When the English docked their ships on the shore of North America in 1607, they set forth to build a small settlement named “Jamestown” after King James I. The larger territory around Jamestown, “Virginia,” had already been named by earlier settlers in honor of their English queen. However, these titles were not what the Powhatan Indians, who had lived in this area for thousands of years, considered home. For them, “Virginia” was “Tsenacomoco,” the homeland they had shared with other Native American tribes for generations.

This map shows Virginia and West Virginia in 1881. Before colonists arrived, Native American tribes like the Powhatan inhabited these lands for centuries.
Life for the Powhatan Indians differed greatly from the English settlers’ lives. It comes as no surprise that the two groups had trouble understanding each other when the English arrived in 1607. The Powhatan were a mighty group who lived among the beautiful, stately trees and rich forests of modern-day Virginia. The Powhatan men spent their time hunting, fishing, and building traps for food, while the women were in charge of most of the farming and gathering. Once an area of land had been farmed, the Powhatan moved to a new location with their families. For the Powhatan, and many neighboring tribes, it was understood that unused farmland remained under the control of the original tribe. Therefore, the Powhatan owned much land, even when it wasn’t being used or occupied.

This was very different from the English way of doing things. The English idea of land ownership was not nomadic – they didn’t move their homes from place to place. Under the English system, a family owned and claimed one particular area. When the English arrived in Virginia, they brought their own ideas of land ownership with them and staked claim to much of Powhatan territory. This caused many disputes and conflicts between the Powhatans and the English.

Most of what we know about the Powhatans comes from English journals and records. When the English arrived, there were about 14,000 tribal members in the area, with hundreds of thriving towns and villages. The Powhatans relied on the wildlife, including the fish, oysters and clams in the nearby waterways, to help feed their people. They were also avid hunters and skilled farmers.

The English were surprised to discover that the Powhatan women did much of their tribe’s farming and trading. They were also surprised to learn that women helped build houses where their families lived. Higher-ranking families had houses shaped like tunnels. The English called them “long houses.” At first the English thought these houses were weak because they
The Powhatan of Tsenacomoco

were made of branches covered with woven mats, but in truth, the houses were better suited than the ones the English built. Over the centuries, the Powhatan had learned how to build homes that stayed warm in the winter and cool in the summer. They also developed ways to keep their food dry and safe.

When the English arrived, the area was ruled by a strong chief named Wahunsunacocok. The English called him Chief Powhatan. His daughter, Pocahontas, would prove to be very important in helping the colony survive. She served as a symbol of peace in the colonists’ early years by delivering food and supplies to them. Eventually she married an Englishman.

Sources:


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