

The Life of the American Indian

People have lived in the Chesapeake region for 15,000 years, even before what we now know as the Chesapeake Bay was formed. By the time Europeans began touching on North America the people in the mid-Atlantic had well-developed cultures and agriculture and lived in established communities along the banks of the coastal waterways and in the woodlands and mountain valleys.

Three Native American language groups dominated the Chesapeake region during the late 16th century through the 17th century. The languages were Algonquian, Siouan and Iroquoian.

While exploring the Chesapeake Bay, Capt. Smith and his crew encountered these tribes, interacting with some extensively. The Chesapeake's Indians provided Smith's crew and the English settlers with valuable knowledge and in exchange for trade goods, with food.

The food the English got from the Indians through trade and raids sustained them during the early years of the colony. Subsequently, English survival led to the destruction of the Indian's world.

In 2006, Karenne Wood, a member of the Monacan Indian Nation and at the time the chair of the Virginia Council on Indians, wrote on behalf of the Council to Senator Paul Sarbanes and Senator John Warner as Congress considered establishing the Capt. John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. The trail, she said, "provides an excellent opportunity to educate the general public about American Indian history. Our support for this trail is contingent upon prioritizing the incorporation of the American Indian story and heritage, as told by American Indians from the Virginia state-recognized tribes."

Stephen R. Adkins, chief of the Chickahominy Indian tribe, echoed that support in a letter to Senator Warner.

"Our tribe feels that the John Smith Trail would be an excellent way to teach people about American Indian culture and history.... honest historical interpretation will provide an excellent vehicle to tell the story of English settlement not just from the European perspective, but also from the American Indian perspective," he wrote.

Now, four centuries later, the ancestors of the Chesapeake's native people maintain their identities, with tribal organizations in Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware.