

WEROWOCOMOCO: SEAT OF POWER

When the English colonists selected Jamestown as the site of their colony in 1607, they did not know they were planting their fledgling settlement within 15 miles of Werowocomoco, the seat of power of the Powhatan paramount chiefdom. At that time the chiefdom was comprised of more than 14,000 Powhatan Indians scattered among an estimated 32 Indian tribes living in the Coastal Plain of Virginia. Their leader was Wahunsenacawh, whom the English called Powhatan. Within the Powhatan paramount chiefdom, each tribe retained its own chief but all chiefs paid tribute to Powhatan. The Powhatan Indians called their land Tsenacommacoh. The closeness of Jamestown to Werowocomoco would ensure a number of historic meetings between the English and the Powhatan Indians in the early years of the colony.

Though Werowocomoco was an important power center when the English arrived, it had been a significant site long before Powhatan made it his capital. Archaeologists believe American Indians may have occupied the site intermittently for thousands of years before the arrival of the English. Powhatan's move to Werowocomoco placed him in the geographical center of his sprawling chiefdom as he aggressively increased the size of his dominion from six inherited tribes to more than 30 tribes. It also probably increased his prestige since it was an ancient ceremonial site.



**Chief Powhatan,
from John Smith's Map of Virginia**

The unique topography of Werowocomoco reveals why the location had been a vital site to American Indians for thousands of years. Werowocomoco sits on a high bluff on the north side of the York River. From the bluff, it was easy to see who was traveling on the river and detect anyone approaching Werowocomoco by water. The York River is approximately a mile-and-a-half wide at the Werowocomoco site. The river provided a rich source for seafood. A small bay below the bluff, now known as Purtan Bay, runs into the York River and was a natural harbor for canoes. There are three creeks which feed into the small bay and define the borders of the site. Fresh water springs on the property provided a good source of water.



Site of Werowocomoco today

The river and three creeks surround an area of approximately 50 acres. In 1607, there was a small village on the high bluff along the bay. It was not a large settlement in terms of population. John Smith noted it contained "40 able men", but this number would not have included women, children and the elderly. Approximately 1,000 feet from the river, archaeologists believe a separate area may have been designated as ceremonial in nature. While there are no large ceremonial mounds at Werowocomoco like the Ely Mound found in Virginia's Lee County, archaeologists find evidence that one part of the area was delineated by a pair of curved ditches and earthworks. These ditches, running parallel to each other, were 600 feet long. The excavation analysis and Carbon 14 data indicate these features date from the first half of the 15th century. Dr. Martin Gallivan, a College of William and Mary archaeologist working with the Werowocomoco Research Group, believes these features had monumental significance and may have delineated the ceremonial core of Werowocomoco from the secular area. Archaeological diggings indicate a very large house, possibly a chief's residence, was located in the ceremonial area. The large size of

Powhatan's house as described by John Smith in his writings seems to fit the description of the large structure found at Werowocomoco within the ceremonial area.

Most of what we know about Werowocomoco prior to recent archaeological diggings at the site stems from the writings of Captain John Smith. This resourceful soldier was the first Englishman to meet Powhatan. Captain Smith clearly identified the site of Werowocomoco on his famous map of Virginia which was published in 1612. He had a number of audiences with the paramount chief at Werowocomoco between 1607 and 1609. On his first trip to the site, Smith did not arrive as a visitor but as a prisoner. Smith was taken prisoner when he and his small party of men stumbled into a large Powhatan hunting party on the Chickahominy River in the late fall or early winter of 1607. This hunting party was headed by Powhatan's half-brother, Opechancanough. Captain Smith relates the events of his capture and time as Powhatan's prisoner in some detail in his writings. What Captain Smith claims to have happened to him at Werowocomoco on his first visit has become part of American historical lore.



John Smith visiting Werowocomoco is threatened with death by the Powhatan Indians, Theodor de Bry

After Smith's first arrival at Werowocomoco as a prisoner, Powhatan treated Smith kindly, provided him food and, according to Smith, promised his freedom within four days. During their first meeting the paramount chief questioned why the English had settled his land. Captain Smith claims he told Powhatan that their ships had been involved in a battle with Spanish ships, had been blown off course, and their small ship was in need of repair. Captain Smith assured Powhatan that Captain Christopher Newport had returned to England but was scheduled to return to Virginia in the near future to rescue them.

There may have been moments of great distress for Captain Smith during this first encounter with Powhatan. During another one of their talks, John Smith claims he was grabbed by Powhatan's warriors and his head was placed on two great stones. Smith was certain Powhatan intended to kill him. At this critical point, Captain Smith claims Pocahontas, Powhatan's young daughter, came forth and placed her head on Smith's head to stop his execution. Given the cultural and language differences, it is unlikely John Smith understood what was happening when Pocahontas intervened to stop his execution. Some historians doubt the event occurred since Captain Smith did not write of the incident for many years. Other historians believe the event occurred; however, the ritual may have been an Indian adoption ceremony where Captain Smith, after enduring a mock execution, was taken into the tribes and given a new name, Nantaquoud. Powhatan also used this opportunity to exert his power and authority over the small group of English at Jamestown. What really happened on that fateful visit will probably never be known but, shortly after the ceremony, Captain Smith was allowed to return to Jamestown. He was accompanied by a number of Powhatan Indians who brought gifts of food.

Werowocomoco was the site of several more encounters with the English, two of them involving Captain Christopher Newport, who made a number of voyages to Virginia to resupply the colony. Newport's first resupply ship returned to Virginia in January 1608. In February, Newport went with Smith to Werowocomoco. On the first day of their visit, Smith presented gifts to Powhatan, including a suit of red cloth and a white greyhound. On the second day, Captain Newport appeared and presented 13-year-old Thomas Savage to Powhatan as a "gift" while Powhatan gave Captain Newport Namontack, an Indian boy whom Newport took with him to England. Before Newport's return to England in April 1608, he sent swords as a gift to Powhatan.

Newport made a second visit to Werowocomoco in late 1608. Again, Newport brought a number of small gifts for Powhatan including a scarlet cloak and an English crown. Newport had been instructed by the Virginia Company of

London to make Powhatan a vassal of King James I. The audacious but ill-conceived coronation ceremony to crown Powhatan did not go well. No one could convince Powhatan to kneel to receive the English crown and only with great effort was the crown placed on Powhatan's head. Though he probably did not understand the ceremonial terms used by the English as they attempted to get him to kneel, Powhatan, a paramount chief, probably understood their implications. This time, Powhatan offered the English little corn and his "old shoes and his mantle." After this unproductive visit to Powhatan, Captain Newport made a visit into Monacan Indian territory to the west to explore for rich ore. Upon their return from the land of the Monacan Indians, the English found the Powhatan Indians reticent and unwilling to trade.



Section of John Smith's Map of Virginia, showing Jamestown and Werowocomoco

By 1609 Powhatan became wary of the English.

The last of the meetings between Powhatan and the English at Werowocomoco ended in a violent confrontation. Around this time, Powhatan removed his seat of authority from Werowocomoco to another location further from Jamestown. Though the exact reason for this abrupt move is unknown, the desire to remove himself from the troublesome English must be considered a strong possibility.

After Werowocomoco was abandoned by Powhatan, Virginia Indians may have continued to live there but it is uncertain to what extent or how long they continued in the area. By the 1630s, English settlers began crossing the York River and patented extensive farms. The site was owned by a number of different families over the past 400 years and was used for agricultural purposes.



Archeological excavations at present day Werowocomoco

In 1996, the current owners of the site, Robert F. and C. Lynn Ripley, took title to the property. Prior to their ownership, Virginia Commonwealth University archaeologist L. Daniel Mouer reported the site as the possible location of Werowocomoco. Recent research at Werowocomoco began in 2001 with a survey of the site directed by Fairfield Foundation archaeologists Thane Harpole and David Brown in consultation with E. Randolph Turner III of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. In 2002 the Werowocomoco Research Group, a joint effort of the College of William and Mary, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, and a number of Virginia Indian tribes, was formed and began systematic archaeological excavations of the

site. Based on these findings, it was announced in 2003 that there was sufficient evidence to confirm that the property is indeed the settlement of Werowocomoco.

Today Werowocomoco is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Historic Landmarks Register. Currently archaeological excavations are taking place under the guidance of the Werowocomoco Research Group. Thousands of artifacts, including pottery shards, projectile points and stone tools have been uncovered. Some of these artifacts date to the Archaic period (8000 to 1200 B.C.) and late Woodland period (A.D. 900-1600). Numerous fragments of copper, much of it of European origin dating from the early 17th century, have been discovered. Some of the copper is rolled bead while some is in sheet form. Along with copper, colored glass beads were one of the principal goods given or traded by the English to the Powhatans during the initial period of English settlement. Al-

most 4,000 glass beads also have been discovered. The discovery of European copper and glass beads gives evidence of trade between the Powhatan Indian and English cultures.

The site at Werowocomoco has shed new light on the rich, cultural life of Virginia's Indians before European contact. The numerous artifacts uncovered have also confirmed the extent of contact and trade between the Powhatan and English cultures in the early years of Jamestown. The partnership of the Werowocomoco Research Group with the Virginia Indian community has provided a model as historians and archaeologists direct their attention to other Native American sites across the country.



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