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Historic Narrative - Section 1

Foreword

The truth about the first years of the Jamestown colony is difficult to establish. Almost every aspect of this era is a subject of debate among historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists, as well as a frequent source of confusion among members of the public. Much of the problem lies in the fact that all of the contemporary letters and books were written by one party to the story—the English—who came to America bearing a culture almost as unfathomable to the native peoples as their cultures were to the newcomers. Each side had expectations, suspicions, and fears about the other, which, when combined with cultural conflicts and the language barrier, produced misunderstandings that sometimes resulted in bloodshed. The colonists also suffered the consequences of internal conflicts, social divisions, and personal feuds. Historians therefore encounter books and letters written in antique English, whose authors, busily grinding their own axes, present parts of one side of the story and see the American Indian side as through a glass, darkly. The historian’s challenge is thus made doubly difficult: to understand, interpret, and write clearly for the public about the worldviews and cultures of two societies that are vastly different from most people’s experiences today. Historians must also persuade the public—the audience members who will eventually travel the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Water Trail—that almost everything they thought they knew about the period is wrong, or at least in need of serious reconsideration. The power of myth is difficult to overcome.

Telling the story of this early period in our nation’s history, then, requires asking and debating the most basic questions of analysis and interpretation. The questions change and the debates intensify as forgotten documents are rediscovered, records thought familiar are read again, and marvelous artifacts are brought from under the ground up into the light. This study begins with the native peoples who lived around the Chesapeake Bay, not only because they were there when the English arrived, but also because it appears that during much of the period under discussion the Powhatan dominated the English, not the other way around. The English survived at first at the sufferance and with the continual assistance of the native peoples, not because the newcomers were paragons of outstanding leadership, exemplary teamwork, effective social skills, judicious planning, and imaginative adaptability. This study also focuses primarily on the Virginia Indians because it was with them that the English had the most frequent interactions and about whom more is known through contemporary writings combined with recent archaeological investigations.

The three principal figures in the story are Powhatan, Opechancanough, and Captain John Smith. Powhatan was the charismatic leader of the people in whose land the English settled in 1607. Opechancanough, a skillful planner and war leader, engineered a devastating attack on the colonists in 1622. Both men dealt during the first years of the colony with John Smith, the

EXCERPT FROM THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
APPROVED STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE PROPOSED
CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH CHESAPEAKE NATIONAL HISTORIC WATER TRAIL



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soldier of fortune whose forceful personality attracted either devotion or hatred from his contemporaries. Much of the narrative that follows focuses on the Powhatan domain or polity because it was there that the English had their first and longest-lasting contacts with the native peoples, and because much was written about those contacts during John Smith's sojourn in America. The interactions between the English and the Powhatan became the model—for good and ill—for future interactions between the newcomers and the native peoples throughout North America.

John Smith remains a fascinating character today, because of the volumes of writings he left behind and the strong feelings for and against him evident in the writings of others. Historians still debate his veracity—we know he sometimes lied, because he told us so himself—but he was also frequently truthful. From his explorations of the Chesapeake Bay came a map so accurate that it remained useful for most of the seventeenth century, and his books influenced the history of the settlement and commerce of North America. Both Smith and his journeys through the Bay are of national significance to the story of our country.