



## Overview of Smith's First Chesapeake Bay Voyage

In exploring the Chesapeake Bay, Smith was following Virginia Company instructions to seek valuable minerals, identify fish and wildlife, study the forests for useful timber, locate good ports, and learn about the native people's towns and numbers of warriors. Although Smith later wrote extensively about both of his Chesapeake Bay voyages, there are gaps in the narrative that must be filled with calculations and assumptions based on our understanding of tides and wind directions, the places that Smith did or did not record on his map, and the customary sailing procedures of the early seventeenth century. Smith based some of what appears on his great map, for instance, on information from the native people rather than his own observation. Many of the place-names he assigned are still in use.

### The Participants

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Smith selected fourteen companions for his first voyage, probably for their skills. Six of them—James Bourne, William Cantrill, Richard Featherstone, Thomas Momford, Ralph Morton, and Michael Sicklemore—were gentlemen familiar with firearms. Walter Russell was a physician. Robert Small was a carpenter who could make any necessary repairs to the shallop. John Powell, a tailor, could sew sails as well as clothes. James Read was a blacksmith. Jonas Profit, a fisherman, was also a sailor, and Richard Keale, a fish merchant, could identify edible fish. James Watkins and Anas Todkill were soldiers. Smith also engaged the services of native people as guides and translators when necessary throughout the voyage.

### Route of Smith's First Voyage

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On June 3, Smith and his party explored Fisherman's Island just off the tip of Cape Charles and Monkhorn Island on the Atlantic shore. Returning to the Bay, they saw native men fishing with bone-headed spears. They directed Smith north along the western side of the Eastern Shore to Accomack Town, near Elliots Creek, where the Englishmen got a friendly reception. Smith conversed with the chief there, who told him that canoes could harbor easily for a considerable distance up the peninsula. The Englishmen probably spent the night at Accomack.

The next day, they explored the shore to the north, entering Cherrystone Inlet and either Nassawaddox or Occohannock Creek. The sight of an island in the distance (either Watts or Tangier) caused Smith to bypass other creeks, some of which had towns a short distance inland. That afternoon, as the group sailed for the island, a violent thunderstorm struck, causing Smith to turn toward the mainland and anchor perhaps in Chesconnessex Creek, near present-day Onley.

Smith spent the morning of June 5 exploring Watts and Tangier Islands, which he named the Russells Isles in honor of the doctor. Then he turned back east and entered Beasley Bay, sailed or rowed around the marsh to the north, and took the boat into the mouth of the Pocomoke River, which he called the Wicocomoco (Wighcocomoco) after the native people whose town he soon encountered. At first the English got a hostile reception but soon made peace. The Wicocomoco were outside the Powhatan polity and spoke a different Algonquian dialect, so communication was difficult. One or more of them guided Smith upstream (either in a canoe or overland) as far as the site of present-day Pocomoke City,

Maryland. The party then returned to the town, where the men feasted and rested for the night. The Englishmen were disappointed with the quality of the fresh water.

On June 6, Smith explored Tangier Sound. He sailed north along the shore and noted Marumsco, East, and Ape Hole Creeks, then rowed through Cedar Straits, observing Clump and Great Fox Islands and finally entering the sound. He next visited the Annemessex and Manokin Rivers and Deal Island. When he reached Bloodsworth Island, another storm tore away the mast and sail, and the crew had to bail to keep from being swamped.

For the next day and a half, Smith explored Bloodsworth Island, which he named Limbo, while Powell the tailor repaired the sail. On the afternoon of June 8, the company got underway again, returning to the Eastern Shore and sailing up the Wicomoco River to Monie Bay. Encountering salt marshes, Smith sailed north into the Kuskarawaok (Nanticoke) River, where the inhabitants shot arrows at the boat from the shore. Anxious to find fresh water, Smith anchored the vessel out of range in midstream for the night, near Ragged Point.

Smith maneuvered the shallop close to the shore the next morning, where the native people waited unarmed, bearing baskets of goods for trade. Suspecting an ambush, Smith had ordered a volley fired at the crowd and then backed off when he saw armed men hiding in the marsh on the point. Late in the day, he again approached the shore and fired into the marsh but saw no one. Observing smoke across the river, Smith sailed there to find some abandoned houses. He left a few trade goods, then went back down the river and into Fishing Bay, past Elliott Island and the Transquaking River, before returning to the Nanticoke River and anchoring near the abandoned houses.

On June 10, four Nanticoke men in a canoe approached the shallop from downstream. They had been away fishing and were unaware of the clash the previous day. Smith was friendly and generous, and they paddled away to tell their people. Soon, twenty Nanticoke appeared, then some hundreds came to trade furs and other goods, and the Englishmen went ashore, probably between present-day Bivalve and Tyaskin. Smith noted the high quality of the furs, which the Nanticoke obtained by trade with other tribes, using large quantities of shell beads that they made.

It is uncertain just how far up the Nanticoke River Smith and his men explored, given the frenzy of trading, the need to take on fresh water, the hospitality he received, and the distance to the paramount chief's town of Cuskarawaok near present-day Vienna. Smith may instead have relied on information supplied by the local inhabitants (Powhatan and others sometimes drew maps for him in the earth) rather than passing into present-day Delaware himself. The Nanticoke told Smith that the Eastern Shore was only a peninsula separating the Chesapeake Bay from the Atlantic Ocean, and they also spoke of "a great nation called Massawomecks" who lived farther up the Bay. Because one of Smith's goals was to find a northwest passage, he was anxious to locate and interview the people of that nation, so he probably recorded the information and sailed back to the mouth of the river to spend the night.

On June 11, Smith and the men sailed west through Hooper Strait between the mainland and Bloodsworth Island, past the Honga River and Nancy Point on the south end of Hooper Island. In the distance, as he sailed across the Bay, Smith saw high cliffs just above the horizon—the eroding cliffs between Drum Point and Little Cove Point—and made for them. Once across, he sailed north past the mouth of the Patuxent River and Calvert Cliffs, noting Plum Point Creek at Breezy Point and Fishing Creek at Chesapeake Beach. He probably anchored for the night between Fishing Creek and Randle Cliff.

The next day, Smith continued north along the shore, sailing all the way to the mouth of the Patapsco River and recording Herring Bay, the South River, White Hall Creek, and the Magothy River. He found no towns, suggesting that attacks by Iroquoian tribes to the north and west had depopulated the area. Smith probably stopped for the night at the mouth of the Patapsco. Smith explored up the Patapsco River past the site of present-day Baltimore on June 13. First the men rowed the shallop upstream as far as today's town of Elkridge, and then they went on foot past the first falls of the river near the present Interstate 95 bridge to a point about half a mile beyond present-day Avalon. He and his men looked for minerals but found none. They placed a brass cross claiming the valley for England at the farthest point they explored. Since the river obviously was not a navigable route to the interior, Smith returned to the mouth, exploring Northwest Harbor and Middle Branch on the way.

Whatever spirit of adventure the men had possessed when the voyage began had by this time worn thin, and they wanted to go back to Jamestown. Storm water had wet their bread and caused it to rot, and the crew had been jammed into the shallop for almost two weeks. The sudden absence of towns also may have made them uneasy. Smith gave them an oration, observing that there was no more risk in sailing on to find the Massawomeck nation than in returning to Jamestown, and they agreed to go on.

Nature intervened, however. A storm blew in on June 14, probably a northeaster with cold wind and rain, preventing the shallop from leaving the Patapsco. Five men fell ill, and Smith decided to return to Jamestown. The next day the wind propelled them south to Herring Bay, an easy sail that probably lifted the men's spirits. They spent the night there, and then sailed south again to the mouth of the Potomac River. On June 17, they navigated up the river about twenty miles to Nomini Bay on the south (Virginia) side. There they saw two native men and accepted their invitation to come with them up Nomini Creek to Onawmanient town. It was an ambush, however, with several hundred men emerging from the woods to shoot arrows at the Englishmen, who responded with gunfire deliberately aimed low. The warriors, perhaps both Chicacoan (Sekakawon) and Wicocomoco, laid down their weapons and agreed to an exchange of hostages. Soldier James Watkins was given up to the native men, and a parley followed. The Onawmanient chief told Smith that Powhatan had ordered the attack, but Smith thought that malcontents at Jamestown had put him up to it. It is possible that Powhatan ordered Smith punished or chastised for wandering through the Chesapeake Bay region, trading with some who might be Powhatan's enemies, without his permission. Powhatan may have heard about the expedition from the Accomac. Chastised or not, Smith spent the night either with the Onawmanient chief or aboard the shallop in Nomini Bay.

Smith's travels on the Potomac River over the next four weeks—June 18 to July 15—are difficult to reconstruct because he wrote of them briefly and did not indicate their sequence or the exact time for each stage. At some point early in his journey up the Potomac, Smith met a Wicocomoco man named Mosco, who had an unusually heavy beard that suggested some European ancestry via earlier explorers. He assumed the position of guide and coordinator for Smith and his men, both on this and on Smith's second voyage of exploration. Mosco took the Englishmen mostly along the north bank of the river upstream as far as Patawomeck, where he remained while they went on. His plan may have been to keep them out of Powhatan's polity, where they were likely to encounter more chastisement (as apparently also occurred at Patawomeck and elsewhere on the south bank).

Smith, his men, and Mosco sailed to Saint Clement Bay due north across the river from Nomini Bay, then upriver to the Yeocomico (Wicomico) River, and next to Cecomocomoco back on the Potomac River. They visited the Potopaco people on the Port Tobacco River; this was part of the Piscataway polity, outside Powhatan's realm. Next came the Nanjemoy, followed by Patawomeck, where Mosco remained behind while the Englishmen continued upriver. They received hospitality from a number of

people en route, including the Tauxenent (Dogues), supposedly on the edge of Powhatan's polity, the Pamacocack, Moyaone (Piscataway), and Nacotchank. 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). He traded for furs with native people he encountered in canoes there and then worked his way back downstream to Patawomeck on Potomac Creek.

There he found that Mosco had persuaded the chief to allow Smith to visit a valuable mine. Located far up Aquia Creek, the mine produced an "ore" with silvery glitter (perhaps specular hematite) that was washed out, bagged, and traded over considerable distances. The silver specks were mixed with grease and paint to decorate faces and were highly esteemed. Several Patawomeck men led Smith and six of his party up the creek in the shallop about thirteen miles, and then they walked the rest of the way, about eight miles. Smith was vague about the mine's exact location, which seems to have been on a tributary of Aquia Creek. The group dug some of the ore, but when it was assayed in England later it was found to contain no silver.

Smith and his men returned downstream to the mouth of the Potomac River, probably visiting Ozatawomen town on Upper Machodoc Creek and perhaps Chicacoan on the Coan River. Eager to explore the Rappahannock River, Smith headed south along the shore of the Northern Neck on July 15, examining the creeks along the way and visiting Wicocomoco on the Great Wicomico River and the town of Conquack. From Ingram Bay, the next day Smith and his men sailed and rowed to Fleets Bay. On July 17, at low tide the shallop ran aground at the mouth of the Rappahannock River, where shoals extend for some distance into the Chesapeake Bay. Smith and his men decided to fish while they waited for the tide to float the boat, and employed their swords to impale the fish that swam through the shoals in abundance. Smith had the misfortune to spear a cow-nose ray, which sank its tail spine into his wrist as he tried to remove the fish. His arm, shoulder, and chest swelled from the toxin, but Dr. Russell applied oil from his medical stores and by evening Smith was well enough to eat the ray for supper. He called the place Stingray Point, a name it bears to this day.

That night, Smith—still feeling the effects of the ray's sting—decided to postpone his exploration of the Rappahannock River and return to Jamestown. The incoming tide had floated the shallop off the shoal, and during the night the crew made enough progress to round Old Point Comfort and put in at Kecoughtan by the next evening. The Kecoughtan people, seeing the goods for which Smith had traded (including bows, arrows, warclubs shields, mantles, and furs), thought that the Englishmen had successfully fought the much-feared Massawomeck. Smith allowed them to believe this, and the night may have been spent feasting in celebration.

## **End of First Voyage**

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On July 20, the party made little progress up the James River, probably because of contrary winds. Smith landed for the night at Waraskoyack, only about fifteen miles upstream, but was consoled by additional celebrating, as word of his "victory" over the Massawomeck had reached at least that far. The next day, as the explorers approached Jamestown, they played a little joke on the inhabitants. Knowing that the colonists lived in dread of a Spanish attack and to test their responsiveness, Smith and his men decorated the shallop with painted streamers that looked Spanish rather than English, so that the Jamestown residents would think the vessel was a scouting boat in advance of a Spanish frigate. It is doubtful that Ratcliffe and the others were amused, because the situation at Jamestown had gone from bad to worse in Smith's absence. According to Smith, Ratcliffe's role as president had turned him into a tyrant. He had plundered the stores and forced the workers to build him a "pallace in the woods." The

men—perhaps as impressed with Smith’s apparent military success as the native people had been—begged him to overthrow Ratcliffe, and Smith agreed. In short order, he somehow deposed Ratcliffe, installed his friend Matthew Scrivener as acting president, and decided to continue his exploration of the Chesapeake Bay. This time he would concentrate first on the upper reaches of the Bay and then the Rappahannock River.

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Read complete [Historical Narrative](#) from the Statement of Significance for Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail  
[www.smithtrail.net](http://www.smithtrail.net)