

Your Coming Is Not for Trade, but to Invade My People and Possess My Country

A Native American World under Siege, 1608–1790

We shall by degrees chaunge their barbarous natures, make them ashamed . . . of their savage nakednes, informe them of the true god, and the waie to their salvation, and fynally teach them obedience to the kings Majestie and to his Governours.

—WILLIAM STRACHEY, 1612

The Anacostia River effectively splits Washington into two separate and unequal parts. To its north and west, the hills slope upward toward the monuments of the federal city and the affluent neighborhoods of Northwest Washington. To its south and east lay the flood-prone flats and hills of “Far Southeast” and “Far Northeast.” Cut off physically and psychologically from the rest of Washington, these “East of the River” communities historically have suffered from political neglect, economic deprivation, and social isolation.

The river itself reflects the area’s stagnation. Up through the early nineteenth century, the Anacostia rivaled the Potomac—it was a bustling trading channel deep enough for oceangoing vessels to travel to Bladensburg, Maryland, beyond the District’s northeastern border. But as tobacco-exhausted soils upstream eroded into the river, the silted Anacostia became too shallow for commercial use. The area’s economy shriveled. Despite the impressive efforts of local environmental groups, in the twenty-first century the Anacostia remains a litter-strewn barrier between a flourishing capital city and its poorest, blackest neighborhoods.¹

The word “Anacostia,” a term almost synonymous with “black” and “poor” in modern Washington, has its roots in the first racial struggles in the area that we now call the nation’s capital. The word emerged as a Latin pronunciation and spelling of “Nacostine,” the tribe of Native Americans who lived at the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. Three hundred in number at the dawn of the seventeenth century, the Nacostines lived in Nacotchtank, a sprawling

village that dominated the river plain on which now sits Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling.²

Situated just below the fall line, a ragged break in the land where the Piedmont drops off to the coastal plain, Nacotchtank rested along the frontier that separated the Algonquian-speaking peoples of the Tidewater from the Iroquoian tribes of the hinterland. The two groups carried on a lucrative trade, gathering by the hundreds each year to hawk beaver pelts, copper, shell beads, and other goods. Using the natural advantage of their location, the Nacostines acted as intermediaries and profited handsomely.

The frontier brought prosperity, but it also brought danger as warriors from northern tribes such as the Susquehannock and Massawomack staged frequent and destructive raids into the upper Tidewater. Villages close to the fall line, including Nacotchtank, were particularly vulnerable to attack. They sought protection from paramount chiefdoms, entities in which a chief of chiefs commanded tribute from subject tribes in exchange for military protection.³

The Nacostines allied themselves with the Piscataways. From their base on the massive peninsula created by the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay, what today is Prince George's County, Maryland, the Piscataways held sway over roughly seven thousand people. Nacotchtank stood along its western border, and the Nacostines paid tribute to the Piscataway chief, who made his capital at Mayone, just fifteen miles downriver where Piscataway Creek empties into the Potomac.

To the south and east of Nacotchtank lay the Piscataways' rival, the mighty Powhatan Confederacy, named for its formidable leader. Based at Werowocomoco, on the York River in what is now Gloucester County, Virginia, Powhatan dominated the Tidewater from the southern shores of the Potomac all the way to the Neuse River in modern-day North Carolina. He commanded tribute from thirty subject tribes containing fifteen thousand people.⁴

When English colonists established an outpost on the James River in spring 1607, they settled amid this large, fractious, and politically sophisticated Native American population. Initially, they were interlopers in a Native American world, subject to the whims of its established rulers. Yet within just one hundred years that native-dominated world was gone, and the few Native Americans who remained in the area had become wards of the English king. In their place lived English settlers, servants, and slaves in the colonies of Maryland and Virginia. To understand how this transformation took place, we must explore the first struggles over race and democracy in the area that would become the capital of the United States.⁵

*"We Shall by Degrees Chaung Their Barbarous Natures":
Native Americans Encounter European Explorers*

Powhatan received its first European visitor, Captain John Smith, in summer 1607. Born to a family of farmers in Willoughby, Lincolnshire, Smith had, through force of will and sheer luck, transformed himself into a gentleman and adventurer. Fleeing an apprenticeship at the age of sixteen, he spent a decade as a mercenary in France, a privateer on the Mediterranean, and a slave in Turkey. On his return to England, he held the title of captain and moved in respectable society. Still restless for adventure, Smith left London to join the Virginia Company's efforts to establish a permanent colony in the Chesapeake.⁶

At the time that Smith landed at Nacotchtank, he and other English colonists had been in the Chesapeake for well more than a year. In May 1607, they had settled nearly two hundred miles to the south, in the heart of the Powhatan Confederacy. On a low-slung, swampy island they christened Jamestown, the colonists erected a palisaded fort and set about their appointed task of building a permanent settlement in America. The project went poorly. By September, inept leadership, lack of food, hunger, and hostilities with the surrounding Native Americans had cut the colonists' numbers nearly in half.⁷

Powhatan watched from afar as the new arrivals struggled to survive. He could have left the colonists to starve or dispatched a raiding party to wipe them out, but he saw in the intruders an opportunity to expand his economic and political power. The Chesapeake Algonquians believed that copper and translucent objects acted as conduits to the spirit world, and chiefs derived their power, in part, by controlling access to these precious objects. The Jamestown colonists brought prodigious amounts of copper and beads from England, and iron tools as well, to trade for food. Powhatan, whom one Englishman described as a "fearful spirit, vigilant, ambitious, subtle to enlarge his dominions," determined to gain exclusive access to these goods by incorporating the colonists into his paramount chiefdom.⁸

In December 1607, Powhatan commanded Smith and the colonists to leave Jamestown and settle at Capahowasick, just downriver from his capital. If they would do so, he provided him with "hatchets and copper," Smith wrote, Powhatan "promis[ed] to give me corn, venison, or what I wanted to feed us . . . and should disturb us."⁹ Though starving and harried by their Native American neighbors, the colonists must have thought Powhatan's offer absurd and humiliating. They had crossed the Atlantic fully intending, indeed with instructions from the Virginia Company, to subjugate the natives and convert them to Christianity. "We shall by degrees chaung their barbarous natures, make



"Virginia / Discovered and Described by Captain John Smith, 1606; Graven by William Hole." Published in 1612, this map shows the Chesapeake region and Native American place-names. Chief Powhatan is depicted inside a longhouse in the upper left-hand corner. Library of Congress.

them ashamed . . . of their savadge nakednes, informe them of the true god, and . . . teach them obedience to the kings Majestie," wrote William Strachey of the colonists' intentions. But the desperate winter of 1608 was no time for such condescension. Smith agreed to the terms, and Powhatan sent food, fulfilling his part of the bargain.¹⁰

The colonists, however, reneged on the deal. Not only did they remain at Jamestown, but Smith began probing the soft edges of Powhatan's territory to assess the military strength of the local population and map King James I's new domain. In June and July 1608, he made the first of two voyages up the Chesapeake and its tributaries, sailing in an open barge with a crew of fourteen. The men surveyed several river systems of the Eastern Shore before recrossing the bay to explore the Patapsco and Potomac Rivers.¹¹

Unsurprisingly, Powhatan took offense and directed his subject chiefs to hound the exploring party. Along the banks of the lower Potomac, "all the



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woods were layd with ambuscado's to the number of three or foure thousand Salvages so strangely paynted, grimed and disguised, shouting, yelling and crying as so many spirits from hell could not have shewed more terrible," Smith wrote in his diary.¹²

The harassment ceased only when Smith passed out of Powhatan's domain to the upper Potomac, where he became the first European to explore what is now Washington, D.C. When he reached "Moyaones, Nacotchtant and Toags" in mid-July, he wrote, "the people did their best to content us." The three villages were part of the Piscataway Confederacy and likely greeted the explorers warmly because they hoped to ally themselves with the English against Powhatan, who had been expanding up the Potomac in recent years.¹³

If Powhatan initially had viewed the colonists as troublesome but nonetheless valuable allies, he now saw them as a threat. On Smith's return to Jamestown, Powhatan summoned him to a tense meeting at which the chief accused the colonists of harboring grand designs on his territory: "Your coming hither is not for trade but to invade my people and possess my country." Within a few short months, relations between the English and the confederacy deteriorated into warfare. The First Powhatan War, as the colonists and their descendants came to call it, lasted for five years and temporarily halted colonists' exploration of the Chesapeake. With the English hunkered down in Jamestown, the Nacostines saw few Europeans and experienced little disruption to their way of life in the decade after contact.¹⁴

*"They Knew That Our Trade Might Hinder Their Benefit":
English Traders Disrupt Native Networks*

Though John Smith was the first Englishman to see Nacotchtank, none knew the village and its inhabitants better than the trader Henry Fleet. Born to wealth in Chatham, England, Fleet came to the Chesapeake in fall 1621 as part of the delegation accompanying his second cousin, newly appointed Virginia governor Sir Francis Wyatt. No more than twenty years old when he disembarked at Jamestown, Fleet hoped to make his fortune in the New World.

Initially, this looked to be an easy task. Wyatt and his delegation had traveled to Virginia to assume control of a growing colony seemingly at peace with its Native American neighbors. In 1614, the colonists won the First Powhatan War, and as part of the negotiated peace Powhatan agreed to supply the English with food and honor their claim to the prime farming land they had captured along the James River. Capitalizing on John Rolfe's experiments with tobacco cultivation, they used this land to raise a crop of two thousand pounds in 1615. The

plant fetched a high price back in England, where it had become fashionable among the royal court. Having found the colony's cash crop, the Virginia Company imported hundreds of indentured servants, expanded cultivation, and exported forty thousand pounds in 1620. By the time Wyatt arrived, the colonists had become so focused on tobacco production that they had neglected their charge to explore the Chesapeake and convert the Native Americans to Christianity. His principal assignment was to refocus their energies.¹⁵

Wyatt never had the chance to implement his reforms. On the morning of March 22, 1622, just five months after Wyatt had arrived, Powhatan warriors casually walked onto the eighty-odd plantations scattered along the James River, asked to borrow hoes, shovels, and other tools, then proceeded to beat and hack their hosts to death. Within a matter of hours, they had killed 347 men, women, and children, fully one-fourth of the English population. Opechancanough, Powhatan's younger brother and the mastermind behind the assault, aimed to force the English to retreat to Jamestown and pay tribute to the confederacy.¹⁶

The attack brought calls for blood from London. Concluding that the natives were hopelessly savage, Virginia Company officials abandoned their dreams of assimilating and converting the local population and instead called on colonists to "destroy them who sought to destroy us."¹⁷ Wyatt and his lieutenants launched the Second Powhatan War in 1622 and spent ten years conducting harvest raids against hostile chiefdoms. They stole corn, burned villages, and left their foes hungry and exposed on the eve of winter—a practice the English had pioneered in the Nine Years' War against the "savage" Irish. Ever aware of their economic interests, the governor and other plantation owners used the purloined corn to feed their indentured servants, who in turn devoted their labors to growing tobacco.¹⁸

Unlike during the First Powhatan War, Nacotchtank did not escape the violence. Scrambling for allies, the English approached the Patowomekes, an independent chiefdom that dominated the area around present-day Quantico, Virginia. The Patowomekes sought their own benefit in the hostilities, and they consented to an alliance if the English joined them in a raid on their "sworne enemies," the Piscataways to the north. The English agreed, and together they set upon Nacotchtank, killing eighteen men, plundering the food stores, and burning the houses. Among the raiders that day was Henry Fleet.¹⁹

The Nacostines struck back in March 1623, when Fleet returned to Nacotchtank to barter for corn. Nacostine warriors overwhelmed the English traders, killing twenty and taking Fleet hostage. Governor Wyatt sent a military expedition against the Nacostines—he bragged that they "burnt their houses & a

marvelous quantity of corn" — but Fleet remained in captivity until the colonists paid a ransom for his release four years later.²⁰

Ironically, Fleet's time in Nacotchtank gave him the skills necessary to establish the English as the dominant traders on the Potomac. He became intimately familiar with the geography of the river and "better proficient in the Indian language than mine own," he recalled. After his release, he and his two brothers set out to monopolize trade along the upper Potomac. In spring 1632, they scoured the area for furs, even stopping at Nacotchtank, where they came away with an impressive haul of eight hundred pelts.

Though open to trading with the Fleets, the Nacostines balked when the brothers attempted to deal directly with the tribes above Great Falls. Some years before, the Massawomacks had pushed south from above the Falls, viciously attacking the tribes of the upper Potomac. They designated the conquered Nacostines as their intermediaries who would, in Fleet's words, "convey all such English truck as commeth into this river." Determined to maintain their favored status, the Nacostines sought "to withdraw me from having any commerce with the other Indians," Fleet wrote, "because they knew that our trade might hinder their benefit." Undaunted, Fleet ignored his former captors, sailed up the Potomac, and sent his brother Edward several days' journey by foot to meet the "four kings" of the Massawomacks. Impressed by the Fleets' wares, the kings agreed to cut the Nacostines out of the upper Potomac beaver trade.²¹

The success of Virginia fur traders such as the Fleet brothers drew interest from enterprising investors in London, including the Jesuit Sir George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore. Animated by the prospect of significant profits as well as a desire to save native souls, Calvert asked King Charles I for a charter for the land between the fortieth parallel and the Potomac River. Calvert died days before his request was granted, and proprietorship of the new colony, Maryland, passed to his son Cecilius. On his arrival in the Chesapeake in 1634, Cecilius Calvert hired Fleet to help him "conforme . . . to the Customes of the Countrey." Fleet did this and more. He introduced Calvert to the Piscataway chief Wannas, who granted the Maryland colonists the abandoned village of Yacomoco on the St. Mary's River, one hundred miles downstream from Nacotchtank, for settlement.²²

Though their trade networks had been disrupted and English colonists now occupied a permanent settlement on the lower Potomac, the Nacostines remained upon their land, largely undisturbed by the foreigners, save a few traders and Jesuit missionaries, for another thirty years.

To "Occasion a Greater Quantity of Tobacco to Be Made":
The English Supplant the Nacostines

The Nacostines' fortunes began to shift in the 1650s, when a decline in beaver prices led Maryland colonists to turn from furs back to tobacco. Tobacco required land—lots of it. The little colony, which had not grown much beyond the immediate vicinity of St. Mary's City in its first two decades, expanded rapidly in the 1650s and 1660s as planters moved north along the Potomac and cleared much of the arable land at the water's edge.²³

Colonial settlement eventually reached the Nacostines. In 1663, Lord Calvert granted patents on the land at the confluence of the Potomac and the Anacostia (then called the Eastern Branch), including an 860-acre tract to nobleman Thomas Dent, who dubbed the estate Gisborough after his home village in Yorkshire. Under a treaty between the Maryland Assembly and the Piscataways three years later, Calvert created what came to be known as the "Reserve." Though the agreement stipulated that "the severall nacons aforesd [among them 'Anacostanck'] shall continue upon the places where they now live," Calvert centered the Reserve on the Piscataway capital Mayone, forcing the Nacostines to abandon Nacotch tank and settle several miles to the south. A small number stayed closer to home, moving to Analostan (now Roosevelt) Island in the Potomac River. The colonial government did not resist the encampment, and remnants of this group occupied the site into the next century.²⁴

By 1670, colonists had claimed all the land in what would later become Washington, but they considered the area a dangerous frontier due to continued raiding by tribes from the north and east. Most of the landowners lived in St. Mary's City and left their claims untouched. In the 1680s, they began sending indentured servants and enslaved people to the area to cut tobacco fields out of the forests. Life in what were called the "Out Plantations" was lonely and difficult. Workers lived on isolated outposts with rudimentary accommodations and suffered repeated assaults from Nacostine and Piscataway warriors unwilling to accept displacement. All lived in fear of an invasion from the north. As late as 1689, rumors of an impending Seneca assault caused planter John Addison to dash off a letter to the sheriff of Charles County requesting arms, "being these parts is soe very naked and lives at soe great a distance."²⁵

Addison was the first European of rank to make his home on Nacostine territory. A sailor and owner of a trading company, Addison settled in Maryland in 1677. Following his marriage to the wealthy widow Rebecca Dent, he purchased the upper half of the Gisborough tract, which covered much of the river plain on which Nacotch tank once stood. By 1688, he had built a handsome brick house

on a point jutting out into the river, not far from the rotting remains of the Nacostines' old palisade.²⁶

In the following decade, Addison and the colonists of the Out Plantations secured the frontier. In 1692, the Maryland Assembly commissioned forts along the colony's northern border and the movement of "white soldiers" between them. Addison directed the construction of the Charles County fort on the Potomac at Little Falls and subsequently received orders to "Raise five Men & a Captain to Range from the flails of Potomock to the falls of Petuxant or in other places where it shall be Needfull to make quest after all skulking Indians."²⁷ Addison and his "Rangers" patrolled the area, helping clear the way for English settlement north to present-day Bladensburg, Maryland.

Having gained the upper hand along the frontier, the colonists turned on the remaining Piscataways and Nacostines in their midst. They wanted native land to, as Governor Francis Nicholson put it, "occasion a greater quantity of Tobacco to be made." The assembly responded by carving Prince George's County out of upper Charles County, appointing Addison colonel in command of the county militia, and empowering him to "hear and determine all Personall differences that may happen or arise between the Indians & English."²⁸ Many of these "Personall differences" turned violent, as the Nacostines and Piscataways resisted this latest English incursion on their land and autonomy.²⁹

Addison responded sternly to native assaults on colonists. A 1697 attack on one of James Stoddert's slaves drew such a threatening rejoinder that the Piscataways and the Nacostines temporarily fled the Reserve for the hills of northern Virginia. They returned, only to leave permanently in 1701 after accepting an offer from the Pennsylvania governor to settle a reservation on the lower Susquehanna River. In subsequent years they continued to move north and west, fleeing the forward line of European settlement and melding with other Native American groups until, in the late eighteenth century, they disappeared from the historical record.³⁰

Back at the confluence of the Potomac and the Eastern Branch, Addison and his fellow colonists created a plantation society ruled by a landed aristocracy. By 1708, Prince George's County boasted well more than four hundred English households. Thomas Addison, who succeeded his father as colonel of the county militia, deemed the area secure enough to disband the Rangers. In the coming decades, the wealthier among these colonists turned increasingly to enslaved Africans and greatly reduced the supply of indentured servants who had served as the base of the colony's white population.³¹

In both Maryland and Virginia, the first towns on the upper Potomac were extensions of the plantations. By 1730, enslaved workers were producing so much

tobacco that the Virginia colony established the Hunting Creek Warehouse on the western bank of the Potomac to gather the crop for shipment downriver. The settlement was incorporated as the town of Alexandria in 1749. Four years earlier, Maryland planter George Gordon established a tobacco inspection station at the place where a "rolling road" that stretched north to the farms of the interior met the Potomac. The area around the warehouse became "George Town" in 1751, though the Maryland legislature did not issue a charter until 1789.³²

The landed families of the region, including the Dents, Addisons, Youngs, and Bealls, used the wealth from their plantations to dominate the region's elected offices. Their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren would intermarry, inherit land, assume offices, and monopolize northern Virginia and southern Maryland politics for the next century. Indeed, Addison's great-grandson, Maryland governor George Plater, signed the act of cession that deeded the territory on the Maryland side of the Potomac to the federal government for a capital city in 1791.³³

The cumulative effects of war, disease, and subjugation decimated the Native Americans of the upper Potomac. Thousands lived in the river valley in 1608, but by 1708, just a few hundred remained—beaten, scattered, and subject to the Crown. Contact itself initially brought little change to Nacotchtank, with few Europeans visiting the village before the 1620s. With the start of the Second Powhatan War, however, the Nacostines were drawn into the violent rhythm of raid and counterraid that characterized native-white relations. The English emerged from the hostilities strengthened and eager to expand while most Native Americans, including the Nacostines, were greatly weakened. During the next thirty years, they were cut out of the valuable trade networks of the upper Potomac and made subject to the Maryland colony.

By the 1660s, the Nacostines, their numbers depleted and their trade networks disrupted, moved first south and then north and west, scrambling to distance themselves from European settlement. On their abandoned lands, the colonists created a plantation society. The few Native Americans who remained watched in anguish as their hunting grounds and corn fields were transformed by European indentured servants and enslaved Africans into tobacco farms; their trade routes made links in a transatlantic commerce joining the Chesapeake to New England and beyond to Europe. The area that would become the nation's capital, like the colonies that stretched north and south along the Atlantic seaboard, was cleared through wars of conquest and settled with coerced labor on stolen land.

When Andrew Ellicott began his survey of the ten-mile square that would become the nation's capital in 1790, the Nacostines were long gone and Nacotchtank was a distant memory—so much so, in fact, that when Thomas Jefferson inquired about the name of the Native Americans who lived along the Eastern Branch, no one could remember. Native American artifacts littered the ground on the sites of the old villages for a century after the founding of the District, but these were later gathered by Smithsonian archaeologists and amateur collectors. In the early twentieth century, the site of Nacotchtank was buried in landfill to make way for a military airstrip that became part of Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling. Today, the only remaining trace of the Nacostines is the river that bears the Latinized version of their name: Anacostia.³⁴