

Captain John Smith, a tough character who was twice nearly hanged for insubordination by fellow Englishmen, treated Indians with a mixture of aggression and diplomacy as he searched the Chesapeake Bay area for gold, food, and a passage to the Pacific Ocean.

The Arlington Encountered by Captain John Smith

BY CHARLES S. CLARK AND MARY A. ROGALSKI

Terrain we moderns know as the woods between Spout Run and Chain Bridge below the GW Parkway was quite likely described by Captain John Smith as long as four centuries ago. The English explorer who came up the Potomac by boat in 1608 found “mighty rocks growing in some places above the ground as high as the shrubby trees and diverse other solid quarries of diverse tinctures and diverse places where the waters had fallen from high mountains.”

Though we can appreciate Smith as the first European to leave a written account of an exploration through what would become Arlington, the continually revised journals he later published were too vague on geography to allow us to pinpoint with certitude the sites of his passage through our county.

But modern historians, by bringing to bear other early colonial-period writings and archaeology, can offer informed speculation about sights Smith would have seen during his epic summer trip up the Chesapeake Bay. These include Indian villages near the modern-day 14th Street Bridge and the crashing waters of the Little Falls that are visible from Chain Bridge. Intriguingly, the scholars’ need to speculate produced shifting views about precisely how far Smith’s party journeyed west into what is now Fairfax County.

In May 2007, the long-in-the-making commemorations of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown included a reenactment of Smith’s trips up the Chesapeake Bay, a historic visit of Queen Elizabeth II to the Virginia site, an array of new books and articles about the first enduring English colony in the New World, and some fresh research on the flora and fauna noted by Smith conducted by staff at Arlington’s Potomac Overlook Regional Park. All of which makes this year a suitable time to examine what the famous explorer would have beheld as he entered the terra nova that became our hometown.

Smith’s Purposes

Capt. John Smith in 1608 was a haughty 28-year-old who had come to the New World the previous year on behalf of the private Virginia Company of London. A veteran military adventurer, he joined the many chronically unemployed Englishmen who thrilled at the chancy prospects of finding gold and the mythical passage to the Pacific Ocean.

Smith was a tough character (as the Indians with whom he frequently clashed would learn) and controversial among his fellow colonists. Twice, he was nearly hanged by the Jamestown authorities for acts of insubordination, and he had to be rescued by his superior officer, Captain Christopher Newport.

The Jamestown settlers, who were competing with the Spanish, Portuguese and French for a toehold in North America, were ignorant of how to sustain themselves in this unknown environment and were seeking ways to cope with a multi-year drought. More than half of the expedition's original 120 passengers died within a year of setting sail for the historic Virginia landing that was accomplished in May 1607, and there was a desperate need to befriend the native peoples for nourishment and know-how.

The side trips that would be undertaken by Smith to map the land around the Chesapeake Bay had at least one additional motivation: a desire to solve the mystery of what had become of England's "Lost Colony" members who had disappeared in North Carolina two decades earlier.

Smith's five-week trip up the Potomac that brought him to Arlington took place from June 16 to July 20, 1608.

He commanded a 30-foot-long English-built wooden boat called a shallop. It was a rib-framed, eight-foot wide rowable vessel weighing 2-3 tons. Outfitted with a canvas tarpaulin, a square lugsail and, as one historian notes, perhaps a jib, the shallop could be broken down into two parts to be transported overland.

Smith's crew consisted of 14 men, who, wearing thick English wool and armor in the mid-summer heat, must have given the local Indians some new experiences in odors. They included a doctor, a carpenter, a blacksmith, a fisherman, a fishmonger (to help identify types of fish), a tailor, a laborer, a soldier and six "gentlemen." The soldier, named Anas Todkill, kept the log of the trip.

Here, as a sampling of the type of detail Smith used in his "General Historie" and later writings, is how he would describe the dimensions, appearance, and native peoples of what today is Arlington's defining body of water:

The fourth river is called Patawomek, 6 or 7 myles in breadth. It is navigable 140 myles, and fed as the rest with many sweet rivers and springs, which fall from the bordering hills. These hills many of them are planted, and yield no lesse plenty and varietie of fruit, then the river exceedeth with abundance of fish. It is inhabited on both sides.

Smith's progress westward was probably limited by the "fall line," a geologic boundary between the Atlantic Coastal Plain (in which the Chesapeake Bay is situated) and the Piedmont Plateau. Of interest politically is the fact that

the river also served as a natural border between the Iroquois Confederation, to the North, and the league of Indians of the southern highlands, which included Cherokees, Creeks, and Catawbas.

Recording Flora and Fauna

Along the route up the Potomac, Smith enjoyed adventures in fishing. “We attempted to catch them with a frying pan: but we found it a bad instrument to catch fish with,” he wrote. After passing by Nomini Creek in modern Westmoreland County, and across the Occoquan from Prince William County and Pohick Bay in Fairfax, he then arrived in the modern-day District of Columbia where the Potomac meets the Anacostia River, near what then was a major Indian settlement called Nacotchtank.

As modern naturalists explain, the climate Smith encountered would have been slightly cooler than what we have today, corresponding with a several year drought in combination with a climatic period known as the “Little Ice Age.” Fish stocks would have been far more abundant and diverse. On the river’s banks he might have seen wild turkeys and an occasional black bear, creatures that have since been driven out of the area by urbanization. Smith would have seen none of the honey bees, earthworms, horses, or cattle that would be introduced by later Europeans.

Smith stayed on meticulous lookout for new natural phenomena, particularly birds and mammals. Here is one of his descriptions with details that seem familiar:

Of beasts the chief are Deere, nothing differing from ours. In the deserts toward the heads of the rivers, there are many, but amongst the rivers few. There is a beast they call *Aroughcun*, [raccoon] much like a badger, but useth to live on trees as Squirrels doe. Their Squirrels some are neare as great as our smallest sort of wilde Rabbets, some blackish or blacke and white, but the most are gray.

Smith encountered some animals he found puzzling. Of the beaver, he wrote: It “is as big as an ordinary water dog, but his legs exceeding short. His forefeete like a dogs, his hinderfeete like a Swans. His taile somewhat like the forme of a Racket, bare without haire, which to eat the Salvages esteeme a great delicate.” Having never seen a marsupial, Smith explained that “an Opassom hath a head like a Swine, and a taile like a Rat, and is the bignesse of a Cat. Under her belly shee hath a bagge, wherein she lodgeth, carrieth, and suckleth her young.”

Smith was also a disciplined recorder of botanical sightings. He left us an itemized list of trees, herbs, berries and agricultural foods, as well as observa-

tions on the Indian food seasons and dietary regime based on unfamiliar wild nuts, tobacco, corn, pumpkins, and squash.

He was adventurous enough to taste a strange fruit that we now call persimmons, which he described thus: "*Putchamins*, grow as high as a Palmeta... it is first greene, then yellow, and red when it is ripe; if it be not ripe, it will draw a mans mouth awry, with much torment, but when it is ripe, it is as delicious as an Apricot."

In the landscape Smith gazed upon, American chestnut trees would have made up a considerable portion of the hardwood forests, according to naturalists. But today there are very few chestnut trees, owing to the 20th century blight.

The Potomac's Native Peoples

Smith's encounters with Tidewater Indians comprised a series of on-again-off-again alliances that reflected both his dependency and his aggressive efforts to subdue them. His initial fears come clear in his description of a clash that took place in Stafford County in which he writes of "three or four thousand [more likely hundred] savages, so strangely painted, grimed and disguised, shouting, yelling, and crying as so many spirits from hell could not have showed more terrible."

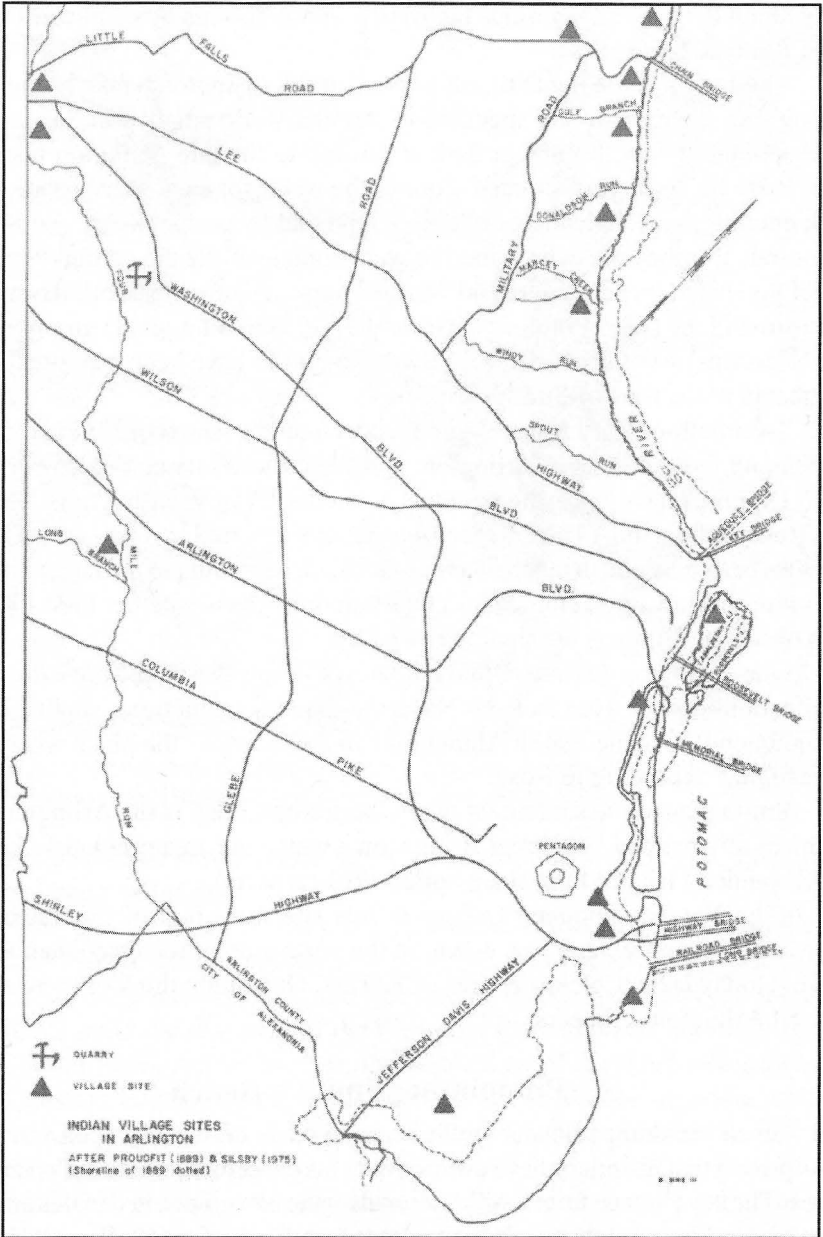
He would threaten the natives with bullets, take some hostage for protection, and menace them with talk of bringing in mercenaries from rival tribes. But he also relied on friendly Indians for meals and for guidance through the dense forests, as well as for information he included on his maps.

Smith's descriptions of their appearances showed an admiration for the native people's practicality:

They are sometime covered with the skinnes of wild beasts, which in Winter are dressed with the hayre, but in Sommer without. The better sort use large mantels of Deare skins, not much differing in fashion from the Irish mantels. Some imbrodered with white beads, some with copper, other painted after their manner.

He commented on the sexual modesty of the Indian females, as well as their intricate adornments: "Some have their legs, hands, breasts and face cunningly imbrodered with divers workes, as beasts, serpents, artificially wrought into their flesh with blacke spots. In each eare commonly they have 3 great holes, whereat they hang chaines, bracelets, or copper."

The natives' sense of fashion seemed to simultaneously repulse and impress Smith, who noted one Indian male wearing "a small greene and yellow coloured snake, neare halfe a yard in length, which crawling and lapping her



C.B. Rose, Jr., Arlington County, Virginia
Indian village sites in Arlington, after Proudfit (1889) and Silsby (1975); shoreline of 1889 dotted.

selfe about his necke oftentimes familiarly would kiss his lips. Others weare a dead Rat tyed by the taile.”

The Indian settlements Smith passed on the Arlington banks of the river (though he mentions none specifically) tended to be small. The largest village population would number 300, according to the late Arlington historian C.B. Rose Jr. They were situated close to the water for easy transportation but high enough to take advantage of arable land and to escape floods. Unlike the thousands of tribesmen who joined or were conquered by the confederation of Chief Powhatan (headquartered in Werowocomoco, across the York River from Jamestown), the upper Potomac tribes of the Algonquin linguistic group (called the Necostins) were unaffiliated, and are thought to have been estranged from Powhatan at the time of Smith’s trip.

Twentieth-century research produced a map that shows 12 Indian village sites along the Potomac in Arlington, and three more inland along Four Mile Run. Diggings have unearthed evidence of villages in what today is Rosslyn and Roosevelt Island. (The latter settlement was reported by Spanish explorers decades before Smith, using the name Analostan, according to the late Arlington historian Eleanor Lee Templeman.) One can only guess whether their inhabitants observed Smith as his shallop rowed by.

One Arlington Indian settlement shows up on the map Smith drew for publication in 1612. He labeled it Nameroughquena (sometimes spelled Nameraughquend), a name that in Algonquian dialect means “the place where fish are caught,” according to Rose.

Smith placed the settlement near where what today is the Arlington side of the multi-spanned 14th Street Bridge, on a waterside area previously known as Alexander’s island (long since buried, Rose reports).

The Nameraughquend Indians at this site were part of the Tauxent tribe, whose main village was down on the north side of the Occoquan River, at what today is the Colchester area of Fairfax. One might think of them as our earliest Arlington forebears.

Pinpointing Smith’s Reach

Given the skimpy details Smith bequeathed us on his Arlington visit, it is unsurprising that historians have differed over his exact route westward up the Potomac. The key passage from Smith’s journals—the paragraph cited in this article’s introduction hinting at the Chain Bridge-area woods—begins as follows: “Having gone so high as we could with the boat, we met diverse savages in canoes well loaden with the flesh of bears, deer, and other beasts; whereof we had part.”

The text goes onto to suggest Smith’s preoccupation with the unsuccessful search for gold, describing how “digging the ground above in the highest



This portion of the map Smith published in 1612 shows the area along the Potomac that is now Arlington, near the Indian village of Nameroughquend. Note that north is to the right.

cliffs of rocks, we saw it was a clay sand so mingled with yellow spangles as if it had been half pin-dust.”

The precise locale of the cliffs, of course, is lost to history, and there is ambiguity in the phrase “having gone so high....” However, this phrase implies that Smith may have reached the fall line of the Potomac River—the place where the more durable rock of the Piedmont Plateau meets the softer rock of the Coastal Plain. At the fall line, the water flow of the river wears away the soft Coastal Plain sediments faster than that of the Piedmont, and a waterfall results. On the Potomac, the fall line is found just upstream and west from present-day Chain Bridge.

Mid-20th-century Arlington historians Rose and Templeman, citing the language of Smith’s journals and the “cross” drawn on his map, declare that Smith most likely stopped when his shallop encountered the rocks at Little Falls. Their discussions do allow, however, for the possibility that Smith debarked at Little Falls and traveled further on foot (though he never mentions it). Such an inland hike elsewhere was described by Smith during a later leg of the trip, and

Templeman points to two ancient Indian trails that led from Little Falls up into Fairfax and Arlington near modern-day Glebe Road at Walker Chapel.

Philip L. Barbour, who in the 1980s would edit a most-thorough edition of Smith's writings, wrote in a 1964 book that Smith's highest reach was up to Great Falls, "near what is today the David Taylor Model Basin, five or six miles above the District of Columbia boundary," across the river in Carderock, Md. This supposition was echoed by Arlington historians Nan and Ross Netherton writing in the 1980s, and by historian and editor John M. Thompson, who, in the 2007 edition of Smith's key writings, described the high point as "about six miles above the future capital, between Little and Great Falls." (One clue Barbour offers in a footnote is that the distance from the mouth of the Potomac to Great Falls is only 100 miles, yet Smith gave a figure of 140 miles for the Potomac's length, a figure later republished as 120 miles. Some consider this an indicator that he went farther than Little Falls.)

As it turned out, a solution to the location problem would have concrete implications at the time of the 400th anniversary Jamestown celebration. The National Park Service, as authorized by an act Congress passed in December 2006, set about creating the National Historic Water Trail. It pinpoints Smith's route to the extent possible and offers a map, buoys and markings to encourage history-minded boaters to retrace it.

A study done in preparation for the water trail notes: "Eventually Smith reached the Little Falls of the Potomac, a mile upstream from present-day Washington, D.C., and traveled overland to the Great Falls, where the party examined the rocks and studied the sediments that glittered with yellow dust (mica.)"

To cope with Smith's vagueness, historians researching the trail in 2007 roughed out the following hypothetical log of his days on the upper Potomac in that summer of 1608:

June 24: Nacotchtank to 2 miles up Anacostia River to Little Falls: 15 miles.

June 25: Little Falls overland to Great Falls: 10 miles on foot for part of crew.

June 26-27: Great Falls to Little Falls; search for minerals for part of crew: 10 miles.

June 28: Little Falls to Nacotchank to Assaomeck: 14 miles.

Edward Wright Haile, a freelance historian in Essex County, Va., who edited a collection of narratives on the Jamestown settlement, says the only way to determine Smith's westernmost movement is to put yourself in the scene and use judgment.

“He was trying to push things to the limit, but he was not authorized to go into the Piedmont,” Haile says. The experience with rivers back in England would have influenced him to look for calm water above the falls. So, “judging by what Smith did at other rivers and by what Christopher Newport did near Richmond,” Haile speculates that “Smith probably anchored his boat at Little Falls, debarked, and got a Nacotchtank Indian guide to show him the portage path. He may have spent a few hours hiking the distance toward Great Falls, but since he didn’t find gold, he may have felt the hike was a bust,” which could be why he didn’t provide details in his narrative.

In another dimension that might place Smith further west are clues from Smith’s relations with the Indians. Blair Rudes, an expert in American Indian languages and early contacts with Europeans in the East (and a consultant for the 2005 movie on the Jamestown settlement titled *The New World*), suggests that “Smith may have continued west until he became convinced that there were no major towns on the river past Nacotchtank (modern Anacostia) where the river rapidly became unnavigable by canoe. Another possibility is that Smith found himself approaching the limits of Algonquian territory above Great Falls and turned back to avoid or escape an encounter with hostile Iroquois.”

One good argument against assuming that Smith and crew hiked up to Great Falls is that he failed to “comment on the magnitude of the falls,” said Kent Mountford, a co-author of a book on the period who is an ecologist and environmental historian with Cove Corporation in Maryland. On the other hand, “there had been a drought in the area since 1585, as evidenced by tree rings, so the river may have been at low flow, as it would be in the 1930s and 1960s, with the falls looking more like a pile of rocks.” Mountford also cites hints that Smith may have encouraged his crew to wade up and across the river for “sport,” as evidenced by mentions of oarsmen grabbing tree branches to provide themselves with shade.

What is certain is that, on leaving Arlington, Smith sailed back down past the Indian settlement of Assaomeck, on what today is Hunting Creek in Alexandria, and continued toward the mouth of the Potomac. Resting only a day, he then began his second Chesapeake Bay trip up through Maryland. He would return some seven weeks later to take over as president of the troubled Jamestown colony, before undertaking further North American voyages as far north as Massachusetts.

Eventually, Smith would retire to England, where, before his death at age 51 in 1631, he would write multiple accounts of the voyages to establish the settlement that became the pivotal meeting place between the old and the new worlds.

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