

Alexandria and John Smith's Map

On April 26, 1607, three ships from the Virginia Company, the *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and *Discovery*, arrived at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay near what is present-day Jamestown. By mid-May, they had landed at a site on the north side of the James River, and established the colony of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America. While the Spanish had established a short-lived mission settlement in the area almost 40 years earlier and the English made a prior attempt at settlement with the ill-fated Lost Colony at Roanoke in the 1580s, Europeans knew little about the Chesapeake or the people who lived here. In June 1607, an expedition led by Christopher Newport reached the fall line on the James River, at the site of present-day Richmond.

The following year, in the summer of 1608, John Smith embarked on two voyages around the Chesapeake Bay and up many of its tributaries in order to survey the area, determine the extent of the bay, make contact with the people already living there, and identify any resources the English might exploit. On June 16, Smith and fourteen others from the Jamestown settlement entered the Potomac River in a small barge, or shallop. Over the course of a few weeks, they made their way as far up the river as Great Falls, where the river becomes unnavigable, before returning back to Jamestown. Smith has included on his map a small cross to indicate the extent of his voyage up the river.

The well-known John Smith map of Virginia was compiled from these early English experiences in the Chesapeake (the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division has a [digitized copy](#) of this map). It was the first printed in 1612 as a part of Smith's book, *A Map of Virginia. With A Description of the Country, the Commodities, People, Government and Religion*, and was the most influential map of the region until the 1670s. Smith did not use the now-familiar cartographic convention of orienting maps with north at the top of the page and instead oriented his map with west at the top, as if one were approaching the region by water from the east. Once rotated 90 degrees to the left, Smith's geographies are generally recognizable, if a little crude, as are the labels on his map, which are early 17th century English spellings and transliterations of Native group and places names.

Central to Smith's map is the Chesapeack [Chesapeake] Bay, into which flow many rivers. Smith labels each of these with the word "flu", from the Latin *fluvius*, meaning "river," including the:

- Powhatan [James River]
- Pamaunk [York River]
- Toppahanock [Rappahannock River]
- Patawomeck [Potomac River]
- Pawtuxunt [Patuxent River]
- Bolus [Patapsco River]
- Sasquahanough [Susquehanna River]



While the map includes a note that claims that the area was “Discovered and Described by Captain John Smith”, the predominant feature on Smith’s map are numerous Indian villages and towns that were already here when the English sailed into the region. In the vicinity of present-day Alexandria, Smith depicted Hunting Creek and Four Mile Run, which form the southern and northern borders of the City, as well as the broad crescent-shaped bay on which the town of Alexandria would be founded 141 years later. Smith included on his map the towns of Tauxenent and Moyaons to the south and Nacotchtanck to the east, as well as the smaller villages of Namassingakent, Assaomeck, and Tessamatuck to the south, and Namoranghquend to the north. The map also includes several unnamed settlements in the area. While no settlements are depicted within the modern boundaries of Alexandria on the John Smith map, archaeological evidence confirms the presence of peoples here as many as 13,000 years ago.

Learn more about John Smith’s journey:

- [National Park Services](#)
- [Historic Jamestowne](#)