

Upper Potomac Buoy History

Historians believe that Capt. John Smith and his crew passed by this point in their Discovery Barge twice in June 1608. The first time was on June 22 when they headed upriver as they explored the Potomac and searched in vain for the Northwest Passage through the continent to the Pacific Ocean. Several days before, they had stopped briefly 40 miles downstream on today's Potomac Creek to visit the Patawomeck chief and his people, the farthest-upstream tribe thought to be allies of the paramount chief Powhatan.

Scholars reconstructing this part of the expedition believe that the reception the Englishmen received at Patawomeck was chilly, so they crossed the river and followed the Maryland shoreline to the more welcoming Piscataway people at the towns of Nussamek, near today's Mallows Bay, and Pamacocack, just inside the mouth of Mattawoman Creek, where General Smallwood State Park is located now. They also returned to the Virginia side to visit Tauxenent, inside the mouth of today's Occoquan River.

The people in the Piscataway communities urged Smith to visit their paramount chief, or tayac, at Moyaons, which is still sacred ground to the Piscataway people today but which also houses the National Colonial Farm (which is open to the public), just below the mouth of Piscataway Creek. The Piscataway tayac welcomed Smith and the crew and feasted them, we believe on the evening of June 21. The next day, well-fed and rested, the English took their Discovery Barge upriver past this point for an overnight visit with the Anacostan people at the town of Nacotchtank, located on the south side of the mouth of the Anacostia River, at the current site of Bolling Air Force Base.

From Nacotchtank, the English spent the best part of a week exploring the river up to its head of navigation at Little Falls. There they left the Discovery Barge with several guards and proceeded upriver on foot along an Indian portage trail on the Maryland side to Great Falls, where they searched unsuccessfully for gold and silver. There they also met a hunting party of Indians who shared some of their game with the English, including "bears, deer, and other beasts." The latter category may have included the now-extinct Eastern bison.

The Englishmen also explored the Virginia side of the river between the falls, then headed downriver past this point around June 28. They were on the way back to Patawomeck because some of the Native people they had met spoke of a mine near that chief's town that Capt. Smith suspected to contain silver.

Though the search for gold and silver along the Potomac proved fruitless in the end, Smith's map and notes about the tribes were very useful to the English people who came after him in the next decade, especially including Capts. Samuel Argall and Henry Spelman, who spent a good deal of time piloting ships up and down the river. Unfortunately, however, the settlers who moved in under claims of land grants from the King of England quickly crowded out the

Native people. The Upper Potomac today, of course, houses Washington, DC, the Capital of the United States, with its huge, sprawling complex of surrounding cities and towns. It is a testimony to the tenacity and resilience of the Piscataway people that they have maintained their identity and awareness of their culture despite centuries of dramatic change.