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Historic Narrative - Section 2

The Chesapeake Bay Region and Its People in 1607

The large body of relatively shallow water today called Chesapeake Bay was—about four centuries ago—the center of the world for the people who lived along its shores and tributaries. Large rivers and small streams flowed into the Bay from the east and the west, serving the inhabitants as liquid highways. The Bay itself teemed with aquatic life that also enriched the rivers and streams: sturgeon, striped bass, menhaden, white perch, eels, crabs, oysters, mussels, and clams were all found in great abundance. For thousands of years, the native peoples used the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries for transportation, migration, communication, and trade. Fish and shellfish not only provided food for the people, but shells served as valuable trade goods, especially those that could be worked into scarce “blue” beads.

A deep forest covered most of the land around the Bay. Some of it was ancient, with massive trees, scant undergrowth, and occasional meadows. Oaks, hickories, and chestnuts abounded, as well as pines, and deer, squirrels, rabbits, opossums, raccoons, bears, foxes, wolves, bobcats, and beavers were among the common mammals of the Chesapeake woods, fields, and water-courses.

The people who occupied the coastal plain in approximately the southern half of the Bay in present-day Virginia called their territory Tsenacomoco. Its boundaries extended, in modern parlance, roughly from somewhat below the south side of the mouth of the James River north to the south bank of the Potomac River, and from the Eastern Shore of Virginia west to approximately the fall line of the rivers, where the coastal plain meets the central piedmont’s rolling terrain. The people of Tsenacomoco lived in towns, large and small, located along the principal waterways and their tributaries. Town sites offered advantages in arable land, fishing, hunting, and communication. A “typical” large town sprawled—by European standards—over many acres through fields and woods. Often, an entire town could not be seen all at once. It usually contained garden plots, dwellings, storehouses, and ceremonial and religious structures. The buildings were constructed of poles overlaid with bark or woven mats. Towns might be occupied or virtually deserted at various times of the year, depending on the demands of gardening, hunting, and fishing. The towns also “migrated” slowly along the rivers as the people reconstructed dwellings closer to fresh arable land. Sometimes the people packed up their towns and moved them to new locations. They also occupied temporary towns or camps during hunts. They periodically set parts of the woods afire to remove undergrowth and keep the forest open.

Tsenacomoco’s people—whom the English called the Powhatan—were Algonquian speakers residing in the southernmost range of linguistically related people who occupied the East Coast from coastal North Carolina into New England and who lived in similar towns. A small town named Powhatan, encircled by a palisade, stood at the lower end of the falls of the James River.

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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It was the native town of the principal leader also named Powhatan (another of his names was Wahunsenacawh). Born perhaps about 1547, Powhatan had inherited a domain or polity encompassing a number of tribal districts and a large territory that he further enlarged by diplomacy as well as conquest. The tribal districts within the polity were led by werowances or chiefs answerable to Powhatan, the paramount chief. The Powhatan polity was most secure in the middle, near the town at the center of power called Werowocomoco. Less-committed tribes and allies lived along the fringes, and beyond them lived other tribes and other polities.

The principal Powhatan districts along the James River from the Chesapeake Bay upstream were the Chesapeake, Nansemond, Kecoughtan, Warraskoyack, Quiyoughcohannock, Paspahegh, Weyanock, Appomattoc, Arrohattoc, and Powhatan. The Chickahominy, located on the river named for them, successfully resisted becoming part of the Powhatan polity but remained allies. They also were governed by a council rather than a werowance. Up the Pamunkey (York) River were the Kiskiack, Werowocomoco, Pamunkey, Mattaponi, and Youghtanund. The Piankatank were on the river of the same name. On the Rappahannock River were the Opiscopank, Cuttatawomen, Moraughtachund, Rappahannock, Pissaseck, Nantaughtacund, and Upper Cuttatawomen. The allied Wicocomoco (Wighcocomoco), Chicacoan (Sekakawon), Onawmanient, and Patawomeck occupied the Potomac River. On the Eastern Shore, the Accomac and the Accohannock were part of the polity.

Outside the polity, the greatest threat to Powhatan came from the west, from the Monacan on the upper James River. The Mannahoac, who occupied the upper reaches of the Rappahannock River, also raided the western border. Both groups were Siouan speakers. Farther north, at the head of the Chesapeake Bay, were the Susquehannock. And in the very far north, principally in present-day Ohio near the Great Lakes, lived the Massawomeck, who periodically raided as far south as the Shenandoah Valley and upper Tidewater Virginia and were much feared. An array of other tribes and polities occupied present-day northern Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania in the vicinity of the Chesapeake. Major polities included the Piscataway on the north shore of the Potomac River and the Nanticoke across the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland.

In the Powhatan world (and throughout the Chesapeake), men were warriors and hunters, while women were gardeners and gatherers. The English described the men, who ran and walked extensively through the woods in pursuit of enemies or game, as tall and lean and possessed of handsome physiques. The women were shorter, and were strong because of the hours they spent tending crops, pounding corn into meal, gathering nuts, and performing other domestic chores. When the men undertook extended hunts, the women went ahead of them to construct hunting camps. The Powhatan domestic economy depended on the labor of both sexes.