still had some meat on their bones.” A 2005 National Geographic documentary references “hunger so extreme, some even turn to cannibalism.” According to these various portrayals, cannibalism in Jamestown was a certainty and a vividly gruesome episode in American history.

Historians generally take the case of cannibalism in Jamestown for granted; they usually assume that colonists practiced man-eating during that winter, and then they move ahead quickly to tobacco planting, sometimes pausing to discuss the Powhatan-English wars of the 1610s and 1620s. In fact the existence of cannibalism in Virginia is not easily verifiable. Early writers in colonial Virginia wrote about that winter with varying degrees of horror, remorse, and amusement, and they were influenced as well by their own fluctuating levels of personal interest in the colony’s success. For too

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6 *National Geographic Video, The New World: Nightmare in Jamestown* (Washington, D.C., 2006), DVD.
long historians have taken these writers at their word, without considering their motivations for publication. Cannibalism may or may not have taken place during 1609–10; some evidence exists to suggest that it did, whereas other accounts might be cited to argue that it did not. Ultimately, there is no way to answer this particular question definitively, nor is it the intent of this essay to do so. What historians can do is consider the various accounts together and acknowledge that cannibalism should no longer be stated as a bare fact in the chronology of early Jamestown.

It is significant, however, that colonists in the following decade displayed an obsession with cannibalism stories that began circulating as early as 1610. And so a different line of inquiry asks why this fixation occurred. In the wake of the Starving Time, which witnessed the deaths of at least 160 people, stories by Sir Thomas Gates, George Percy, John Smith, and the Virginia Assembly illustrated why tales of anthropophagy were so important to colonials at the time. These several renditions, taken together, served two purposes from 1610 to 1624, when they were written. First, Starving Time accounts provided early colonial leaders opportunities to defend themselves from blame and to explain their failures to sustain the colony. The stories allowed these men to assure colonial investors in London that the Starving Time was a freak disaster that would not occur again. Publication of some of these stories during the 1620s illustrates the extent to which such writers were concerned about their personal reputations as well as the colony’s well-being.

Second, the reports of that fateful winter reinforced—yet also modified—the concept of abundance in America, an idea that became ubiquitous in an emerging American mythology and persisted into the twenty-first century. Before the Starving Time, writers depicted America as an Edenic paradise where food was plentiful and required little labor. But the new, postlapsarian Virginia demanded hard work and perseverance to realize the

8 James Horn estimates the number of deaths at 160, but other historians disagree. See Horn, Land as God Made It, 176. Original tallies stood at more than 400 deaths. Carville V. Earle’s seminal essay contains a good summary of the debate; he concludes that 100 men survived the winter, 15 were killed by Indians, and 80 died from other causes. See Earle, “Environment, Disease, and Mortality in Early Virginia,” in The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-American Society, ed. Thad W. Tate and David L. Ammerman (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), 96–125, esp. 108–9.

land’s bounty. Thus, in the 1610s and 1620s, colonial leaders enacted new laws about food production and consumption, in part because of the concomitant appearance of Starving Time accounts. Memories of the winter of 1609–10 acted as indispensable cautionary tales that shaped Virginia’s future governance as well as settlers’ sense of themselves and their colony. Jamestown became America’s first real creation myth, which was a mixture of truth and fiction that chronicled Virginia’s failures as well as its eventual triumphs. Fears about repeat periods of dearth and starvation created powerful motivations for developing a successful colony that would become the prototype for all other English “projects” in America.10

The historiographies of cannibalism, food, and colonial settlement rarely intersect, but combining the three produces a workable methodological framework for analyzing the Starving Time. If historians have rarely questioned the veracity of cannibalism tales at Jamestown and elsewhere, anthropologists and postcolonial scholars, by contrast, taking their cue from W. Arens’s seminal work, The Man-Eating Myth, frequently challenge the existence of cannibalism yet sometimes neglect to place anthropophagy in historical context. Their work does not ask why and under what circumstances people engaged in the practice of cannibalism or made claims that others had. Food historians range widely from discussions of individual foods—culinary microhistory—to explications of food and power, to topics of food, migration, and contact.11


Can historians ever get to the heart of what really happened in Jamestown? Comparing all the known accounts of man-eating in Jamestown allows scholars to argue for and against the occurrence of cannibalism and then to ask why these stories were so pertinent to the colonists eating and living in seventeenth-century Virginia as well as to invested gentlemen in London. Looking at these narratives in light of the new laws regulating food and trade in 1612 and linking Starving Time accounts with changing concepts of abundance in America reveal why the different versions began to circulate in the 1610s and 1620s and suggest the broader resonance they may have had. Combining close primary source readings done by historians with anthropologists’ skepticism and food historians’ interest in foodways helps explain the roles that cannibalism, starvation, and abundance played in early American history.

When historians mention the Starving Time in Jamestown, they traditionally cite Captain John Smith’s and George Percy’s familiar accounts of cannibalism during that difficult winter of 1609–10. Three other English narratives survive from the first quarter of the seventeenth century: Thomas Gates’s *A True declaration of the estate of the Colonie in Virginia*, the Virginia Assembly’s “The Tragical Relation of the Virginia Assembly,” and William Strachey’s *A True Reportory*. Gates’s 1610 refutation of cannibalism published for the Virginia Council came first, preceding the others by fourteen years. Gates became governor of Virginia after Percy’s rule, but, delayed by a shipwreck in Bermuda, he did not set foot in the colony until May 1610. He arrived in the colony after the Starving Time when the worst of the winter was over and decided that returning to England was the only way to feed himself, his shipwrecked crew, and the original Jamestown colonists. On June 7, 1610, as the colonists were on their way down the James River, they ran into a longboat belonging to Thomas West’s fleet, which had ample new supplies and an influx of men. The colony was saved, and West officially assumed rule of Virginia, leaving Gates free to return in July to England, where he published *A True Declaration*. Since scholars have long acknowledged *A True Declaration’s* influence on William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, initially performed in 1611 and finally published in 1623, Gates’s

My approach here departs from that of previous scholars. Mark Nicholls and Dennis Montgomery have gathered all the Starving Time accounts together, but no historian has performed a close reading of these sources to ask what motivated the elite writers to produce them. See Nicholls, *Colonial Williamsburg* 29: 52–58; Montgomery, *Colonial Williamsburg* 29: 59–61. Michael A. LaCombe has interpreted leaders’ writings as their attempts to situate themselves in either a patriarchal or humanist approach to governance through food, but his work is not particularly concerned with portrayals of cannibalism. See LaCombe, *American Historical Review* 115: 670.
account presumably achieved wide circulation by the early 1610s. It would regain attention in 1625, when it was included in William Strachey’s *A True Reportory.*

It is illuminating and important to recognize that all five accounts appeared and circulated during 1624–25, including the reprinted version of Gates’s refutation. Three original stories came to light in 1624: Smith’s, Percy’s (written in response to Smith’s but never published in his lifetime), and the Virginia Assembly’s. Smith, the bombastic captain who arrived at Jamestown in chains after being accused of rallying Virginia-bound seafarers to mutiny in the West Indies, rose to the position of cape merchant and Indian-English go-between when John Ratcliffe came into the governorship after leaders deposed Edward Maria Wingfield. Smith would later become fourth president of the Virginia Council, but, like Gates, he was absent from the colony during the Starving Time. He had been forced to depart a few months prior, in the fall of 1609, when a bag of gunpowder exploded in his lap. His early accounts of the Jamestown colony contained no mention of cannibalism, yet his 1624 *Generall Historie* strongly emphasized that only in his absence did the colonists fail to feed themselves that winter. This line of argument permitted Smith to assert his own indispensability to Virginia; in doing so, he portrayed Percy, who was president of the colony during the Starving Time, in a negative light, which prompted Percy’s own 1624 rebuttal.

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14 For more on John Smith’s efforts at self-promotion through publication, see Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 2–4; “The Tragical Relation of the Virginia Assembly, 1624,” in Tyler, *Narratives of Early Virginia*, 419–26. For information on Edward Maria Wingfield and John Ratcliffe, first and second presidents of the council of Virginia, see Tyler, *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*, 1: 33–34. For a longer description of the circumstances surrounding Smith’s arrival at Jamestown and subsequent actions, see
Percy was the only writer among the five to witness the events in Jamestown during the Starving Time, when he had the misfortune of being president. Because he had so much at stake, his account presents some of the most salient challenges to the tale Smith and others told. His story tallies with Smith’s to a certain extent, but the points at which they diverge should also serve as a caution to historians who would take either tale at face value. Though he never published *A Trewe Relacyon*, Percy revealed in a letter to his brother Henry, 9th Earl of Northumberland, that he intended the narrative to offer a defense of his actions as the colony’s fifth president. By detailing the events of that winter, he sought to establish Virginia’s dire situation and explain his many efforts to save it, demonstrating overall that there was little he could have done to remedy its problems. To state a convincing case for his actions, it behooved him to make the events of that winter appear as desperate as possible.

The last two Starving Time accounts were put forth by the Virginia Assembly and Strachey, who had served as secretary to the colony. Strachey’s 1625 *A True Reportory* appeared in Samuel Purchas’s *Haklytus Posthumus; Or, Purchas His Pilgrimes* and included a transcript of Gates’s 1610 letter. Strachey had composed his own piece around 1618; since he was part of the group of men shipwrecked in Bermuda with Gates, he too was absent from the colony during the Starving Time. He remained in Virginia for about a year and then departed in time to publish the famously strict recommendations for running the colony, *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martill*, in 1612. Strachey, then, wrote from a similar position as Gates: he arrived in time to witness and assist in Virginia’s recuperation. Finally, the Virginia Assembly apparently composed its own account with the goal of criticizing the laws envisioned by Strachey and propounded by Sir Thomas Smythe, member of the Virginia Council in England and treasurer of the colony from 1609 to 1619. The laws met with much disapproval because they were notoriously draconian, but Strachey and Smythe defended them as the only way to save the colony. To better criticize Smythe and praise the administrations of Henry Wriothesley, 3d Earl of Southampton, and Sir Edwin Sandys, the assembly argued that the colonists’ actions during the Starving Time were...

Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 3–7. Smith was injured when, as he slept in a boat on his way back to Jamestown, a bag of gunpowder exploded in his lap. James Horn argues that this chain of events was no accident but rather a deliberate attempt on the part of Gabriel Archer, John Martin, and John Ratcliffe to kill him. They later plotted to murder him once he returned to the fort but instead deposed him and placed him on a ship back to the Old World. See Horn, *Land as God Made It*, 170; Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 235. For the details of George Percy’s motivations for writing, in addition to one scholar’s skepticism about the veracity of Percy’s narrative, see Mark Nicholls, “George Percy’s ‘Trewe Relacyon’: A Primary Source for the Jamestown Settlement,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 3 (2005): 212–75, esp. 226.  
unavoidable and that the implementation of such harsh new laws was not necessary. 

The proliferation of these retellings in the 1620s therefore begs the question of the significance of such tales at that specific moment. These stories even raise doubts about whether acts of cannibalism really occurred in Jamestown at all. With these matters in mind, consider the two most famous Starving Time accounts. Each describes colonists eating at least two people. According to Smith the colonists grew so desperate after using up the available resources that they ate “roots, herbes, acornes, walnuts, berries, now and then a little fish,” the starch for their shirts, and “even the very skinnes of our horses.” Finally,

So great was our famine, that a Salvage we slew, and buried, the poorer sort tooke him up againe and eat him, and so did divers one another boyled and stewed with roots and herbs: And one amongst the rest did kill his wife, powdered her, and had eaten part of her before it was knowne, for which hee was executed, as hee well deserved; now whether shee was better roasted, boyled or carbonado’d, I know not, but of such a dish as powdered wife I never heard of.17

Though Percy seemed to rehearse some of the main points, important differences remained. For him the famine was so great

Thatt notheinge was Spared to mainteyne Lyfe and to doe those things which seame incredible, as to digge upp deade corpes outt of graves and to eate them. And some have Licked upp the Bloode which hathe fallen from their weake fellowes. And amongste the reste this was moste lamentable. Thatt one of our Colline murdered his wyfe Ripped the Childe outt of her woambe and threwe itt into the River and after Chopped the Mother in pieces and salted her for his foode, The same not beinge discovered before he had eaten parte thereof.18


17 Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 130.

18 Percy, Trewe Relacyon, 1100. In some editions of George Percy’s account, the cannibal is given the name “Collines.” I think, however, this word choice is a misunderstanding
Smith and Percy certainly felt it imperative to rationalize, if not excuse, their fellow colonists’ actions: people ate people because they were starving. Yet clearly these two 1624 versions display important discrepancies. In Smith’s presentation men adhered to what historian Robert Appelbaum has described as a hunger topos, or a menu that included a list of decreasingly desirable comestibles, from acorns to starch to horsehides. When these were depleted, multiple colonists ate one Indian, and one man killed his wife and ate her preserved body. Smith had good reasons to embellish English rumors of cannibalism because such exaggerations demonstrated that food stores in Jamestown had been utterly depleted in his absence. Perhaps still smarting over his forced removal in the wake of his gunpowder injury, Smith hoped to demonstrate just how extensively the colonists had struggled without him.

Though some aspects of Percy’s story concurred with Smith’s, their tales also contained noticeable differences. In A Trewe Relacyon, the hunger topos was written with greater detail, containing more animals than those often included in similar English accounts of starvation: they ate “horses and other beastes as longe as they Lasted,” followed by “vermin” such as “doggs Catts Ratts and myce,” then “Bootes shoes or any other leather,” and, finally, “Serpents and snakes.” Percy then depicted a second hunger topos, moving gradually from dead bodies to almost dead bodies (weak, but still bleeding), and then on to the consumption of a woman in good health. He concluded his narrative with the murder of her unborn child, a detail that Smith did not include. Percy did not specifically identify the corpses as Indian, but he described more fatalities; he wrote of men who could not wait for their fellows to die before drinking their blood. Percy’s tale was more tragic yet more fantastic; instead of Smith’s darkly humorous crack about the best method to serve dead wife, Percy earnestly adjudged the situation as lamentable. Though his rendition might be more trustworthy because of his presence in the colony during the Starving Time, the


19 Appelbaum, Aguecheek’s Beef, Belch’s Hiccup, 263.
20 Percy, Trewe Relacyon, 1099.
21 For another example of embellishment in cannibal stories, see Peter Hulme, “Introduction: The Cannibal Scene,” in Cannibalism and the Colonial World, ed. Francis Barker, Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Cambridge, 1998), 1–38, esp. 16–18.
artfulness of his prose, the drama of his tale, the story's conformity to a set sequence of literary conventions, and that his personal reputation was at stake also provoke some skepticism.

Such variations become more suspicious when placed alongside the two other, lesser-known narratives by Gates and the Virginia Assembly, which historians have largely ignored. Though he had not been present, Gates claimed as early as 1610 that cannibalism never took place: “There was one of the companie who mortally hated his Wife, and therefore secretly killed her.” To conceal the crime, the husband “cut her in pieces and hid her in divers parts of his house.” When other members of the colony noticed her missing, they searched the man’s house and discovered the body parts. Gates said the man claimed “that his Wife died,” and “hee hid her to satisfie his hunger, and . . . fed daily upon her” merely to excuse himself from the capital crime of murder. Gates had good reason to question the man’s claims of starvation because a search of the house revealed “a good quantitie of meale, oate-meale, beanes and pease.”

Though the murderer may have killed his wife to avoid having to share food with her, it is impossible to say whether he did or did not cannibalize her. In Gates’s report there was no salting of the wife, no child ripped from the womb, and no mention of eating unburied Indians or hanged men; the claims of starvation and cannibalism merely served as the man’s cover for murdering his wife.

If, as Gates argued, the stories about cannibalism were untrue, he had to explain who was responsible for starting such rumors. He suggested that the lies originated with former colonists who had abandoned the colony in favor of piracy and thereafter sought to mitigate their crimes with excuses for leaving Jamestown. Gates explained that about thirty colonists were appointed to trade with the Indians for corn and had set off in a ship called the Swallow but, en route, “they stole away the Ship” and “made a league amongst themselves to be professed pirates, with dreames of mountaines of gold.” Failing in their piracy, the men made a vow “to discredit the land, to deplore the famyne, and to protest that this their comming awaie, proceeded from desperate necessitie” as an excuse for their defection. These were the men, he wrote, “that roared out the tragicall historie of the man eating of his dead wife in Virginia.”

The Starving Time was a clever tale, Gates asserted, an invention promoted by unworthy men to slander Virginia, justify abandoning the colony, and explain why they engaged in illegal activities.

These rumors were not merely self-interested; Gates showed they were also radically contradictory. The renegade captain of the Swallow confessed

22 Virginia Council, *Tree declaration of Colonie in Virginia*, 38 (“There was one”), 39 (“that his Wife died”).
23 Ibid., 37 (“they stole away”), 38 (“to discredit the land”).
“before 40 witnesses” that when they departed Jamestown “they left three moneths victuals, and all the cattell living in the Fort,” indicating that starvation would have been impossible with such a storehouse of food for the winter. In addition none of the former pirates told the same story about cannibalism: “sometimes they reported that they saw this horrible action, sometimes that Captaine Davies sayd so, sometimes that one Beadle the Lieutenant of Captaine Davies did relate it, varying this report into diversitie of false colours, which hold no likenesse and proportion.” Gates declared that beyond a man’s murder of his wife, no further criminally immoral behavior had occurred; furthermore, there had been no desperate need for food in Jamestown and no single consistent eyewitness account of the Starving Time.

The Virginia Assembly’s 1624 version added yet more shocking details to an increasingly colorful tale. It recycled aspects of Percy’s deliberate hunger topos of men reduced to eating a list of progressively undesirable foods: “Doggs, Catts, ratts, Snakes, Toadstooles, [and] horse hides”; it also repeated parts of Smith’s story of a man “out of the mystery that he endured, killinge his wive powdered her upp to eate her, for wch he was burned.” Adding to a description of several colonists eating corpses, the assembly told of a man “who had gotten unsatiable, out of custome to that foode” and “could not be restrayned” from practicing cannibalism until he was executed. The authors even suggested, tongue in cheek, that the circumstances in Virginia were so bad that colonists who witnessed an Indian killing a horse for food doubtless found themselves “wishinge whilst she was a boylinge that Sr. Tho: Smith were uppon her backe in the kettle,” presumably to rid themselves of the hated treasurer of the Virginia Company rather than in preference for human flesh over horsemeat. The exaggerations of this reading also make it difficult to ascertain which aspects of the account were accurate and which were less likely.

Taken together, these divergences, changes in tone, delayed reports, and so-called eyewitness accounts versus hearsay rumors raise important questions about the events of the winter of 1609–10 and, ultimately, larger questions about why the stories mattered. On the one hand, cannibalism may not have occurred. The writers did not claim that they had actually seen it taking place. Smith, Gates, and Strachey were not physically there; Smith waited more than a decade to tell the cannibalism part of the story, and Gates went so far as to argue that the stories of man-eating were complete fabrications. Percy, who was present, only obtained an admission of anthropophagy from one of the alleged cannibals after torturing him by hanging the man by his thumbs “with weightes att his feete a quarter of an howere,

24 Ibid., 38.
before he wolde Confesse," a highly coerced (if conventional) confession. He was the only writer to mention the dead baby, a detail that Smith and the Virginia Assembly would have wanted to include to increase the shock value of the incident. Additionally, archaeological studies of the Jamestown site make no mention of bones bearing signs of cannibalism, even in the case of corpses buried during the Starving Time.

One could also make the case that men in Jamestown did in fact eat each other during that winter. Though the accounts of Gates, Percy, Smith, and the Virginia Assembly varied, they all mentioned the dead wife. Out of all the chroniclers, Percy alone was present at the time. He was not writing for a public audience or for profit, and he still maintained that cannibalism had taken place. Degrees of artfulness and exaggeration alone are not enough to disprove cannibalism, and bodies may have been cannibalized and hidden outside the fort, though no bones have been found. In the chaos of the Starving Time, it is not difficult to imagine Jamestown's leaders having trouble keeping track of everyone who died.

Furthermore Gates, who denied cannibalism, also denied that colonists were starving, a claim that seems unlikely. Just because three months of provisions remained in Jamestown at the time of the Swallow's departure does not mean those supplies lasted a full three months; food spoils, cattle die, and panicked, starving colonists may have stolen food and depleted stores more quickly than anticipated. In addition Gates's ship did not arrive in the colony until May; even if a full three months of food existed when the Swallow left, there was time enough to engender starving conditions. Though the husband in Gates's account may have had adequate food, he still believed (or hoped) that starvation might be an acceptable defense for cannibalism, indicating that scarcity was enough of a problem at Jamestown to make that particular excuse plausible. If Gates was untruthful about starving conditions, he may also have lied when he denied that cannibalism occurred. Thus, scholars can marshal evidence to support arguments that cannibalism at Jamestown was a fact or interpretations dismissing it as a fiction. Without new evidence historians can get no closer to knowing exactly what happened.

Rather than circle around this seemingly unanswerable question, a more productive line of inquiry seeks to understand why multiple narratives circulated and how the English thought about them. Here the flurry of publications in 1624 and 1625 proves illuminating. The Starving Time authors had motivations that biased the way they told their stories. Financiers could

not afford to lose money on Virginia, so men published repudiations of cannibalism. The proliferation of Starving Time accounts occurred because of the authors’ personal considerations for retelling their stories as well as the economic worries of investors in the Virginia project.

The rationales that governed Smith’s and Percy’s writings were probably the simplest: both men used Starving Time accounts to advance or defend their personal image and reputation. Smith displayed a particular eagerness to aggrandize himself and to argue that without his assistance the colonists were incapable of feeding themselves. Smith was probably also aware that 1623 and 1624 had been years of particularly bad famine in England, and by publishing the Generall Historie in 1624 he was pandering to a potentially sympathetic audience.28 Percy had every reason to make the situation appear as grave as possible so as to excuse his shoddy tenure as president of the colony following Smith’s departure. Though Percy did not publish, he doubtless offered verbal explanations to his friends once he returned to England; in addition, the very writing of the account and subsequent letter to his brother suggests that these matters weighed heavily on his mind.

Gates, by contrast, had more complex reasons for writing his version of the winter of 1609–10. He sought to refute verbal rumors of cannibalism that had made their way from Virginia to London as well as a written report from Spaniards in the Jamestown vicinity. No written English source about the Starving Time existed before Gates’s 1610 account, so the rumors that Gates sought to counter came from two possible sources: the pirates themselves, who made their way back to England, or the Spaniards, who had heard news of the Starving Time from a 1610 letter circulated in Spain. From England Don Alonso de Velasco wrote a letter to the King of Spain, dated June 14, 1610, in which he described how the English in Jamestown “eat the dead, and when one of the natives died fighting, they dug him up again, two days afterwards, to be eaten.” Furthermore, because the Indians had killed all of the domesticated pigs, the colonists had “eaten dogs, cat skins and other vile stuff.”29 In the eating of the Indian and the hunger topos, this letter resembles all the English accounts, though, oddly, it did not mention the dead wife. Perhaps the original sources were the same: men who had returned early to England or rumors from pirates. Well aware of

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Jamestown's shaky Protestant toehold in the New World, Gates had to find a way to indicate that Spanish knowledge of the Starving Time did not pose a threat to the English colonial enterprise. He saw his task as twofold: to promise Londoners that Catholic Spaniards posed no threat to the colonists at Jamestown and to assure them that settlers in Virginia were not destroying the colony from within.\footnote{For a fuller discussion of these matters, see for example Eric Griffin, “The Specter of Spain in John Smith’s Colonial Writing,” in Appelbaum and Sweet, Envisioning an English Empire, 111–34.}

Yet another reason motivated Gates to write his account. He sought to vindicate Thomas West, whose brother Francis had been captain of the ship that departed Jamestown and turned to piracy. In most accounts Francis West had not become a pirate but had lost control of his mutinous crew.\footnote{Horn, Land as God Made It, 175; Kupperman, Jamestown Project, 250, 254–55.} It is also likely that West was the captain who confessed to the sufficient amount of food present in the fort before the pirates’ departure, since he had nothing to lose by admitting that piracy was unnecessary. Gates was trying to exonerate West as well as to justify his own decision to leave Virginia and return to England when conditions in Jamestown had spiraled out of control.

In addition to its exaggerations, the Virginia Assembly’s account contains elements suggesting that its chronology is somewhat confused, perhaps in an attempt to discredit Thomas Smythe. The authors described the eating of cats, dogs, snakes, and horsehides as well as the salted wife as undertaken during Smythe’s government, yet, according to the authors, Smythe did not assume power as treasurer until after the Starving Time. The narrative was published in 1624 and described “those 12 yrs of Sr. Tho: Smith his goverment.”\footnote{“Tragical Relation of the Virginia Assembly,” 422 (quotation), 423.} This timeline would push the incidents of cannibalism to 1612, two years after the conclusion of the Starving Time. Even if the assembly was referring to the year Smythe’s term as treasurer ended, in 1619, this sequence of events would date his ascent to power to 1607.\footnote{Morgan, “Smythe [Smith], Sir Thomas.”} Smythe became treasurer of the company in 1609, not 1612, but the authors of the assembly account did not appear to be saying that these incidents of cannibalism took place in 1609–10. The hunger topos and mention of the wife indicate that this narrative comes from the same accounts as Percy’s and Smith’s, yet the timing is different. In many instances Starving Time accounts were employed for personal reasons, whether to defend one’s own reputation or that of a friend, in the cases of Percy and Gates, or to make someone else look bad, as evidenced by John Smith’s and possibly the assembly’s retellings.
Economic considerations characterized the second set of motivations for refuting cannibalism. Men such as Gates, who were heavily invested in New World projects, worried that cannibalism stories had become dangerously widespread. Such men felt particular pressure after they signed the 1609 charter to add 650 new investors and fifty London guilds and companies as corporate subscribers: writers had to convince these men that the Virginia project was still sound after a year of abject failure and news of starvation. In March 1622 Opechancanough, Powhatan’s successor, undermined the colony’s recent successes when he led a well-orchestrated attack on settler towns. Opechancanough’s plan to strike when the colonists were busy at their breakfast tables displayed an informed understanding of colonial eating habits. The violence of the attack also demonstrated the Powhatan and Pamunkey Indians’ discontent with the number of settlers flooding the region and encroaching on Indian farmlands and hunting areas, in other words, on Indians’ abilities to feed themselves. By 1625 English boosters had to contend with the tumult of the early 1620s in Virginia.

In the wake of this attack, the colony experienced a second Starving Time during the winter of 1622–23 that witnessed the death of at least one thousand people. By springtime news of this fresh disaster had reached the metropole. On May 24, 1624, the crown resumed control after it revoked the Virginia Company’s charter. Stories of the colony’s first Starving Time thus proved especially pertinent in 1624, when colonists and Englishmen required reassurance that Jamestown could endure under direction of the monarchy. So, in 1624, Smith’s and the Virginia Assembly’s accounts served the same purpose as Gates’s original narrative—as evidenced by its republication by Strachey. Yet in refuting the English cannibalism rumors, these accounts, and others that emerged in the 1610s and 1620s, also served another purpose: they reiterated the need for industrious colonists to turn Virginia into the abundant land earlier settlers had believed it was.

Before the Starving Time of 1609–10, writers portrayed Virginia as a food-filled paradise where people did not have to labor to produce things to eat. That winter marked a turning point at which the characterization of New World abundance shifted from limitless to attainable only via hard work and strict regulations enforcing industrious behavior. The rumors of the Starving Time circulated by the pirates in Thomas Gates’s account, by John Smith after his return to England, and by the Spanish served to increase investors’ worries about the colony. These stories provoked changes in laws pertaining to food supply and, consequently, Virginia’s security.

34 Horn, Land as God Made It, 255–56; Kupperman, Jamestown Project, 9, 243, 304, 306, 324.
35 Horn, Land as God Made It, 268, 274–77.
Cannibalism in Virginia requires a reassessment not only because previous historians’ analyses of what happened omitted important sources but also because cannibalism stories served broader purposes in constructing an American mythology in the seventeenth century. Early on—earlier than other historians have acknowledged—the Starving Time became the event that enabled colonists to redefine what they meant by abundance and to decide how its initial absence was to function in Virginian and American memory. By the early eighteenth century, Americans did not argue about whether cannibalism had taken place; they assumed that it had and pointed to it as the ordeal that forced lazy Virginians to become industrious producers. As Richard Slotkin has noted in his work on mythmaking in America, this experience prompted an almost religious response to encourage the formation of a collective identity. The fear of starvation functioned as an effective measure of ensuring the colony’s future prosperity.

Even prior to the settlement at Jamestown, early explorers and writers described the New World as a paradise where food was readily available for virtually no work. These descriptions usually began with a listing of the land’s merchantable or edible commodities. As early as the fourteenth century, Sir John Mandeville had promised abundance from new lands, and Richard Hakluyt was the first to do so specifically for English readers. One of the stories he quoted in his 1582 Divers Voyages promised spices such as cinnamon, cloves, mace, and nutmeg. The New World, he wrote, was “abounding in hony, venison, wilde foule, forests, [and] woods of all sortes.” Abundance became one of the most useful and convincing keywords to describe the Americas.

Later travelers wrote glowing accounts of the country to prove that Virginia was a hospitable, fruitful, and boundless land. Writing in 1589, Arthur Barlowe observed, “The earth bringeth forth all things in abundance, as in the first creation, without toil or labour.” Barlowe compared Virginia with the garden in Genesis, where Adam and Eve lived without having to work. He also compared the Virginia coast with other places, arguing, “in all the world the like aboundance is not to be founde: and my selfe having seene those partes of Europe that most abound, finde such difference, as were incredible to be written.” Virginia was exceptional, paradisaical; Europe offered no comparison with the ease of living in the New World.

38 Arthur Barlowe, Discourse of the First Voyage, in Horn, Captain John Smith, 819–30 (“earth bringeth,” 826, “in all the world,” 820). The biblical text describing paradise before the Fall reads: “And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the
Once Englishmen arrived in the Chesapeake, they quickly recited these earlier literary tropes and assumptions. One can almost picture early colonists wandering around the New World coast, putting various items into their mouths and rushing home to write about it. Smith wrote of rivers in the lands around Jamestown “so covered with swans, geese, ducks, and cranes, that we daily feasted with good bread, Virginia pease, pumplings, and putchamins, fish, fowle, and diverse sorts of wild beasts as fat as we could eate them.” Smith noted the “great abundance” of birds, as well as numerous types of fish. Agriculture seldom played a role in these early accounts by colonial writers; rather, colonists ambled about, plucking game from the forests and fish from the sea.

Following the Starving Time, perceptions of abundance changed drastically. The early 1610s witnessed a spate of writing that referred to the colony’s tribulations and acknowledged that optimistic appraisals of the country had led to disaster. Though some of these writers went so far as to call the Starving Time stories false or slanderous, they all agreed that the tales had injured Virginia’s reputation. In 1611 Deputy Governor Thomas Dale, in a letter to Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury, referred to Virginia’s early history, noting “some former slaunders yet upon itt (not removed).” In Alexander Whitaker’s 1613 *Good Newes from Virginia*, the dedication by William Crashawe—an anti-Catholic preacher and investor in the Virginia Company—ridiculed “these idle and slanderous surmises” as well as “the calumnies and slanders, raised upon our Colonies, and the Countrey it selfe.” When men mentioned these slanders, they probably referred to the cannibalism accusations spread by rumormongers. In Crashawe’s opinion these stories were “blown abroad by Papists, Players and such like, till they have filled the vulgar eares.” Crashawe, then, attributed the rumors to the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food” (Genesis 2:8–9). Compare this passage with the passage following God’s discovery of Adam and Eve’s eating from the Tree of Knowledge, in which he tells them, “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field: in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground” (Genesis 3:17–19). Interestingly, the Authorized King James Version was begun in 1604 and finished in 1611, after Barlowe’s work, it is true, but right around the Starving Time in Jamestown.

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39 Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 218 (quotations), 85, 95.
41 W[illiam] Crashawe, dedication to Alexander Whitaker, *Good Newes from Virginia. Sent to the Covnsell and Company of Virginia, resident in England . . . Wherein also is a narration of the present State of that Country, and our Colonies there. Perused and published by direction from that Counsell. And a Preface prefixed of some matters touching that Plantation, very requisite to be made knowne* (1613; repr., New York, 1936), A2v (“idle and slanderous surmises”), A2r (“calumnies and slanders”). See also
Spanish (the Papists) and, it would seem, to early enactments of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in other words, to the literary iteration of the Gates account. In 1615 Ralph Hamor, who sat on the Virginia Council and served as its secretary in 1611, published *A True Discourse of the Present State of Virginia*. He referred to the cannibalism stories by citing the “manifould imputations, & disgraces, which Virginia hath innocently undergon.” All these writers observed the damage that rumors of famine and cannibalism had done to the Virginia enterprise. They had their work cut out for them as they sought to turn the tide of public opinion.

Though historians have ascribed early failures in Virginia to any number of factors—exceptionally harsh winters, “unprecedented drought,” poor planning with regard to food supplies, disease, or salt poisoning—English observers at the time concluded that the causes of starvation boiled down to laziness, selfishness, and poor governance. As rumors about cannibalism during the winter of 1609–10 reached the metropole, colonial leaders in Jamestown began to fling accusations at each other and at the colonists. Leaders blamed each other for hoarding food. Such criticisms implied that there might have been enough food in Virginia, as Gates had suggested, but that leaders had allotted it unevenly, precipitating a Starving Time severe enough to prompt cannibalism rumors. The problem of greedy leaders went back to the colony’s first weeks. Smith did not hesitate to name names, citing President Edward Maria Wingfield as one of the guilty who ate from his private stores of “Oatmeale, Sacke, Oyle, Aquavitae, Beefe, [and] Egges” while the rank and file starved during some of Smith’s earliest days in Virginia. For this reason Smith and other members of the council deposed Wingfield on September 10, 1607, and replaced him with John Ratcliffe. Even these actions, however, did not remedy food problems in a way sufficient to prevent famine in 1609–10.

Critics also decried the laziness of early colonists. In doing so writers implied that the problem was not Virginia but the people living there; in contrast, industrious men would prosper in the New World. Crashawe described the “base and idle lubbers, that come from thence.” Hamor

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44 Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 82.

45 *Horn, Captain John Smith*, 1200; Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 83.

46 Whitaker, *Good Newes from Virginia*, [C4v].
suggested that if there had been a famine, it had resulted from indolence. He noted that he would “deterre all lasie, impotent, and ill livers from addressing themselves thither, as being a Country too worthy for them, and altogetheer disconsonant to their natures.” By claiming that only the most hardworking men deserved the New World, such writers reserved Virginia for the virtuous and blamed the earlier misery and death on the failings of indolent and selfish colonists as well as on the inadequate leadership of early governors. These writers argued that it was possible for investors and settlers to recoup their losses and start over; idleness was an easily remedied sin. By leveling these charges, writers suggested that the colony could still have a bright future.

New laws implemented in the second decade of the seventeenth century suggest that stories about cannibalism during the Starving Time functioned as a turning point in how colonists understood foodways in Virginia. In 1612 William Strachey published the *Lavues Divine, Morall and Martiall*, a compendium of regulations for the colony first envisioned by Gates in May 1610, approved by Thomas West in June, and enlarged by Dale in 1611. Significantly, three of the men connected to cannibalism stories during the Starving Time—Gates and Strachey, in refuting rumors, and West, by virtue of having a brother responsible for the storytelling pirates—involved themselves directly in the lawmaking process undertaken to prevent starvation in the future. Even as they denied stories of cannibalism and famine, these men constructed regulations to control food supply and consumption. *Lavues Divine, Morall and Martiall* contained numerous rules dictating access to and control of food, manifesting a singular preoccupation with such matters. In fact, of the first thirty-seven articles, more than one-quarter dictated how people would eat: seven referred directly to food and three to provisions trading. Punishments for stealing and hoarding food were draconian. One would face execution if caught robbing provisions from the common store, “by water or land, out of boate, house, or knapsack.” Those daring to “spoile and wast or steale the same, or robbe any vineyard, or gather up the grapes, or steale any eares of the corne growing” would also “be punished with death.” Laws warned that bakers who employed weights to make their loaves heavier or used less flour or meal (presumably siphoning it off to hoard) would lose their ears for a first offense, be confined for “a yeare [in] the Gallies” for a second, and spend three years in prison for a

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47 Hamor, *True Discourse of Virginia*, 1132. 
48 Michael A. LaCombe has suggested that John Smith’s definition of idleness differed from that of other colonial writers in that he ascribed laziness to colonial gentlemen rather than middling colonists. Indeed, Smith was one of the few able to coax industry out of the lower ranks of men at Jamestown. For the colony to succeed, however, most writers recognized the need for regular productivity rather than that achieved by one man who was unlikely to return to the colony. See LaCombe, *American Historical Review* 115: 680.
third. Even colonists who owned their animals had to ask permission from those in charge before butchering them, perhaps to prevent colonists who did not own domesticated animals from killing those belonging to others. Those guilty of this crime “in the Principall” would die; those “in the accessary” would have their hands burned and ears lopped off, and those concealing the aforesaid crime would be whipped.49

These laws in Jamestown and the consequences for disobeying them were more punitive than earlier English military laws. Armstrong Starkey has pointed out the similarities between *Lavves Diuine, Morall and Martiall* and previous codes, such as *Leicester’s Disciplinary Code*, devised by Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester.50 In that set of regulations, which dates to 1586, the consequence for stealing and hoarding food was usually imprisonment. Slaughtering animals without permission, eating more rations than one was allowed, and stealing provisions from other men were all actions forbidden “upon paine of imprisonment.” Death was only a possible punishment if soldiers prevented food from reaching “the Campe or place of garrison” or “into the Market place.”51 The Starving Time, then, may indeed have been responsible for changing English definitions of punishments because earlier, more lax rules had resulted in such dire conditions in the New World.

Not incidental to these rules about food and eating were warnings about gluttony as well as elements that might refer to the cannibalism stories. One of Strachey’s final observations for the common soldier cautioned, “He must not set his minde over-greedly upon his belly, and continuaull feeding, but rest himselfe contented with such provisions as may bee conveniently provided, his owne labour purchase, or his meanes reach unto.”52 Though *Lavves Diuine, Morall and Martiall* did not explicitly mention cannibalism, it instituted new laws against murder, except in self-defense. Perhaps Dale, Gates, Strachey, and West were thinking back to the case of the wife killer and hoped to forestall such excuses in the future.

At the same time, *Lavves Diuine, Morall and Martiall* more directly implied that anthropophagy would be punished severely, even in desperate circumstances. Strachey took special care to warn against the especially heinous crime of a man committing murder “to satisfie his owne pleasure and appetite.”53 By 1612 “appetite” certainly connoted a desire for food,

49 Strachey, *For the Colony in Virginea Britannia*, 6 (“by water”), 14 (“spoil and wast”), 15 (“be punished”), 18 (“yeare”), 11 (“Principall”). For other examples relating to food and eating, ibid., 1, 5–6, 11–12, 14–15, 18.
52 Strachey, *For the Colony in Virginea Britannia*, 81.
53 Ibid., 43–44 (quotation, 43).
and a meaning propounded as early as 1366 indicated that the desire for food was natural.\footnote{Oxford English Dictionary Online, search under “appetite, n.,” esp. def. 3, \url{http://oed.com/}.} Lawmakers acknowledged that the need to feed oneself, even in the face of starvation, was a natural desire but indicated that cannibalism was still unacceptable. Given the prevalence of rumors about cannibalism, Strachey’s use of the word appetite must have given men pause; they were not to kill because they were hungry. Men employing the starvation defense would be punished the same as those who killed in anger. Colonists contemplating such actions would do well to remember that “the life of a souldier, or a laborer, belongs to none to take away, but to the Lord Generall, Lieftenent General, Marshal, or their deputy or deputies.”\footnote{Strachey, \textit{For the Colony in Virginea Britannia}, 43–44 (quotation, 44).} One who killed a man to eat him would pay with his life. Colonial leaders may not have been willing to face the issue of cannibalism in overt terms or to answer the question of whether it had actually occurred, but they took extraordinary measures to prevent instances of man-eating in the future. By publishing \textit{Lavves Diuine, Morall and Martiall} in London, they did more than publicly pronounce new policies; they also offered reassurance.\footnote{Kupperman, \textit{Jamestown Project}, 257.}

Prescribed laws did not always conform to colonial practice, and colonists needed continual reminders not to be lazy. Historian Kathleen M. Brown has noted that during the 1650s courts still occasionally punished men who refused to plant crops and tend fields, and even as late as 1660 leaders had to reenact a law several times requiring men to plant corn.\footnote{Kathleen M. Brown, \textit{Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia} (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996), 136.} Colonial leaders and common men did not always agree on the best methods to protect against starvation. Furthermore, as the second Starving Time of the 1620s passed and men revolted against the harsh measures of \textit{Lavves Diuine, Morall and Martiall}, enforcement of such rules waned, resulting in the laxity that necessitated these occasional judicial interventions. Court cases against the lazy, however, were required only sporadically by the time the colony reached a level of sustainability. When starvation no longer posed a ready threat, punitive laws were much less necessary.

\textbf{After the implementation of William Strachey’s \textit{Lavves Diuine, Morall and Martiall}, post–Starving Time accounts of the colony ensured that cannibalism would remain etched in colonial memory for a long time.}\footnote{Darra Goldstein’s essay on starvation in World War II–era Leningrad has been particularly helpful in laying out this section. See Goldstein, “Women under Siege: Leningrad, 1941–1942,” in \textit{From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food}, ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (Amherst, Mass., 2005), 143–60.}
These memories served two purposes in the 1610s and 1620s. They allowed colonists to see the Starving Time, even in all its gruesomeness, as a moment when colonists continued to observe English foodways. More importantly, they enabled writers to posit a sense of optimism about the future that, though more measured than Richard Hakluyt’s early accounts, still fostered a sense of unity and possibility regarding the colony’s development.

Memories of the Starving Time explained how colonists understood cannibalism within the cultural context of the Old and New World. Preconceived notions about Indian cannibalism as well as Indian methods of obtaining food shaped these perceptions. Long before English colonization began, fantasies of cannibals infused textual and visual representations of the New World. Travelers coming to America expected to encounter the practice because they had seen cannibals depicted on New World maps and read about cannibals in ancient mythology, in Sir John Mandeville’s writings, and in more recent accounts of Spanish voyages by Christopher Columbus, writer-lawyer Hakluyt, and his cousin, Richard Hakluyt the Younger. Only years before, witch-hunters in Europe—especially in Germany—had accused suspected women of killing and eating babies.59 But the English were not averse to making use of human bodies for medical purposes. Doctors recorded treatments for epilepsy, vertigo, and other “lunatisms” that recommended eating dried placenta and powdered human skull, and these medical recipes, or receipts, made their way from pharmacoepias into contemporary cookbooks.60 These examples are not to suggest


60 John Partridge, trans., Thesaurus & Armamentarium Medico-Chymicum; Or, A Treasury of Physick. With the Most Secret Way of Preparing Remedies Against all Diseases. Obtained by Labour, confirmed by Practice, and published out of good will to Mankind. Being A Work of great Use for the Publick. Written Originally in Latine by that Eminent Physician Hadrianus à Mynsicht, Com. Patal. Med. Phys . . . (London, 1682), 89 (quotation), 83–84, 90, 96. For historical recipes that make use of medicinal cannibalism, see Note-Book of recipes, chiefly medical and culinary, in most cases with the names of the persons recommending them, and sometimes with the dates (1619–1674); in several hands, in British Library, Add. MS 36308, fol. 53; [—] St. John, Recipes for cookery and medicine, many of them bearing the names of the persons from whom they were obtained (c. 1754), ibid., Add. MS 29435, fol. 43; [Elizabeth Grey], A Choice Manuall, or Rare and
that recipes reflect what everyone was eating or that medicinal cannibalism shocked patients in the same way as Hakluyt’s account of European travelers shamefully admitting they had broiled and eaten meat “of such a mans buttocke”; rather, cannibalism could at times titillate and at other times represent conventional practices.61

When the English arrived in Virginia, they were astonished to find that the Powhatans were not man-eaters. Robert Appelbaum has suggested that the English, finding the Indians were not cannibals, claimed cannibalism for themselves. In remembering cannibalism during the Starving Time, George Percy and John Smith portrayed it as a deliberately non-Indian practice that otherwise followed English foodways. Unlike Chesapeake Indians who, according to incorrect European perceptions, adhered to a fast-and-feast cycle of eating, preferred their food raw, and did not preserve food, Englishmen refused to allow the natural absence of food to determine whether they would be allowed to eat.62 Once they acquired food, the eaters were restrained in their consumption; in Smith’s account, the colonists took the time to prepare the body with roots and herbs, and Percy and Smith recorded the colonists eating only part of the corpses at once. The eaters employed salting to preserve what was left of the bodies, indicating a

61 Richard Hakluyt, The Principal Navigations, in Taylor, Writings of the Two Richard Hakluys, 2: 385–96, esp. 2: 392. For the conclusion that cookbooks should not be used to assess what people ate, unless paired with other, less prescriptive sources, see Nancy Jenkins, “Martha Ballard: A Woman’s Place on the Eastern Frontier,” in Avakian and Haber, From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food, 109–19, esp. 109.

continuing concern with obtaining food. Such moves implied adherence to English foodways: even when starving, the English stored their food and ate it in moderation, allowing them to survive and maintain their Englishness in the most desperate of circumstances.

Percy's and Smith's accounts, however, are not to be trusted as exact portrayals of how people ate. And though some aspects of their stories might point to continuing English foodways, no evidence suggests that by spicing, salting, and storing human flesh the colonists thought they were making cannibalism a more acceptably English practice. Some parts of Percy's retelling, such as settlers licking blood from dying men, represent people not just drifting from English custom but descending into the worst kind of savagery and brutishness. Yet cannibalism was not a practice only associated with the wilds of the New World, since it was fairly well known in Europe.

Periods of famine and subsequent incidents of cannibalism were not new to English history in fantasy or in fact. In addition to rumors of ancient English cannibals and baby-eating witches, periods of dearth and famine in Europe prompted more recent stories of man-eating. Though yeomen-husbandmen aimed for and achieved self-sufficiency by farming with domesticated animals, laborers and cottagers could not always provide for themselves. Peasants sometimes starved, and there were significant food shortages in the 1550s and 1590s. Adam Berg, a printer in Munich, published a broadsheet illustrating peasants cooking and eating human flesh following 1573 famines in Reuss and Littau, and famines also occurred in the counties of Westmorland and Cumberland in 1587–88 and 1597.63 As Smith indicated with his prescient 1624 publication to a starving audience, famine was enough of a common experience that such tales would shock but not be wholly unfamiliar. This previous experience with starvation was probably why Dale, Gates, Strachey, and West were ready with laws to prevent future episodes.

Memories of the Starving Time combined with the continued belief that cannibalism had occurred played important roles in creating the colonists' collective sense of themselves as hardworking laborers in the first half of the seventeenth century. Remembering the Starving Time fostered a growing sense of optimism that such tragedy would not occur again. Ralph Hamor asked in 1615, “why should any man (if he be industrious) mistrust starving?”64 In 1617 John Rolfe observed that the colony was “plentifully stoored with food and other commodities” and wondered incredulously

64 Hamor, True Discourse of Virginia, 1132.
whether it was possibly “the same still it was, when men pined with famyn?” His point was like that of the other writers: Virginia had not changed but its colonists supposedly had.

A quarter century later, cannibalism still lingered in Virginians’ memory. In 1650 writer Edward Williams noted that “the incomparable Virgin hath raised her dejected head, cleared her encloused reputation, and now like the Eldest Daughter of Nature expresseth a priority in her Dowry . . . her unwounded wombe full of all those Treasuries which indeere Provinces to respect of glory.” He used the metaphor of a woman who had not yet given birth, which drew readers’ attention to the potential inherent in Virginia. After a second Starving Time, colonial leaders had fought off rumors of laziness, squashed stories of cannibalism, and instituted stricter laws. And the colony was finally prospering, though from tobacco instead of any sort of food.

Historian of Virginia Robert Beverley, writing in 1705, remembered that the first colonists “seem’d to have escaped, or rather not to have been concern’d in the first Curse, Of getting their Bread by the Sweat of their Brows . . . Living without Labour, and only gathering the Fruits of the Earth when ripe.” He recognized early settlers’ overly optimistic impressions of the land as well as their lack of motivation to work it. He then recalled the Starving Time: “They continued in these scanty Circumstances till they were at last reduced to such Extremity, as to eat the very Hides of their Horses, and the Bodies of the Indians they had killed; and sometimes also upon a Pinch they would not disdain to dig them up again to make a homely Meal of after they had been buried. And that Time is to this Day remember’d by the Name of the Starving Time.” And, indeed, this depiction is how historians remember the Starving Time even now: the eating of horses, the killing and eating of Indians, and the unburying of corpses for consumption in times of desperation. Without understanding the motivations of the men who circulated these stories as well as their personal incentives for telling or distorting the truth, however, these stories lack important context.

Historians need to reconsider cannibalism in Jamestown because the sources they draw on to describe the Starving Time are not transparent.

66 Edward Williams, Virgo Triumphants, Or, Virginia In Generall, but the South part therof in particular: Including the fertile Carolana, and the no lesse excellent Island of Roanoak, richly and experimentally valued (London, 1650), 44.
67 Robert Beverley, The History and Present State of Virginia, ed. Louis B. Wright (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1947), 17 (“seem’d to have escaped”), 35 (“They continued”).
records of fact. Of the five main authors—Gates, Percy, Smith, Strachey, and the Virginia Assembly—only one was present during the winter of 1609–10, and he did not claim to witness cannibalism. Furthermore the artfulness of Percy’s account and what he had to lose in the way of honor and personal reputation if no one believed his story raise questions about its credibility as a reliable source. All the other writers had suspect motives for writing, which certainly may have affected the way they described events: Gates did not want to be implicated in the colony’s near defeat and so denied starvation as well as man-eating, Smith was a self-promoting brag-gart, Strachey wanted to justify his involvement in propounding *Lavves Divine, Morall and Martiall*, and the Virginia Assembly borrowed stories of the Starving Time to smear unrelated events. The numerous discrepancies among versions make it impossible to determine for certain what actually happened in Virginia.

Nevertheless, cannibalism captured the early colonial imagination. The reiterations of tales describing cannibalism served as a turning point in Virginia’s history. They enabled colonists to shift from envisioning the New World as a place of boundless abundance to one of more realistic and measured possibility. The Starving Time functioned as a fortunate fall that allowed leaders to reassert control over unruly settlers and to impose laws controlling food production, dissemination, and consumption. Tales from the time also dictated refined rules for future English settlement. Men settling in other parts of the New World would take note of Virginians’ experiences. Unlike men in Jamestown, Plymouth settlers knew not to permit food hoarding. And though they also experienced a period of dearth, it was shorter than Jamestown’s, and no one was accused of eating anyone else. Plymouth colonists agreed before departing England that for seven years “all profits and benefits that are got by trade, traffic, trucking, working, fishing or any other means of any person or persons, remain still in the common stock.” After Jamestown future colonists instituted preventative measures to guard against famine, most likely because accounts of the Starving Time had already served their purpose, warning of dangers involved in settling the New World.

The circulation of Starving Time accounts raised awareness about the possibility of famine and justified stringent measures for preventing repeat occurrences. Once the Starving Time was long enough past, it allowed colonists to reflect on how far they had come. The stories of that winter helped to create one of the first myths in American history: the myth of Jamestown’s creation through the absence of food and settlers’ efforts to overcome starvation. Whether people believed early colonials practiced cannibalism, the failures of the Starving Time enabled Virginians to realize that they could try again, that future starvation was not inevitable, and that the possibilities for future colonial endeavors were, in fact, abundant.

Historiographical Note

Since the rise of the Annales school in the 1960s, scholars interested in material culture and everyday life have pursued the study of food, eating, and history. Food history has changed significantly from its beginnings, shifting from anecdotal accounts to popular histories of individual foods. Anthropologists have been writing about food and cannibalism far longer than historians, probably as early as the discipline's founding. In “The aborigines of Australia, the Maoris of New Zealand, the Hurons and Iroquois of America, the Ashanti of Africa, the Uscochi of the Balkans,” the Aztecs of Mexico, the Tupinamba of Brazil, and the Foré of Papua New Guinea, anthropologists have traced actual and perceived instances of anthropophagy. See Reay Tannahill, *Flesh and Blood: A History of the Cannibal Complex* (New York, 1975), 9. Early anthropologists saw cannibalism as an indicator of difference, a mark of savagery and primitivism. Perhaps in an effort to step away from judgmental depictions of other cultures, anthropologists began to write about anthropophagy with a sense of certainty that they were describing it exactly as it happened. Such scholarship sparked a heated debate in the late 1970s, initiated by W. Arens, in which anthropologists argued about specific instances of the practice. Around this time historians, too, began to mention cannibals in passing, without sufficiently analyzing the motives or points of view of their sources. Eventually, both disciplines reached a dead end on the subject. For historians, cannibalism was something to list when detailing Anglo-Indian relationships, and for anthropologists, it seemed like the catalyst to an endless debate in which neither side could agree.

This stalemate came to an end with the rise of postcolonial studies. Historians and anthropologists began to realize that arguing over whether anthropophagy took place was not a process that lent itself to the production of profitable scholarship. Instead, they decided to ask why cannibalism mattered so much to colonial observers. They started to look at perceptions of cannibalism among European explorers and to examine those impressions from a racialized and gendered perspective. For the most part, their work focused on Latin America and the Caribbean. Much remains to be done in North America, especially British North America, where fears about cannibalism shaped the European quest for food and the exchange of Anglo-Indian foodways. For a general discussion of food history, see “Historiography,” in Andrew F. Smith, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America* (Oxford, 2004), 1: 669–76, esp. 1: 672. Other examples are listed in the following paragraphs.

Only a few scholars have tackled the topics of cannibalism and food within the same work. For the writings of these historians and
