The "Starving Time," winter of 1609-1610

Just as John Smith was leaving Jamestown, the Virginia Company was sending Sir Thomas Gates with another supply. Unfortunately, Gates's ship and several others encountered a storm and shipwrecked at Bermuda (about 120 miles off the coast of Virginia). The time from Smith's departure to the arrival of Gates has come to be called "the starving time." A pamphlet titled A True Declaration of the Estate in Virginia, written in 1610, describes this period.

A True Declaration of the Estate in Virginia (1610)
Published by advise and direction of the Councell of Virginia.

[All] The ground of all those miseries, was the permissive providence [protective care] of God, who, in the fore-mentioned violent storm, separated the head from the body, all the vital powers of regiment being exiled with Sir Thomas Gates in those unfortunate (yet fortunate) Islands [Bermuda]. The broken remainder of those supplies made a greater shipwreck in the continent of Virginia, by the tempest of dissention [disagreement]: every man overvaluing his own worth, would be a Commander: every man underprizing another’s value, denied to be commanded. . . . How much more easily might ambitious discord tear in pieces an infant Colony, where no eminent and respected magistrates had authorities to punish presumptuous [arrogant] disobedience. . . .

[1] The next fountain of woes was secure negligence, and improvidence [lack of foresight], when every man sharked for his present bootie, but was altogether careless of succeeding penury [poverty]. Now, I demand whether Sicilia, or Sardinia (sometimes the barns of Rome) could hope for increase without manuring? A Colony is therefore denominated, because they should be Colony, the tillers of the earth, and stewards of fertility: our mutinous loiterers would not sow with providence, and therefore they reaped the fruits of too dear-bought repentance. An incredible example of their idleness, is the report of Sir Thomas Gates, who affirmeth, that after his first coming thither, he hath seen some of them eat their fish raw, rather than they would go a stones cast to fetch wood and dress it. Dij laboribus omnia vendunt, God sells us all things for our labor, when Adam himself might not live in paradise without dressing the garden.

[2] Unto idleness, you may join treasons, wrought by those unhallowed creatures that forsook the Colony, and exposed their desolate brethren to extreme misery. You shall know that 28. or 30. of the company, were appointed (in the Ship called the Swallow) to truck [trade] for Corn with the Indians, and having obtained a great quantity by trading, the most seditious of them, conspired together, persuaded some, & enforced others, to this barbarous project. They stole away the Ship, they made a league amongst themselves to be professed pirates, with dreams of
mountains of gold, and happy robberies: thus at one instant, they wronged the hopes, and
subverted the cares of the Colony, who depending upon their returned, fore-slowed to look out
for further provision: they created the Indians our implacable enemies by some violence they
had offered: they carried away the best Ship (which should have been a refuge, in extremities:)
they weakened our forces, by subtraction of their arms, and succors [support]. These are that
scum of men that failing in their piracy, that being pinched with famine and penury, after their
wild rowing upon the Sea, when all their lawless hopes failed, some remained with other
pirates, they met upon the Sea, the others resolved to return for England, bound themselves by
mutual oath, to agree all in one report, to discredit the land, to deplore the famine, and to
protest that this their coming away, proceeded from desperate necessity: These are they, that
roared out the tragical history of the man eating of his dead wife in Virginia; when the master
of this Ship willingly confessed before 40 witnesses, that at their coming away, they left three
months victuals [food], and all the cattle living in the Fort: sometimes they reported that they
saw this horrible action, sometimes that Captain Davies said so, sometimes that one Beadle the
Lieutenant of Captain Davies did relate it, varying this report into diversity of false colors, which
hold no likeness and proportion: But to clear all doubts, Sir Thomas Gates thus relateth the
tragedy.

There was one of the company who mortally hated his wife, and therefore secretly killed her,
then cut her in pieces and hid her in diverse parts of his house: when the woman was missing,
the man suspected, his house searched, and parts of her mangled body were discovered, to
excuse himself he said that his wife died, that he hid her to satisfy his hunger, and that he fed
daily upon her. Upon this, his house was again searched, where they found a good quantity of
meal, oatmeal, beans and peas. He thereupon was arraigned [brought to court], confessed the
murder, and was burned for his horrible villainy[...]

[3] [...]Unto Treasons, you may join covetousness in the Mariners, who for their private lucre
partly embezzled the provisions, partly prevented our trade with the Indians, making the
matches in the night, and forestalling our market in the day: whereby the Virginians were
glutted [satisfied] with our trifles, and enhanced the prices of their Corn and Victuals. That
Copper which before would have provided a bushel [8 gallons], would not now obtain so much
as a pottle [half gallon]: . . . the consequent of sordid gain is untimely wretchedness.

Join unto these another evil: there is great store of Fish in the river, especially of Sturgeon; but
our men provided no more of them, then for present necessity, not barreling up any store
against that season the Sturgeon returned to the sea. And not to dissemble their folly, they
suffered fourteen nets (which was all they had) to rot and spoil, which by orderly drying and
mending might have been preserved: but being lost, all help of fishing perished. Quanto maior...
timentur dispendia, tanto promptior debet esse cautela, fundamental losses that cannot be repealed, ought with the greatest caution to be prevented.

[4] The state of the Colony, by these accidents began to find a sensible declining: which Powhatan (as a greedy Vulture) observing, and boiling with desire of revenge, he invited Captain Ratcliffe, and about thirty others to trade for Corn, and under the color of fairest friendship, he brought them within the compass of his ambush, whereby they were cruelly murdered, and massacred. For upon confidence of his fidelity, they went one and one into several houses, which caused their several destructions, when if but any six had remained together, they would have been a bulwark [defensive wall] for the general preservation. After this, Powhatan in the night cut off some of our boats, he drove away all the Deer into the farther part of the Country, he and his people destroyed our Hogs, (to the number of about six hundred) he sent none of his Indians to trade with vs, but laid secret ambushes in the woods, that if one or two dropped out of the fort alone, they were endangered.

[All] Cast up this reckoning together: want of government, store of idleness, their expectations frustrated by the Traitors, their market spoiled by the Mariners, our nets broken, the deer chased, our boats lost, our hogs killed, our trade with the Indians forbidden, some of our men fled, some murdered, and most by drinking of the brackish water of James fort weakened, and endangered, famine and sickness by all these means increased here at home the monies came in so slowly, that the Lo. Laware could not be dispatched, till the Colony was worn and spent with difficulties: Above all, having neither Ruler, nor Preacher, they neither feared God nor man, which provoked the wrath of the Lord of Hosts, and pulled down his judgments upon them. Discite iustitiam moniti. Now, (whether it were that God in mercy to us would weed out these rank hemlocks; or whether in judgment to them he would scourge their impieties; or whether in wisdom he would try our patience, Vt magna magnè desideremus, that we may beg great blessings earnestly) our hope is that our Sun shall not set in a cloud, since this violent storm is dispersed, since all necessary things are provided, an absolute and powerful government is settled, as by this ensuing relation shall be described.

After discussing each section with your group, individually you will answer the following questions in 2-3 paragraphs each, supported with examples and evidence from the whole document.

1. How does the author describe the "starving time"?
2. Where does the author place the blame for this situation?