

Potomac River History

Welcome to NOAA's Potomac River Interpretive Buoy, located at latitude 38 degrees 02.00 minutes North, longitude 76 degrees 20.25 minutes West. It lies southwest of Point Lookout, the Maryland side of the river's mouth. Captain John Smith and his crew turned from the main Bay into the Potomac here June 16, 1608 on their first exploratory voyage up the Bay that summer.

Although the weather was apparently mild that day, this is big water. It's eleven miles diagonally across the Potomac's mouth to Smith Point on the Virginia shore and twelve miles due east to the northern tip of Smith Island. It can kick up rough, because the Chesapeake's two largest rivers meet here: the Susquehanna (Maryland's portion of the Bay's main stem is essentially the tidal Susquehanna) and the Potomac. Their ebb currents clash over the bar they have formed that extends for half-a-mile off Point Lookout. When strong southerly winds fight the two ebbs, or northwesterly winds fight flood current, this can be a dangerous place.

The clashing currents and rough water have, however, created rich benthic (bottom) habitat here. Turbulence on the bar off Point Lookout concentrates plankton, while the currents scour the bottom of fine sediments, providing both food and hard substrate for oysters. Look at a chart and you'll see a lumpy, hard bottom, especially on the Potomac (western) edge of the bar, that was historically rich in oysters. Captain Smith probably had to navigate the Discovery Barge around large reefs here.

The curving shoreline here, Cornfield Harbor, provided mariners with good shelter from northwest winds, but its name has more recently been associated with oysters and with fish like menhaden, flounder, Atlantic croakers, Norfolk spot, gray trout (weakfish), and rockfish (striped bass). The combination of oyster reefs and their proximity to the two great interstate river highways have made Cornfield Harbor and its surrounding waters natural stopping-off points for fish. Both watermen and recreational anglers work this area.