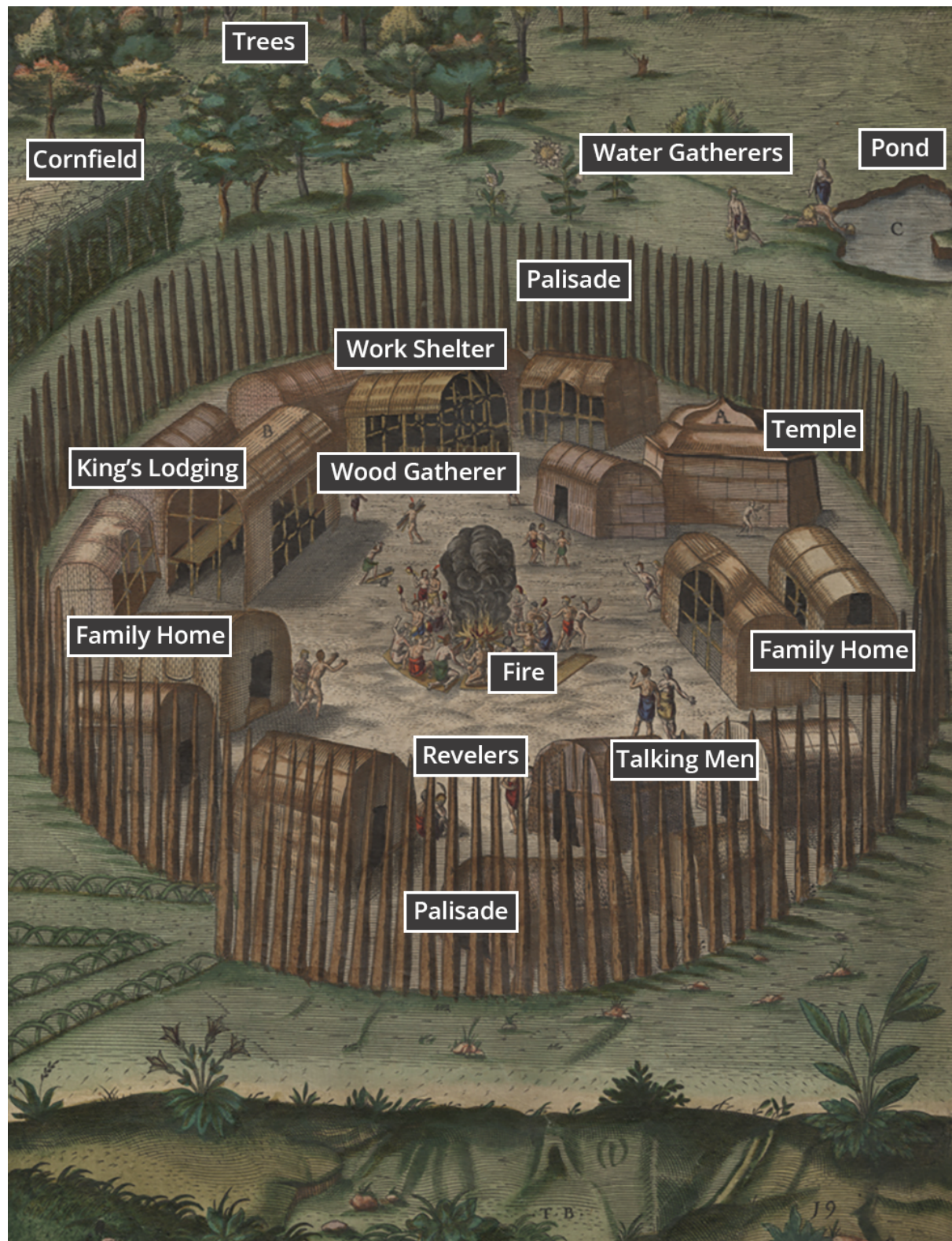


Living in an Algonkian Village



Intro

Step back in time to 1590 and discover the daily life of an Algonkian village. Your journey begins with a historical engraving, based on original sketches by explorers John White and Thomas Harriot.

How to Look

The best way to approach a primary source is by asking questions. Whose perspective is this? Why did they make it? How did the creators' beliefs, understanding, and experience shape the source?

The Algonkians

The Algonkians were not a single tribe, but included many tribes who shared a similar language and culture. The lands of Algonkian-speaking tribes stretched along the Atlantic Coast, around the Great Lakes, into the Great Plains, and across a large part of Canada. In the Chesapeake Bay region, the Piscataway tribes, Powhatan Confederacy, and Eastern Shore tribes like the Pocomoke, Nanticoke, and Assateague were part of the broader Algonkian language and cultural group.

The Village of Pomeiock

This engraving is based on sketches and descriptions of Pomeiock Village in what is now the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The Indigenous people of this area and the people of Maryland and Virginia were all part of the eastern Algonkian language family and shared cultural elements. John White's sketch and notes therefore contain useful information for understanding life in villages throughout the Algonkian cultural region of the coastal mid-Atlantic, including what is now Maryland.

The European Observers

This engraving first appeared in the 1588 book *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, by John White and James Harriot. Sir Walter Raleigh, an English statesman and explorer interested in colonizing North America, hired White and Harriot to keep records of a 1585 voyage to the New World. White joined the voyage as an illustrator and mapmaker, and Harriot joined as a scientist. The goal of the voyage was to look for natural resources and to start the colony of Virginia.

European Perspective

The Algonkians of the 16th and 17th centuries did not leave written accounts or illustrations of where they lived, so the words and drawings of European explorers and colonists, along with archaeology and oral tradition, are among our most valuable sources for learning what Algonkian villages looked like. However, relying only on Europeans has its limits. As outsiders, they often misinterpreted what they saw, and their own prejudices and cultural perspective shaped what they thought.

The Engraver

Belgian artist Theodorus de Bry never traveled to the Americas, but he created engravings based on the drawings and reports of 16th-century explorers. His work followed the popular art trends of his time, which is why the people in his engravings often have European faces and poses. He also relied on second-hand accounts, so de Bry's work was not always accurate. For example, he often added extra trees and wildlife to make the land look more abundant than the original drawings.

The Engraving

This illustration of Pomeiock is a copperplate engraving. Engravers create these by using a sharp tool to carve a design into a sheet of copper. They apply ink to the plate and wipe the surface clean, leaving ink only inside the carved grooves. When paper is pressed against the plate, the design is transferred. Since plates could be inked and reused, this became a standard method for creating maps, book illustrations, and other designs across 16th- and 17th-century Europe.

Cornfield

Algonkian people of this region had three major sources of food: hunting, fishing, and farming. Men usually handled hunting and fishing. Women were in charge of growing crops.

What was a normal planting season like? First, the men would clear any trees they had girdled in previous years. Then, the women, children, and older men would go to the area with hoes and digging sticks.

Before planting seeds, the soil had to be broken up and made soft for planting. This was a special time, and villagers may have led the activity with songs and ceremonies. Once the soil was broken up, mounds of earth would be piled up. These mounds would support the corn

plants. On the day of planting in late March or April, the women and children would dig holes a few inches deep and about four feet apart. Then, they would place four kernels of corn in the hole. In the Renape and Unami dialects, most likely known to Maryland's Indigenous people, corn was called *pekatawas* or *xàskwim*.

After several months, once the corn became knee-high and strong enough to support the climbing bean plant, the Algonkians planted beans and squash. The crops grew together and helped each other grow. The corn stalks were poles for the beans to grow on. The squash had large leaves that kept the ground damp and stopped weeds from growing. Together, corn, beans, and squash were known as the "Three Sisters" of the garden.

These plants needed fertilizer to grow. Corn needs plenty of nitrogen, which the beans supply, but not enough. The Algonkians added undesirable fish, overly abundant fish, or broken and dead crabs to the soil, which provided the nitrogen the plants needed to flourish.

From late summer to mid-autumn, crops would begin to ripen and be harvested. Corn was husked and tied to a witchott frame by its husk, sometimes woven together by the husk in long chains, and dried for several weeks. Dry corn may have been pounded into cornmeal, or softened into nutrient-rich hominy in a labor-intensive process using wood ashes. Hominy could be eaten plain, or dried and ground into coarse grits or fine flour.

Explore how the village community worked together to prepare and protect their food sources and plan for the next year.

Food preparation

Algonian people used hoes, or carved pieces of wood, with an L-shaped bend at the top to prepare the ground for planting season. A deer scapula, or sometimes a ground-stone blade, would be lashed to the end. Digging sticks or planting sticks were branches sharpened at the end, sometimes with a carved flat L-shaped top that could be used as a hoe for light weeding and pushing soil.

Villagers had to guard their crops for several months. Birds, rabbits, and other animals would eat their plants. To keep the animals out, farmers built watchtowers by the fields. The towers were platforms with cattail mats for shade. Children from the village had to sit in the tower all day. If they saw an animal, they had to yell or jump down to chase it away.

When harvest time arrived, beans were either eaten green or left to dry in their pods. Summer squash were eaten fresh. Other types of squash were left on the vine until they changed color and their flesh became hard, like a pumpkin. These might also be smoked and dried for winter preservation. The villagers chose seeds from the best plants for next year's planting, dried them, and stored them underground. Finally, they would hold a feast for the harvest. They offered prayers to the Creator and spirit beings, and ate the foods they worked so hard to raise.

Trees

Before the English colonists arrived, the Chesapeake region was a giant forest. Trees such as cedar, pine, oak, fir, walnut, cypress, chestnut, and slippery elm crowded the land. Indigenous people in the region had cleared some land to plant crops and build their homes. However, trees still covered huge areas of the region.

Clearing the land was a hard job. The Algonkian people didn't have sharp metal axes to chop down the trees. Instead, they used fire and ground stone-bladed axes. Adult men and teenage boys of the community would build a fire at the base of the tree. The fire charred the wood, breaking down and weakening even very hard wood. The men could then use a ground stone-bladed axe to chop away wood. The axe removed larger chunks of weakened wood, causing the tree to fall. This method was used for thousands of years.

The Algonkians of Maryland believed that wasting natural resources displeased the Creator and spirits that watched over human beings. It was also seen as disrespectful to the plants and animals that gave their lives so that humans could live. When land was cleared for horticulture, some fallen trees were left to rot and become soil and habitat for insects, plants, and some animals. Other times, girdled trees (trees left standing with their bark removed) would die and act as perches for birds. Dead limbs and trees would fall within a year and be harvested as much-needed firewood. Certain trees would be chosen to make dugout canoes. They then used fire to burn out the wood and hollow the boat.

The Indigenous peoples of the Chesapeake were excellent builders and craftsmen and women. When Algonkian people living in Maryland first encountered Europeans, they likely had never seen a tall ship before. Ships of that construction would have been strange but fascinating to them. They must have wondered how they were built and how they worked.

Palisade

What is this ring of trees around the village? It's called a palisade. The trees are actually logs that men cut down. Placing the trees close together turned the village into a fort.

People have made palisades for thousands of years. They kept villages safe from attackers. Palisades stopped enemies from rushing into the village.

Making a good palisade takes a lot of work. Hundreds of tall, thin trees were cut or burned down. Burning made the wood harder and less likely to rot, so the ends at least were usually burned. The trunks were between 10 and 20 feet tall. Then, the villagers dug deep holes with digging sticks and put the trunk into the ground. They packed earth tightly around the trunks. This kept the tall poles from falling down. The poles were placed tightly together so enemies couldn't come in between them; however, arrows could be aimed and shot through them. The builders cut, dug, and packed logs until they circled the entire village.

The Importance of Palisades

The palisade had no gate. Instead, the builders made one end of the palisade curl inward for several yards. This made a small passage between the poles. The villagers could easily guard this one entrance. Later, the villagers might add platforms around the inside of the palisade. The platforms were for lookouts. If the village was attacked, they could shoot at the enemy from the platforms.

Only some villages had palisades. Villages where a werowance lived might have one. The werowance is a clan or village chief in the Renape dialect of the Algonkian language found in Virginia and Maryland's Eastern Shore. The palisade showed others that the village was important.

Smaller villages might not be as protected. Without a palisade, these villagers built their witchotts further apart among the trees.

Pond

Humans need three things for survival: shelter, food, and water. Algonkian people built their villages near places that helped provide for all three needs.

Of the three necessities for survival, building near water was the most important. Rivers and streams provided both food and drink for the Algonkians. Waterways held fish, clams, oysters, and crabs for eating. Deer, beavers, muskrats, and waterfowl like ducks and geese also lived near water. For the Chesapeake Algonkians, this meant better hunting. Villagers also gathered freshwater, or non-salty, water from rivers, streams, and springs for drinking. Plain water was the main drink of almost all Indigenous North Americans, although for seasonal treats, Maryland's Algonkian people sometimes made flavored drinks from wild fruits and berries.

Rivers and streams also supplied fresh water for cooking and cleaning. Villagers carried water from the stream to the village for cooking. Children usually had this job. They used dried and hollowed bottle gourds and gooseneck gourds to carry the water.

Living near rivers and streams had other uses, too. To get from place to place, Algonkian people used canoes. A trip walking through rivers and marshes could take days. By canoe, the same trip might only take hours.

For all these reasons, most villages were built close to water. But in the village White and Harriot saw in coastal North Carolina, there was no river or stream nearby. Harriot explained:

"When the town stands far from the water they dig a great pond noted with the letter C (in the drawing) from which they fetch as much water as they need."

Using stagnant pond water was not typical, but they might have done so in desperation during droughts, when regular water sources were unavailable.

Water Gatherers

In Algonkian culture, men and women had different jobs.

In general, women took care of their families and their homes. They gathered all the water their family needed. They also wove cattail and bullrush mats. They used the mats to form the walls, ceilings, and sometimes floor of their homes. If the family needed new rope, they twisted plant fibers into cords to make it.

Women also managed the crops. They planted, weeded, and harvested them. They also picked berries and nuts from the forest. They processed the meat from animals men in the group had killed. Women used these resources to prepare all the family's meals.

They were also very successful in gathering food from rivers and the bay. Using rope women wove from dogbane fibers, the men would make nets. They used the nets to trap fish and crabs. They also used wooden fishing spears to fish from their canoes.

Discover how Algonkian families divided their labor and taught their children the essential skills of survival, storytelling, and leadership

Roles and responsibilities

Men hunted for food for their families. Algonkians were expert trackers and hunters. They could sneak up on deer and beavers. Then they would shoot them with bows and arrows. They also trapped animals such as beavers, muskrats, raccoons, and foxes.

If enemies came, men would fight them off, or lead the women and children to safety. If the family needed new clothing, women would tan the animal skins. After an animal like a deer was killed and meat was harvested from it, the skin was scraped of any clinging meat, fat, and hair and stretched on a wooden rack for several days, where it would dry. The women would take the hard, dried skin and soak it in water until it was soft and pliable, then squeeze it dry. They would then use a special solution made from deer brains and a wooden tool to work the skin, making it softer. It would then be soaked again. Once the skin absorbed the solution, they stretched and pulled it by hand, scraped it with tools, and pressed it dry. The goal was to make the skin as soft as a blanket. At that point, the women wrapped the skin around a frame and smoked it on both sides over a fire. The wood smoke preserved the skin, changed its color, and turned the raw skin into usable leather. The women used the finished leather to make different types of clothing, such as breechcloths, leggings, moccasins, dresses, skirts, or mantles.

What did the children do? Girls would help their mothers, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers. Their mother's eldest sister was the girls' teacher. Girls learned how to cook, weave baskets, harvest and work clay, make clay pots, and make rope. One of the most important things a girl learned was how to grow, nurture, and sustain the garden where her village grew corn, beans, and squash. She would also spend time in the woods, learning local medicinal plants and medicine-making.

Boys would also help their mothers when they were very young. As they grew older, they began going into the forest with their fathers, uncles, and older brothers. Similar to the girls, a boy's teacher was his father's oldest brother. Boys would learn how to fish, hunt, and track. They learned which trees and plants were useful for creating tools, and which could be used as food if times were hard.

While they were working, boys and girls listened to oral traditions from their family members. They learned of their community's histories, spirituality, and the roles and expectations awaiting them as adults. They also heard gossip, stories of wars and battles, great hunts, fishing trips, and harvests, and learned which neighboring tribes were friends, allies, and kin, and which were enemies.

Scholars think Algonkian children also played games. However, the games might have another purpose. In one game, for example, they tried to throw sticks through wooden hoops. This helped them learn the hand-eye coordination needed to hunt and fight when they got older. Games helped them practice the skills they would need as hunters or protectors of the village.

Family Home

Indigenous people living on Maryland's coasts and marshy peninsulas called their homes witchotts. Their homes only had one large room for the entire family.

The witchotts were made from young trees called saplings. They bent the saplings at the top to form an arc. They then tied the tops together with rope made from the inner bark of hardwood trees like hickory, elm, tulip poplar, and white ash. The roof and sides were covered with mats of woven cattail reeds, wide sheets of dried tree bark, or both. A hole was left in the center of the roof. This let the smoke escape from the fire the family always kept burning in the middle of the floor. The hole was covered with a mat that could be raised or lowered.

Several related family members could live inside a witchott. It could be very dark inside. Light usually came from a small, covered smoke hole in the ceiling, the doors, and a fire in the center of the room. In the summer, families might roll up the mats on their walls to let in more air.

The only furniture in a witchott was a raised bench. It was about three feet wide and went around the wall. The bench was covered with animal furs. On this bench, the family slept and sat to eat some meals. They only worked inside if the weather was really bad.

At the end of each day, the family would sleep "tips to points" – head to toe – on the bench. If there wasn't enough room for everyone, some had to sleep on cattail mats on the witchott's dirt floor.

The family used the beams and rafters of the witchott to store their goods. They hung animal skins and furs from the rafters. They also hung foods such as corn, beans, and squash here. They also attached things like tobacco and extra cattail mats to the wall and ceiling posts. The fire in the center of the room kept everything warm and dry. Smoke from the fire kept mosquitoes, mice, and other pests away from the family's goods.

With a good fire and well-made cattail walls, the family could stay quite warm, even in the winter.

Temple

Thomas Harriot described the building he labeled with the letter A this way:

"On the one side is their temple, separated from the other houses, and marked with the letter A. It is a round building, and covered all over with skin mats. With walls like curtains, but with no windows, it had no light except what came through the door."

Scholars aren't sure what to make of this description because archaeologists have never found a building that matches it. From Harriot's description, it seems that the temple was a round building with skin mats all over, and it had long, woven mats (the "curtains") for some walls. Archaeologists have only found oval or rectangular buildings.

Modern scholars do know that the Powhatan and Powhatan-allied peoples in Virginia and North Carolina had special buildings where they prayed. These buildings kept ancestral bones and grave goods. No records show whether Maryland's Algonkian people had the same thing.

Algonkian people believed that all living things have a spirit. They also believed in a Creator, called by many different names throughout the region, sometimes translated as the "Great Spirit" or the "Master of Life." The Creator made life and gave the village all good things. "Good things" included deer, crabs, and all their crops. Villagers held feasts during planting season, harvest time, and mid-winter. At the feasts, Algonkians made offerings of corn and meat to the Creator. They thanked the Creator and the good helper spirits for the rich land, and asked for success in growing and hunting. The villagers also prayed for success in battle if they went to war.

King's Lodging

Did you notice that this building is a little bit larger than the other buildings in the village? Thomas Harriot said this building was "the king's lodging." In other words, this building was home to the werowance (if a man) or weowancesqua (if a woman), the village chief.

Since many villages were composed of one clan, the werowance might be the chief of that clan. The werowance had a difficult job that required a lot of listening. He or she was expected to take care of the poor people in the village, the orphaned children, and families whose male providers died in war.

The werowance was also the final voice in decision-making, though they did not decide alone. He or she had many advisors to help make important decisions. After listening to a council of elders and vice chiefs, the werowance would make their decision, and the village would follow.

The werowance relied on two kinds of advisors: war chiefs and wisos. The war chief helped make decisions about war. They would tell the werowance when to attack and how to defend his land. Among the Powhatan in Virginia and coastal North Carolina, these chiefs were called cockarouses, but we don't know what they were called among Maryland tribes. Wisos helped make decisions about village life. They would tell the werowance when to plant, when to harvest, and what to trade with other tribes.

Learn how village councils operated and how the village chief worked to keep their people safe and supported during challenging times.

Village Council

When an important problem or question arose, a village council was assembled. Among the Powhatan of Virginia and coastal North Carolina, this was called a matchacomico, but we don't know what Indigenous Marylanders called their village council. The village elders and advisors would meet around the werowance's fire. The village council could last for hours. Some meetings stretched on for days. The advisors gave very long speeches. They made careful plans. The werowance listened attentively, even if listening took a long time, setting an example of patience and respect for the community. After hearing the advisors, the werowance always made the final decision.

The werowance's job was to make sure the village's people were safe. During harvest time, all the villagers would give the werowance extra food. The werowance kept the food for the winter. If hunting went poorly, then he or she gave the food back to his people.

The werowance also may have had to make a yearly gift to the tayac in his region. The tayac was the chief of chiefs in the area. This gift, known as a tribute, showed respect for the tayac. In return for the tribute, the tayac also gave the werowance's tribe guidance and protection from their enemies.

Work Shelters

Algonkians didn't use their witchott homes like we use our homes today. Witchotts were places for sleeping and storing goods. Almost all the work was done outside the witchott. Villagers worked in the forests, streams, and fields. Near the village, they would be in the open or under work shelters. Scholars think Algonkians worked outside in almost all kinds of weather.

When it rained or snowed, villagers could work under a shelter. Fancy work shelters, like the ones in this picture, looked like an unfinished witchott. You can tell it is a work shelter because some walls are missing. Very simple work shelters might be just a woven cattail roof held up by four to six saplings.

Women and children usually used the work shelters. Here, they made rope from plant fibers and wove baskets or mats. They tanned deer or beaver skins and cut animal skins for clothing. Women made pottery by rolling clay into snake-like pieces. They coiled the pieces around and around, using tools and their hands to smooth the surface, to make cooking pots or other useful items.

Men used work shelters to make tools for hunting, fishing, and protecting the village. They used small trees of hickory and elm to make their bows. The rolled and dried intestines of a deer, known as gut, or a strip of raw deer hide rolled into a cord, could make a very good bow string. Deer sinew, or tendons, was used to make the string to fletch their arrows and secure arrowheads. They used bones and rope to make fishing hooks and nets. They even used stones and small trees or saplings to make tomahawks, which is a word in the Renape dialect of the Algonkian language that means "to cut or strike."

Tomahawks were the type of small axe Algonkian people used in Maryland before Europeans. They have a wooden handle and a stone head for an axe blade. Though somewhat difficult and time-consuming to make, these axes worked very well. Though mostly used for utilitarian tasks such as cutting green or living trees and carving green wood, they could be used for combat.

Wood Gatherer

Algonkians would use trees in every part of their life. They ate chestnuts, walnuts, hickory nuts, and acorns. They used large logs to build dugout canoes. They made tools like hoes from small trees or tree limbs. They also made bows from small trees and arrows from woody bushes such as arrowwood viburnum. They burned and carved out logs to make large, heavy bowls called mortars for grinding corn. They used twigs, branches, and logs to build fires needed to stay warm and cook their food.

What do you think this villager is going to do with the branches? Some people think he was building a witchott, or home, for his family.

Algonkian people used young trees to make the frames of witchotts and work shelters. Young trees were easier to use because they could be bent and shaped. First, builders would cut down the young tree and strip off the bark. Then, they would bury the first few feet of each tree in the ground, following the outline of an oblong, a rectangle with curved ends.

After all the trees were in place, the builders would bend the tops of the trees together to make a kind of arch. They would use other young trees to brace the frame. At this point, the frame would look similar to a dome-shaped jungle gym. Then they would lace everything together with strong rope made from plants and strips of stringy and very strong inner bark from the inside of trees like slippery elm and hickory.

When the builder was finished, the frame for his witchott might be over 10 feet high, 12 feet wide, and 30 feet long.

Fire

Fire played a huge role in Algonkian people's lives. Here, the large bonfire is the center of a village celebration. This kind of bonfire was used only for light, warmth, and keeping mosquitoes away. At other times, the villagers might build a large fire for a feast. They could roast fish or game, like deer, elk, or goose, on wooden spits over the fire.

Algonkians used fire for cooking almost every day of their lives. Every home had a fire that was always kept burning. Indoor fires warmed the witchotts in winter. They also kept foods and animal skins hung from the ceiling dry and fresh.

Algonkian women had several ways of cooking over the fires. The most common method for Maryland's Algonkians seems to have been cooking in clay pots. The pots came in all different sizes, from small bowls to family stew pots. They were placed directly on the fire.

There were other ways of cooking too. Some fish and meat could be roasted directly over the fire. Deer meat and fish could be cooked on wooden skewers over hot coals. Women could also bake foods by placing them directly on the stones in the fire.

Revelers

Life in an Algonkian village wasn't all work. On special occasions, celebrations or feasts were held. In 1585, explorer Thomas Harriot explained the celebrations this way:

"When they have escaped any great danger by sea or land, or be returned from the war in token of Joy, they make a great fire about which the men and women sit together, holding a certain fruit in their hands like unto a round pumpkin or a gourd, which after they have taken out the fruits, and the seeds, then fill with small stones

or certain big kernels to make the more noise, and fasten that upon a stick, and singing after their manner, they make merry..."

Algonkians danced and sang at their feasts. They shook gourd rattles filled with seeds, stones, or dried corn for music, and they ate large meals of the food they hunted and grew. Foods like venison, turkey, ducks, geese, fish, corn, squash, beans, berries, and nuts would be served. If they lived by the bay, oysters, saltwater fish, and hard and soft-shelled crabs might also be part of the feast.

The most important feast of the year was the mid-winter feast. At this celebration, villagers honored different spirit beings and gave prayers and offerings to their great Creator, who was called by different names depending on the community. They thanked their Creator and the many helper spirits for a good harvest the year before. The men asked the Creator and the spirit beings for good hunting through the winter, and the whole village asked for good fortune in growing crops next spring.

Talking Men

These two men seem to be talking about something. But what language are they using?

Most Native Americans near the Chesapeake Bay were part of a large language and cultural family known today as Algonkian. Algonkians lived in small villages organized by clanship. Every tribe is different and has a different number of clans. Many clans are represented by animals and sometimes by plants, but clans help people know who they are related to and who they can marry and not marry. Each clan also had responsibilities that helped the tribe as a whole. The Algonkian language was spoken across a wide area, and people spoke differently in certain places. This is what we call a dialect, and it may include different pronunciations or words depending on geography. The more distant the communities, the more distinct the dialects would be.

Men from the same village spoke the same language. But if they were from different villages, they might have a harder time talking to each other. Names for animals, like deer, might be the same almost everywhere. But their words for a fish or plant only found near one village could be very different.

The more two groups talked to and traded with each other, the easier it was for them to talk. Luckily, Algonkians combined speech with hand signals and gestures. Using signs, people everywhere could understand simple ideas.