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Rappahannock Oral Tradition, John Smith's Map of Virginia, and Political Authority in the  
Algonquian Chesapeake

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For more than a century, researchers have used the distribution of Indigenous Rappahannock River settlements shown on John Smith's 1608 map of Virginia to frame the river valley's Native communities as unwilling subjects of the Powhatan chiefdom to their south. The map depicts the majority of Native settlements on the river's north bank, a pattern interpreted as evidence that the Rappahannock communities physically distanced themselves as much as possible from Powhatan political control. Rappahannock tribal oral history, however, holds that the Rappahannock polities and the Powhatans enjoyed a political relationship as equals and neighbors, not as subjects or adversaries. Tribal historical and ecological knowledge, publicly available environmental information, and the distribution of known archaeological sites indicate that desirable factors for settlement—including level sandy loam soils, access to marshes, proximity to navigable waterways, and wide viewsheds—occur more frequently and in closer association with one another on the river's north bank. This analysis's mixed-methods and materials approach reveals the unevenly distributed and often highly contingent nature of Indigenous political authority at the time of European invasion.