Native Americans of the Chesapeake

The Chesapeake Bay Has Been Home to Native Peoples for Over 10,000 Years

When the Jamestown settlers arrived on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay in 1607, the region had already been inhabited by Native Americans for thousands of years. For centuries, people had lived off the land by harvesting the abundant natural resources the Bay had to offer. In the spring, thousands of shad, herring and rockfish were netted as they entered the Chesapeake’s rivers and streams to spawn. Summer months were spent tending gardens that produced corn, beans and squash. In the fall, nuts such as acorns, chestnuts and walnuts were gathered from the forest floor. Oysters and clams provided another source of food and were easily gathered from the water at low tide. Hunting parties were sent out in search of deer, bear, wild turkey and other land animals. Nearby marshes provided wild rice and tuckahoe (arrow arum), which produced a potato-like root. With so much food available, the Indians of the Chesapeake region were able to thrive.

Indian towns were found close to the water’s edge near freshwater springs or streams. Homes were made out of bent saplings that were tied into a framework and covered with woven mats, tree bark, or animal skins. Most dwellings were thirty to fifty feet in length and housed one or two families. Homes were often clustered together, and some were built within a palisade - a large wall made from stout tree limbs - for defense. Some villages had a large fire pit in the center where dances and religious ceremonies took place.

Indian men often wore their hair shaved on one side so that it didn’t get caught in their bowstrings. Their clothes were made from deer hides that were softened by a process called “tanning.” Earrings, necklaces, bracelets and other jewelry made from shells, bones and feathers were worn for decoration. Body paint and tattoos were also common. While the men fished, hunted, trapped wild game and defended the tribe, the women tended gardens, wove mats, baskets, and cordage, gathered firewood, made clothing and played a central role in raising the children.
Most Native Americans in the Chesapeake region spoke a form of the Algonquian (al-gon-kee-un) language. This was one of the largest language groups in North America, spreading as far north as Canada and as far west as the Rocky Mountains. There were at least two other native languages spoken in the Chesapeake region. The Susquehannock (sus-kweh-han-ock), for example, were a powerful nation that inhabited the lands at the head of the Bay and spoke Iroquoian (ear-uh-kwoi-en). Still others nations living in the mountains west of the Chesapeake spoke a Siouan (soo-uhn) dialect. When tribes that spoke different languages traded with one another, they used hand signals to communicate.

Over many centuries, Indians had developed trade routes that stretched north and south along the Atlantic coastline and west into the mountains. Some of the more valuable trade goods came from very far away. One example of this was copper, a metal from the Great Lakes that was made into pendants and jewelry. On the lower Eastern Shore, whelk shells were very valuable. These large shells were carved to make beads that were strung onto necklaces. Other trade goods included furs, fish, venison, bear meat, stone tools, and roots that were used to make body paint. These items were carried on walking trails or shipped in dugout canoes made from the large trees in the area. Sometimes, conflicts arose between tribes when they tried to gain control over these products. In 1608, for example, Captain John Smith found much of the Upper Bay deserted due to raids by tribes from the north and west who hoped to control the shell trade. At the same time, the Powhatan Indians near Jamestown were at odds with the Monacans, a nation in the western mountains, for control of the copper trade.

Historians disagree on how many Indians lived in the Chesapeake region before Europeans arrived, but the number was well into the tens of thousands. In the 1600s, this number would quickly fall to just a few thousand due to disease, warfare, and land seizures.
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NAME: ____________________________________________  DATE: ____________

DIRECTIONS: Use information from the reading to answer each of the following questions in a complete sentence.

1. What were some food sources used by local Indian tribes?

2. Why was the Chesapeake region an attractive place for Indian tribes to live?

3. Why did men wear their hair shaved on one side?

4. What were some jobs that were mostly done by men?

5. What were some jobs that were mostly performed by women?