

Virginia Geography Environment, Maps, and History

This is a map drawn by John Smith who was one of the first English settlers at Jamestown. And it was first published in 1612 in England.

Probably what's most interesting about the map is just to stop and think: Who did it? Who's it for? Why is he doing it? What's he trying to do? It shows us the world view of the maker, John Smith, who draws the map. And of the audience, the people in England, members of the Virginia Company, who are investors trying to make money off of this colony of Virginia, who want to hear back that this is a good investment.

It's a good idea to start out with a few basic orienting things. What's the orientation? What direction are we coming from? When you look carefully at this map, you'll see that north is not at the top of the map the way it is in most maps that we're accustomed to and that most maps at the time in Europe would've done. North is to the right. If you stop and think about why that is, it really captures the point of view of somebody looking at the New World from Europe.

How would you approach it? Well, you get a hint with the picture of the ship down in the bottom left. You're coming on a ship from Europe and this is the European point of view.

There are some places, which are named clearly for European figures—Cape Charles, Cape Henry. Jamestown itself, of course, is named for King James. But most of the names are not English names. And this shows how densely populated this area was in the early 17th century by native peoples. It tells us something about the style of life in which you live in many different groups with different names. It isn't clear that all of these Indian groups would've thought of themselves as having a common identity beyond owing political allegiance to Powhatan.

It says at the top, "Virginia," although it doesn't actually cover all the area that the Virginia Company claims to be Virginia.

Powhatan—that's a name of the chief, but it's also the name for the group of people who are parts of the empire that Powhatan rules. He's the leader and he has all these tribes whom he protects. And they pay him tribute, tax, in the form of corn, trade goods, pelts. And that's what makes him the powerful figure that the English have to deal with.

This helps us understand why it's limited to this area. It's not a map of Virginia from the point of view of the Virginia colony and its aspirations to own a great deal more of the continent. And it's not a map of Jamestown where the English people are settled. It's a map of Senecomaca, Powhatan's kingdom.

There're a couple of answers we come across from the written records. One reason he's not showing you beyond Powhatan's area is he's relying on Powhatan's Indian guides. They showed him all of the area where they could go freely. When they get to the fall line, you can see that there're other

tribes—the Manahoacs, the Monocans. The Powhatan guides aren't going to take Smith into enemy territory. So all he can do at that point is take a record and say, "this is where these other Indians are."