

The Starving Time: When horses & dogs were gone, they ate rats & snakes

October 17 2011, by Joseph M. McClain

The Starving Time came about after John Smith returned to England in 1609 and the uneasy truce he had brokered with the Powhatan Indians fell apart and led to the beginning of the First Anglo-Powhatan War.

“The First Anglo-Powhatan War was about food,” says James Whittenburg, the director for instruction at the National Institute of American History and Democracy (NIAHD). “The Powhatans could feed themselves during this time—but just. They didn’t have any food to trade with the colonists—and the colonists started taking food.”

Whittenburg says analysis of the Jamestown garbage middens shows evidence of colonists eating well in the first couple of years after Jamestown’s 1607 founding, dining on abundant seafood from the James River supplemented by corn received in trade from the natives. [Food](#) remains that were dated to the winter of 1609-1610—the Starving Time—paint a grimmer picture.

“They were eating their domestic animals,” Whittenburg said. “There are horse bones that show signs of butchering—dogs, too.”

Fear of Indian attacks kept the colonists inside their fort, eating a diet that led from horses and dogs to rats and even poisonous snakes. It also kept the colonists from seeking better water supplies, Whittenburg added.

He says historical descriptions of the Starving Time [colonists](#) correspond

with symptoms of people suffering from salt toxicity, including lethargy and irritability.

Provided by The College of William & Mary

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