

Prince William Forest Park

National Park Service
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Prince William Forest Park
Triangle, Virginia



Tsenacommacah on the Eve of Jamestown



The town of Pomeiooc, 1585. This watercolor, by English artist John White, depicts an Algonquian village in modern North Carolina similar in appearance to villages in Tsenacommacah. (British Museum)

The Lands of Tsenacommacah

At the start of the seventeenth century, the Doeg people residing near today's Prince William Forest Park lived on the northern fringes of Tsenacommacah, the Powhatan paramount chiefdom. The Powhatan chiefdom was one of the largest and most powerful tribal bodies encountered by European colonists in Virginia during the late 1500s and early 1600s. At its zenith, Powhatan paramouncy encompassed over thirty tribes and nearly 6,000 square miles (15,500 square kilometers), from the Nansmond River in southern Virginia to the Potomac River in the north.

Civilization on the Coastal Plain

In what became Virginia, Algonquian-speakers such as the Doeg lived in the coastal region from today's Hampton Roads to the Potomac River. Monacan peoples, whose languages were Siouan, and the

Wahunsonacock, popularly known as Powhatan. He was *mamanatowick* (paramount chief) of nearly thirty vassal tribes. He did not directly govern most of these groups. Instead, tribes gave him various

peoples, whose languages were Siouan, and the Patuxent, another Algonquian-speaking group, lived to the west and north of the Doeg. Relations between the Powhatan and Monacan were often hostile, but Powhatan relations with the Patuxent were generally friendly. Around 1600, between 14,000 and 25,000 people lived in eastern Virginia.

The Doeg (also written as Douge or Tauxenent) lived on the west bank of the Patawomeck (Potomac) River, in modern Fairfax and Prince William counties. A chief known as a *weroance* (male) or, more rarely, a *weroansqua* (female), meaning “commander,” governed Doeg tribes.

Doeg lands and people were remote to the Powhatan chiefdom, which was centered between the York and James rivers to the south. Its chief was

The Doeg used the area of today’s park for hunting expeditions, camping on the banks of the Quantico Creek. Villages were closer to large bodies of water such as the Potomac; a settlement with fifty buildings was large. Doeg diet reflected the seasons. The Doeg cultivated a variety of vegetables - including the staples of squash, maize and beans - and foraged for nuts and berries in local forests. Agriculture was the responsibility of women; men hunted, fished, and gathered shellfish.

Homes and outbuildings were made of woven mats or bark attached to pole frames. A central opening in ceilings allowed smoke from cooking fires to escape. Fire was also an important agricultural tool; the Doeg used it to clear land, girdling trees and burning ground cover to prepare soil for planting. Everyone in a family had a role in the large winter-time hunts near the fall line. These hunts occurred far from villages to avoid depleting animals hunted during other times of the year.

Of these groups, instead, tribes gave him various goods as tribute, and it is likely that for a brief time in the early 1600s, the Doeg provided such tributes. In 1624, Englishman John Smith recollected that tributes vassal tribes paid to Powhatan included “skinnes, beades, copper, pearle, deare, turkies, wild beasts, and corne.” As the Powhatan chiefdom collapsed, it lost the minimal power it held over its most distant tribes, which regained their autonomy.

Weroances inherited their status through their mothers. They had multiple roles in society as social and political leaders and accumulated greater personal wealth than most tribal members; they could afford to support several wives. Villages also had war-chiefs, responsible for leading warriors in battle. Councils of tribal leaders advised their *weroance*.

Hunting also provided clothing, as most Doeg garments were made of deerskin. Women and men wore belted loincloths that reached the knee. Leather leggings and moccasins were worn during forest treks. Fur cloaks provided warmth in the depths of winter. Men kept their hair on the right of the head short to facilitate archery and for religious reasons, while women wore symbolic tattoos.

Religious beliefs differed slightly among the Powhatan tribes, but for all groups beliefs were intricately connected with daily life, especially medicine. Priests treated serious illnesses when other cures failed. Temples were mysterious buildings that also stored tribute and gifts; lay people did not enter them. The Powhatan were polytheists and believed in many gods, including Ahone, the beneficent creator of the world, and Okeus, a severe god who caused illness, crop loss, or other misfortunes if angered. John Smith wrote that “Blood, deare suet, and Tobacco” might be presented as offerings to the gods to give thanks or request assistance.

Life Near the Patawomeck

English and Powhatan Relations

The motives of the London Company merchants who sponsored Virginia's colonization were primarily commercial, though they also believed their colonists would bring 'civilization' to the 'wilder-ness.' The English asserted that Virginia's native peoples were childlike, requiring English govern-ance to escape 'heathenism' and live 'civilized' lives. Like children, they would implicitly obey the English and their teachings. Europeans were not unknown to the natives; Spanish and French mis-sions encountered coastal tribes from the 1500s. Moreover, native contacts with Europeans in other parts of the Americas affected Powhatan civilization even before the London Company launched its ships. Europe's diseases travelled with its sailors, infecting indigenous Americans who then infected others in areas distant from European contact.

When colonists from the *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and *Discovery* established the Jamestown settlement in May of 1607, the Powhatan treated them as potential trading partners, not expecting them to remain permanently. In subsequent years, as addi-tional colonists arrived (and as poor planning by the colonists required them to purchase or comman-deer food from the Powhatan), the relationship between the two peoples became increasingly antagonistic. While English trade goods and arms appealed to the Powhatan, English customs and

faith did not. Few Powhatan wished to discard their customs and live as the colonists lived; they did not consider themselves uncivilized or heathens, or of lower social status than the English. Moreover, few colonists made significant efforts to understand Powhatan perspectives to their new neighbors, as multiculturalism was not an important value among the seventeenth-century English. There was little cross-cultural assimilation through marriage. John Rolfe's 1614 marriage to the kidnapped -and al-ready married - Matoaka (Pocahontas) was a highly unusual diplomatic union and an attempt at peacemaking.

In the summer of 1608, John Smith led an expedi-tion up the Potomac and met the Doeg, who gave his party a friendly welcome. However, Virginia's native residents soon realized that the English did not intend to leave and attacked Jamestown in 1610. European weapons repulsed the superior Powhatan numbers, presaging future conflicts. Even a 1622 Powhatan attack that killed nearly 25% of the colonists could not halt European immigration. Meanwhile, violence and disease drastically re-duced the Powhatan population and the cohesive-ness of the paramount chiefdom. It ceased to exist after the 1646 assassination of Opechancanough, Wahunsunacock's brother, although the individual tribes of the chiefdom persevered.

The Legacy of the Doeg and Powhatan

The Doeg population of today's Prince William County dropped rapidly during the 1600s. Powha-tan populations to the south also fell precipitously due to intertribal wars, wars with the English colo-nists, and the introduction of European diseases, to which the native Virginians lacked defenses. During the 1660s, some Doeg relocated to Piscataway territories on the east bank of the Potomac; others moved south to the north bank of the

The colonial government of Virginia signed treaties with several native tribes between the 1650s and 1670s. These treaties, the oldest valid pacts between a tribal government and a colony, established several reservations; while many Powhatan tribes lost their reservations, those for the Pamunkey and Mattaponi still exist and are among the oldest reservations in the United States.

moved south to the north bank of the Rappahanock. There they integrated with other groups and eventually lost their Doeg identity.

The sociopolitical power of the tribes of Virginia declined greatly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the European population of the colony of Virginia grew. By the late 1660s, nearly 30,000 colonists lived within its borders.

Places to Learn More About the Powhatan and Doeg Cultures

Among the many sources of information concerning pre-colonial Virginia, available online or at your local library are:

Egloff, Keith and Deborah Woodward. *First People: The Early Indians of Virginia*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993.

Feest, Christian F. "Virginia Algonquians." In *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 15, ed. Bruce G. Tigger, 253-270. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978.

Gleach, Frederic W. *Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

The Mariner's Museum, *Chesapeake Bay: Our History and Our Future*, 2000, <<http://www.mariner.org/chesapeakebay/native/namoo2.html>> (4 November 2002).

Potter, Stephen R. *Commoners, Tribute, and Chiefs: The Development of Algonquian Culture in the Potomac Valley*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993.

Recent archaeological studies within the Park found campsites and areas near the Quantico Creek where the area's native peoples crafted tools from stone outcroppings over thousands of years. These studies show that the relationship between people and the land in today's Prince William Forest Park is an ancient and ongoing series of interactions that predates the great empires of Europe, the Americas, or Africa.

Rountree, Helen. *Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia Through Four Centuries*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

_____, ed. *Powhatan Foreign Relations 1500-1722*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993.

_____. *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia: Their Traditional Culture*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

Smithsonian Institution, Anthropology Outreach Office, *Selected References on the Indians of Virginia, the District of Columbia, and Maryland*, 16 July 1999, <<http://www.nmnh.si.edu/anthro/outreach/loclarch.html>> (4 November 2002).

Sheehan, Bernard W. *Savagism and Civility: Indians and Englishmen in Colonial Virginia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.