

Now, Voyager

We Need a Water Trail to Trace Capt. John Smith's Travels

Pop quiz: Who were the first explorers sent by a president to find a route through the North American continent to the Pacific Ocean?

If you said Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who laid eyes on the Pacific two centuries ago, you'd be wrong. In late 1607 and

1608, two centuries before Lewis and Clark, the president of the Jamestown colony and its ruling council dispatched John Smith to find a passage by water to the "other sea."

In an open boat about 30 feet long, Smith and his men traveled more than 1,700 miles through the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, reaching present-day Maryland and Washington as well as the borders of Delaware and Pennsylvania. Smith's explorations brought him into contact with many tribes, including the Patowomecks of today's Potomac River, as he sought to learn what was around the next bend.

Smith never found the Pacific — the hoped-for river route doesn't exist — but his observations of the region and its peoples became the basis for his later writings. Smith's detailed descriptions of the New World not only informed the English back home in his day; they also continue to serve as essential sources for modern ethnologists, ecologists and historians.

Nonetheless, the only incident of Smith's Chesapeake explorations familiar to most Americans is his encounter with Chief Powhatan and Pocahontas, the subject of director Terrence Malick's new film "The New World." That could change, though. At the direction of Congress, the National Park Service is studying the feasibility of a Capt. John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Water Trail.

The proposed trail has the support of the governors of Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Delaware, the mayor of the District and the Chesapeake Bay Commission. It would be marked by informational buoys for canoeists, kayakers and boaters, while visitors on land could visit the sites of many of Smith's stops, such as former native villages.

The creation of the Smith trail would help educate visitors about the native cultures of the 1600s and about the earliest English colonists. Moreover, as the first national water trail in the country, it would provide a unique window into our country's maritime

roots. Like the natives of the Chesapeake, who built their villages close to river banks and relied on dug-out canoes for long-distance transportation, generations of European settlers of the mid-Atlantic located their towns and cities along waterways for the sake of commerce.

If approved, the water trail would be one of 17 national historic trails and part of a system that the National Park Service and other agencies have maintained since 1978. These trails allow visitors to retrace routes of national historic significance. In this way, they differ from purely scenic and recreational trails such as the Appalachian Trail. National historic trails include the Lewis and Clark Trail, the Pony Express Trail and the Santa Fe Trail. When land acquisitions are needed, the government buys from willing sellers. The four-state area that the Smith water trail would encompass has, surprisingly enough, no other national historic trails.

The 400th anniversary of Jamestown's founding, in 2007, offers a chance for Congress to establish the trail while the Jamestown colony is in the spotlight. If the United States can be said to have a birthplace, it would be the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Had English settlement of the Chesapeake Bay area not lasted, English institutions probably would not have taken root on the continent.

A principal reason that the colonists came to this region — and a key objective of the Virginia Company and its investors — was the quest for a water route to the Pacific. But with English settlement of the Chesapeake area also came the origins of American private property and representative government. The bleakest chapters of our history had their opening lines in this region, too — war against the natives (after early years of trade and cooperation) and slavery.

American history cannot be told without a beginning. With the help of this region's state and local governments and private organizations, the National Park Service can and should finish its deliberations on the John Smith trail quickly and make a positive recommendation to Congress. Congress then should act promptly to commemorate Smith's pioneering journeys.

— David A. Price

is the author of "Love and Hate in Jamestown."