



Looking for Interpreter Zero: (9) Thomas Savage, Henry Spelman and Robert Poole

The settlement of Jamestown by the English in the early 17th century and the role of interpreters, whose stories give us a sense of the difficult position of intermediaries as well as a broader picture

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'Wee our selves have taught them how to be treacherous by our false dealings ... Spelman's death is just revenge [but] a great loss to us for that Cap. was the best linguist of the Indian tongue of the country [1].'

Sir Walter Raleigh's early attempts at settlement in Virginia informed the approach taken by the next wave of English colonists: Thomas Harriot's *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* and engravings based on John White's illustrations were well known, others had written memoirs and Native Americans had travelled to England. The Virginia Company representatives who founded Jamestown in May 1607 may well have felt that they knew what to expect. When Captain Christopher Newbolt spotted local people soon after reaching the American coast, he made a sign of friendship by placing his hand on his heart and felt welcomed by the Algonquians. Early encounters between colonists and native people depended on the sorts gestures and mimicry used in the 1580s but when more sophisticated communication was required, the settlers, like their predecessors, decided to train interpreters. This time, however, the linguists were English.

We have at least three names of interpreters for the settlers and the Native Americans: Thomas Savage, Henry Spelman and Robert Poole. All three of them were affected by the tensions and conflicts that marked relations between the two sides and they were also involved in disputes as they, like others, tried to find their place in a new world. Their stories give us a sense of the difficult position of intermediaries as well as a broader picture of what life was like for the settlers.

Nothing is known about **Thomas Savage's** life before he landed in Jamestown in January 1608, aged 13. He was supposed to work as a labourer but found himself accompanying John Smith, Newport and others to Werowocómoco - the seat of [Powhatan](#), ruler of the Tidewater and Chesapeake Indians - where he was introduced as Newport's son. He was left there when the settlers headed back to Jamestown, taking Powhatan's servant, Namontack with them instead. Both sides seemed to agree that these youngsters would learn Algonquian or English more easily than grown men - *'The motive was twofold: the boys could promote understanding and facilitate trade between cultures in times of peace, but they might also serve as informants in time of war. [2].'*

Conflict was certainly a risk. Savage was briefly expelled by Powhatan in May 1608 when he failed to get some Indian prisoners released from Jamestown. He returned once again to the English settlement after relations deteriorated badly during the 'Starving Time' of the winter of 1609/10. The

Algonquians certainly had no doubt as to his allegiance: when fighting broke out, they had a war chant against the man they knew as Thomas Newport, claiming they would *'do their best to wound or kill the interpreter despite his bright sword.'* [3] He survived and appears in the record after the war. His familiarity with local people and their culture served him well: Debedeavon, the Laughing King of the Accomacs, granted him nine thousand acres on the Eastern Shore, a peninsula between Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic in present-day Maryland, where he was the first English settler.

Henry Spelman arrived in Jamestown in August 1609. This son of a Norfolk antiquary had left home *'in displeasuer of my friends, and desirous to see other countries'* [4]. He too was left in an Algonquian village, with one of Powhatan's sons, as a guarantor of the settlers' good intentions. He wrote a memoir which includes sympathetic accounts of the land, buildings, customs and beliefs of the people among whom he lived some 18 months. It does not tell us much about his work as an interpreter, though one anecdote does show how risky it could be, as the messages he was asked to convey could be deceptive. He describes how Powhatan: *'sent me backe to our English bidding me to tell them, that if they would bring ther ship, and sum copper, he wold fraught his backe with corne, which having reported to our English and returning ther answer to ye Kinge, he before ther comminge layd plots to take them, which in sum sort he affected for [16 or 17] they killed ...'* [5]

In March 1610, Spelman settled with the Patawomeke people. His presence enabled them to negotiate a treaty with the Jamestown settlers. His loyalty came to be called into question in an incident which foreshadowed Thomas Savage's legal difficulties. In 1619 he was accused by fellow-interpreter **Robert Poole** of denouncing Jamestown governor Sir George Yeardley and predicting his replacement [6]. This led to the Virginia Assembly stripping him of his military rank and – setting an improbable precedent – sentencing him to serve as the governor's interpreter for seven years.

Poole had been in America since May 1611, having come with his father and brother on a ship bringing supplies to the settlement. In 1614 he had been assigned to [Opechancanough](#), a powerful leader whom the settlers thought would be Powhatan's successor and may have been caught up in a dispute among Jamestown's leaders as to which local leader to choose as an ally. The authorities' willingness to heed his accusations against Spelman gives a sense of the fraught nature of life in the settlement. Settlers far from home were loath to place their trust in those whose expertise they depended on: these linguists were as necessary and unwelcome to their projects as Portuguese navigators, Dutch fortifications builders and others whose vital know-how made them subject to suspicion. The interpreters' loyalty was questioned because they could communicate with local people. In March 1622 Savage warned Jamestown Governor Wyatt that Opechancanough was planning an attack but the Governor did not believe him. Three hundred and fifty colonists died. The Native Americans themselves were wary of their intermediaries. Spelman was killed in March 1623 by members of the Patawomeke tribe while trading for food on the Potomac. The complications of alliances, betrayals and suspicions affected the interpreters themselves: Savage came to grief in 1624 when he was convicted of slander and insubordination and sentenced to serve as interpreter to Governor Yeardley. He was clearly needed, even if distrusted, as was Poole. Both of them went on to prosper and fur traders and faded from the colony's record, having contributed to establishing interpreting as a profession in the New World.

To read previous chapters of *Looking for Interpreter Zero* click [here](#).

[2] McCarney, M., & Thomas Savage (ca. 1595-before September 1633). (2014, August 15). In Encyclopedia Virginia. Retrieved from http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Savage_Thomas_ca1595-before_September_1633

[3] Fausz J Frederick. (1987). 'Middlemen in Peace and War: Virginia's Earliest Indian Interpreters'. In The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, p 50

[4] Spelman, H. (1613) Relation of Virginia. Crandall Shifflett © 1999-2007. Retrieved from <http://www.virtualjamestown.org/>

[5] ibid

[6] Ordahl Kupperman, S 'The Love-Hate Relationship with Experts in the Early Modern Atlantic' in Early American Studies (Spring 2011) p 258

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