

For Teachers

USING PRIMARY SOURCES: WHAT DID WOODLAND INDIAN HOUSES LOOK LIKE?



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PREPARATION

OBJECTIVE:

Students will examine primary source materials in order to understand how historians draw conclusions about the houses used by Woodland Indians in 17th-century Maryland.

FOR DISCUSSION:

The Woodland Indians who lived in Maryland at the time the English came did not leave written descriptions or drawings that show historians how they lived, what kind of tools they used, or what they wore. Instead, to learn more, historians have had to depend upon a few drawings and descriptions offered by English colonists—some of whom lived in Maryland and others who explored along the Atlantic coast in the 16th and 17th centuries. Sometimes the written descriptions and drawings tell only part of the story or may represent a partial or incorrect interpretation by the English authors and artists. Historians can also learn about life long ago by studying the artifacts and information found by archaeologists who excavate places where people once lived. Unfortunately, very few pieces of physical evidence survive from the Woodland Indian villages of 17th-century Maryland.

MATERIALS:

- Written descriptions of Woodland Indian Houses by Thomas Harriot, John Smith, and Father Andrew White
- Drawing of a Woodland Indian village by Theodor de Bry
- Photograph of an excavated site with soil stains left from posts that once supported a Woodland Indian house

ACTIVITY:

- Ask students to make sketches of the *witchotts* (Woodland Indian houses) based on each of the English written descriptions. Do not let the students look at the drawing of the village or the archaeologists' map yet.
- Have students list the features of the house that are being described (windows, doors, furnishings, etc.).
- Discuss: If the houses eventually fell down after the occupants abandoned them, what might remain for archaeologists to discover three hundred years later?
- Compare the students' sketches with the houses in the drawing of the village. Are they similar?
- Compare the houses in the drawing of the village with the written descriptions. Do they look similar? How are they different? How are they the same?
- Look at the houses in the village drawing very carefully. Try to determine in what pattern the posts, that support the houses, were set into the ground when the houses were built. Assume that the houses in the drawing eventually fell down, leaving only the posts rotting in the ground. Have students sketch of the pattern left in the ground by the *post molds* (discoloration of dirt left by the rotting posts). Do not look at the archaeologists' photo yet.
- Compare the students' post mold patterns with the photograph from the excavation site. What makes them different?

- Discuss: If historians are faced with two pieces of evidence which contradict each other—such as the drawing [which shows houses built in such a way as to leave a rectangular pattern of post mold stains] and the stains left in the ground from where a real Woodland Indian house once stood [based on the archaeologists' photograph]—which do you think they are more likely to accept? Why?
- Discuss: Even though the physical evidence found by the archaeologists is the most accurate, why are the written descriptions and the drawing of the houses in the village still important? Would many of the things in the descriptions or drawing have survived for more than three hundred years?

EXTENSION OPTION:

- Choose an object or structure and ask two students to write a brief description of it. Compare the descriptions to see how they differ. Discuss why there would be variations in the descriptions and how different people interpret what they see and hear in different ways based on their own experiences, knowledge, etc.
- Do you think the Woodland Indians would have described their own houses in ways different from the English descriptions? How? Why?

WRITTEN DESCRIPTIONS OF WOODLAND INDIAN HOUSES

1. From *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* [the Roanoke area of North Carolina] by Thomas Harriot, **1590**:

Their houses are made of small poles made fast at the top in the rounde forme after the manor as is used in many arbories in our gardens of England, in most townes covered with barks, and in some with artificiall [clever] mattes made of long rushes; from the tops of the houses downe to the ground. The length of them is commonly double to the breadth, in some places they are but twelve and 16 yards long, and in other some wee have seen at foure and twentie.

2. From *The General History of Virginia . . .* by John Smith, **1624**:

Their houses are built like our Arbors, of small young springs bowed and tyed, and so close covered with mats, or the barks of trees very handsomely, that not-withstanding either winde, raine, or weather, they are as warme as stooves [stoves], but very smoaky, yet at the toppe of the house there is a hole made for the smoake to goe into right over the fire.

3. From *A Relation of The Successful beginnings of the Lord Baltimore's Plantation in Maryland* by Father Andrew White, **1634**:

The Indian houses are built here in a long half Oval; nine or ten feet high to the middle top, where (as in ancient Temples) the light is admitted by a window, half a yard square; which window is also the chimney, which gives passage to the smoke, the fire being made in the middle of the floor (as in our old halls of England) and about it they used to lie. Save only that their kings and great men have their cabins, and a bed of skins well dressed (wherein they are excellent) set on boards, and four stakes driven into the ground. And now at this present, many of us live in these Witchotts (as they term them) conveniently enough till better be set up. But they are dressed up something better than when the Indians had them.

WHAT DID THOSE DESCRIPTIONS TELL US?

DESCRIPTION 1

- houses are made of small poles fastened at the top
- houses are made in a round form similar to garden arbors
- houses are covered with bark or handmade mats or rushes [reeds]
- the length of the houses is often twice the width
- some of the houses are 12 to 16 yards long, but some of the houses are 24 yards long

DESCRIPTION 2

- houses are built like garden arbors
- houses are built of young saplings bent and tied
- houses are covered with mats or bark
- houses are weatherproof from wind and rain
- houses are warm but smoky
- houses have a hole in the top which allows the smoke to escape

DESCRIPTION 3

- houses are built in a long, half-oval shape
- houses are nine or ten feet high at the highest point
- houses have a small window in the top which allows light and smoke to pass
- houses have a fire in the middle of the floor
- the Native Americans (*Yacocomico tribe*) lie around the fire
- only the houses have raised platform beds covered with animal skins
- the English are living in the Native American (*Yacocomico tribe*) houses until better ones can be built
- the English have the houses fixed up better [in the writer's opinion]

PRIMARY SOURCE IMAGE



Theodore de Bry, "The Tottovne of Secota", 1590, engraving (after the watercolor by John White) for volume 1 of *Collected travels in the east Indies and west Indies* which reprinted Thomas Hariot, *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia, of the commodities and of the nature and manners of the naturall inhabitants* (British Library)

PRIMARY SOURCE IMAGE



An archaeological site in Virginia Beach, VA. Archaeologists discovered a series of post molds indicating that it was likely the location of a longhouse frame.
From the Virginia Department of Historic Resources