

## James River History

Welcome to NOAA's James River Interpretive Buoy, located at latitude 37 degrees 12.25 minutes North, longitude 76 degrees 46.65 minutes West. It lies off Jamestown Island about a quarter-mile south of Captain John Smith's statue, where he can see it well as he looks out over the river. The English colonists were more sophisticated about military strategy than ecology. After an exploratory trip up the river in early May, 1607 to look for suitable sites, they chose Jamestown Island because it lies far enough up the James that their presence would not be obvious to a Spanish ship entering the mouth of the Chesapeake, and there was no Native village there. In addition, the narrow neck of marsh connecting the island to the mainland made it easy to defend from Native attack. Finally, the river's channel swung close enough to the island that they could moor their ships at the bank. On May 13, they landed there, claimed the land for England, named it for their King, James I, and began to create a settlement, including a fort.

From the Native perspective, the island lay within the hunting territory of the Paspahegh, a tribe under allegiance to the region's paramount chief, Powhatan, whose name the Natives had long since given to the river (and the name by which some of their modern descendants still refer to it). The Paspahegh were not pleased by the settlement and attacked it a short time later, while the colony's leaders (including Captain John Smith) were away exploring the James up to its fall line. The fort's palisades were still incomplete, and while the English were able to repulse the attack, the Paspahegh succeeded in wounding several colonists and killing a boy. When the leaders returned, they turned everyone to finishing the palisade.

The colony's relations with the Paspahegh eventually improved from overt hostility but remained fragile for obvious reasons. In the fall of 1607, for example, Smith had much more success trading for corn at the villages of the Chickahominy, who were independent from Powhatan, than at Paspahegh.

The primary practical challenges at Jamestown during Smith's time here (May, 1607-October, 1609) were building a fort and the surrounding settlement that served the colonists' needs for security, moorings for the boats, living space, sanitation, drinking water, a church in which to worship, storehouses for food and supplies, and fields where they could grow some of their own crops. Health challenges were many and severe, from diseases like malaria and severe gastro-intestinal bleeding to heat prostration and, in winter, meager diet. Political challenges arose from the mix of strong personalities, material expectations, and social status among the colonists, exacerbated by the stresses of living under primitive and difficult circumstances. Smith's military and leadership skills, in fact, played a pivotal role in Jamestown's survival during his time here.