On the morning of March 22, 1622 in a highly coordinated attack, the Pamunkey Indians of Virginia and their allies fell upon the English settlements that had been spreading alarmingly on both sides of the James River for the preceding four years and wiped out or took captive about a third of the English population. Edward Waterhouse in London compiled the official Virginia Company account of the “Barbarous Massacre in the time of peace and League” out of the letters and personal reports that made their way home. The reports affirmed that the “utter extirpation” of the English had been the Pamunkeys’ goal, “which God of his mercy (by the meanes of some of themselves converted to Christianitie) prevented.” The planters had encouraged “daily familiarity” with their American neighbors “for the desire we had of effecting that great master-piece of workes, their conversion. And by this meanes that fatall Friday morning, there fell under the bloudy and barbarous hands of that perfidious and inhumane people, contrary to all lawes of God and men, of Nature and Nations, three hundred forty seven men, women, and children, most by their owne weapons; and not being content with taking away life alone, they fell after againe upon the dead, making as well as they could, a fresh murder, defacing, dragging, and mangling the dead carkasses into many pieces, and carrying some parts away in derision, with base and bruitish triumph.” Robert Beverley argued that the Pamunkeys’ reason for trying to destroy all the English was to leave “none behind to bear Resentment.”

“Lyons and Dragons…(as Histories record)” have spared their benefactors, but “these miscreants…put on a worse and more then unnaturall bruitishnesse” and killed those who had been kindest to them. The worst example was the fate of “that worthy religious Gentleman, Master George Thorpe.”

George Thorpe, M. P. and
gentleman of the king’s privy chamber, had gone to Virginia in March 1620 to inaugurate an Indian college and a program of religious conversion. The context of the college plan was the Virginia Company’s reorganization in 1618 and the offer of land to all prospective planters. With tobacco established as a cash crop, that land was valuable and the settlers spread over the terrain in wave after wave.

A call went out from the bishops, and pious donors in England contributed £1,500. The money, combined with Virginia Company allotments, financed a 10,000-acre plantation at Henrico to be worked by fifty servants, with the proceeds going to support the college. Indian children, backers hoped, would come to board at the college and experience total immersion in English culture; trade goods, judiciously distributed, would encourage parents to send their children. John Rolfe, back in Virginia after his wife Pocahontas’s death in England, reassured Virginia Company backers: “The Indyans very loving, and willing to parte with their childeren. My wives death is much lamented; my childe much desyred . . .” Young Thomas Rolfe had been left in England.2

William Strachey, colony secretary, had urged “that holie Cause” of conversion in his Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania, which circulated in manuscript from 1612. Playing on the theme that the Americans resembled England’s Anglo-Saxon ancestors, and punning on the resemblance between “Angles” and “Angels,” he wrote:

Wild as they are, accept them, so were we,
To make them civill, will our honour bee,
And if good workes be the effects of mindes
That like good Angells be, let our designes
As we are Angli, make us Angells too
No better work can Church or statesman doe.3

As Waterhouse wrote, Thorpe “did so truly and earnestly affect their conversion, and was so tender over them, that whosoever under his authority had given them but the least displeasure or discontent, he punished them severely. He thought nothing too deare for them.” Thorpe himself described his strategy in a letter home to Virginia Company leader Sir Edwin Sandys. He would teach first from “the booke of the worlde as beinge nearest to theire sence,” and he expected “the winning of them by degrees.” He was pleased to see that the Powhatans “begin more and more to affect English ffassions.” As they “wilbe much alured to affect us by giftes,” Thorpe hoped the