

Annapolis John Smith History

On June 12, 1608, Capt. John Smith and his crew sailed their Discovery Barge close to this buoy's location at the mouth of the Severn River as they explored the Chesapeake Bay's upper western shore. Long-time residents of Anne Arundel County, who love this region's pretty but short rivers, including the West, Rhode, South, Severn, and Magothy, find it difficult to understand why he didn't stop to explore any of them in detail. The answer lies in his primary objective, to find the Northwest Passage through the continent to the Pacific Ocean, which his patrons at The Virginia Company of London were convinced lay within the Chesapeake.

Thus he dismissed these rivers with the following comment: "The western shore by which we sailed we found all along well watered, but very mountainous and barren, the valleys very fertile, but extreme thick of small wood so well as trees and much frequented with wolves, bears, deer, and other wild beasts. We passed many shallow creeks but the first inlet we found navigable for a ship we called Bolus..." The detail on his map suggests that he looked briefly into the West and Rhode Rivers, noted the mouth of the South River, came far enough into the Severn to note Spa Creek's mouth to the southwest and Whitehall Bay to the north, and passed close enough to the Magothy to note its narrow mouth before turning into the Bolus, which is today's Patapsco.

Smith had recently visited the Nanticoke people on the lower Eastern Shore, who had told him about a powerful tribe on a large waterway to the north. That information had persuaded him to hurry out through Hooper Straits and across the Bay to the "mountainous and barren" western shoreline that we know today as the Calvert and Scientists' Cliffs. Some historians speculate that the capable warriors of the Massawomeck and Susquehannock tribes to the north had intimidated other Native peoples inhabiting this part of what is now Southern Maryland, which may be why Smith and Co. saw no one as they explored north into the Bolus/Patapsco. Unfortunately, because Smith didn't document any Indians here, today little is known about the Natives who must have enjoyed the rich resources of this area prior to his arrival.

So why should a buoy at the mouth of the Severn mark Capt. Smith's Trail? The question raises a really important point. The primary reason that the Trail exists is the map that Smith, with the help of Native inhabitants, compiled of the Chesapeake and the tributaries that he explored. Because of its uncanny accuracy, it was literally the chartbook, cruise guide, and blueprint for English settlement in Virginia and Maryland in the seventeenth century -- and the foundation for most of what has happened here since then.

One good example of the consequences of Capt. Smith's map is the establishment of a Virginia trading post at the south end of Kent Island -- just ten miles southeast from here-by Smith's friend William Claiborne in 1631. A crucial second example is the first Maryland settlement by Lord Baltimore's colonists at St. Mary's City in 1634. Both of these groups came up the Chesapeake on Capt. Smith's map, then filled in empty spaces with their own

experiences. By the way, the Marylanders quickly laid claim to Kent Island and took it from Claiborne by force, and King Charles I, who had granted Maryland to Lord Baltimore, upheld that colony's claim to the island.

In 1649, Lord Baltimore, who believed in religious toleration, granted the point just northwest of this buoy (today's Greenbury Point, which does appear on Smith's map), to a group of English Puritans to establish the village of Providence. Around 1670, the residents of Providence moved across the Severn to the present site of Annapolis, where there is a better harbor. Soon enough, English colonists began to settle on the other rivers of Anne Arundel County, and the rest, as they say, is history. Capt. Smith may not have set foot ashore here, but he has had a profound effect on the history of Anne Arundel County over the succeeding four centuries.