

## *An Epic Chesapeake Adventure* Official Press Materials

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF SMITH'S VOYAGES

The following is an excerpt from the article, *EXPLORING THE CHESAPEAKE BAY WITH CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH: 1608 AND 2007*, by Philip J. Webster and Christopher Cerino to be published in the April 2007 issue of *Sea History Magazine*.

#### **The Jamestown Colony and Captain John Smith**

In December 1606, three small ships named the *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed* and *Discovery* set sail from England carrying just over 100 Englishmen bound for the New World. The settlers' mission was to establish the first permanent English settlement in North America. In the process, they hoped to locate precious minerals, find an all-water route to the Pacific Ocean, and convert the Natives to Christianity. After a harrowing four-month ocean crossing, the vessels safely arrived at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. Shortly thereafter, a site for a fort was selected on the shores of one of the Bay's major tributaries, which the colonists named the James River after their King. The settlement was called Jamestown.

One member of the colony's first governing council was Captain John Smith. A man of modest means, Smith had already led an extraordinary life before ever setting foot in the New World. Prior to his twenty-sixth birthday, he had fought in the Dutch wars for independence from Spain, battled the Turks in Hungary, been captured and sold into slavery, and traveled extensively throughout Europe and North Africa. His adventures abroad helped Smith develop survival skills that made him uniquely suited to deal with the challenges the English colonists would face in North America.

By all accounts, the first year at Jamestown was a difficult one. Starvation, disease, and armed conflicts with the Indians took the lives of nearly half the settlers in the first six months of the colony's existence. John Smith's expertise in military matters and foreign relations quickly thrust him into the forefront of Jamestown's political affairs. In August 1607, Smith was put in charge of relations with the Indians, a position which became increasingly important as the colonists' food supplies dwindled. In the fall of 1607, his trading missions to the Indian villages on the shores of the James and Chickahominy Rivers almost single-handedly allowed the Englishmen to survive the winter of 1607-08, providing much needed stores of corn, fish, venison and oysters.

#### **Into The Unknown: Captain Smith's Explorations of the Chesapeake Bay**

By June 1608, more than one year after the first landing, few of the settlers had ventured further than the James and York Rivers, the two tributaries closest to the safety of the Jamestown fort. As a result, the Englishmen still knew little about the geography of the Chesapeake Bay and even less about its inhabitants. The length of the Bay's main stem was unknown, and it was still believed that one of its larger tributaries might provide the Englishmen with an all water route to the Pacific Ocean and the riches of the Orient. Many colonists held out hope that the estuary's shores were lined with gold and silver

## *An Epic Chesapeake Adventure*

### Official Press Materials

deposits. The men had no knowledge of the Indian nations inhabiting the waterways outside of present-day Virginia, or what trading commodities they had to offer.

Against this backdrop, Captain John Smith set forth on June 2, 1608 to map and explore the great estuary. Carrying only the most basic supplies and propelling themselves by oar and sail, Smith and his men covered more than 2,500 miles in just over three months – from June 2 to September 7, 1608 – while exploring to the fall-line of almost every major tributary on the Chesapeake Bay. Along the way, the men braved heat, exhaustion, summer squalls, adverse wind conditions and attacks from the Natives.

#### **The Exploration of the Chesapeake, Voyage 1: June 2 – July 21**

The vessel Smith and his men used for his expedition was a stout open workboat known as a shallop, or the Discovery Barge as they called it. It had been pre-assembled in Europe and transported across the Atlantic Ocean in sections in the hold of the *Susan Constant*, the largest vessel in the fleet. When the settlers made landfall at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay on April 26, 1607, the sections were hoisted on deck and reassembled in two days. The resulting craft was roughly thirty feet in length, powered by oar and sail, and capable of holding up to twenty five men. Sturdily built and somewhat cumbersome to maneuver, the shallop was ideally suited for coastal patrol and carrying out trading missions with the Indians.

To man the vessel, Smith recruited fourteen settlers with a variety of skill sets. Crewmembers included “gentlemen”, a fisherman, a physician, a carpenter, a tailor, a sailor, a blacksmith, and soldiers. After loading the shallop with provisions and trade goods, the men headed out of the James River and sailed across the Bay to the uncharted territory of the lower Delmarva Peninsula. On June 3, 1608, they had their first encounter with Indians on the Eastern Shore when they spied two natives fishing in the shallows “with long poles like Javelings, headed with bone”. The men invited the settlers to the Indian town of Accomack, where they met the chief and were “kindly treated”. After hearing the chief give them “..such descriptions of the Bay, isles and rivers that often did us exceeding pleasure”, they moved north.

Any modern mariner who has sailed the Chesapeake during the summer months has experienced the sudden thunderstorms that seemingly come from nowhere towards the end of many hot, humid days. In moments, languid afternoons are interrupted by full-force gales complete with fifty mile per hour gusts, heavy rains, lightning, and even hail. Often, the summer squalls dissipate just as quickly as they arrived. On June 4, as Smith’s party headed for Tangier Island, the explorers found themselves engulfed in just such a storm. Within minutes, Smith reported, “...such an extream gust of wind, raine, thunder and lightening happened, that with great daunger, we escaped the unmercifull raging of the ocean-like water.” The men barely survived the tempest after furiously bailing out water and heading back to safe harbor on the Eastern Shore.

## *An Epic Chesapeake Adventure*

### Official Press Materials

The next day, the party explored Watts and Tangier Islands and turned east to the mouth of the Pocomoke River in search of fresh drinking water. Smith met warriors from the Wicocomoco nation, who guided them upriver perhaps as far as present-day Snow Hill, Maryland. The quality of the water they found there was "... such a puddle that never till then wee ever knew the want of good water." Now desperate for provisions, the party headed north through Tangier Sound when they were caught in another violent storm. This time, high winds blew down the mast and tore the sail. After staying on Bloodsworth Island for three days making repairs, the explorers sailed northeast into the Nanticoke River.

Approaching a narrow section of the Nanticoke, the men were suddenly showered with arrows. Smith anchored the shallop in mid-river, safely out of range. Later that afternoon, a Nanticoke fishing party paddling upstream approached the shallop, unaware of what had transpired earlier in the day. After receiving a friendly reception from the settlers, the natives paddled off to tell their tribesmen of the explorers' intention to trade. Soon, hundreds of Indians appeared on the shoreline with gifts. Smith would later call the Nanticoke "the best merchants of all other Savages". The Indians provided Smith with valuable knowledge about the geography of the Eastern Shore, informing him that it was but a peninsula between the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays and the Atlantic Ocean. They also told Smith of "a great nation called Massawomeck" that lived in the western mountains. Tiring of the marshy Eastern Shore, and eager to meet the Massawomeck, Smith decided to cross the Bay and explore further north.

After reaching the Western Shore near present-day Calvert Cliffs, the party voyaged to the mouth of the Patapsco River. Smith and his men explored past where Baltimore now stands and went on foot to the first falls of the river. There they placed a brass cross, marking the furthest advance north on the first leg of their adventure. Now two weeks into the expedition, Smith's men were beginning to tire of life aboard the shallop. Smith remarked that they "... were oft tired at their oares, their bread spoiled with wet, so much that it was rotten, yet so good were their stomacks that they could digest it." Smith urged them on. "Gentlemen ... what shame it would be for you to force me to return with a month's provision, scarce able to say where we have bin, nor yet heard of that wee were sent to seeke ... As for your feares that I will lose myselfe in these unknown large waters, or be swallowed up in some stormie gust, abandon these childish feares, for worse than is past cannot happen, and there is as much danger to returne as to proceed forward ... return I will not til I have seen ... the head of this greate water you conceit to be endless."

Smith, the leader, had spoken, but adverse weather intervened, and the shallop headed south back to Jamestown. On their way down the Bay, the explorers "discovered" the mouth of the Potomac River, which had been missed during the first part of the voyage. The Potomac's size and orientation to the northwest made it the best candidate yet to deliver an all-water route to the Pacific Ocean, and the river had been rumored to contain precious minerals. Reenergized by the promise of instant riches, the exhausted men made a speedy recovery and entered the mouth of the great river.

## *An Epic Chesapeake Adventure*

### Official Press Materials

It was June 14. Two Indians in a canoe approached, inviting Smith to visit their village on the south bank. On entering Nomini Creek, the company was ambushed. Several hundred men emerged, "... so strangely painted, grimed and disguised, showing, yelling and crying, as we rather supposed them so many devils." Smith and his men fired their muskets for effect, but not to harm the Natives. The Indians laid down their bows and arrows, and spears, awed perhaps by the unexpected display of English might. Hostages were exchanged, and a friendly discussion ensued.

Smith and his crew spent the next four weeks exploring the Potomac with the aid of a bearded Indian guide named Mosco, whose thick facial hair suggested he had European ancestry. They explored to the Little Falls of the Potomac, a mile upstream from today's Washington, and on foot perhaps as far as Great Falls. Along the way, they visited numerous Indian towns and received generally hospitable receptions. They even mined for a silver-like ore, which later proved to be of no commercial value when assayed in England. Everywhere they looked, they discovered a wealth of wildlife scurrying about in the forests – deer, bear, otter, mink, martin, raccoon, beaver, opossum, wildcats and flying squirrels. The abundance of marine life was no less amazing. They found "... fish lying so thicke with their heads above water, as for want of nets we attempted to catch them with a frying pan: but we found it a bad instrument to catch fish with ..."

On July 17, having left the Potomac, Smith and company sailed south toward the Rappahannock River. At the mouth of the river, the shallop ran aground on a sandbar. While waiting for high tide, the crew hopped overboard to fish in the shallows. Here, John Smith cheated death once again. After spearing a stingray with his sword, he was stung on the wrist by its poisonous barb while removing it from his weapon. Within minutes, Smith's arms, shoulder and chest swelled so extremely that he feared he was dying. He ordered the men to dig his grave, but miraculously recovered in time to eat the ray for supper! The location is still known by the name Smith gave it - Stingray Point.

Still feeling the effect of the stingray incident, Smith decided to forego his exploration of the Rappahannock and headed back for Jamestown. He arrived on July 21, 1608 to find the settlement in disarray. Sick and dying men lay about the fort, and the acting President was in danger of being overthrown by an angry mob. In short order, Smith had the President deposed and installed his friend Matthew Scrivener in his place. Then, after resting for three days, he set out again with twelve men to finish his exploration of the Chesapeake Bay.

### **The Exploration of the Chesapeake, Voyage 2: July 24 – September 7**

Aided by favorable winds, Smith and his crew made haste to the uncharted waters north of the Patapsco River. On July 30, they reached the head of the Bay, where they saw the estuary divide into four large rivers: the Susquehanna, North East, Elk and Sassafras. At this point, many of the men had fallen ill, leaving only six able sailors to manage the shallop. While severely undermanned, they faced an encounter with the powerful Massawomeck. Several birch bark canoes filled with armed warriors approached the

## *An Epic Chesapeake Adventure* Official Press Materials

party near the mouth of the Sassafraz River. Thinking quickly, Smith laid his sick men under a tarp. He then placed their hats on sticks and put muskets by the gunwales to create the perception of a large and healthy crew. When the Massawomeck saw the fictitious English force, they retreated to a nearby beach. Shortly afterwards, two canoes ventured out, gifts were exchanged, and serious trading began, with the English acquiring shields, meat, fish, bows and arrows and bear skins.

The next morning, August 1, the Massawomeck vanished as quickly as they came. Smith went on to explore the Sassafraz River. At its mouth, the shallop was surrounded by another group of natives in dugout canoes, who turned out to be warriors from the Tockwogh nation. Smith was escorted upstream seven miles to their palisaded town near present-day Kentmore Park in Kent County, Maryland. He was struck by the fact that the Tockwogh were outfitted with European hatchets and metal tools. These, he was told, came from the Susquehannock, a mighty tribe who lived two days above the falls of the Susquehanna River. Smith resolved to meet them.

Smith and his crew sailed across the Bay and up the Susquehanna, where they waited for their Tockwogh friends to arrange for a trading session. On August 7, a party of sixty warriors appeared with gifts and trade goods. John Smith was impressed by the mighty warriors from the north. “Such great and well proportioned men are seldome seen, for they seemed like Giants to the English, yea and to their neighbours, yet seemed to have an honest and simple disposition ...”

Having found the head of navigation of the Chesapeake Bay, it was time to head south to chart the major rivers that had been missed on the first voyage. From August 8 through 12, the party explored to the fall line of the Patuxent River. On August 13, the shallop sailed to the Rappahannock River, where they met up again with their old friend Mosco. The Englishmen were ambushed by Indians on four separate occasions while exploring the long and winding river, but were able to reach the fall line (now the site of Fredericksburg, Virginia) towards the end of August. The end of the voyage was near.

On September 3, as the crew headed back to Jamestown, they ran into the last of their violent Chesapeake storms and had to bail strenuously to stay afloat. “Yet running before the winde,” Smith wrote, “at last we made land by the flashes of fire from heaven, by which light only we kept from the splitting shore, until it pleased God in that black darkness, to preserve us by that light to find Point Comfort.” It was a fitting end to an incredible adventure. On September 7, 1608, the party reached the fort.

Three days later, Captain John Smith became the third President of Jamestown. Under Smith’s leadership, industry flourished, crops were planted, homes were constructed, security was tightened, and the death rate fell dramatically. Unfortunately, Smith’s reign came to an abrupt end in the fall of 1609 when a packet of black powder on his hip accidentally ignited, severely wounding his leg. That September, he boarded a supply ship heading back to England. He would never set foot in Virginia again.

## An Epic Chesapeake Adventure Official Press Materials

### **The Impact of Smith's Voyages: Mapping the Course for a New Nation**

After his return to England, Smith worked with engraver William Hole to create a map of "Virginia" that was printed in Oxford in 1612 (see accompanying map). Based largely on notes and sketches made during his 1608 voyages, Smith's map was so accurate that it served as the definitive rendering of the Chesapeake region for nearly a century. Accompanying the map was a pamphlet guide describing the Chesapeake region in striking detail, including information about the area's climate, flora, fauna and marine life. It also contained the first ethnographic study of the Native inhabitants of the Chesapeake, which remains an important source of information about the Algonquian peoples of the mid-Atlantic region.

Much as Lewis and Clark's maps and written descriptions of the American West opened a new frontier for thousands of settlers in the 1800s, Smith's 1612 map of the Chesapeake Bay greatly stimulated interest in the New World. As English immigrants flocked to Virginia in greater numbers in the 1600s, Smith's widely published work served as a blueprint for settling the region. More broadly, Smith's accounts of the Chesapeake Bay began a process of political, social and economic change that still reverberates today in the United States and the world.



John Smith's 1612, "Map of Virginia."