

NOAA Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System

York Spit Buoy: History

Capt. John Smith passed the site of NOAA's York Spit CBIBS buoy at least nine times during his stay in Virginia: four times on his two round trip voyages of exploration up and back down the Chesapeake's main stem in the summer of 1608, and five more times on his round trips to Powhatan's capital of Werowocomoco, up today's York River, in the winters of 1608 and 1609. It is worth noting that Smith had already visited Werowocomoco during the weeks that the Natives had held him captive (December 1607 to January 1608). With them, he had also seen the York's two big headwater tributaries, the Pamunkey and Mattaponi Rivers, on foot.

In February, after his return to Jamestown, Smith made his first trip by water—in frigid weather—taking Capt. Christopher Newport to meet Powhatan. That voyage also included a run up the Pamunkey so that Newport could meet Powhatan's powerful brother, Opechancanough, who had been Smith's captor.

At the end of Smith's second exploratory voyage up the Bay, in early September, he and his crew passed here and anchored for the night in the mouth of the Poquoson River, which they had named Gosnold's Bay. That evening, however, a thunderstorm sprang up. They raised sail and ran before the strong wind, navigating by what they could see during lightning flashes until they rounded Old Point Comfort and the squall blew over.

In October of that year, Smith sailed again to Werowocomoco under orders from Capt. Newport, with gifts for Powhatan, but he returned to Jamestown overland that time. At the end of December, he sailed again to Werowocomoco to trade for corn. It turned out to be his last, and most hostile, encounter with the great chief. He also traveled up the Pamunkey to trade with Opechancanough, another encounter that ended badly, and up the Mattaponi. Busy though he was with diplomacy and defense, he apparently took enough notes on this trip to map both tributaries with remarkable accuracy. He returned to Jamestown in mid-February, passing this buoy site for the last time.

The amazingly accurate map of the Chesapeake and its rivers that Smith published three years later, based on his explorations and what he had learned from the Native people he met, played a crucial role in the history of English settlement of both the Virginia and Maryland colonies. It is a remarkable legacy from an extraordinary man.