

# Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail

Chesapeake Bay Region  
Delaware, Maryland, New York,  
Pennsylvania, Virginia, and  
Washington, DC

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Werowocomoco was a significant Indigenous town, known as a center of spiritual and political activity for at least 400 years. Located along what is now named the York River, Werowocomoco was home to the leader Powhatan, father of Pocahontas. Captain John Smith traveled to Werowocomoco several times.

## Some journeys make good stories. Some make a mark on history. The travels of John Smith, who captained a small wooden boat across the Chesapeake Bay in the early 1600s, did both.

Smith and his crew sailed from a struggling English outpost into a world they knew little about. They traveled an enormous web of waterways, where the forests were as vast as the marshes. And it was not vacant terrain. Indigenous peoples, who had called these shores home for thousands of years, met Smith at nearly every turn.

Based on these travels, Smith created a detailed map of the Chesapeake Bay region. He also kept written records of his voyages which were later published in England. These publications influenced the exploration and settlement of eastern North America for many generations.

Smith's map and writings also provide an informative firsthand account of the region's Indigenous societies. Smith routinely interacted with Native people throughout the voyages, stopping to trade, regroup, and exchange information. His narrative of what he experienced, however, is influenced by cultural bias and personal interpretation.

Today, you can follow Smith's travels on the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. By land or by water, you'll find something captivating along each of the trail's diverse waterways.



**Mapping the Chesapeake:** Captain John Smith's map of the Chesapeake was remarkably accurate for the time, created using navigational tools like a compass, sundial, and chip log. Smith explored the landscape by boat and on foot. Indigenous people informed him about places he did not reach in person.

**A Small, Open Boat:** Learning one another's language was vital to communication. Words from the Virginia Algonquian language were recorded by John Smith and William Strachey, Jamestown's secretary from 1611 to 1613. Both men noted the word for water: suckahanna. Strachey included several words for vessels, including aquointan for a canoe or small boat. Other Algonquian dialects, as well as Siouan and Iroquoian languages, were also spoken within the watershed.



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC / RICHARD SCHLICHT

## John Smith's Voyages

It was the spring of 1607. On the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, Indigenous people watched as three boats rounded the mouth of the James River. Sponsored by the Virginia Company of London, these three ships carried 104 passengers, including the young but experienced soldier Captain John Smith.

Within territory controlled by the Paspahegh people, the colonists built a fort they called "Jamestown" after their King, James I. This new colony was a business venture, the beginnings of an empire that would one day overshadow its rivals in Spain and Portugal. The men of Jamestown were instructed to document any valuable natural resources, search for a northwest passage to the Pacific Ocean, and learn what they could about the Native peoples.

With these goals in mind, Smith and a small crew embarked on two major voyages during the summer of 1608. The voyages, which together lasted over three months, took place on a small open boat equipped with a sail and oars for paddling. In all, Smith documented nearly 3,000 miles of the Bay and its rivers, as well as the location of Indigenous communities, with remarkable precision.

During his voyages, Smith visited many Indigenous communities. Some approached with caution or hostility, but Smith generally restrained his men and the tension of first encounters often shifted into trade and feasting. Along the way, he received valuable help from Indigenous guides and interpreters. Smith's accounts of these voyages serve as important, yet biased primary resources for historians today, documenting the location of towns, diplomatic customs, and more.

## Werowocomoco: Place of Leadership

Werowocomoco: [wayr-uh-wah-KOH-muh-koh]

More than 400 years before English settlers established Jamestown, Werowocomoco was an important Indigenous town. Werowocomoco, translated from the Virginia Algonquian language, means "place of leadership."

Werowocomoco was the residence of a powerful political and spiritual leader known as Powhatan. His daughter Pocahontas lived there as a child. Beginning in the late 1500s, Powhatan established a tributary network that influenced dozens of communities and their leaders along the rivers of the southern Chesapeake Bay.

Captain John Smith was captured and brought to Werowocomoco in December 1607. Smith and Powhatan's meeting marked the beginning of escalating interactions between Tribes and colonists that ranged from cautious and friendly to confused and violent. By 1609, more of the English had arrived and continued to demand food, sometimes through force. The Native population was increasingly unwilling to trade and wary of English intentions. Attempts at cooperation steadily led to conflict, and Powhatan moved his headquarters farther inland.

Nearly 400 years later, archeologists have confirmed the location of Werowocomoco. Today, the site is managed by the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail in coordination with Tribal Nations. Werowocomoco remains closed to the public as planning efforts are ongoing.

## Indigenous Chesapeake

By the 1600s, some 50,000 Indigenous people lived in communities along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. Their roots in the region ran deep, as their ancestors had first arrived here some 15,000 years ago at the end of the last ice age. Vast trade networks connected these communities to a diversity of cultures throughout the Americas, facilitating the exchange of goods, culture, knowledge, and technology.

Some of the Indigenous communities within the Chesapeake watershed developed "tributary networks" – a political and economic system where local leaders made payments of valuable goods to a regional "paramount chief." While everyday governance remained with local leaders, paramount chiefs exercised broad authority over their districts and in some cases served as spiritual leaders.

While it was more common for men to serve in leadership positions, these societies were matrilineal. This meant that women could become the chief, or weroansqua, and that inheritance of titles and property followed the female lineage.

Communities were made up of yehakin, or longhouses, where extended families would live together under one roof. Many tasks were divided between men and women. Men were the primary fishermen, hunters, and soldiers, while women took charge of farming, foraging, and homebuilding. In the winter, or taquitock, groups moved to inland hunting camps, following the deer. It was a way of life dependent on a rigorous, generational knowledge of the landscape.



PHOTOGRAPH BY STATE HISTORIC

**One Bay, Many Cultures:** Pottery, a common artifact from the Chesapeake's Indigenous history, is a tradition still practiced by many Indigenous craftspeople today. Methods and designs vary by community and change over time. This vessel, for example, is unique to the Susquehannock people of Pennsylvania, and features a distinctive human face along its collar.



PHOTOGRAPH BY STATE HISTORIC

**Family Homes:** A longhouse consists of a frame made from bent saplings that is covered with slabs of tree bark or woven mats. The round shape and layered roofing of a longhouse make it resistant to wind and rain, and its size can vary based on the number of extended family members it needs to accommodate.

## North America's Largest Estuary

The Chesapeake Bay is North America's largest estuary. An estuary is a body of water connected to the ocean and fed by freshwater rivers. This results in a "brackish" environment, or a mix of salt and freshwater. The Chesapeake's watershed, or drainage area, spans 64,000 square miles and includes six states.

Wetlands, found in abundance throughout the Bay, provide many benefits. Marsh vegetation creates habitat and plentiful food for wildlife, from migratory birds to the iconic blue crab. When it storms, wetlands act as a buffer, preventing strong waves from battering the shore. Wetlands also clean our air and water by recycling nutrients like sulfur and phosphorous and absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

The Chesapeake Bay is as much a natural resource as it is a cultural one, contributing to the region's rich heritage. In his writings, John Smith reported, "fish lying so thick with their heads above the water as for want of nets. . .we attempted to catch them with a frying pan." In addition to fish, shellfish and edible plants like wild rice have been staples of human diets historically. These resources, depended upon for thousands of years, are no longer as plentiful today, underscoring the importance of restoration efforts.



NPS / MATT RATH



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## Plan Your Adventure

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail traverses more than 3,000 miles across the Chesapeake Bay region. The trail follows the route of John Smith's 1608 voyages as well as historic river routes traveled by the region's Indigenous peoples. The trail is one of 21 National Historic Trails that trace historic routes throughout the United States. It was the first national trail in the country to travel over water.

There are countless things to see and do along the Chesapeake Trail. The water route offers world class experiences for paddling and boating, and there are many land-based sites to visit by car. You'll find opportunities for boating, hiking, bicycling, and watching wildlife, as well as historic settings with museums, living history exhibits, and visitor centers. Many destinations along the trail offer several of these options in one location.

## Use these resources to learn more about what the Chesapeake trail offers.

Visit the trail website at [www.nps.gov/cajo](http://www.nps.gov/cajo).

Use the trail's website to design your itinerary. Explore places to collect passport stamps, download the Junior Ranger program, and read the official boater's guide.

Download the National Park Service app, a free mobile application that can be found through your device's app store. Use the app to discover National Park sites located near you. View interactive maps, tours of park places, on-the-ground accessibility information, and much more to plan your national park adventures before and during your trip.

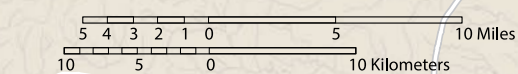


A dramatic view of Great Falls on the Potomac River.

## Check in with smart buoy.

These yellow buoys float on the water to mark places on the Chesapeake Trail. Onboard technology transmits information on water quality and conditions. You can access buoy data at [www.buoybay.noaa.gov](http://www.buoybay.noaa.gov).

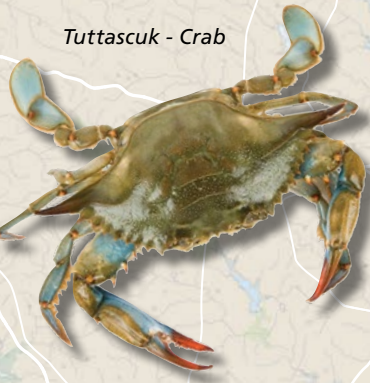
- Map legend**
- Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail
  - Visitor information
  - Trail point of interest
  - Local water trail
  - NOAA interpretive buoy
  - Public water access site
  - National & state capitals



Tidal marshes are a haven for birdwatchers.



Trail Maryland and Susquehanna River access facilities are available at the Zimmerman Center for Heritage.



Tuttascuk - Crab



Fishing is a treasured Chesapeake tradition.



Meanders, or winding curves in a river's path, are among the Bay's visual charms.



A demonstration of how to build dugout canoes.



Opatenaiok - Eagle  
ATLANTIC OCEAN



The Chesapeake Trail extends beyond the route of Smith's explorations to include additional river routes used by Indigenous peoples.



Cuitak or Rokayhook - Otter  
VIRGINIA STATE PARKS / GLEN MITCHELL