

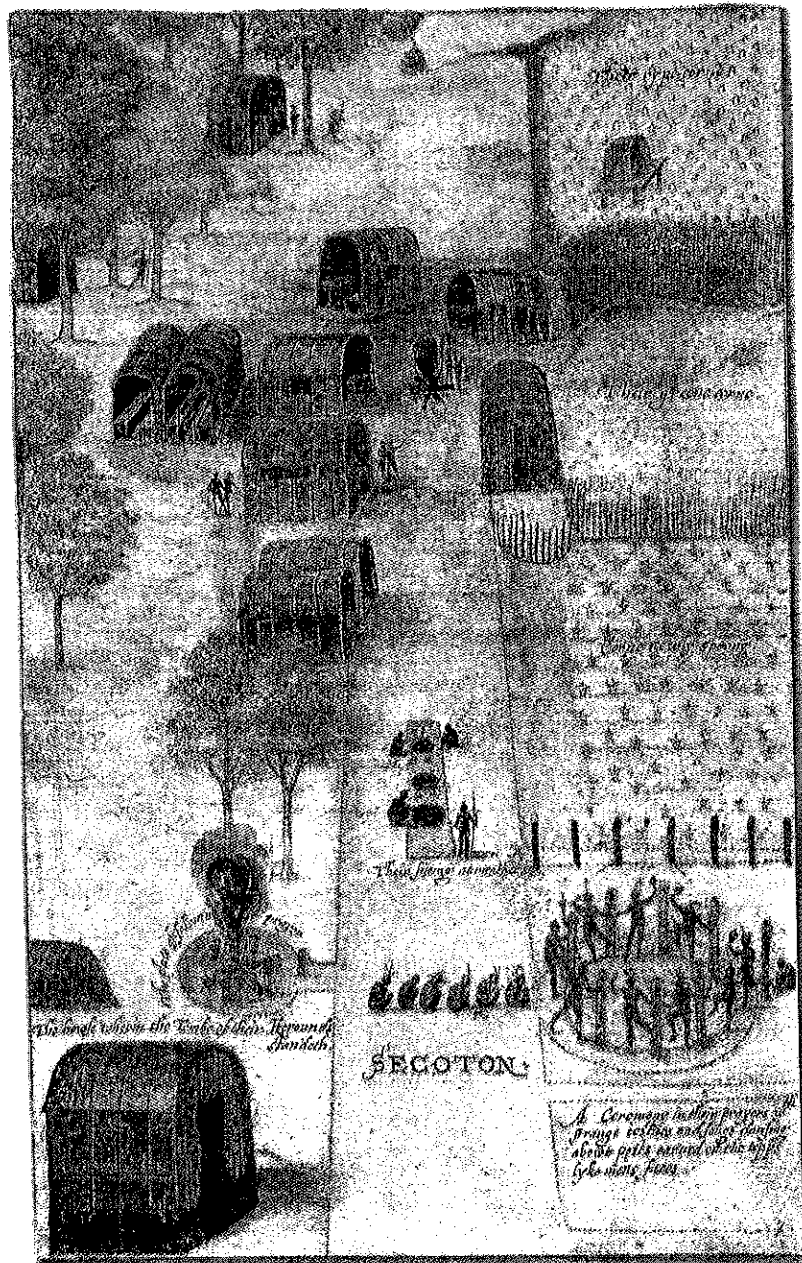


2. The Powhatan Indians

The Powhatan Indians lived in the Chesapeake Bay region of present-day Virginia and Maryland. Scholars estimate that when the English arrived in 1607, there were between 8,000 and 14,000 Powhatans residing in the area. The Powhatan nation was composed of several different tribes. All of the tribes spoke a dialect of Algonquian, the family of languages spoken by many Native Americans living along the eastern coast of North America. The Powhatans are also known as the Virginia Algonquians or the Tidewater Indians.

“Tidewater” refers to the environment in which the Powhatans lived. The Virginia Tidewater is a coastal plain, an area of low-lying land on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. The Chesapeake Bay, situated on the Atlantic coast, forms an estuary, or a body of water where the salt water of the ocean and the freshwater of

Opposite: This photograph of Jamestown Island, which is situated in the James River, offers a bird's-eye view of the trees that are native to this marshy coastal region of Virginia. Among the trees that have flourished in the Virginia Tidewater are oak, red maple, black gum, bald cypress, and loblolly pine.



The Secotan Indians lived in the coastal region of North Carolina and sustained themselves by hunting and farming. John White's 1585 watercolor of a Secotan village documented the villagers' cultivation of crops, which included corn, sunflowers, pumpkins, and tobacco.

rivers meet. Five major rivers flow into the bay. The rivers are the Potomac, the Rappahannock, the York, the James, and the Susquehanna, with several smaller rivers and creeks branching off from them. The entire area includes beaches, marshlands, swamps, and forests. The range of land inhabited by the Powhatans spanned about 100 miles (161 km) from east to west, from the Atlantic Ocean to the fall line, or a place where the Indians could no longer travel the rivers because of waterfalls. From north to south, approximately between the present-day borders of Maryland and North Carolina, the Powhatan homeland stretched along the coast for another 100 miles (161 km).

The Powhatans built their villages along the banks of the rivers. The rivers and their streams offered water for drinking and bathing and provided food such as fish, oysters, and mussels. The rivers were also important for transportation by dugout canoe, allowing people to communicate and trade with one another all along the waterways. The canoes were made from a single log that was split in half and hollowed out by gradually burning the inside of the log and then scraping out the burnt wood.

The Powhatans constructed their homes by fastening mats made from rushes or strips of bark over an arched framework of cut saplings. An opening was left at either end of the home for entrances and in the roof, as well, so that smoke from the household fire could escape. Inside this shelter, low wooden platforms covered with mats

served as beds. Household utensils included dishes and cups made from turtle shells, ladles and spoons made from gourds and shells, clay cooking pots, and wooden mortars and pestles that were used to grind corn. Other furnishings, which were usually made from plant materials, included mats, bags, and baskets for gathering and storing food.

Women grew food in the fields, which were located near the homes. To clear the ground for planting, the Powhatans practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. They removed the trees in an area by burning them and then clearing them away. The remains of large tree stumps were left in place and the crops were grown among them.

Corn was the most important and valued food that the Powhatans harvested, although they also grew beans and squash. Using a digging stick to poke holes in the ground, women dropped a few seeds of corn and beans together into each hole. As the crops came up, the cornstalks would support the vines of the growing beans. Squashes, gourds, and pumpkins were planted between the rows of corn and beans. Boys and girls often helped the women in the gardens by sowing the seeds and weeding. Children also kept watch and scared off birds and other wildlife that could eat the seeds and the young plants. Pocahontas might have helped the women in her village in such a way.

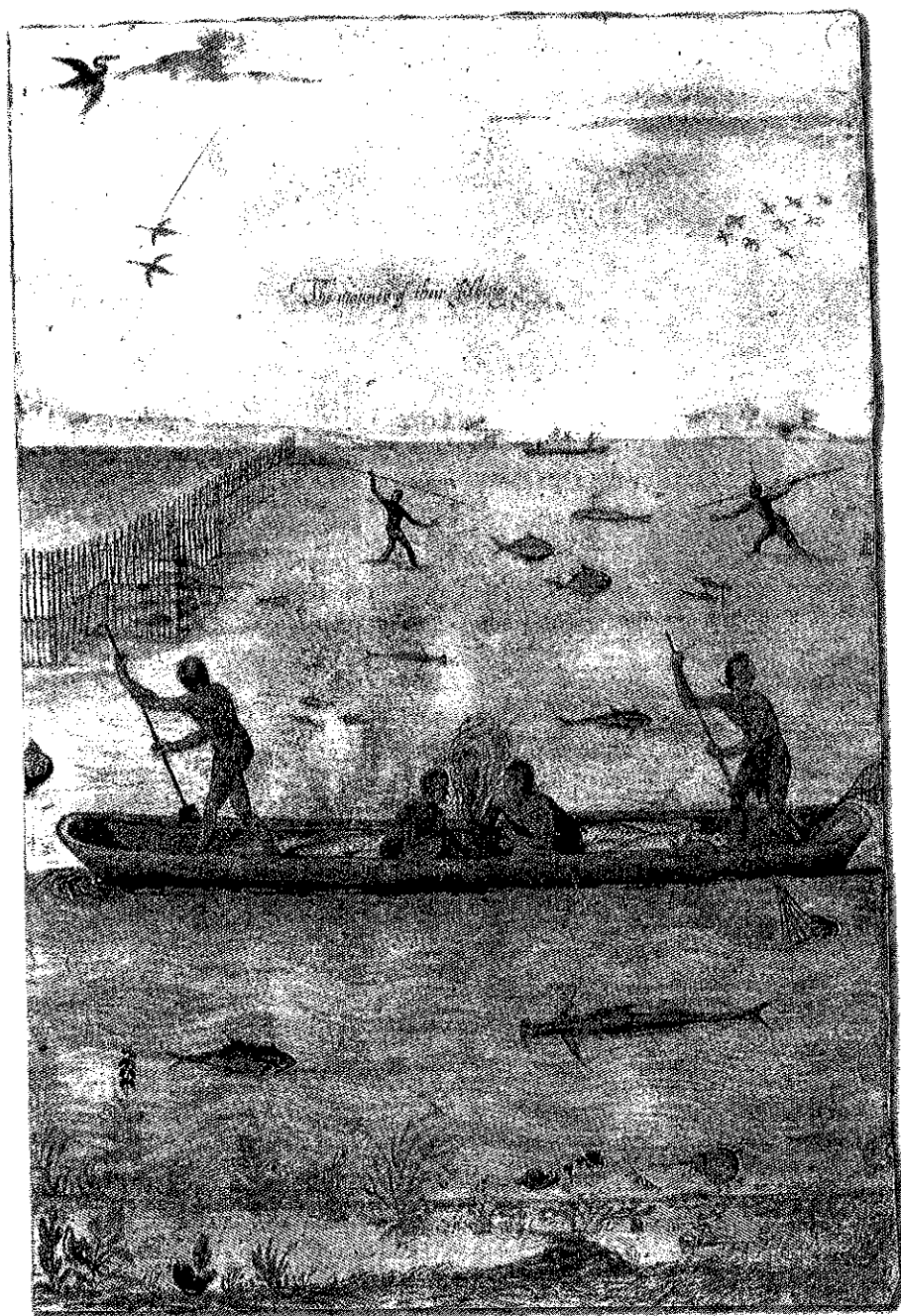
Besides growing food, women also gathered plants from the land. Wild berries and nuts were collected to



Shown above are some of the foods that were essential to the Powhatans' diet. Included on the mat are squashes, pumpkins, corn, and several varieties of beans.

be eaten. Oils from some nuts were used to prepare certain medications.

In addition to providing plants, the Tidewater region offered a wide variety of animals that the Powhatans used for food and for raw materials. Men usually fished from canoes using several different methods. They caught fish in nets, snagged them using fishing lines with bone hooks, stabbed the fish with spears, or caught them in traps called weirs. The men also gathered shellfish by diving for them. The men hunted for deer and wild turkeys, as well as for



This 1585 watercolor by John White shows the various methods that Native Americans from the coastal region of Virginia used to catch fish. To lure fish to the surface during the night, men would light a

other animals such as raccoon, opossums, beavers, otters, turtles, and snakes.

A Powhatan man's reputation depended on his hunting ability, as well as on his skills as a warrior, so boys were taught these skills at a very young age. Methods of hunting varied. Hunters caught smaller animals in traps. They hunted larger animals with bows and arrows. Bears were killed for their meat, their fur, and for their fat, which was mixed with crushed minerals to make paint. Deer were trapped in different ways. Sometimes a hunter wearing a deerskin stalked the animal before shooting it with a bow and arrow. To hunt a herd of deer, several men surrounded the animals and trapped them. They did this by building fires around them or by driving them into the water where other hunters waiting in canoes shot them.

The deer were then brought to the women of the village, who skinned them and prepared the carcasses for a variety of uses. Deer provided meat for food; bones for making tools and utensils; sinew, or muscle tendon, for string; and skins for clothing. The women scraped the skins and then tanned, or preserved, them before sewing them into garments.

Pocahontas and other young girls observed the women in their village carrying out such tasks. Eventually, after watching the adults work, the girls would imitate the women and undertake these activities themselves. As the daughter of a chief, Pocahontas



This watercolor, based on a 1585 drawing by John White, shows stew cooking in the type of pot used by the Powhatans. The pot was made from layers of clay coils molded together.

probably had more leisure time than did most other girls her age.

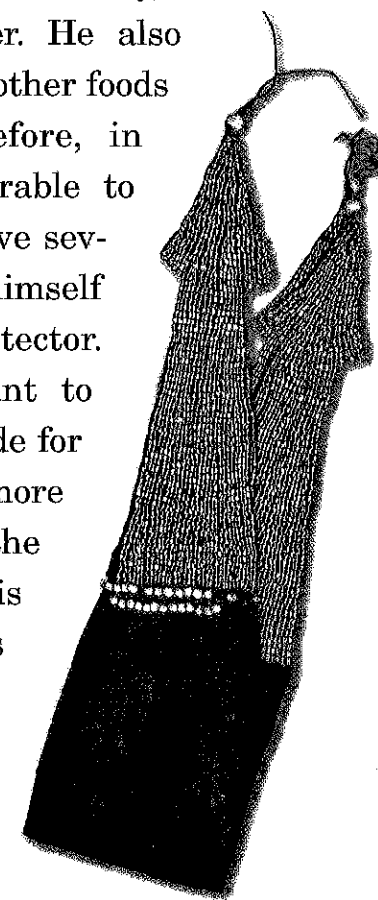
Powhatan clothing included fringed leather aprons for women and loincloths for men. In the forest, where brambles and branches could scratch their skin, the Powhatans wore deer-skin leggings and moccasins. Both men and women wore jewelry and body paint. Hairstyles for both sexes could be quite elaborate. Women also tattooed their bodies

with designs of flowers and animals.

The Powhatans made all the tools they used from stone and other natural materials. Arrowheads and axes were made from quartz and flint, sharpened reeds, bird bills, beaver teeth, and sharpened shells. When the English arrived with metal axes, hatchets, and firearms, the Powhatans were eager to trade for these tools and weapons, which were sturdier and stronger than their own.

Powhatan families had all they needed in their surroundings to care for themselves and were quite self-sufficient. Yet some families were wealthier than others. The wealthier Powhatans had more luxury items, such as copper, shell beads, and freshwater pearls, many of which they acquired through trade. The most important method of becoming wealthy, however, was by having a large supply of food. To be wealthy, a man had to be a good hunter. He also needed a great deal of corn and other foods that women produced. Therefore, in Powhatan culture it was desirable to have more than one wife. To have several wives, a man had to prove himself as an able provider and protector. Powhatan women did not want to marry men who could not provide for them and defend them. The more wives a man could attract, the more food he could bring into his household through the women's farming and gathering.

Child rearing was a communal task for Powhatan women. Mothers watched and cared for children, as did grandmothers, older sisters, and aunts.



Virginian Powhatans made this bag from deerskin. They decorated it with shell beads. The bag was brought to

When a child was born, it was customary to dip the baby in water, regardless of how cold the water was. Powhatans of all ages bathed every morning, even in the winter months. The Powhatans bathed not only for cleanliness, but also because the practice was believed to keep the people hardy in all kinds of weather.

Until they were able to crawl, babies spent their infancy bound to wooden boards called cradleboards. Wrapped in skins and then strapped to these boards with a cord, the babies could be carried or hung from a tree branch as the women did their daily work.

Pocahontas's childhood was probably spent much like that of other wealthy Powhatan children. She learned the skills she would need as an adult and played with the other children in her town. Although much is known of Pocahontas's father, little is known of her mother. Pocahontas's



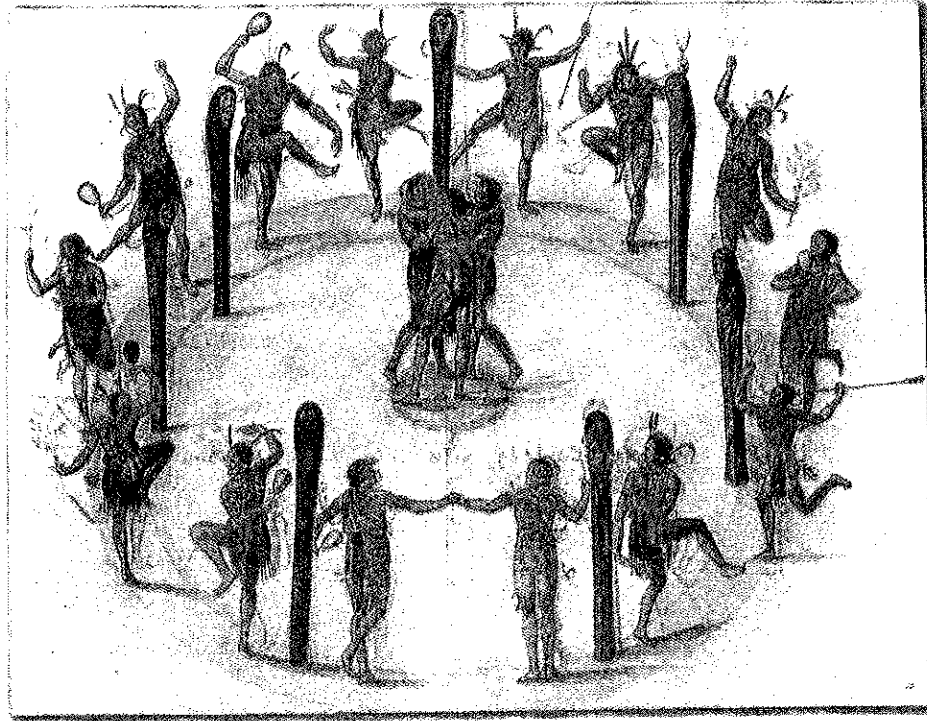
This Native American woman, drawn by John White in 1585, has tattoos on her legs. Circles, triangles, and designs of flowers, fruits, and snakes were often

mother was one of Powhatan's many wives. Chief Powhatan was said to have had more than one hundred wives from different towns. Most of these women lived with their own people. Powhatan had a total of at least twenty sons and ten daughters with these women.

After one of Powhatan's wives had borne a child, Powhatan sent the woman back to her town with the baby. There the mother would raise the child until Powhatan was ready to have his son or daughter returned to him to be raised in his household. By the time the English arrived, Pocahontas was living apart from her mother.

As a girl living in her father's village, Pocahontas would also join in the feasting that the Powhatans enjoyed on special occasions. These celebrations included a great deal of singing and dancing. Dancing was both an important part of Powhatan rituals and a favored leisure activity in the evening after the day's work was done.

The Powhatan nation was a chiefdom, which meant that it was composed of several towns or villages that were all under the rule of a single chief, or leader. Powhatan, Pocahontas's father, was the paramount, or the supreme chief, of the Indian groups in his region. As the highest-ranking ruler, he was known as Powhatan, but his personal name was Wahunsenacawh. The Algonquian word for his rank as the supreme chief was *mamanatowick*. Powhatan held great power over the



A Secotan Indian dance, probably in celebration of the corn harvest, was recorded by John White around 1585 in the coastal region of North Carolina. As they danced around a circle of carved wooden posts, men and women carried small leafy branches and rattles made from gourds.

people of his region and his people paid Powhatan tribute by giving him deerskins, food, and other valuables.

Powhatan's chiefdom was made up of districts. Each district was ruled by a lesser chief who was called in Algonquian *weroance*, or *weroansqua* if the chief was a woman. Each district had several towns within it, and each town also had a leader. The town leaders were called weroances as well. The town weroances had to answer to the weroance of their district, and the district weroances had to answer to the mamanatowick

Powhatan. All these leaders expected obedience and respect from those whom they led.

Other important members of Powhatan society were the *quiyoughcosuck*, or priests. The Powhatans believed that priests had special abilities as seers, or individuals who could look into the future and predict the outcome of events. For this reason, priests had great influence over their rulers and were often consulted in matters of warfare.

One dramatic example of the power of priests occurred sometime around 1607. Powhatan's priests told him that a nation from the Chesapeake Bay would arise to "dissolve and give end to his Empire." Powhatan decided that the group to which the seers were referring was a tribe called the Chesapeake. Therefore, he had all the Chesapeake people killed.

It was also thought that priests could identify people who had committed



John White drew this Native American priest around 1585. Powhatans believed priests protected the crops by controlling the weather.

crimes. Punishment for certain crimes was severe. Anyone who robbed or murdered another Powhatan, or who helped to commit such crimes, was executed. However, it was not considered a crime to steal from or to kill anyone who was not a Powhatan.

Men who were exceptionally skilled hunters and warriors also held a high place among the Powhatan, although they were not as powerful as the priests were. The rulers respected hunters and warriors and sought their advice because of their skills.

3. Before Jamestown

The paramount chiefdom that Chief Powhatan eventually created began as a smaller chiefdom that he had inherited from his ancestors in the mid-to-late 1500s. Powhatan's chiefdom grew as he conquered more groups, such as the Nansemond, the Weyanock, and the Warraskoyack. By 1607, Powhatan ruled all the tribes in the Chesapeake Bay area except for the Chickahominy, a large tribe that he could not conquer.

During the period when Powhatan enlarged his chiefdom, the kings and queens of Europe expanded their empires around the world. Trade was thriving and items from Asia, such as exotic spices and silks, were brought to Europe to be sold as luxury goods in European markets.

Early trade routes from Europe to Asia were mostly over land. By the end of the fifteenth century, however, monarchs were hiring explorers to find faster and shorter passages by sea. A turning point came when the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama discovered a new sea route to Asia. He sailed from Portugal, around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, and into the