

Exploring Life in St. Mary's City



Even before colonists settled in Maryland, mariners from around the globe explored the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. Algonkian-speaking people named this body of water Chesepiooc or "Great Shellfish Bay." In this interactive map, you'll step into two different perspectives from the 1600s:



- an English explorer



- a local Chesapeake Algonkian person

Compass Rose

The crew is heading west in open sea when we spot land! According to our map, we will turn north after entering the Chesapeake Bay.

"When you are come within the Capes, you enter into a faire Bay, which is navigable for at least 200 miles, and is called Chesapeake Bay, and runneth Northerly:"

— Jerome Hawley and John Lewger, 1635

The compass rose told European mariners their position in relation to wind direction — north, south, east, and west. The Algonkian people of the Chesapeake Bay area, however, would rely on their knowledge of the environment for directions. They followed the sun, stars, and natural landmarks to navigate on land and water.

The Changing Bay:

Early maps of Maryland, like this one, have west at the top instead of north. This helped show sailors how to approach Maryland from the ocean. To us, it looks like the Bay is on its side.

Atlantic Ocean

After a two-month journey across the ocean, the men aboard can't wait to set foot on solid ground. Salt from the sea coats our skin, hair, and clothing.

After we make land, we'll be able to find fresh drinking water from inland streams.

Salt water from the Atlantic Ocean enters the mouth of the bay. As you travel north up the Bay, the amount of salt in the water gradually decreases.

Many cultures throughout history harvested salt by boiling seawater and then used that salt to preserve fish and meat.

There is no evidence that the Chesapeake Algonkians boiled seawater before colonists arrived. Instead, they smoked fish and meat to preserve them.

The Changing Bay:

The Atlantic Ocean, labeled Oceanus Orientalis on this map, was also called the North Sea or the Virginian Sea in colonial times.

Cape Charles and Cape Henry

Men have returned from fishing, and they say they saw a strange canoe. The beings on this canoe also look strange. They have yellow and red hair, different skin colors, and hair on their faces like animals. The men ask the village chief and council to watch these strange beings, and the chief and council decide to allow them to go. The men bring their bows and arrows with them. They do not want to fight, just watch, but they will protect the village if they need to.

"The ordinary entrance by Sea into this countrey, is betweene two Capes, which are distant each from other, about 7 or 8 leagues, the South-Cape is Called Cape-Henry; the North, Cape-Charles. - "

— Jerome Hawley and John Lewger, 1635

A cape is a point of land jutting out into water. Cape Charles is at the tip of a large peninsula, which is an area of land surrounded by water on three sides.

This may have been the first place where Algonkian people on land spotted tall ships entering the bay.

The Changing Bay:

This peninsula is now called the Delmarva Peninsula. It includes parts of three states: Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.

Lower Chesapeake Bay

This Bay is magnificent! It's a warm day, and the water is so clear the sailors can see the bottom. The water still tastes salty. Will it turn fresh as we travel up the bay?

Someone just caught a huge fish for lunch, a slow-swimming sturgeon. What a treat! We've been eating salt pork and stale bread for weeks.

"Chesapeake Bay flows gently between the shores; it is ten leagues wide, four, five, six, and seven fathoms deep, and teeming with fish, when it is the right time of year."-Andrew White, 1634

"...heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation..."
— Captain John Smith, 1612

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in the United States. An estuary is a body of water where salt water and fresh water mix.

The bay is about 200 miles long, contains more than 4,400 miles of shoreline, and holds about 18 trillion gallons of water. Its widest point measures 30 miles, and its average depth is only 27 feet. Was Andrew White's estimate of the bay's dimensions accurate? Hint: a league = 3 miles. A fathom = 6 feet.

The Changing Bay:

Unlike the murky waters of today's Chesapeake, the water in colonial times was much clearer and cleaner. In fact, the bay's health today is determined by comparing it to the condition it was in when Captain John Smith explored the area in the early 1600s. Then, clear water revealed meadows of underwater grasses, huge oyster reefs, and many fish. John Smith believed the bay was a perfect place for people to live. But the area has suffered from the impact humans have had over the past 400 years.

Potomac River

A messenger came by canoe carrying a wampum strand and asked to speak with the chief and council. He says that the men on the strange canoe are not here to fight, but seem to want to trade. He unrolls a buckskin and shows the village several metal knives, three strands of solid blue and layered multicolor glass beads, fishing hooks made of a strange dark metal, and a mantle made from a strange white cloth that is neither animal skin nor bark.

With the permission of the chief and council, the men of the village gather furs and tobacco to trade with the strangers.

"Into this Bay fall many goodly navigable Rivers, the chiefe whereof is Patomack...It's navigable for 140 miles, it begins to be fresh about 2 leagues above Patomack Towne."

— Jerome Hawley and John Lewger, 1635

"At the mouth of the river itself we perceived armed natives."

— Andrew White, 1634

Five major rivers, as well as smaller rivers, creeks, and streams, provide almost all of the fresh water to the bay. The Potomac is the largest river at nearly 400 miles long.

These rivers provided transportation for Indigenous Marylanders and colonists alike, allowing them to move around the watershed and trade with other groups. Traders didn't always speak the same language and would use hand gestures to communicate.

The Changing Bay:

As long as people have lived along its shores, they have polluted the Potomac River. The Algonkian people of the Chesapeake region moved their villages from time to time as they used up the soil's nutrients and collected waste. Today, the polluting effects of population growth, farming, mining, clear-cutting, sewage, and garbage could be disastrous for the river if left unchecked.

St. Clement's Island



The leaves have changed color, but the sun is still warm, so the men and women of the village paddle to the nearby island for a long camping trip. They've brought cattail mats, cooking pots, fur blankets, dried food, and several nice orange sugar pumpkins to eat.

They spend weeks filling their baskets with nuts and fruits and making memories before paddling home. Some in the village have wondered, with the arrival of these Englishmen who also need to eat, will they also use the islands for food?

"This island abounds in cedar, sassafras, herbs and flowers to make all kinds of salads... However, since it is only four hundred acres wide, it did not seem spacious enough as a location for the new settlement."

— Andrew White, 1634

St. Clement's Island in the Potomac River is where Maryland's colonists first landed and where Leonard Calvert encountered Chief Wannas of the Piscataway. From there, they explored and chose a site for the new settlement.

The nearby Algonkian people visited seasonally and collected shagbark hickory nuts, white oak acorns, black walnuts, and American chestnuts. Nuts provided fats and nutrients to get through the harsh winter. They might shell and grind them into flour or meal, roast or dry them for long-term storage, or process them into oil for cooking or to make hair and body oils.

Fruits like persimmons could be collected as they fell to the ground or picked from the trees. They might be eaten fresh or smoked and dried for winter preservation.

The Changing Bay:

Today, the island is a state park used for fishing, hiking, hunting, and picnicking, much like it was for the Chesapeake Algonkians. And just like in the 17th century, the only way to reach St. Clement's Island is by boat.

Islands

There are lots of islands all over this bay. We discovered a small one near the Isle of Kent that isn't on our map.

Some of the islands we've stopped on lack fresh water. We dug for two days to find fresh groundwater to drink on one of the Russel Isles. We would have given up two barrels of gold for one barrel of water!

"Kent is about twentie miles long...all along the necke where is not above 3 roode of water betwixt it and the maine land, and at either end having about 3 foote deep when the tyde is out;"

— Cyprian Thorowgood, 1634

The largest island in the Chesapeake Bay area is Kent Island. Chesapeake Bay islands are surrounded by water and cut off from most large predators. That makes them a great home for terns, herons, ducks, ospreys, and bald eagles. Islands can also protect underwater plants and limit land erosion in shallow water areas.

Like the ocean, the Chesapeake Bay has tides. The ocean's high tide pushes more water into the bay. When the ocean's tide goes out, the water from the bay rushes after it. This is called low tide.

The Changing Bay:

More than 400 islands, large and small, have disappeared from the Chesapeake Bay since the area was first described and mapped by Europeans. Many more islands are in danger as the sea continues to rise because of global climate change. In the next 100 years, the water level could rise as much as 3 feet.

St. Mary's City



Weary strangers are coming to the village. They look very tired and smell like sweat and brine. The villagers give them boiled corn cakes and curious children come to watch. One little boy takes an Englishman's hat, puts it on his head, and marches around to much laughter.

At last night's town council, the werowance relayed a message from the tayac that the Yaocomico would move their village across the river and allow the strangers to use their land. The tayac thinks it is wise to have them living nearby. The Englishmen have new weapons, tools, and trade goods, and they may become useful allies.

"This place he found to be a very commodious situation for a Towne, in regard the land is good, the ayre wholsome and pleasant, the River affords a safe harbour for ships of any burthen, and a very bould shoure; fresh water and wood there is in great plenty, and the place so naturally fortified, as with little difficultie, it will be defended from any enemie...."
— Jerome Hawley and John Lewger, 1635

In early March of 1634, a group of English colonists led by Leonard Calvert chose this spot to settle. They acquired part of an Indian village from the friendly Yaocomico Indians and named the colony St. Mary's.

The colonists could have settled anywhere along the shores of the Chesapeake. Why do you think they chose this place as their home?

Explore an interactive map of St. Mary's City and investigate how geography shaped life on the land where the Potomac and the St. Mary's River meet.

The Changing Bay:

Today, Historic St. Mary's City is an outdoor living-history museum and archaeological park built around the largely buried remains of Maryland's first capital. While time and technology have changed the bay forever, scientists and historians are working to recreate and preserve what this spot looked like when the colonists made it their capital city.

Patuxent River and Other Tributaries

We noticed that many small creeks and streams feed into the rivers. The flowing water is pristine and teeming with fish.

The water also draws other animals. We see an elk stop by a creek for a cool drink. Furbearers like beaver, muskrat, and fox will make for good trade later on.

"...Patuxent is very pleasant and commodious River; It's fit for habitation, and easie to be defended, by reasons of the llands..."
— Jerome Hawley and John Lewger, 1635

Water flows into the Chesapeake Bay from rivers and streams. These are tributaries of the bay. Maryland has more than 400 tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay. All of the waterways that feed into the bay and the land that drains into those waterways make up the bay's watershed, covering 95% of the state!

The Changing Bay:

The smallest creeks and streams can affect the health and clarity of the Chesapeake Bay. When pollution washes into these tributaries, it ends up polluting the bay, too.

Marshes

Tall grasses line the shores in some places. The sailors are bothered by the mosquitoes. When we try to wade around in the low marsh ground, our boots get stuck in the soft muddy bottom.

But lots of small fish, birds, and other animals seem to love the marshes. Furbearers, fowls, and other creatures are abundant. Perhaps it's not so bad after all.

"...there is great store of Marish ground also, that with good husbandry, will make as rich Medow, as any in the world."
— Jerome Hawley and John Lewger, 1635

Marshes and wetlands are the areas between land and water. They are filled with cattails and other plants that like extremely wet soil. The soil in marshes is usually soggy because it is underwater or frequently flooded. All kinds of insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals live here. Shrimp, shedding blue crabs, and the young of many fish species love to hide in these areas, where the bay waters are very shallow. Predators, including blue crabs, spot, striped bass, ducks, herons, and osprey, visit the marshes to look for food.

This abundance of plant and animal life made marshes a valuable place for Algonkian people to harvest plants, hunt, and fish, often from a canoe.

The Changing Bay:

There were more than 3 million acres of wetlands in the Chesapeake Bay during colonial times, more than twice what remains today. New marsh develops naturally as rising seas flood the land. But many coastal residents protect their property by building sea walls and other structures that prevent marshes and beaches from moving inland as the sea rises. The loss of marsh habitats because of rising sea levels affects birds, fish, turtles, and other wildlife.

Inland Woods



The women and children of the village are spending the morning gathering strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries from the cool, damp forest floor. For as long as human beings have lived upon the Great Turtle's back, the forest has provided for us.

The Englishmen seem perplexed at the height and size of our trees. Do they not have trees in their homelands? They must, since they have vessels made of many trees.

"...on both sides wonderful forests of fine trees rise up on solid ground, not made inaccessible by thorn hedges and underbrush, but just as if planted spaciouly by hand so that one could easily drive a chariot drawn by four horses between the trees... the soil seems especially fertile. Far and wide in the very dense forests we tread on strawberries, vines, sassafras, acorns, and nuts. Soft black earth of about one foot is spread over rich, dense red clay. Very high trees are everywhere, except where a field is cultivated by a few people. An abundance of springs supplies drink."

— Andrew White, 1634

The forest provided the Chesapeake Indigenous people with almost everything they needed to live. The trees provided wood to make bows, bowls, spoons, and canoes; bark to cover their homes; baskets and strong rope; and the inner bark of some trees could even be used as food in times of need. Some small trees and bushes produced good food, like pawpaw and juneberry; others were good for making arrowshafts.

The forest was also home to many animals that nourished people, such as deer, turkey, and bear. The shade of the great big trees gave animals a safe place to live, to hide from predators, and to avoid the hot sun.

The Changing Bay:

In colonial times, a continuous line of trees grew around the bay and its tributaries. These trees held the soil in place and protected the land from storms. Today, people, houses, roads, and parking lots have replaced many of the trees and other protective plants. As the sea level rises, the forests that remain are threatened by marsh migration. The forests turn into marshes, making them unsuitable habitats for the wildlife that once lived there.

Fish/Shellfish

Our pinnacle is stuck on a bed of oysters, and the sailors have to wait for the tide to come in to continue sailing. We open a few of the huge oysters with a knife and eat them raw. We drop more oysters into a stew for later.

*"In sommer no place affordeth more plentie of sturgeon...lying so thicke with their heads above water, [that] for want of nets, we attempted to catch them with a frying pan...[oysters] lay as thick as stones."
— Captain John Smith, 1607- 1608*

Algonkian-speaking people named this body of water Chesepiooc, meaning "great shellfish bay" for good reason. The bay is rich with shellfish such as oysters, clams, and crabs. Many types of fish also live in the bay, including perch, bass, herring, and shad. During the warmer months, bluefish, weakfish, croaker, menhaden, flounder, and spot enter the bay for food.

Some of the fish and shellfish live in both fresh and salt water. For example, the blue crab travels throughout the bay — from the mouth of the bay to fresher rivers and creeks — to complete its life cycle.

The Changing Bay:

The Chesapeake Bay still produces a delicious supply of fish, crabs, and other seafood, but not nearly as much as it did in the 1600s. By some estimates, the oyster population is less than two percent of what it was in colonial times. Too much fishing and too much pollution have decreased the number of fish, shellfish, and underwater plants.

Wildlife on Land



Today the forest is echoing with birdsong. We hear the hammering and laughter of the pileated woodpecker and the buzz of insects that the birds will feast on.

Later the men of the village will come to the forests to hunt. With the goodwill of the Creator and spirit beings, they'll bring home deer, raccoons, squirrels, and turkey. The meat will feed the people, the skins will clothe the people, and nothing will be wasted.

"No other mammals appear besides deer, beaver, and squirrels, which compare in size to European hares. Infinite is the number of birds of various colors, such as eagles, herons, swans, geese, partridges, and ducks."

— Andrew White, 1634

"...a few of us went ashore...[where] we see many deere, yelkes and turkies..."

— Cyprian Thorowgood, 1634

The Chesapeake Bay area is home to many mammals, such as squirrels, rabbits, beavers, and deer, that would have fed and clothed the local Algonkian people. Most mammals live on land. They nurse their young and usually have fur. The region is also the home to hundreds of different kinds of birds.

The Changing Bay:

During the 1600s, wolves, cougars, elk, and even buffalo still lived in the Chesapeake Bay area. Some animals that have disappeared include the passenger pigeon, red wolves, elk, the heath hen, and the Carolina Parakeet.

You can still find white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, and raccoons, but people are taking over the land they live on. Many scientists also believe that global climate change could threaten the bird population. On the other hand, the black bear population is naturally recovering in western Maryland.

Climate



When the Englishman arrived, we were curious as to why they wore so many clothes. Their clothes were made of a strange, itchy material that they call "wool." They say that in their homelands, there is an animal that has a type of fluffy hair they can use to make cloth and clothing. This clothing keeps them very warm.

It was not until we decided to meet them that they told us that in their lands, the sun is not as strong. They say it is a green place that rains very much and is cloudy and cold.

*"The weather was very fine and hot, without rain, near six weeks."
— Thomas Dudley, 1634*

Large bodies of water like the Chesapeake change temperature more slowly than air does. The water helps keep nearby places cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.

The Algonkian people of the Chesapeake region dressed according to the seasons. In cooler weather, they wore deer skin leggings and moccasins and mantles of deer skin, bear skin, otter, or muskrat. Women wore deer skin wrap skirts or one-shoulder dresses. In warmer weather, everyone wore less. Men might wear just a breechcloth and women just a wrap skirt.

The Changing Bay:

Pollution has shifted weather patterns and temperatures around the world. In the past 100 years, the average temperature in the Chesapeake Bay region has increased about three degrees due to global climate change. The government, businesses, and individuals are taking action to limit pollution and build green technologies, but more must be done to protect natural habitats.

Neighboring Tribes



One of the villagers says that he encountered a group of Susquehannocks at a trade site up north. The rumors are true, he says. They have deep voices and wear wolf pelts and wolf tooth pendants, just like we've heard. He also says their language is very different from ours, with no shared words as we have with the Powhatan.

The villager found the Susquehannocks unfriendly and suspects they want to control the region's fur and wampum.

"...There dwell the Sasquehanocks, upon a River that is not navigable for our Boates, by reason of Sholes and Rockes; but they passe it in Canoos... The Sasquehanocks... did usually make warres, and incursions upon the neighbouring Indians..."
— Jerome Hawley and John Lewger, 1635

Early explorers encountered different Indigenous tribes all along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. The Susquehannock/Conestoga were a culturally and linguistically Iroquoian group who lived at the north end near what is now called the Susquehanna River. They were powerful and known to be conflict-driven. They often attacked smaller tribes, such as the Yaocomico, in other parts of the bay to spread their cultural influence and reach wider trading networks.

Scholars now believe the people known as the Susquehannock, called "Black Minquas" by Algonkians, may have called themselves Conestoga, meaning "place of the immersed pole."

The Changing Bay:

The population of Indigenous Marylanders along the bay has drastically decreased since the colonists arrived. This was partly due to European diseases and war with colonists and other tribes. However, Maryland's Indigenous people never went away. Though not every tribe from before European colonization is still here, many of Maryland's tribal communities are present and active in carrying on their ancestors' traditions. Maryland's current tribal communities with long historical roots in the state include the Piscataway Conoy, the Piscataway Indian Tribe, the Pocomoke Indian Nation, the Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians, the Accohanock Indian Tribe, and the Youghegheny Band of Shawnee Indians.