



Native Americans of the Chesapeake Bay: An Introduction

When Captain John Smith sailed up the Chesapeake Bay in 1608, American Indians had already lived in the area for thousands of years. The people lived off the land by harvesting the 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.

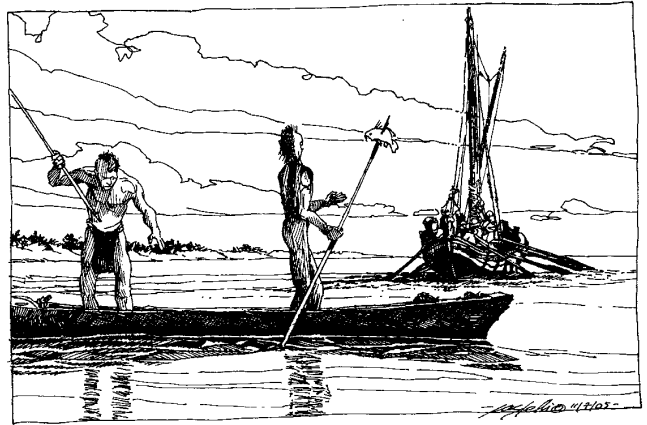
Hunting parties were sent overland in search of deer, bear, wild turkey and other land animals. Nearby marshes provided wild rice and tuckahoe (arrow arum), which produced a potato-like root. With so much food available, the American Indians of the Chesapeake region were able to thrive.

Indian towns were found close to the water's edge near freshwater springs or streams. Homes were made out of bent saplings (young, green trees) that were tied into a framework and covered with woven mats, tree bark, or animal skins.

Villages often had many homes clustered together, and some were built within a palisade, a tall wall built with sturdy sticks and covered with bark, 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 in the way when they fired their bows and arrows. 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 men were responsible for fishing, hunting, trapping wild game and defending the tribe, the women tended gardens, wove mats and baskets, gathered firewood, made clothing and raised the children.

As Europeans flocked to the Chesapeake in the 1600's, the way of life that local tribes had experienced for thousands of years was changed forever. Invasion, disease and murder greatly lowered their numbers, causing many tribes to disband or move inland. Today, some Maryland tribes - such as the Nanticoke, Piscataway and Accohannock - still inhabit their ancestral lands and work to preserve their culture and traditions.



Captain John Smith and his exploring party encounter two Indian men spearing fish in the shallows on the lower Eastern Shore. The Indians later led Smith to the village of Accomack, where he met with the chief. Illustration courtesy Marc Castelli.



Native Americans of the Chesapeake Bay: An Introduction

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage on the previous page, then answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. What were some food sources used by 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 jobs did men do?

5. What jobs did women do?
