

This article appeared in the Opinion section of The Virginian-Pilot on September 15, 2013.

Virginia's connection to the Lost Colony

By RICHARD PROESCHER

NUMEROUS theories over the centuries attempt to solve the mystery of the Lost Colony. One speculation is that the colonists were absorbed by the native population of coastal North Carolina.

This idea was given more credibility by recent evidence from a 425-year-old map that offers a possible clue to the fate of the Lost Colony and the settlers who disappeared from Roanoke Island in the late 16th century.

"We believe that this evidence provides conclusive proof that they moved westward up the Albemarle Sound to the confluence of the Chowan and Roanoke Rivers. Their intention was to create a settlement," said James Horn, vice president of research and historical interpretation at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and author of a 2010 book about the Lost Colony.

I don't discount the evidence provided by this map, but it may not be the full answer. It is quite possible that the settlers divided into two groups, one going in the area marked on the map and the other headed north to the Hampton Roads area. David Beers Quinn, noted authority on early American settlements and exploration, suggested this in his book, "Set Fair For Roanoke: Voyages and Colonies, 1584-1606."

Quinn believes members of the Roanoke Colony moved north toward the Chesapeake Bay since the company originally planned to settle there.

A general account of their exploration is reconstructed from Ralph Lane's report of the country and from John White's detailed maps of the areas explored. Lane, governor of the colony in 1585-86, sent a party of men in late October or early November 1585 to explore the area north of the Pamlico and Albemarle sounds and into what is now Virginia.

Thomas Harriot, a distinguished scientist who spoke the eastern Algonquin language, and White, a well-known painter who recorded the people, flora and fauna of the uncharted territory, were important members of this party. White's paintings and etchings are some of the first to capture the likeness of Native Americans.

According to White's map, the expedition made its way north through Currituck Sound, followed the coast north to Cape Henry and apparently explored the Lynnhaven Bay. The party probably stopped at two Chesapeake Indian villages, Chesepiuc and Apasus. It proceeded along the shore and channel until it came to the Elizabeth River. Continuing up the river, the men reached the major Chesapeake village of Skicóac. The party spent the winter there and returned to Roanoke in early spring.

"If their dealings ... were as friendly and cooperative as is indicated by the limited references we have," Quinn wrote, "the ground would have been well prepared for their friendly association with the people of Skicóac."

Powhatan, chief of the Virginia Algonquin Confederacy, told Capt. John Smith that white people had lived for years among the Chesapeake Indians, but that he had them and the entire Chesapeake tribe massacred. Powhatan's report of a massacre of English survivors living among the Chesapeake tribe was never verified by the Jamestown settlers, however, and no archaeological evidence has been found to support his claim.

But Quinn noted: "It is clear that the killing of the Lost Colony was known in England in early 1609 and that formal arrangements were made to punish Powhatan and his dependents in the same year." This reprisal was never carried out, however.

Various locations have been suggested for the main village of Skicóac. It may have been near the junction of the eastern and southern branches of the Elizabeth River in downtown Norfolk. Or in the Pine Beach area of Sewell's Point. Or possibly on the southern branch of the river, near Great Bridge.

The Chesapeake tribe's other two villages, Apasus and Chesepiuc, were in what is now Virginia Beach. Floyd Painter and James Pritchard excavated the site of Apasus near Cape Henry and Lake Joyce in the mid-1950s.

Chesepiuc was known to have been located in the Great Neck area. Archaeologists have found numerous native American artifacts, such as arrowheads, stone axes, pottery and beads in Great Neck Point. Several buried remains of the indigenous people have been found in this area as well.

The mystery of the Lost Colony may never be solved, but it seems clear that 428 years ago, members of the colony explored our region and spent a winter here.

Richard Proescher, an author, lives in Chesapeake.

Author Richard Proescher will speak to the Norfolk County Historical Society of Chesapeake today about the Lost Colony's time in Hampton Roads during the winter of 1585-86. The lecture is at 2 p.m. at the Chesapeake Central Library.