

# A History of Chesapeake Bay Oysters Featuring Algonquian Speaking People in Virginia

A display for the Machicomoco State Park of Virginia  
By Mark Besore and Vic Spain, Master Oyster Gardeners

Display Provided By:



# The Chesapeake Bay

The Bay we know began to form about 9,500 BC as the glaciers melted and sea level rose.

Oysters colonized the Bay about 6,500 BC.

The Bay reached its approximate present-day form about 3,000 years ago.



Captain John Smith Chesapeake NHT map

# Native Oysters of the Chesapeake Bay



*Crassostrea virginica* are oysters native to the Bay and are commonly called Eastern, Atlantic or Virginia oysters. They are native to the east coast of Canada, USA, and Mexico



Geographic Distribution of *Crassostrea virginica*

# Keystone Species

*Crassostrea virginica* is a keystone species in the Bay.

Oyster reefs grow vertically and provide habitat for fish, crabs, worms, and other animals.

As prolific filter feeders, oysters clarify the water, support submerged aquatic vegetation, and absorb harmful nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus.



*Crassostrea virginica*

# Native Americans and Oysters

Shell deposits called middens indicate that natives were eating oysters and other shellfish as early as 2500 BC.

Oyster reefs were once so prevalent that they were navigational hazards to early European explorers of the 1600s.



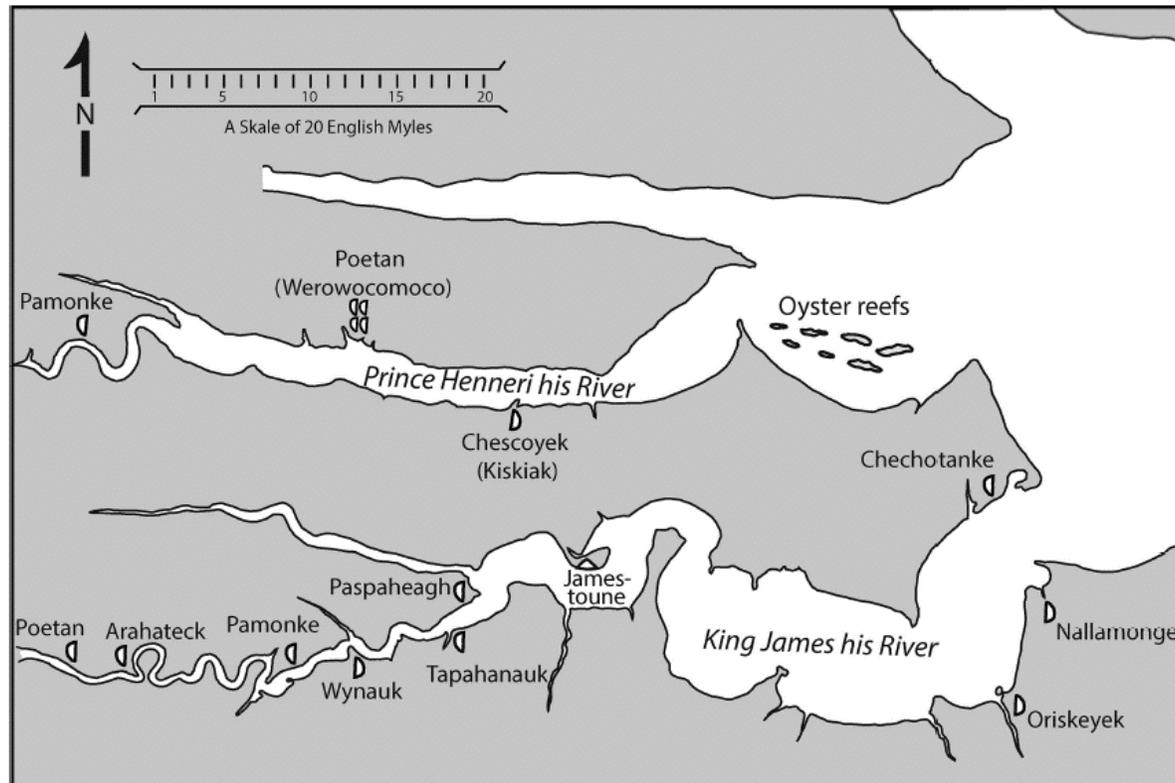
Typical Native American oyster deposit, or midden



Oyster Reef at about mid tide

# Oyster Reefs of the York River in 1608

Early colonial-era maps of the Chesapeake depict oyster reefs near the mouth of the York River. The oyster reefs on this map were down river from where you are standing now. In the diagram below, the York River is labeled “Prince Henneri his River.”



Robert Tyndall's 1608 map *Draught of Virginia*



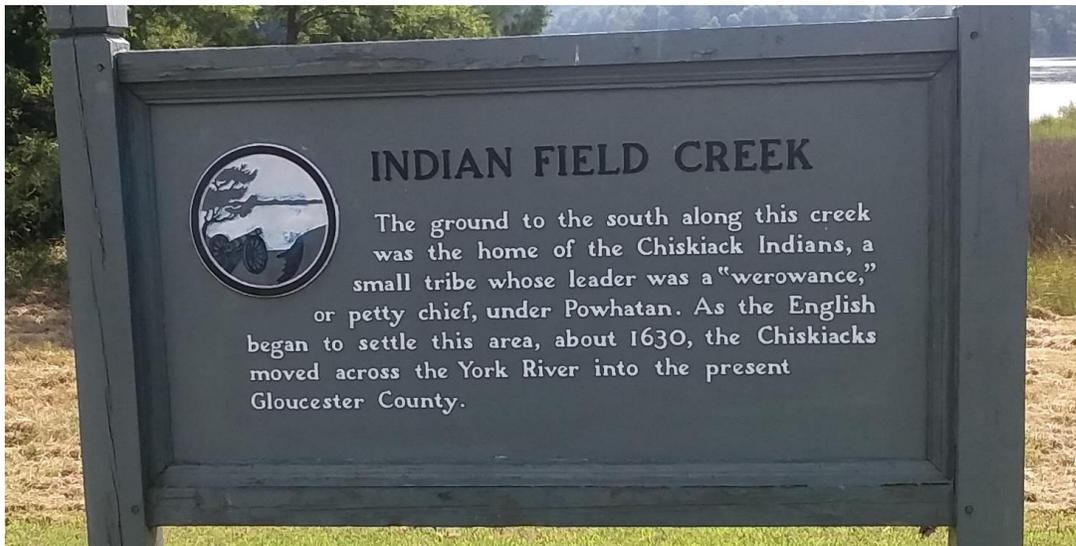
Restored Oyster Reef

# Oyster Midden at Kiskiak

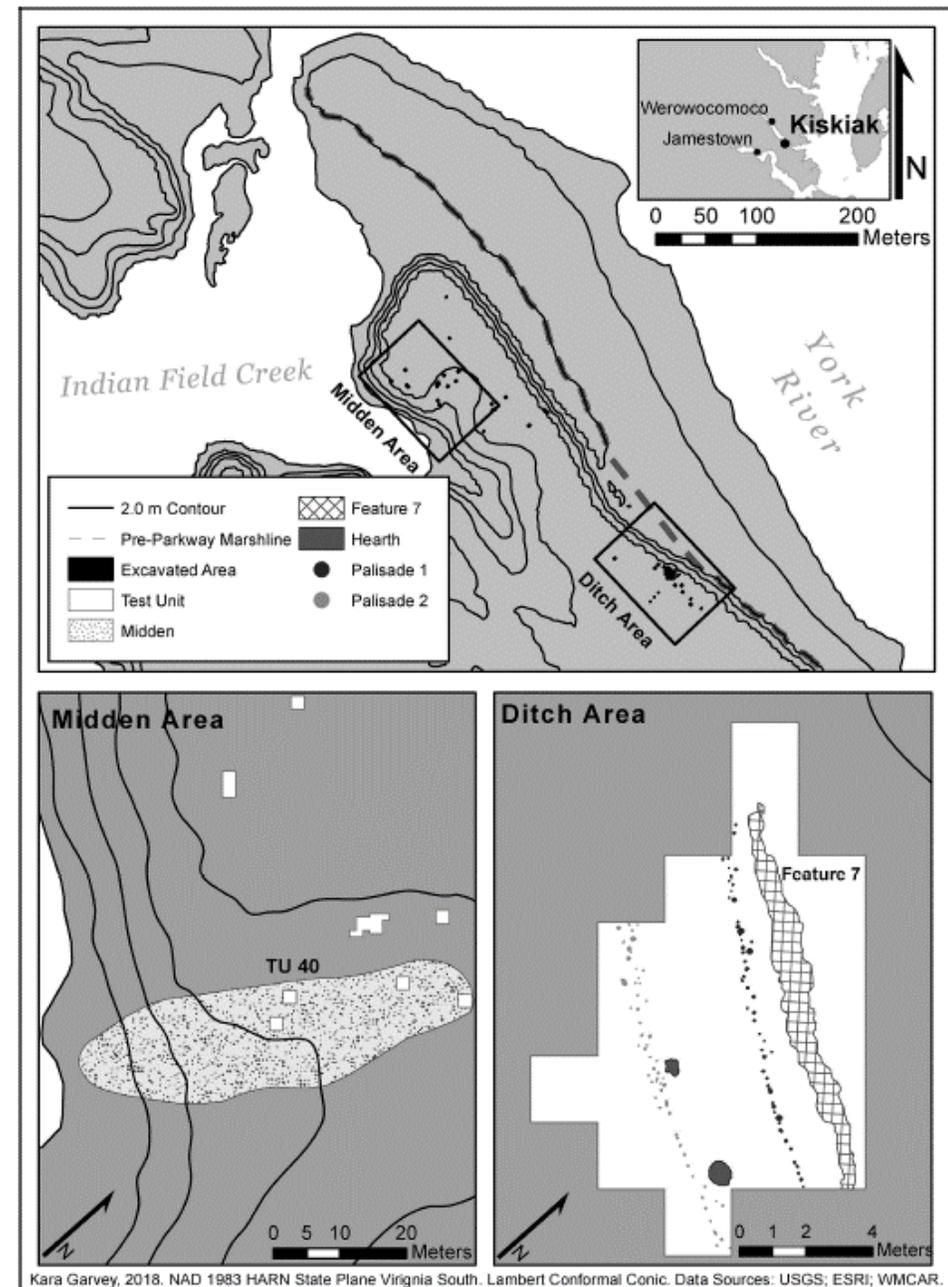
Kiskiak was a pre-colonial settlement at Indian Field Creek across the York River from where you are now.

The site has an oyster midden that extends approximately 50 by 25 meters and is two meters deep.

Radiocarbon dating of the Kiskiak midden estimates the oyster deposits were from 1300 BC to 1600 AD.



Indian Field Creek sign along the Colonial Parkway



Kiskiak site plan and midden areas

# Oysters Consumed Throughout the Year

Piscataway settlement patterns in the lower Potomac valley show that natives relied upon multiple plant and animal food sources.

Oysters were consumed throughout the year.

Corn was also important to subsistence.

Month	Plants	Animals
Jan	Dried food	Deer, oysters
Feb	Dried food	Deer, oysters
Mar	Fruits, berries	Fish, oysters
Apr	Fruits, berries	Fish, oysters
May	Fruits, berries, greens	Fish, oysters, available wildlife
Jun	Fruits, berries, greens	Fish, oysters, available wildlife
Jul	Fruits, berries, greens	Fish, oysters, available wildlife
Aug	Corn	Oysters, available wildlife
Sep	Corn	Oysters, available wildlife
Oct	Corn, nuts	Oysters, available wildlife
Nov	Dried food	Deer, oysters
Dec	Dried food	Deer, oysters

Piscataway Season Dietary Schedule (Mansius 2013)

# Oysters from a Site Visited in Springtime

The Gouldman Oyster Shell Midden Site, near Colonial Beach, Virginia, was occupied regularly during the Middle Woodland period, approximately 500 B.C. to 900 A.D., in the spring when food stocks were low.

The time of the year was determined by the fact that the smaller shells did not show spat scars. Spat, or baby oysters, begin setting each year in June.



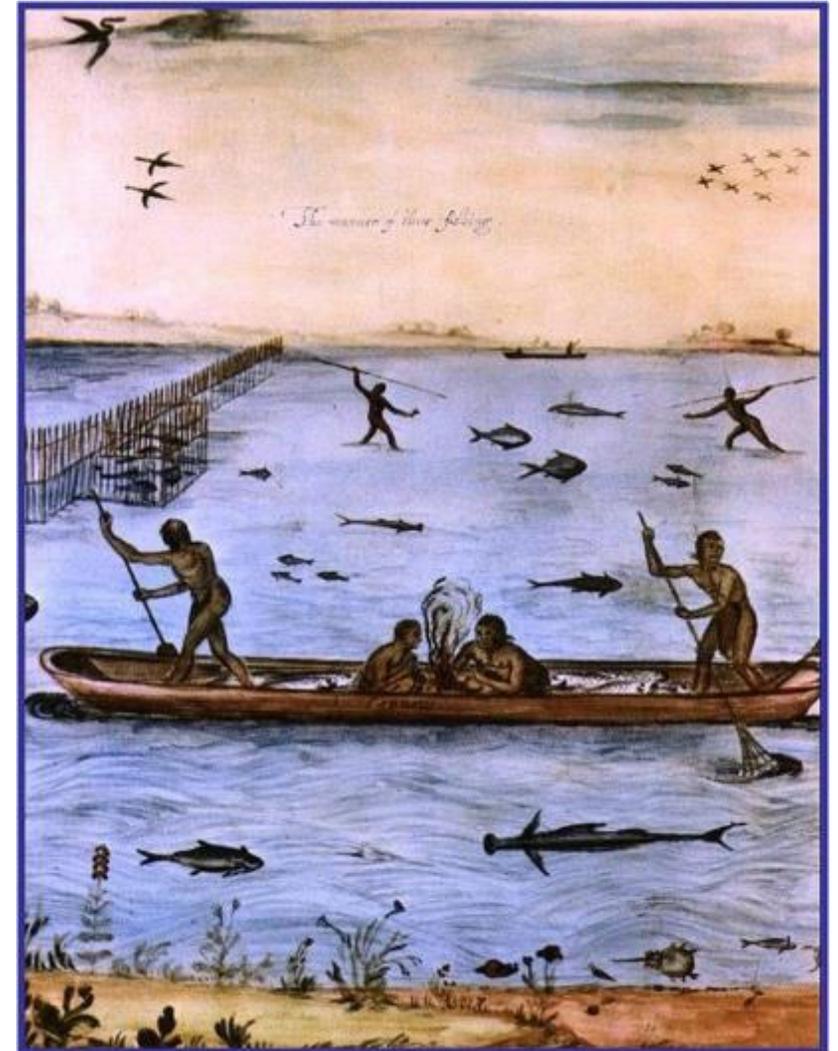
Gouldman Oyster Shell Midden Site (44WM0304)

# Fishing and Gathering Oysters

Fishing was primarily men's work among the Powhatans.

Oysters were also likely to be gathered by wading into shallow water.

English colonists hired Powhatans to fish and harvest shellfish for them.



Native Americans Fishing by John White

# Cooking Oysters

Powhatans cooked their oysters by roasting, drying and boiling. They also made an oyster-mussel bisque thickened with corn meal.

In 1607 Captain Percy wrote: “We came to a place where they had been newly roasting oysters. They fled away and left many oysters in the fire. We ate some of the oysters which were very large and delicate in taste...”

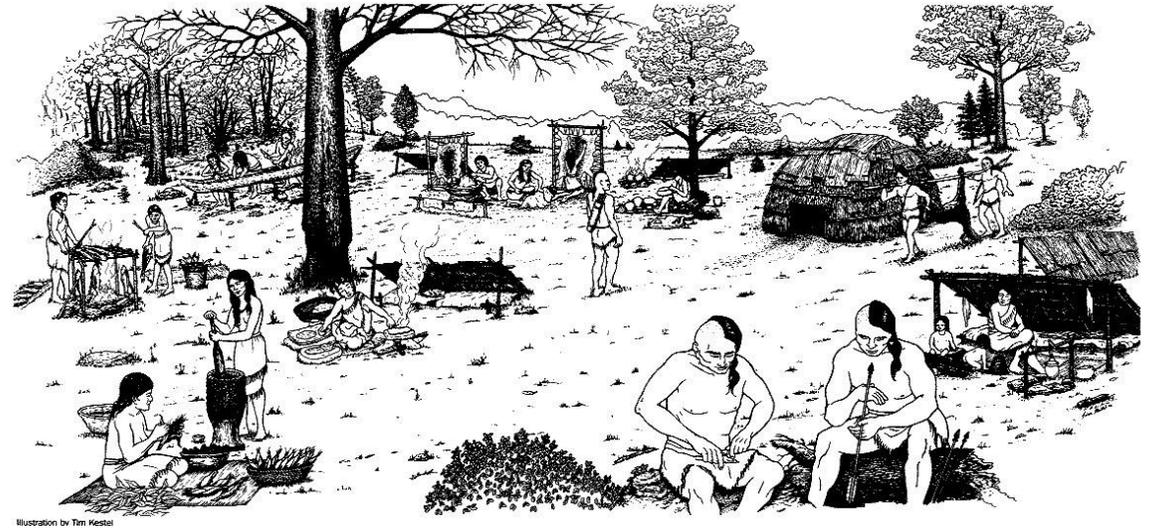


Illustration by Tim Kestel

Piscataway temporary campsite

# Oysters for Trade

Algonquin-speaking natives of the Bay practiced gift giving and expected reciprocation.

English misunderstanding led to hostility.

Pre-colonial Powhatan settlements had little need to trade items as each settlement could produce what they needed.

However, English colonists brought commodities the Powhatans did not have, like copper, metal tools, glass beads and trinkets. The Powhatans provided oysters, fish, corn, other food and furs.



Baskets of smoked oysters

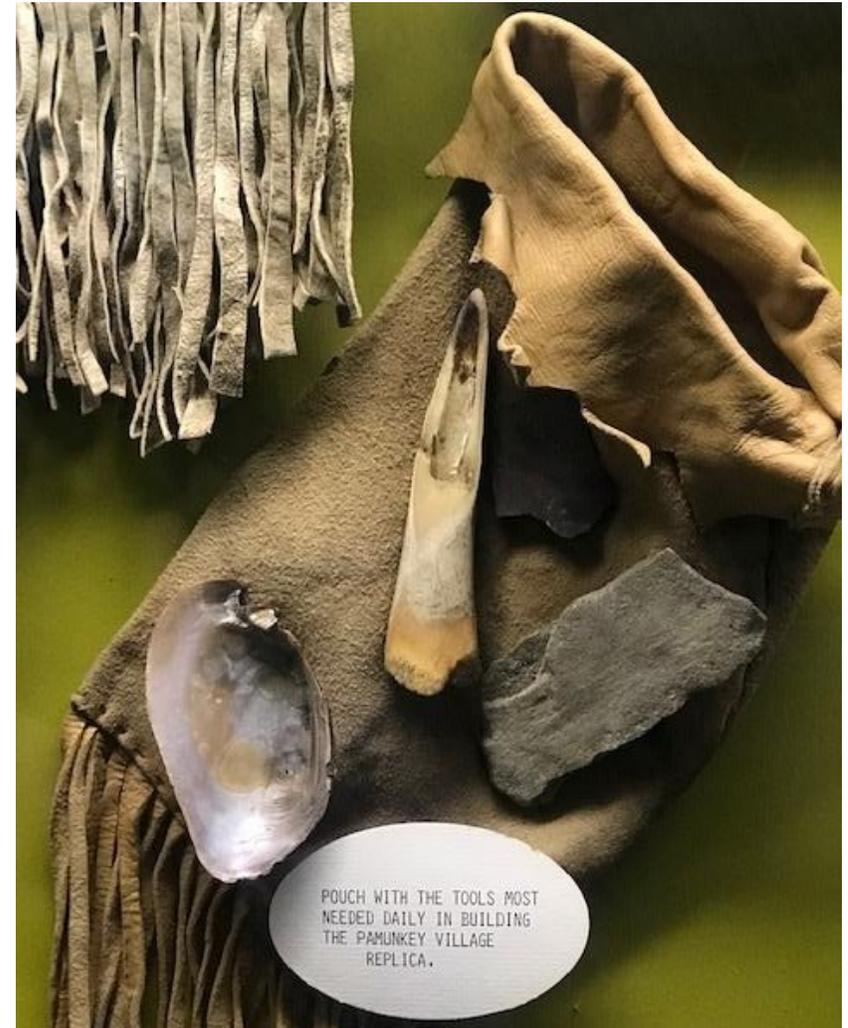
# Use of Oyster Shells

Powhatan Indians fashioned shells into arrowheads, tools, utensils, and added ground shells as temper in pottery.

In Powhatan wood working, the wood for a bow was worked by scraping it with a shell.

Shells were sometimes used as spoons.

Deer hides were also scraped with oyster shells.



Native tools including an oyster shell at the Pamunkey Indian Museum.

# Ceramics at Kiskiak

Mockley ceramic sherds have been found along the mid-Atlantic region in middens left by native settlements.

Mockley is made from medium fine clay and tempered with 20% to 30% crushed oyster and clam shell and then finished with imprints of cord or netting before being fired.

Mockley sherds have been found in abundance in the Kiskiak middens, predominantly from 100 AD to 900 AD but in lesser quantities until early contact with the colonists.



Mockley ceramics



Mockley vessel

# Epilogue - Post Colonial

As the European and then American population grew, the oyster population and Bay water quality declined.

1880s- Golden years, oyster wars and overharvesting were followed by a century of pollution and mismanagement.

1960s-1980s- Diseases led to the collapse of the oyster industry by late 1980s.

1990s- Runoff controls, restoration and aquaculture began.

2000s- Wild oysters started slow recovery and aquaculture grew. Restoration efforts intensified.

2020s- Nansemond Indian Nation joins Bay restoration.

Details, stories, references at

<https://www.oystergardener.org/oyster-history/Powhatans>



Nansemond Indian Nation joins Nansemond River Preservation Alliance

## Further Reading



Display provided by the Tidewater Oyster Gardeners Association (TOGA).

Additional reading materials are available at the TOGA web site.

<https://www.oystergardener.org/oyster-history/Powhatans>

Or scan QR code.

