

# Archeologists say they've found the Powhatan Nation capital

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GLOUCESTER, Va. - State and university archeologists will begin excavating along the York River in June to prove - once and for all - the location of Werowocomoco, the capital of the Great Powhatan Nation.

The archeological team, which calls itself the Werowocomoco Research Group, has asked Virginia's eight tribes, many who are descendants of Chief Powhatan and Pocahontas, to participate in the project and help with the excavation. Despite the invitation, some of the state's American Indians say they have reservations about the extent of their input for this project; others disapprove of the excavations.

For the past 30 years, archeologists have theorized that the village, Werowocomoco, the capital of the Powhatan Nation, sat 15 miles across the York River from Jamestown. They based their theories on maps drawn by explorers and Capt. John Smith, who also claims the village was the site where Pocahontas saved his life from Powhatan warriors who planned to kill him.

The state's eight tribes agree that the site is that of Werowocomoco. Representatives from the tribes met in February with the research team and owners of the property, who informed them of the artifacts found and the excavations planned at the former village.

The archeological team, composed of researchers from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the College of William and Mary along with Gloucester-based archeologists will do the excavations in June.

Lynn Ripley, who spent time walking the grounds of her property, accidentally came across pottery shards, arrow and projectile points of Native people. After consulting local archeologists about her findings, she later learned these artifacts were quite significant.

Archeologists then conducted an archeological survey of the property. After examining the surface area of over 50 acres and excavating over 600 shovel tests, they found they had enough evidence to support theories of the site being the former Werowocomoco village.

The Ripleys agreed to open their property to the excavation provided that the Virginia tribes were allowed to participate in the research, Lynn Ripley said.

"We were told by the tribes that it's rare they are contacted," Lynn Ripley said. "They said they're usually contacted at the end of a project, instead of the beginning."

Danielle Moretti-Langholtz, the College of William and Mary's American Indian Resource Center director, is also working with the owners, the tribes and the archeological team. Her part in the project is to assure that the Virginia tribes know about the project and offer the importance of the findings to their communities, Moretti-Langholtz said.

"It offers us a place to examine history from the Native perspective and to include their voice in the interpretation and in formulating the research questions," Moretti-Langholtz said.

The state's eight tribes agree with the archeologists that the Gloucester County site is that of the former Werowocomoco village, and some have visited the site to meet with the property owners and archeologists.

"I say with reservation that it appears they want our input as long as they are controlling it," said Chief William Miles of the Pamunkey Indian Tribe and a descendant of Chief Powhatan.

Dr. Linwood Custalow, a Mattaponi and the oral historian for the tribe, also agrees that the maps from the early English showing the location of Werowocomoco are "fairly accurate" in depicting the village's site.

"We believe it is the site of the capital of the Powhatan Nation," Custalow said.

The archeological team has asked for input from Virginia's tribes through an outreach coordinator with the Virginia Indian Council, a state-operated agency. However, Custalow said the Werowocomoco Research Group should have consulted with the Mattaponi and Pamunkey tribes first because they are the descendants of the people who lived there.

"We are the direct descendants of the only two original of the six tribes left that formed the Powhatan Nation," Custalow said. "We carry the longest unbroken treaty."

While Werowocomoco remains most famous for Capt. John Smith's story about Pocahontas saving his life, many researchers have questioned Smith's tale. Smith wasn't a large man in stature, liked to throw his weight around and boasted quite a bit, Custalow said.

"As far as Pocahontas saving his life, I don't have any facts on that. This was not something in our oral history," Custalow said.

Custalow maintains that Pocahontas' husband, John Rolfe, poisoned her after taking her to England.

"The English took Pocahontas against her will, had her marry John Rolfe and then took her to England," Custalow said. "She wanted to return home. But before she got out of England, she died. I find it hard to believe she died of natural causes. I think she was poisoned."

He bases his reasoning on the fact that the English feared if Pocahontas returned, Chief Powhatan would order attacks on their villages.

"The researchers take the facts and sometimes misconstrue them by giving the English credit for things that make the settlers sound as though they were justified for their actions," Custalow said. "And other times, they misinterpret the facts."

Custalow said he opposes the excavations if they disturb graves, and he'd like to see the artifacts returned to the Pamunkey and Mattaponi.

"We have problems with their distribution of the artifacts because they should belong to the descendants of the people who made them," Custalow said. "They won't give the people who those artifacts belong to any access to them. We should at least be overseeing the digs."

In 2007, Virginia will mark the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown. Because this celebration is nearing, the push to establish the capital of the Powhatan Nation has increased, Custalow said.

"They've known and suspected for some time that this was Powhatan's Werowocomoco," said Custalow, adding that the celebration will bring money to many people. "They've gotten permission now to conduct research on the site because they're closing in on this big celebration."

Dr. Randy Turner, director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources Portsmouth Regional Office, will head the Werowocomoco excavation and began research on the location of the village 30 years ago. An archeologist, Turner met with the Ripleys to look at what they had found, and he said he would like for the state's tribes to participate in the excavations.

"My interest is in the lifeways of the Native Americans of Virginia during the contact period through the archeology and their interactions with the English settlers," Turner said. He displayed a number of small triangular projectile points found at the site from the very end of the late Woodland period or the early contact period with the English at a May 6 press conference.

Turner admits that the theory and belief that the Gloucester County farm was that of Werowocomoco isn't a new idea.

"The evidence has finally come together that confirms what we had suspected from historical documentation," Turner said. "We're not the first to put this out."

*Read more at <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2003/05/20/archeologists-say-theyve-found-powhatan-nation-capital-88793>*