



## American Indian Interpretation

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Native American consultants offered these considerations when interpreting history on the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail:

- Remember that history is always (initially) written by the conquerors.
- Understand that the history of the Jamestown era is, centuries later, still mostly written by dominant culture scholars, using their interpretations of the primary sources, material (archeological) resources, and ethnographic analogy. Today these ways of learning about the past are available to everyone, and American Indians familiar with them may understand “what was happening” in a very different way from the usual experts.
- When planning interpretation, integrate multiple cultural viewpoints from the very beginning of the process. Create and maintain a relationship with one or more regional indigenous communities or indigenous scholars.
- Recognize that all your consultants are bringing equally valid perspectives to the table, even though their knowledge areas and skill sets may be very different.
- Consider multiple genres of interpretation, and multiple ways to integrate a native perspective. Be aware that there is no homogeneous “Native” view, and various Indian tribes and scholars may have differing views.
- Pay attention to your assumptions, the assumptions your visitors are likely to bring, and especially the connotations of language in your interpretive content, announcements, and press releases.

### Writing and Speaking about American Indians

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At the approach of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, the Virginia Council on Indians prepared these guidelines for writing and speaking about Virginia Indians. They are offered “in the spirit of mutual benefit for historians, anthropologists, journalists, members of the public, and the Virginia Indian communities.”

1. Take care when using the phrase American Indian, Native American or Virginia Indian “culture.” There were numerous Indian cultures in Virginia, and hundreds in North America. Unless you are referring to only one tribe, this word should be plural.
2. Avoid using plurals of names of nations when referring to their people as a group, as in “The Chickahominies shared a reservation with the Mattaponis in the 17th century.” When referring to a tribe as a group by their tribal name, the name should always be singular: “The Monacan were recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1989.”
3. Avoid referring to Indian songs as “chants” and to Indian powwow drums with overly dramatic adjectives such as “throbbing.” Use the term “regalia” rather than “costumes” for American Indian clothing worn for powwows or ceremonial events.

4. Use discretion when using the word “village” to describe any historic Indian community. Even the 17th-century English usually called our communities “towns,” as distinguished from temporary “camps” used in seasonal visits for hunting, fishing, and harvesting oysters or various plants for food, medicine and life functions. Terms like “village” and “hamlet” consistently applied to Native American communities imply that our towns were primitive or quaint.
5. Use caution when describing elements of Native cultures in terms that simplify or marginalize, such as “gardening” for “agriculture,” “myths” or “legends” for “history,” or “woodlands survival skills” for “science.”
6. Avoid referring to the paramount chief Powhatan as “Chief Powhatan” as if he were an ordinary chief, or by his informal name Wahunsunacock, when writing about him as a leader. It is appropriate to refer to him as Powhatan, the name (and name of hometown) that he took when he became paramount chief, before the English came to Virginia. This is what other Indian nations called him. The English terms “king,” “emperor” and “ruler” are also inappropriate, as they are imperfect English translations used by the colonists who did not understand the nature of his political organization.
7. Powhatan’s tributaries (the tribes that paid tribute to him) are best referred to as a “paramount chiefdom” or by using generic terms such as “the Powhatan tribes,” when referring to these tribes at the time of English contact. They did not constitute a “confederacy” or a “nation.” They were not sub-tribes, but individual nations that paid tribute to the same paramount chief. The only “Powhatan nation” was the tribe located to the east of Richmond on the James River, where the paramount chief came from originally.
8. Virginia Algonquian cultures (indeed, most North American Indian cultures) were matrilineal. A child’s status (i.e., being eligible for leadership) was determined by the mother’s status, not by the father. Powhatan’s high status wives were known to the English colonists by name, but the mother of Pocahontas was never identified. Therefore avoid referring to Powhatan’s daughter, Pocahontas, as a “princess.”
9. Use caution when referring to Pocahontas, her age, and the events of her life. It is important to note that opinions differ on the alleged “rescue” incident at Werowocomoco in 1607. Some think it happened much as Smith described it in his 1624 writings, although he did not mention the incident at all in his earlier writing of his time at Werowocomoco. Others think it never happened, and still others believe the event occurred, but was an “adoption” ritual that was misunderstood by Smith.
10. Avoid misinformation about Virginia Indian history, such as incorrect population estimates, referring to the Virginia Algonquians as “Algonquins,” or to the Siouan speaking tribes of the piedmont as “Sioux,” misspelling the names of tribes, the misrepresentation of events, and using inappropriate language, such as describing periods of intensified English/Indian conflict as “wars.”
11. Avoid using only non-Indian “experts” as sources of information about Virginia Indians, whether historical or contemporary. This often results in errors in both historical and modern information, and in the use of inappropriate words, as shown in some of the examples above.
12. Check the facts and use multiple, reliable sources. The Virginia Council on Indians office can supply background information, suggestions for resource material, and referrals to the appropriate tribal leaders as sources for interviews and quotes. The office can be reached via email at [vci@governor.virginia.gov](mailto:vci@governor.virginia.gov), or at telephone number 804-225-2084.

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