

FOR TEACHERS

THE WOODLAND INDIANS OF SOUTHERN MARYLAND



PHYSICAL ADDRESS

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The Woodland Indian Hamlet at Historic St. Mary's City is a re-creation of a small Yaocomaco Indian hamlet typical of those found in southern Maryland in 1634 at the time of contact with the English colonists. The Hamlet represents a unique situation, with native peoples and English colonists living together, until the colonists could establish their own settlement.

The Yaocomaco Indians lived on both sides of what would eventually be called the St. Mary's River.

They were a small, independent tribe who interacted with and were possibly influenced by large chiefdoms in the area including the Piscataway chiefdom (in what became Maryland) and the Powhatan chiefdom (in what became Virginia). A werowance, or chief, led the tribe. He would seek advice from other leaders in the tribe, including spiritual leaders and war captains.

The Yaocomaco were of Eastern Algonquian lingual and Eastern Woodland cultural stock, having much in common with other groups of the Atlantic coastal region such as the Powhatan of Virginia and the Wampanoag of New England. These groups spoke varying dialects or forms of the Algonquian language.

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Settlement

On the east side of the St. Mary's River, the Yaocomaco lived in a hamlet of approximately fifteen houses and other structures. The general term for house used by the Yaocomaco Indians in this area was "witchott" (it is not known exactly how this word was pronounced). The average witchott was twenty feet long, twelve feet wide, and ten feet high, and it was covered with grass mats or sheets of bark. Platforms were built off the ground for sleeping, and a smoky loft area for storage was common among these structures.

Other structures included hunting lodges, work shelters, and sweat lodges.

Survival

The Yaocomaco Indians were dependent upon food available during each season. Most of what they ate, they grew—corn, beans, and squash. Seasonal harvests of foraged roots, seeds, fruits, and green plants as well as fish, reptiles, shellfish, and animals, especially deer, provided additional food

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Work and Tools

The entire Yaocomaco community very likely would join together to build structures and clear fields. Working in groups made many tasks possible, but the responsibility for most tasks seems to have been gender specific. Women generally maintained and managed the witchotts, cared for the children, and kept the village running smoothly. They were responsible for the field crops and foraging, and all processing and cooking of foods. They made clothing, mats, pots, baskets, and preserved hides. Girls spent time watching, practicing, and learning these skills. Men generally cleared land to prepare fields and hunted and fished for food. They were also responsible for protecting the tribe. They gathered materials for and made all the necessary tools. Grinding and knapping (breaking or flaking) stone and making dugout canoes, fish nets, and other implements were skills they began learning as boys.

Renewable natural resources were used to produce a wide variety of tools:

Fire was a very important tool. Dugout methods (burning, then scraping or chopping out) were employed on the log canoes used for transportation and fishing, as well as on bowls, smaller utensils, and mortars that were used to grind grain. Fire was also used to smooth or seal the ends of posts or wooden handles.

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Stone tools made by grinding or knapping included celts (axes) for felling trees and building houses, knives and flakes for cutting and scraping, stone bits for drilling holes, and stone arrowheads for hunting with a bow and arrow.

Bone tools included antlers for knapping or splitting wood, sharpened long bones of large animals for scraping, and split and ground bones for needles, awls, fish hooks, and fishing spears.

Cordage made of plant fibers, bark, animal sinew, or whole plants was used to tie poles together, to make fish nets, to hold tools together, and for sewing, making mats, and other general purpose needs.

Mats made with grasses woven, bundled, or sewn together were used for covering structures and sleeping platforms.

Baskets and bags were made of bark, splints, grasses, and vines which were woven and twined. They were used for storage and harvesting.

Pottery (large or small and round-bottomed) was made by coiling and paddling methods. Pots were fired carefully in a very hot open fire and used as cook pots, bowls, or storage containers.

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Appearance

Yaocomaco people were reported to be tan-skinned with dark hair. They generally wore clothing made from deer hide. A twined cordage or simple hide belt tied around the waist could hold a bag for personal belongings. Their clothing varied somewhat with the season. For example, in cold weather they may have worn linen trade shirts, leggings made from hide, moccasins, and mantles of various furs and hides. Pigments from earth or plant products were sometimes applied to the face and body as insect repellent and for different ceremonial purposes. Women reportedly wore permanent tattoos on their faces, breasts, arms, and legs. Beads of shell, bone, copper, stone, clay, and pearls were used for adornment and sometimes various small animal parts were also worn.

Ceremonies

Gatherings held to celebrate the major events of tribal life and various seasonal activities included feasting and dancing. Gourd and turtle shell rattles, water-filled pottery drums, and reed flutes may have been used as instruments.

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Contact with the English

The Yaocomaco Indians were reportedly in the process of abandoning the immediate area when the colonists first arrived. The exact reason is unknown, but they may have been leaving as a result of attacks from enemy tribes such as the Susquehannock.

In exchange for tools and cloth, the English colonists were welcome to take shelter in vacated Yaocomaco houses and to begin planting crops in the already cleared and fertile fields. The colonists were given information by the Indians about field management, hunting, and trapping. About half of the Yaocomaco people moved immediately and the rest moved within a year.

Relationships between the colonists, the Yaocomaco, and neighboring tribes were reportedly good for the first year or so. Within a few years the Jesuits, who were among the first colonists, undertook to convert the native people to Christianity with some success.

While living in the Yaocomaco hamlet, the colonists would have used many of the items brought from England including some food such as grains, peas, oil, vinegar, and salt, as well as personal clothing, bedding, muskets, hoes, axes, saws, shovels, hammers, nails, iron cook pots, fry pans, wooden eating utensils, and chests or trunks in which to put their belongings

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Resources:

Eastern Shore (American) Indians of Virginia and Maryland by Helen C. Rountree

Indians of Southern Maryland, by Helen C. Rountree, Rebecca Seib

A Chronicle of Maryland, Father Andrew White