



Webcast stars 'America's hometown'

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WILLIAMSBURG, Virginia (AP) -- Capt. John Smith wouldn't have recognized the place.

Lights, cameras and about 150 students assembled Thursday in one corner of a replica of Jamestown's triangular fort for a live, one-hour webcast about America's first permanent English settlement.

The program is part of an 18-month series of events commemorating the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown in 1607 by Smith and others.

Host and PBS journalist Gwen Ifill said at the webcast's start that "the journey of three ships from England changed the world," touching off the mixing of three cultures -- American Indians, Europeans and Africans -- and leading to the birth of the United States.

Organizers estimated more than 1 million students and educators from the United States and about a dozen other countries participated in "Jamestown Live." The production originated from the Jamestown Settlement living history museum, near the site of the original fort.

"This is America's hometown, where America started, so it's pretty cool," said Kori Caswell, 13, a seventh-grader from Hannibal, Mo.

Caswell was among the "student ambassadors" selected to travel to Jamestown to represent the states, the District of Columbia, a Department of Defense school in Germany and the U.S. territory of American Samoa. The live audience also included students from around Virginia.

The program also included pre-taped segments showing student reporters interviewing historians, an Indian chief, an astronaut and others about Jamestown's legacies of representative government, cultural diversity and the spirit of exploration.

Some of the experts also answered questions, including one from a boy in the audience who wanted to know what the Indians called the nearby James River. Indians still call the river the Powhatan in honor of the powerful leader who ruled a large chiefdom at the time the English settlers arrived, said Stephen Adkins, chief of Virginia's Chickahominy Indian tribe.

Afterward, students in the audience said they learned a lot. "It was very informative, and they did it in a fun way," including performances of songs with historical themes, said eighth-grader Wendy Clay, 13. "I liked hearing the story of Jamestown" told from the perspectives of people other than settlers.

Clay said she was surprised to find out that the first Africans to arrive in America, at Point Comfort near Jamestown in 1619, were indentured servants, not slaves.

Rex Ellis, vice president of the Historic Area at nearby Colonial Williamsburg, explained during the webcast that laws didn't establish slavery until 1680, making the status of Africans who came earlier uncertain.