Letter of John Rolfe, 1614

DOCUMENT NO. AJ-079

WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
DIGITAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

© Wisconsin Historical Society 2003
Letter of
John Rolfe,
1614

CONTENTS

Introduction ......................................................... 237
His Reasons for marrying Pocahontas ....................... 239

AMERICAN JOURNEYS COLLECTION
WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
DIGITAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
INTRODUCTION

John Rolfe, the author of this letter, came of an ancient family of Heacham, in the county of Norfolk, England, and was the son of John Rolfe and Dorothea Mason. He was baptized in the church at Heacham, May 6, 1585. In 1609 he went to Bermuda in the Third Supply with Sir Thomas Gates. While there, a wife, to whom he had been married in England, bore him a daughter, who was christened Bermuda, but soon died. The parents reached Virginia in May, 1610, where the mother died. Rolfe was the first Englishman to introduce the cultivation of tobacco in Virginia (1612). Not long after, Pocahontas was captured by Samuel Argall and brought to Jamestown. Rolfe fell in love with her and married her about April 5, 1614. Two months later he was made recorder of the colony; he remained in this office till 1619. He and his Indian bride went with Sir Thomas Dale, in 1616, to England, where Pocahontas was introduced at court by Lady Delaware and her portrait was engraved by Simon de Passe. While in England, he sent a description of Virginia to King James and to Sir Robert Rich. In the spring of 1617 he and Pocahontas made ready to return, with Samuel Argall as deputy-governor, when Pocahontas sickened and died at Gravesend, March 21, 1617. After his return Rolfe married Jane, daughter of Captain William Peirce, and had a grant of land in Mulberry Island. It was singular that this son-in-law of Powhatan should meet his death at the hands of the savages in the massacre of 1622. He left behind by Pocahontas one son,
Thomas Rolfe, who came to Virginia, where his descendants are still represented. This letter to Sir Thomas Dale, the deputy-governor, was published by Ralph Hamor in his tract entitled *A True Discourse of the Present Estate of Virginia and the Successe of the Affaires there till the 18 of June, 1614* (London, 1615), pp. 61–68.

L. G. T.
LETTER OF JOHN ROLFE, 1614

The coppie of the Gentle-mans letters to Sir Thomas Dale, that after married Powhatans daughter, containing the reasons moving him thereunto.

Honourable Sir, and most worthy Governor:

When your pleasure shall best serve you to peruse these lines, I trust in God, the beginning will not strike you into a greater admiration,¹ then the end will give you good content. It is a matter of no small moment, concerning my own particular, which here I impart unto you, and which toucheth mee so nearely, as the tendernes of my salvation. Howbeit I freely subject my selfe to your grave and mature judgement, deliberation, approbation and determination; assuring my selfe of your zealous admonitions, and godly comforts, either perswading me to desist, or incouraging me to persist therin, with a religious feare and godly care, for which (from the very instant, that this began to roote it selfe within the secret bosome of my brest) my daily and earnest praiers have bin, still are, and ever shall be produced forth with as sincere a godly zeale as I possibly may to be directed, aided and governed in all my thoughts, words and deedes, to the glory of God, and for my eternal consolation. To persevere wherein I never had more neede, nor (till now) could ever imagine to have bin moved with the like occasion.

But (my case standing as it doth) what better worldly refuge can I here seeke, then [than] to shelter my selfe under the safety of your favourable protection? And did not my case proceede from an unspotted conscience, I should not dare to offer to your view and approved judgement, these passions of

¹Surprise, or wonder.

239

American Journeys—www.americanjourneys.org
my troubled soule, so full of feare and trembling is hypocrisie and dissimulation. But knowing my owne innocency and godly fervor, in the whole prosecution hereof, I doubt not of your benigne acceptance, and clement construction. As for malicious depravers, and turbulent spirits, to whom nothing is tastful, but what pleaseth their unsavory pallat, I passe not for them being well assured in my perswasion (by the often triall and proving of my selfe, in my holiest meditations and praiers) that I am called hereunto by the spirit of God; and it shall be sufficient for me to be protected by your selfe in all vertuous and pious indevours. And for my more happie proceeding herein, my daily oblations \(^1\) shall ever be addressed to bring to passe so good effects, that your selfe, and all the world may truely say: This is the worke of God, and it is marvelous in our eies.

But to avoid tedious preambles, and to come neerer the matter: first suffer me with your patence, to swepe and make cleane the way wherein I walke, from all suspicions and doubts, which may be covered therein, and faithfully to reveale unto you, what should move me hereunto.

Let therefore this my well advised protestation, which here I make betweene God and my own conscience, be a sufficient witnesse, at the dreadfull day of judgement (when the secret of all mens harts shall be opened) to condemne me herein, if my chiefest intent and purpose be not, to strive with all my power of body and minde, in the undertaking of so mightie a matter, no way led (so farre forth as mans weaknesse may permit) with the unbridled desire of carnall affection: but for the good of this plantation, for the honour of our countreie, for the glory of God, for my owne salvation, and for the converting to the true knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, an unbeleiving creature, namely Pokahuntas. To whom my hartie and best thoughts are, and have a long time bin so intangled, and in-thralled in so intricate a laborinth, that I was even avaried to unwinde my selfe thereout. But almighty God, who never

\(^1\) Prayers.
faileth his, that truely invoke his holy name hath opened the
gate, and led me by the hand that I might plainly see and dis-
cerne the safe paths wherein to treade.

To you therefore (most noble Sir) the patron and Father of
us in this countrey doe I utter the effects of this my setted and
long continued affection (which hath made a mightie warre in
my meditations) and here I doe truely relate, to what issue this
dangerous combate is come unto, wherein I have not onely
examined, but throughly tried and pared my thoughts even to
the quicke, before I could finde any fit wholesome and apt
applications to cure so daungerous an ulcer. I never failed to
offer my daily and faithfull prayers to God, for his sacred and
holy assistance. I forgot not to set before mine eies the
frailty of mankinde, his prones\(^1\) to evill, his indulgence of
wicked thoughts, with many other imperfections wherein man
is daily insnared, and oftentimes overthrown, and them com-
pared to my present estate. Nor was I ignorant of the heavie
displeasure which almightie God conceived against the sonnes
of Levie and Israel for marrying strange wives, nor of the in-
conveniences which may thereby arise, with other the like
good motions which made me looke about warily and with good
circumspection, into the grounds and principall agitations,
which thus should provoke me to be in love with one whose
education hath bin rude, her manners barbarous, her genera-
tion accursed, and so discrepant in all nurtriture from my
selfe, that oftentimes with feare and trembling, I have ended
my private controversie with this: surely these are wicked
instigations, hatched by him who seeketh and delighteth
in mans destruction; and so with fervent prayers to be ever
preserved from such diabolical assaults (as I tooke those to be)
I have taken some rest.

Thus when I had thought I had obtained my peace and
quietnesse, beholde another, but more gracious tentation hath
made breaches into my holiest and strongest meditations; with
which I have bin put to a new triall, in a straighter manner

\(^1\) Proneness.
then the former: for besides the many passions and sufferings
which I have daily, hourly, yea and in my sleepe indured, even
awaking mee to astonishment, taxing mee with remi
nesse, and carelessnesse, refusing and neglecting to performe the dutie
of a good Christian, pulling me by the eare, and crying: why
dost not thou indevour to make her a Christian? And these
have happened to my greater wonder, even when she hath bin
furthest seperated from me, which in common reason (were it
not an undoubted worke of God) might breede forgetfulness
of a farre more worthie creature. Besides, I say the holy
spirit of God hath often demaunded of me, why I was created?
If not for transitory pleasures and worldly vanities, but to
labour in the Lords vineyard, there to sow and plant, to nourish
and increase the fruites thereof, daily adding with the good
husband in the Gospell, somewhat to the tallent, that in the
end the fruites may be reaped, to the comfort of the laborer
in this life, and his salvation in the world to come? And if
this be, as undoubtedly this is, the service Jesus Christ re-
quireth of his best servant: wo unto him that hath these in-
struments of piety put into his hands, and wilfully despiseth
towrke with them. Likewise, adding hereunto her great
apparance of love to me, her desire to be taught and instructed
in the knowledge of God, her capablenesse of understanding,
her aptnesse and willingnesse to receive anie good impression,
and also the spirituall, besides her owne incitements stirring
me up hereunto.

What should I doe? shall I be of so untoward a disposition,
as to refuse to leade the blind into the right way? Shall I
be so unnaturall, as not to give bread to the hungrie? or un-
charitable, as not to cover the naked? Shall I despise to
actuate these pious duties of a Christian? Shall the base
fear of displeasing the world, overpower and with holde mee
from revealing unto man these spirituall workes of the Lord,
which in my meditations and praieres, I have daily made knowne
unto him? God forbid. I assuredly trust hee hath thus delt
with me for my eternall felicite, and for his glorie: and I hope
so to be guided by his heavenly graice, that in the end by my
faithfull pains, and christianlike labour, I shall attaine to that
blessed promise, Pronounced by that holy Prophet Daniell
unto the righteous that bring many unto the knowledge of
God. Namely, that they shall shine like the starres forever
and ever. A sweeter comfort cannot be to a true Christian,
nor a greater incouragement for him to labour all the daies of
his life, in the performance thereof, nor a greater gaine of con-
solation, to be desired at the hower of death, and in the day
of judgement.

Againe by my reading, and conference with honest and
religious persons, have I received no small encouragement,
besides serena mea conscientia, the cleerenesse of my conscience,
clean from the filth of impurity, que est instar muri ahenei,
which is unto me, as a brasen wall. If I should set down at
large, the perturbations and godly motions, which have striven
within mee, I should but make a tedious and unnecessary
volume. But I doubt not these shall be sufficient both to
certifie you of my tru intents, in discharging of my dutie to
God, and to your selfe, to whose gracious providence I humbly
submit my selfe, for his glory, your honour, our Countreys good,
the benefit of this Plantation, and for the converting of one un-
regenerate, to regeneration; which I beseech God to graunte,
for his deere Sonne Christ Jesus his sake.

Now if the vulgar sort, who square \(^1\) all mens actions by
the base rule of their own filthinesse, shall taxe or taunt me in
this my godly labour: let them know, it is not any hungry ap-
petite, to gorge my selfe with incontinency; sure (if I would,
and were so sensually inclined) I might satisfie such desire,
though not without a seared conscience, yet with Christians
more pleasing to the eie, and lesse carefull in the offence un-
lawfully committed. Nor am I in so desperate an estate, that
I regard not what becommeth of mee; nor am I out of hope
but one day to see my Country, nor so void of friends, nor mean
in birth, but there to obtain a mach \(^2\) to my great content:
nor have I ignorantly passed over my hopes there, or regardlesly

\(^1\) Measure. \(^2\) Match.
seek to loose the love of my friends, by taking this course: I
know them all, and have not rashly overslipt any.

But shall it please God thus to dispose of me (which I ear-
nestly desire to fulfill my ends before sette down) I will heartely
accept of it as a godly taxe appointed me, and I will never
cease, (God assisting me) untill I have accomplished, and
brought to perfection so holy a worke, in which I will daily
pray God to blesse me, to mine, and her eternall happynes.
And thus desiring no longer to live, to enjoy the blessings of
God, then [than] this my resolution doth tend to such godly
ends, as are by me before declared: not doubting of your
favourable acceptance, I take my leave, beseeching Almighty
God to raine downe upon you, such plenitude of his heavenly
graces, as your heart can wish and desire, and so I rest,

At your commaund most willing
to be disposed off

JOHN ROLFE.