

Werowocomoco

A POWHATAN PLACE OF POWER

Chickahominy • Upper Mattaponi • Chickahominy • Eastern Chickahominy • Monacan • Pamunkey • Rappahannock • Nansemond • Mattaponi



The beauty of the location combined with the sacred presence of ancestral power and awe brings Werowocomoco once again into the forefront of Native Virginians' consciousness as the state and nation move to recognize the relationships and legacies established at this important site long before 1607.

Rising from the forest floor and the York River's edge, the powerful community of Werowocomoco once flourished in what is now Gloucester County, Virginia. Werowocomoco (site 44GL32) served as the capital of the Powhatan chiefdom that dominated most of coastal Virginia by the early seventeenth century and included perhaps 15,000 Algonquian-speaking Natives.

Currently, archaeologists, students, tribal leaders and several institutions have joined together at this historically significant Eastern Woodland center of power. They are seeking to better understand the origins of the Powhatan chiefdom, the complexities of Powhatan society and the interactions between Natives and Europeans during the early contact era in Virginia. This unique alliance of partners combines archaeological methods, colonial narratives and contemporary Native commentary to generate a more complete picture of Werowocomoco and its place in history.

Colonial documents and Native oral traditions indicate that Wahunsenacawh, better known as Chief Powhatan, held the position of Mamanatowick, or "great king" over numerous settlements. The Powhatan world of Tsenacommacah with its horticultural-foraging communities was grouped into approximately 30 political districts. Their villages lined the banks of the Virginia Coastal Plain. Powhatan society was defined by differences of status, authority and wealth and included werowances whom the English described variously as kings, commanders or chiefs.

Werowances and other emissaries traveled to Werowocomoco to negotiate alliances and to trade. As the most influential leader of the period, Chief Powhatan developed extensive trade networks and tribute systems that enriched the prestige of Werowocomoco and reinforced the village's prominence in society, politics and religion.

The English arrived in Tsenacommacah in May 1607 and established James Fort on the Powhatan (James) River. While exploring the region in December of 1607, Captain John Smith was captured by Chief Powhatan's brother, Opechancanough, along with Powhatan warriors, and brought to Werowocomoco. Stories involving the interactions of Chief Powhatan, his daughter Pocahontas and John Smith at Werowocomoco have entered into the realm of American culture, history and folklore.

In 1609, to distance himself from the English settlers, Wahunsenacawh relocated to the village of Orapaks, in New Kent County. After ending centuries of Native dominance, the English redefined the land now called Virginia. Werowocomoco faded as a place of prominence as English speakers developed their own important places and imposed Western ideas and culture on the land.

Four hundred years later, descendants of the Powhatan people are returning to Werowocomoco.



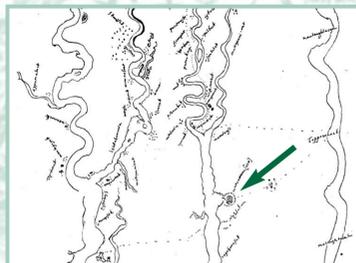
Jeff Brown (Pamunkey Tribe) with archaeologists Martin Gallivan and Dave Brown at the site.

Why excavate at Werowocomoco?

Tribal members, academic researchers and students are interested in the origins and dynamics of the Powhatan paramount chiefdom before and during the contact period. The interaction of cultures and a new understanding of events at this landscape of power have spurred investigators to address exciting new questions of research.

How are the excavations conducted?

Archaeological excavation proceeds through several stages in a careful and deliberate manner. Initially a survey of the Werowocomoco site was conducted in order to identify the size and distribution of artifacts at the site. The archaeologists then excavated small test units and finally opened broader excavation blocks. These larger excavation blocks were chosen to expose archaeological features such as soil stains from pits and house posts. Since archaeological deposits can only be excavated once, detailed notes, drawings and photographs of the fieldwork are kept. Artifacts, features, faunal and floral specimens are analyzed in a laboratory setting and reports of findings with interpretations are prepared and published.



What do the 17th-century documents tell us about Werowocomoco?

Several seventeenth-century notables, including John Smith, William Strachey, Robert Tindall, and Pedro Zuniga document the location and provide evidence for the village's significance.

The image at left is from the Zuniga map, illustrating the placement of Werowocomoco (see arrow) on Purtan Bay, as well as James Fort and Smith's route during his captivity.

What are researchers finding at Werowocomoco?



Werowocomoco's archaeological record contains evidence from a range of occupations and includes materials, such as stone points, that date from the Archaic period (starting 10,000 years ago) through the early colonial era. Beneath the top layer of soil archaeologists have found Native features from the village. The excavation has uncovered Native artifacts from the residential area dating from A.D. 1300 through the early 1600s. The materials – pottery, stone tools, bone, shell, plant remains, trash pits and post stains – are the remains of daily Powhatan life. Pieces of copper likely traded by Jamestown colonists are also present in these deposits. In another area of the site archaeologists have found a series of ditch features that appear to separate the residential area of the village from a special area of the site. Native artifacts from the ditch area, including trade goods and decorated pottery, may be linked to Werowocomoco's status as a place of power.

Partners and Sponsors

The Werowocomoco research project has received critical assistance from numerous individuals and several institutions. The project would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of landowners Bob and Lynn Ripley. Members of the Virginia Indian Advisory Board representing the Pamunkey, Mattaponi, Chickahominy, Nansemond, Rappahannock and Upper Mattaponi have given generously of their time to meet with researchers and act as liaisons to the larger Virginia Indian community. Also critical to the research was institutional support from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, the College of William & Mary, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities.



Virginia Department of Historic Resources



College of William & Mary



Virginia Foundation for the Humanities



National Endowment for the Humanities

To learn more about the Werowocomoco research project visit

powhatan.wm.edu



“Whenever I am at Werowocomoco, I feel that I am home and a part of the past.”

– Howard Adams, Upper Mattaponi