

Native peoples of the Chesapeake region

The Chesapeake Bay has been home to Native Americans for over 10,000 years. Throughout their histories — even to the present day — these societies have adapted to difficult circumstances and unforeseen changes. Chesapeake natives have faced wars, epidemic diseases, loss of land, and treaty violations.

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When you look at the pieces of our people scattered about, it doesn't look like we have much. But put together, we have a lot. We have a story to tell.

— Tina Pierce Fragoso (Nanticoke-Lenni Lenape), *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 13, 2005.



Figure 1. Engraving of the American Indian town of Pomeiooc, published in Thomas Hariot's 1588 book, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*.

Every place in the United States of America has an ongoing Native American story, and our nation's capital is no exception. Washington, D.C. sits in the Chesapeake Bay region, surrounded by Maryland and Virginia. For more than 10,000 years, Native peoples have created thriving societies along the shores of numerous rivers that feed into the beautiful and environmentally rich Chesapeake Bay. They lived in connection to the seasons and the natural resources of the region. They settled in villages made up of wooden longhouses inhabited by extended families. Labor was generally divided, with women responsible for agriculture and men for hunting. Everyone cooperated in harvesting fish and shellfish from bountiful rivers and estuaries. Throughout their histories these societies adapted to difficult circumstances and unforeseen changes. Adaptability has been necessary for survival of Native peoples and their cultures, even to the present day.¹

When the English established their first American colony in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, the Chesapeake Bay region included three major Native chiefdoms, systems of government made up of a group of tribes under the influence of a central chief. The three chiefdoms included the Powhatan, the Piscataway, and the Nanticoke. Most of the tribes living in the Chesapeake Bay region belonged to one of these three chiefdoms, although there were some tribes who kept their independence. [See map².] The people spoke related

languages from a language family known as Algonquian. The central chiefs were men selected from families that inherited and passed their leadership rights from generation to generation. They usually lived in larger towns and oversaw a system of village commanders, or weroances, who could be men or women. An elders council advised the chiefs. The members of the council were called wisoes, and decisions were made in a council house called the *matchcomoco*. Holy men — elders who conducted spiritual ceremonies — also had a voice in the chiefs’ decisions. There were also “medicine men,” who were tasked with physical and spiritual healing. Leaders called *cockarouses* assumed command in times of war. The chiefs were unlike European kings or emperors; they were expected to work like everyone else and usually made decisions in consultation with other leaders.

Most of the Chesapeake Native tribes who have survived and continue to thrive today descend from the Powhatan, Piscataway, and Nanticoke chiefdoms. The tribes that did not originally belong to a chiefdom often became part of one in order to be afforded greater protection from the colonists. Other independent tribes dispersed to various parts of the continent, where they merged with other tribes. Centuries of dispossession from their original lands have left far fewer Native tribes in the present than there were in 1607. [See map³.] Yet, the people remain and so do many Powhatan, Piscataway, and Nanticoke names on the landscape, evidence of the rich cultures that once inhabited the entire region. The nature of the struggles facing Chesapeake Native peoples today has changed, but they continue to live with the difficult legacy of colonial history.

Colonial Indian—White Relations

In some ways, the Jamestown colony served as the beginning of the United States of America. It was also the place where some of the first policies towards Native Americans were enacted. Many of the difficulties experienced by Chesapeake Natives were mirrored over the centuries by other Native Americans as other white settlers moved across the continent.

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT AND CONFLICT

The Spanish were the first Europeans known to have explored the Chesapeake. In 1562, the Spanish cartographer Diego Gutierrez recorded the Chesapeake Bay on a map. He called it the “*Bahia de Santa Maria*.” Because they were looking for gold and found none in the Chesapeake, the Spanish did not spend much time in the region. They did, however, capture a number of young Powhatan boys during their expeditions. These incidents unsettled the Powhatans and raised concerns about future contact with Europeans.

The English arrived in 1607, forty-five years after the Spanish. Their colony, Jamestown, was a business enterprise funded by the Virginia Company for the purpose of finding gold. The English colonists were not adept at farming in the North American soil and climate and lacked the skills for surviving in unfamiliar territory. Many died of starvation. During this early period, the Powhatan people took pity on the colonists and gave them food to help them survive.

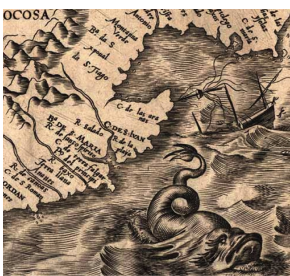


Figure 2. Detail of 1562 map of America by Diego Gutierrez, showing Bahia de Santa Maria — the Chesapeake Bay.

Peaceful relations did not last long. At first, the Indians granted the English permission to live on pieces of land within their territories. The English saw this as a right to own and permanently occupy the land. For their part, Native people believed that the newcomers had no right to permanently possess Native lands. In addition, Native people sometimes left their villages to hunt, fish, or gather resources. Frequently, they returned to their villages only to find the land occupied by colonists. The Powhatans grew increasingly angry as the colonists took over more of their lands. When the English began raiding Powhatan villages for food, sometimes killing women and children in the process, Native leaders retaliated. A series of wars started in the Chesapeake Bay region that continued through the seventeenth century.

LOSS OF LIFE

In the first 100 years of contact, the Powhatan, Nanticoke, and Piscataway suffered severe loss of life. Although it is difficult to obtain precise population figures, scholars estimate that the Powhatan chiefdom included about 12,000 people when Jamestown was settled in 1607. Only 1,000 were left by 1700. The Piscataway chiefdom had about 8,500 members at the time of English settlement, but only 300 remained by 1700.

Epidemic diseases were the primary cause of death. Native peoples had no immunity to new illnesses, including smallpox, cholera, and measles, which the Europeans brought to the Americas. Many tribes suffered huge losses — often, up to ninety percent of the population was wiped out. Because diseases spread from person to person, some communities were affected by European diseases transmitted by other Native peoples, and many populations were weakened even before contact with European settlers. In 1608, Chief Powhatan, who also was known as Wahunsenacawh, told the English explorer and trader Captain John Smith how diseases had affected his people:

You may understand that I having seene the death of all my people thrice, and not any one living of these three generations but my selfe...

— *Travels of Captaine John Smith*. NY: MacMillan, 1907.

Epidemics were not the only cause of death. Wars, loss of land, social upheaval, and disease combined to devastate Native communities. Population losses weakened Native culture. Oral tradition was critical for preserving cultural knowledge; when elders died, it was like having entire libraries burn down.

TREATIES AND THE LOSS OF LAND

They gave us a piece of land that they termed as a reservation for the Piscataway people. They put us there, with the idea that they would protect us forever, took all weapons away from us and in turn gave them to a group of Indians who swore death to us, known as the Susquehannas... We found out we couldn't trust the Maryland colonists and our people fled.

— Chief Billy Redwing Tayac (Piscataway), 2002.

As more and more English colonists flooded into the Chesapeake region, Native peoples lost more of their lands. These encroachments by the colonists led to violence, which the English attempted to quell by establishing treaties with Native peoples. A treaty is an agreement between two nations that becomes a law. In their treaties, the Powhatan,

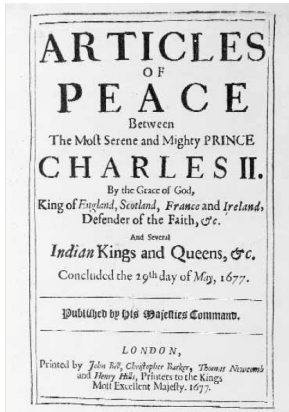


Figure 3. 1677 treaty between Virginia and the Indians of the region.

Piscataway, and Nanticoke agreed to submit to English control in exchange for peace. The English promised Native peoples rights to hunt in their territories and to fair treatment under the law. The treaties also set aside smaller parcels of original Native territories so that the Powhatan, Nanticoke, and Piscataway could live undisturbed by settlers. These lands were called reservations, or “manors.”

While the treaties sounded good on paper, most of their provisions were not enforced. English settlers moved onto reservation lands and restricted Native uses of non-reservation lands. By the 1700s, Piscataway, Nanticoke, and Powhatan treaty rights were largely ignored.

On the web

We have a story to tell: Native peoples of the Chesapeake region

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/native-chesapeake>

Readings and lesson plans exploring the historical and ongoing challenges faced by the American Indians of the Chesapeake Bay region, since the time of their first contact with Europeans in the early 1600s.

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Notes

1. A complete bibliography (see <http://www.learnnc.org><http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/native-chesapeake/bibliography>) can be found at We have a story to tell: Native peoples of the Chesapeake region (see <http://www.learnnc.org><http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/native-chesapeake/>), from which this article is excerpted.
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/native-chesapeake/3.8>.
3. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/native-chesapeake/3.8>.

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Figure 2 (page 2)

Map by Diego Gutierrez, 1562. From Library of Congress, Geography and Maps Division. This image is in the public domain.

Figure 3 (page 4)

Original printed in London, 1677. This image is in the public domain.