

Indian Names in Tidewater Virginia

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ON SATURDAY, JULY 31, 1619, the General Assembly of the Virginia colony prepared a set of petitions to be submitted to the officials of the Virginia Company in London. Among the articles in the document is one in which it is stated that the colonists hope that the officials "wilbe pleased to change the savage name of Kiccowtan, and to give that Incorporation a new name."¹

Evidently the officials acted promptly on what they probably considered a minor matter. In a document dated May 7, 1620, requiring certain boroughs in Virginia to erect guest houses for newly-arrived settlers, the name *Kicowtan* (*sic*) is followed by the parenthetical explanation that it "hereafter shall be called *Elizabeth* City, by the name of his Maiesties [i. e., James I's] most vertuous and renowned Daughter."² The parentheses make it clear that the change in name had been accomplished officially by another document and that here the Virginians were merely being reminded of it.

These obscure remarks in the records of the Virginia Company explain in a large measure the general attitude of the early settlers in the Virginia colony towards the Indian place names that they found in their new homeland. On the one hand, it was natural linguistically for the English-speaking settlers to bestow English names on the new land; and on the other hand, it is not surprising that they took pains to replace Indian names when they considered them savage and heathen names not worthy of preservation by civilized Christian men. Thus, English place names have always predominated in Tidewater Virginia³ from the time of its discovery down to today.

From the moment that the discoverers and the settlers first set foot on Virginia soil, they began to give English names to the new lands. The discoverers in calling the country Virginia derived that

¹ *The Records of the Virginia Company of London*, ed. Susan Myra Kingsbury (Washington, 1906-1935), III, 161.

² *Ibid.*, III, 276.

³ Tidewater Virginia includes the land east of a line running through the fall-lines of the four major rivers of the state and cutting through the cities of Washington, Fredericksburg, and Richmond. The Eastern Shore is a part of Tidewater.

name from the epithet "Virgin Queen," which had been applied with honor to Queen Elizabeth I. In December, 1606, the Virginia Company, with James I as its royal patron, sent three small ships under the command of Captain Christopher Newport to Virginia for the purpose of establishing a permanent colony. When Newport's party landed on a barren and sandy shore on April 26, 1607 (O. S.), they called the place Cape Henry. Recognizing that they had landed at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, they called the point Cape Charles that lay opposite Cape Henry. Thus, the names of the two capes honored the two surviving sons of their sovereign.

They were content to call the bay Chesapeake, the name of an Indian settlement on its southern shore, for earlier explorers had called the bay by that name. When Newport's men entered Chesapeake Bay and landed on its inner shore, they called the spot Point Comfort because, as George Percy wrote, "it put vs in good comfort."⁴ Later the point was called Old Point Comfort to distinguish it from New Point Comfort at the mouth of Mobjack Bay some thirty miles to the north. Virginians today, however, universally call the two points simply Old Point and New Point.

As Newport's three little ships left Point Comfort and sailed the length of the roadstead to the west and entered a broad river, Captain John Smith named the point at the mouth of the river Point Hope to complement Point Comfort ten miles to the east. But the name did not last long, for it gave way to Point Breeze and to Newport News Point, the latter being the more common today.

The adventurers decided to settle on what appeared to be an island some forty miles up the river, and they were pleased to call their first village Jamestown in honor of their king and patron. For a short time they called the river flowing past their settlement by its Indian name Powhatan River, for the Indian king; but it soon seemed natural to call it James River for their own king. In 1634, when Virginia was divided into eight shires, the one incorporating Jamestown was called James City, a name surviving today in the name of the modern county.

The other seven original shires were Henrico (shortened from Henricopolis), Charles City, Charles River, Warwick River, Elizabeth City, Werrosquyoke, and Accomac. That only two of these are Indian names indicates in what slight regard the settlers held the native Indian names in Virginia. The fact that in 1637 Werro-

⁴ *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, ed. Edward Arber (Edinburgh, 1910), I, 1xiii.

squyoke was changed to Isle of Wight and that in 1643 Accomac was changed to Northampton makes it evident that the settlers felt no responsibility for preserving Indian names.

The names of most of the original shires are today continued in the names of modern counties and cities. Henrico, Charles City, James City, Isle of Wight, and Northampton are all modern counties. In 1642/43 Charles River was changed to York, a name preserved in today's York County. In 1663 the northern part of Northampton County was cut off to make Accomac County, thereby restoring the Indian name that earlier had been discarded. Warwick River was shortened to Warwick, and in 1951 Warwick County became a municipality called Warwick. In the same year Elizabeth City County was also converted into a municipality, and its present name Hampton preserves the name of what is thought to be the oldest continuous English-speaking settlement in America.

In the names of the original shires and of the later counties we see evidence of particular practices followed by the colonists in naming geographical features of Virginia. First, in applying English names to Virginia, they honored their king in naming Jamestown, James River, and James City. Second, members of the royal family were also honored in names like Cape Henry, Cape Charles, Elizabeth City, Henrico, and Charles City. Third, patrons of the Virginia Company were likewise honored, Warwick River being named for Robert Rich, the second Earl of Warwick (1587 to 1658) and Hampton for Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton (1573-1624), who is better known today as a patron of William Shakespeare.

As later counties were formed, the colonists borrowed names to remind themselves of such English shires as Surrey, Gloucester, Middlesex, Essex, Lancaster, Northumberland, and Westmoreland. In the names of such older Virginia cities as Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and Richmond the colonists recalled English cities that they had known. While the name Newport News is undoubtedly of English origin, its source is now so obscured that no one can say with confidence and conviction where the name came from.⁵

After the Virginia colony had become permanent and men had acquired large holdings and had begun to build homes after the English fashion, they also began to give names to their homes

⁵ C. W. Evans, "Newport News: What's in a Name?" *Newport News' 325 Years*, ed. Alexander Crosby Brown (Newport News, Va., 1946), pp. 24-30.

after the English fashion. Along the James River homes dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have such English names as Upper Brandon, Lower Brandon, Westover, Shirley, Berkeley, Claremont, Green Springs, Carter's Grove, and Denhigh (of Welsh origin). Chippokes and Weyanoke are the only Indian names of homes that readily come to mind. Since literally hundreds of homes in Tidewater Virginia have names, they provide the material for an independent study. The few from the James River section cited here serve merely as a small but general representation of the kinds of names applied to homes throughout the Tidewater area in Virginia.

As a result of the settlers' low esteem of Indian place names and as a result of their efforts to obliterate them, Tidewater Virginia today contains comparatively few Indian names. Perhaps the largest number is applied to the waters flowing into the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. The name of the bay itself is of Indian origin, as are the names of such rivers as Potomac, Rappahannock, Piankatank, Pamunkey, Mattaponi, Poquoson, Chickahominy, Appomattox, and Nansemond. There are also creeks with names like Dogue, Pohick, Accotink, Occaquan, Chuckatuck, and Pungoteague. On the other hand, though, the Tidewater area is cut by so many streams that waters with English names actually far outnumber those with Indian names.

Here and there in rural areas and along the waters' edges are small towns and villages with Indian names like Massaponax, Tappahannock, Toano, Kiptopeake, Onancock, Wachapreague, and Nassawadox. The islands Assawoman, Chincoteague, and Assateague have given their names to an assortment of inlets, bays, and settlements just as the rivers and creeks have often given their names to settlements and areas.

Only nine of Virginia's present ninety-nine counties have Indian names. Nansemond, which was named in 1642, is the oldest county bearing an Indian name; and Accomac dates from 1663. The other counties with Indian names (Alleghany, Appomattox, Nottaway, Powhatan, Rappahannock, Roanoke, and Shenandoah) are in the central and western parts of the state. They all were named in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when people had come to look upon Indian names as romantic names belonging to the Noble Savage.

English names are used generally for the names of homes in the Tidewater area; but among the older homes there are a few with

Indian names like Cappahosic, Poropotank, and Purton (corrupted from Powhatan?) in Gloucester County; Nomini Hall in Westmoreland County; and Corotoman in Lancaster County. These names, it must be remembered were not applied by the first settlers but by later generations; but, nevertheless, it is remarkable that only comparatively few Indian names have been given to homes in eastern Virginia.

Numerous Indian names have now been lost as far as practical use is concerned. Many people know that Powhatan's Chimney is thought to have stood at the Indian village Werowocomoco on the banks of the creek formerly called by that name in Gloucester County. But today the name is no longer applied to the area, and the creek is called Timberneck Creek. The name of the Indian village Chiaskiack was for two or three hundred years preserved in the name of a home that stood on the site. Today, however, the home is gone, the site is incorporated in the reservation of the Navy Mine Depot near Yorktown, and only a few people recall that the name had been corrupted into Cheesecake many years before that term was appropriated by commercial photographers. Werrosquoyoke has disappeared completely except from historical and scholarly studies, and many Indian place names in early writings like Captain John Smith's *A True Relation* and *A Map of Virginia* were never taken up by the English-speaking settlers or their descendants.

Of the Indian names in Tidewater Virginia today the name of Chesapeake Bay is one of the few that has continued without change from the time it was assigned. Kecoughtan, Accomac, and Pamunkey are almost unique in being continued. In each instance these names have been applied to different places and waters at different times, and their survival is largely due to the insistence of a few persons with a romantic turn of mind.

Americans in general probably believe that the settlers in all the thirteen original colonies preserved a large proportion of Indian place names that they found; but, as it pertains to Virginia, this belief is not justified by the evidence of our brief survey here. In Virginia English place names predominate while Indian place names are comparatively few.

An examination of the place names in the other original colonies would undoubtedly be of interest and value in throwing more light on the practices followed in giving names to the geographical features of the Atlantic seaboard.