

Susquehanna John Smith History

On his second voyage up the Chesapeake in the summer of 1608, Captain John Smith was determined to follow the Chesapeake as far as he could, to see if it did indeed lead to the fabled Northwest Passage to the Orient. Fair winds whisked him, his new crew, and his Discovery Barge to the mouth of the Susquehanna in three days, good speed for a 30' boat of seventeenth-century design.

There he found that the Bay divided into "two heads" and then into four. He took the largest, the river he would name Sasquesahanough, following it for about six miles till he found the way blocked by rocky rapids. This is the point where the river reaches sea level, also known as its "fall line". He and the crew landed on the west shore (today's Harford County side), tied the boat off to the shore, and hiked up to a hill overlooking the river, and nailed a brass cross to a tree. Historians today believe that tree was in today's Susquehanna State Park.

The Englishmen turned downriver and explored to the east, up today's Northeast River and back down the west side of Elk Neck to Turkey Point, where they encountered a raiding party of Massawomeck warriors, Iroquoian Indians with fast birchbark canoes who had come down to the Chesapeake from Western Maryland. The Massawomeck, who had just attacked the Tockwogh chief's town in today's Sassafras River, approached the English with caution, but eventually they traded food, spears, and shields with the English, then departed.

Smith and crew sailed up the Sassafras to the Tockwogh town, where the people looked at the Massawomeck shields and concluded that the English had fought their mortal enemies and beaten them, so they welcomed these strange, bearded men as heroes and treated them royally.

From the Tockwogh, Smith learned of another great tribe two days' travel up the big river, whom they called Sasquesahanough (as Smith spelled it at least once). This tribe was friendly and an important trading partner to the Tockwogh. Through an interpreter who spoke both the Powhatan language and that of the Susquehanna, Smith sent messengers up into today's Lancaster, County, Pennsylvania, asking the chiefs to meet him down at the river's mouth.

While they were gone, Smith and his crew explored the river we know today as the Elk, looking for a route through to the Atlantic, which he didn't find. Imagine how surprised he would be today to find the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal there.

After several days, he and his crew sailed and rowed to today's Garrett Island, in the Susquehanna's mouth just above this buoy, where they met, parlied, and traded with forty "gyant-like" Susquehanna chiefs (who, according to archaeologists, averaged 5'11", while Smith stood about 5'3", and his crew not much taller).

The parley was so successful that two Susquehanna chiefs asked to sail across the Susquehanna Flats to the Tockwogh town with Smith, followed by the rest of their party in their canoes. There they all feasted together. The Tockwogh begged Smith to stay and protect them from the Massawomeck, but the next day, Smith and his crew turned the Discovery Barge south, promising to return the next year, though they never did.

This part of Smith's voyages was very important for his being able to map the head of the Chesapeake and the mouth of the Susquehanna, but he also turned south with the realization that if the Northwest Passage did indeed exist, it wasn't in the Chesapeake, since he had by then explored all of the large western shore rivers to their heads of navigation. The English wouldn't get to the Orient this way, but in time, they would find other riches in the Chesapeake.