

Nauticus John Smith History

Welcome to NOAA's Nauticus CBIBS Buoy, located in the lower Chesapeake's Elizabeth River between Norfolk and Portsmouth at 36 degrees 50' 40.10" North latitude, 76 degrees 18' 1.74" West longitude. If you are on the observation deck at Nauticus, look across the river to see it, roughly a quarter-mile away, just west of the river's channel and south of the Portsmouth Naval Hospital on Hospital Point.

At the end of his second voyage up the Chesapeake in early September of 1608, Captain John Smith and his crew briefly explored and mapped the Elizabeth River, placing a brass cross on the east bank several miles upstream. He noted the narrow but deep channel that would soon make it a great seaport and found a scattering of houses and gardens but no Indians. Smith was looking for the "Chisapeack" people, for whom the Bay had been named by Sir Walter Raleigh's colonists at Roanoke Island 20 years earlier. The reason he found no one here in 1608 was that Powhatan had exterminated the tribe, and possibly English survivors of the Roanoke colony, the year before, because Powhatan's priests had prophesied that they would conquer and end his empire.

The priests weren't far off in their prophecy, quite possibly sensing how much their world would change from the visits of Spanish ships around 1600 and the arrival of the Jamestown colonists in the spring of 1607. In any case, it is ironic that this great Bay should take its name for an exterminated tribe that lived 500 miles south of the Bay's source, the headwaters of the Susquehanna River in Otsego Lake, at today's Cooperstown, New York. The name stuck, however (though Smith spelled it Chesapeack four years later on his map). Today it is difficult to imagine how the Elizabeth River would have looked when he found it deserted that day. It stands as a crossroads between the Earth's oceans and the great Chesapeake and Susquehanna bay and river system. No wonder it is so busy today.