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THE ABORIGINES OF JAMESTOWN ISLAND

Most important of the fauna of Jamestown Island and of Tidewater Virginia prior to the arrival of the English settlers was man--the aboriginal Indian. The fact that man antedated Jamestown Island itself should surprise no one (see note on Geology of Jamestown Island). Evidence exists on the York Peninsula at Indian Fields Creek that the paleo Indian was there with his delicately-chipped blade shaped like a laurel leaf, and atlatl or spear, quite probably in excess of 7,000 years ago. By 1607 the Algonquins, who at the time of discovery had recently become the Powhatan Confederacy in the York Peninsula and adjacent mainland to the north, had certainly frequented the island. The fact that the settlers did not find Indians encamped on the Island indicates that the campsite discovered beneath the 17th century soil zone, and in turn covered by the Confederate fort near the church, had been abandoned some time previously. However, soil evidence indicates the occupation was within one or two hundred years previous to 1607.

This Jamestown Island Indian site was characterized by pressure flaked, quartzite, stemmed projectile points, both large and small, together with shell and sand tempered pottery, all cord impressed. The cultural evidence may be characterized as "Late Woodland", a term of singular terminological vacuity applied by archeologists in reference to the latest prehistoric

evidence on the Atlantic coast north of Florida. We may confidently suppose that these Indians were culturally nearly identical with the southern Algonquins of the early settlers' acquaintance.

Both archeologists (i.e., anthropologists) and historians pay passing lip service to the debt generated by the European immigrants in North America to the native Indians and their culture. Rarely has this debt been spelled out and given proper recognition--certainly not in the Jamestown annals. In this archeological report, it is necessary only to observe that, despite the best efforts of the Indians to exterminate the settlers--and their reasons were easily understandable--it was the economy of the Indians that saved the settlers and made the economic foundation of Virginia. Corn (and the husking peg, the method of planting and cultivation) kept the settlers alive during the first years and thereafter provided a continuing staple food. Tobacco was vital to trade. (The West Indies and Venezuela leaf blend was no less a product of the American Indians when John Rolfe burbanked it into the leading cash crop and the currency of the Company and colony after 1614.)* The introduction of mobile, lightly armed infantry into warfare in 17th century Virginia placed the colonists a hundred years ahead of Europe in military effectiveness--thanks to the Indian. Had the continent been depopulated on discovery, North America might today be still part of the British Empire.

*For a most cogent and able resumé of this topic, see A. Irving Hallowell's article, "The Impact of the American Indian on American Culture" in American Anthropologist, Vol. 59, No. 2, April, 1957.