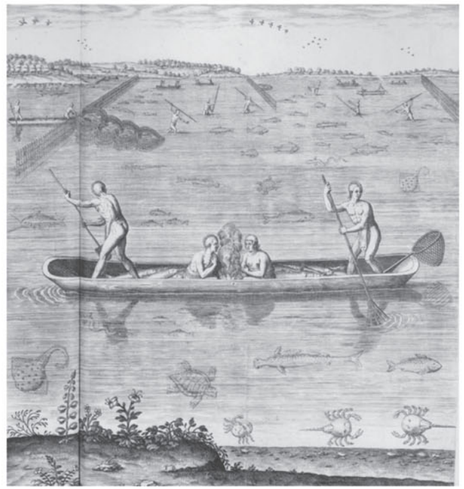
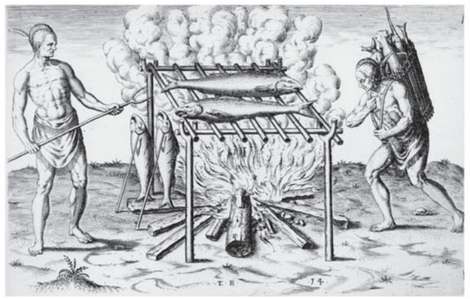
Virginia's First Highways

When Native Americans moved into the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States they traveled on waterways and created overland routes for hunting, migration, and trade. In essence, these were Virginia's first highways. These routes often followed the easiest terrain and most efficient paths around natural features and between destinations. In fact, 17th- and 18th-century European settlers frequently capitalized on the efforts of Native Americans and constructed their own roads and railroads atop these ready-made paths.





Prior to European settlement and exploration in the 1600s, American Indians in the area used the Potomac River as a major trade route and fishing ground. Many groups eventually located villages along the Potomac and its tributaries to take advantage of easy access to food and travel.

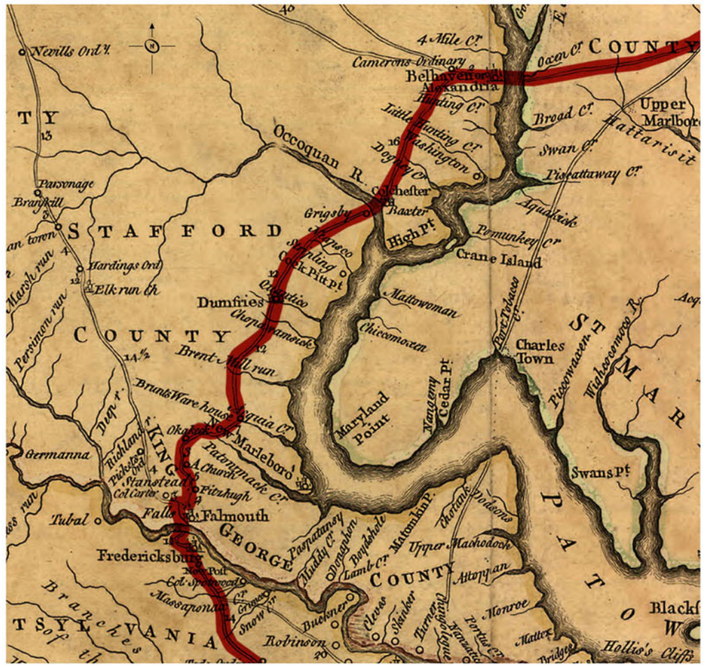
The primary form of water travel for Native Americans in the region, and eventually early European settlers, was by dugout canoe. Canoes were used for transportation and fishing. Fish were a main food source for people living along the Potomac River. Theodor DeBry engravings, left: "Indians Fishing," right: "Cooking Fish," 1590.

"The manner of making their boats in Virginia is very wonderful. For whereas they want instruments of iron, or others like unto ours, yet they know how to make them as handsomely, to sail with where they list in their rivers, and to fish withall, as ours."

17th-century Roanoke Island Colonist

The Potomac Path: Native American Highway

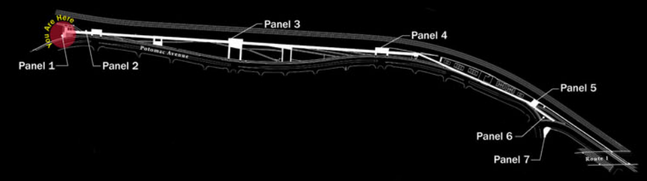
One of the earliest land-based trade routes used by the first Virginians in the region was the Potomac Path. The Potomac Path began as a foot trail that followed a natural ridge between the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers; this path was a major overland trade route for the native people. Portions of the Potomac Path were utilized by white settlers and became the King's Highway. Eventually, these routes became modern-day roads such as Route 1 and Alexandria's Telegraph Road.



Probable location of the Potomac Path in red overlaid on an historic map. "A map of the most inhabited part of Virginia containing the whole province of Maryland with part of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and North Carolina," drawn by Joshua Fry & Peter Jefferson in 1751. Courtesy of The Library of Congress.

Map showing names of American Indian groups at the time of John Smith's explorations in 1606. "Virginia: discovered and discribed by Captayn John Smith, 1606." Courtesy of The Library of Congress.

When Captain John Smith explored the Potomac River by boat in 1608, he noted that people from the Tauxenent (later known as the Dogue) group lived near the future site of Alexandria. These people were on the periphery of the larger Powhatan Confederacy.

Powhatan hunter called "Eiakintomino." "The Powhatan Indians of Virginia: Their Traditional Culture" by Helen C. Rountree.

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