



John Smith Explores the Chesapeake

Captain John Smith explored the Chesapeake Bay in the early 1600s seeking precious metals and a passage to Asia. He traveled the James, Chickahominy, and York rivers in 1607, and led two major expeditions from Jamestown in 1608. Smith and his crew sailed and rowed a primitive 30-foot boat nearly 3,000 miles, reaching as far north as the Susquehanna River.

Although Smith did not discover gold, or a river passage to the Pacific, his precise map and detailed observations of American Indian societies and the abundant natural resources guided future explorers and settlers.



Smith's remarkably accurate map of the Chesapeake Bay (published in 1612), and his spirited written accounts of a lush landscape inspired European migration.

Native Inhabitants

At the time of Smith's explorations, an estimated 50,000 American Indians dwelled in the Chesapeake region—as their ancestors had for thousands of years. Their sophisticated societies included arts and architecture, systems of government, extensive trade and communication networks, and shared spiritual beliefs. The native peoples hunted, fished, grew crops, and gathered food and raw materials from the land and waterways.



Decorative shells—such as those found on this ceremonial robe—were valuable in the American Indians' trading network that extended for hundreds of miles. This robe (which may have belonged to paramount chief Powhatan) was crafted from four elk skins and adorned with more than 17,000 shells.

An Abundance of Life

Smith discovered a treasure trove of natural wonders in the Chesapeake region: thick forests of giant pines, oaks, and hickories; vast marshlands; huge turtles, 800-pound sturgeon, and great schools of shad and striped bass. Massive flocks of ducks, geese, and swans darkened the sky; and enormous oyster reefs rose above the water's surface.



IMAGE / HUGH ROBBY

Wood ducks and other waterfowl flourished



The forests and lowlands teemed with deer



Cattails grew thick in pristine marshes



Flocks of geese filled the sky

