



Not Primitive at All: Indian Houses

Hearing of “sapling-and-mat” houses makes many people think immediately of flimsiness and impermanence. The Algonquian speakers’ houses were impermanent; they moved every few years anyway; and instead of selling or renting their “old” houses as modern mobile families do, they let theirs fall down—no one was going to occupy the sites for a while—and simply biodegrade. The houses were not truly flimsy, though, as long as the pole framework’s lashings were kept tight. Smaller houses were conical; longer houses had rounded ends that provided bracing. Such frameworks can withstand hurricane winds; although the mat or bark coverings would need repair or replacement afterward, the house would not be completely roofless. Such frameworks, especially the conical ones, can also withstand heavy snowfalls, which is why conical houses were standard among Algonquian speakers from New England and the Maritime Provinces westward to the Great Lakes.

Indian Towns Could Be Difficult to See from the Water

It is difficult to spot a town that is camouflaged, even if the inhabitants did not do the camouflaging deliberately. Most Indian towns consisted of houses scattered among small fields, overgrown fields, and groves of older trees. Even after the harvest, much of the “town” would consist of vegetation interspersed among the houses. Then there were the houses themselves. Whether covered with bark or with mats, their outer shells were brown or dun-colored when new and grayish when weathered. They blended in with deciduous vegetation in winter and were shielded from view by it in summer. The best way to find an Indian town was to watch for smoke rising above the trees on calm days and blowing into one’s nostrils on windy ones—if the wind was right. The wind was not right, however, when John Smith passed by the lower Eastern Shore: it was from the southwest, and it blew the telltale smoke from houses inland.