

Potomac River History

Welcome to NOAA's Potomac River Interpretive Buoy, located at latitude 38 degrees 02.00 minutes North, longitude 76 degrees 20.25 minutes West. It lies southwest of Point Lookout (Smith named it Sparkes Point), the Maryland side of the river's mouth. Captain John Smith and his crew turned their Discovery Barge from the main Bay into the Potomac here June 16, 1608 on their first exploratory voyage up the Bay that summer.

They had gotten as far up the Bay as the Patapsco and Gunpowder Rivers, but with food running low and several days of foul winds, the crew persuaded Smith to head south. By the time they "fell with the river Patawomeck," however, they had regained their spirits of adventure.

Smith had learned of this river during his captivity with Powhatan the winter before and understood the south (now Virginia) shore to be part of the great chief's dominion. He knew of several major Native towns up this river, wanted to map it, and as always, hoped to find gold, silver, and the mythical Northwest Passage through the continent to the Orient.

Thus, despite the lack of provisions, but trusting that they would find friendly Natives, Captain and crew turned their Discovery Barge to the west and entered the river, which they would spend the next month exploring. Smith's journals record several adventures, and his map records extensive visits to Native towns and villages on both sides of the river. He and his second crew came by here again on July 28, headed north to the head of the Bay, and stopped briefly nearby at the mouth of St. Jerome Creek the evening of August 12 on the way south to the Rappahannock.