

## Nature and History in the Potomac Country: From Hunter-Gatherers to the Age of Jefferson

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Robbie Ethridge

In the opening of his recent volume, *Nature and History in the Potomac Country*, historian James D. Rice informs his readers that the idea for the book began with what he perceived as a 'hole in the map' (p. 1). By this Rice means that if one were to map the early 17th-century inhabitants of the 14,670 square miles that drain the Potomac River, one could see that much of this interior basin was uninhabited at that time. Rice wondered why, and thus began his investigations into the Potomac River basin from the earliest inhabitants to those who lived during the Age of Jefferson, or the late 18th century. Kudos to Rice for noticing this 'hole in the map' and also for noticing that to understand this hole and the historical cultural geography of the region one must first begin with the environment and the Native inhabitants who lived there for thousands of years. Rice does not present the usual pictures of the environment as a mere backdrop to the historical action and prehistoric Indians who disappear soon after European colonists arrive. Instead, Rice tracks Native history into the colonial era and takes a close look at the intertwining of European and Indian lives once Europeans invaded the Potomac basin and the consequences of such. He also understands humans and nature to be inseparable. The story of the Potomac, in Rice's hands, is thus a story about Natives, the environment, and the Europeans and Africans who eventually made the same place their home. Through such an approach, Rice is able to reconstruct the long-term social and environmental structures of the Potomac basin that emerged long before European contact and yet continued to structure life long after European contact.

Rice begins *Nature and Culture in Potomac Country* by delimiting and describing the geographic range in

question. The Potomac River and its tributaries drain a large portion of the mid-Atlantic, extending into present-day Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Given its massive extension, the basin also serves to connect the Chesapeake to other river systems such as the Ohio, Cumberland, Tennessee, and to ranging valleys that move into the north, south, and west. In other words, the Potomac River basin is one of the major river systems in the eastern United States. It is also one of the richest ecological zones in the eastern United States with fertile soils, good hunting, and especially good fishing. Rice also notes a topographic fault line in the Potomac basin between the uplands of the Appalachians and Piedmont with their cooler temperatures, swift-moving rivers, shortened growing season, and narrow valley floors and the lowlands inner and outer coastal plain with their long growing season, wide alluvial valleys, and slow-moving rivers. He notes that this fault line also corresponded to an Indian social and cultural one between the southern Algonquian and Siouan speakers and the northern Iroquoian speakers; sometime in the deep past, this social fault line became one between enemies. As such, the Potomac basin was a complex transitional zone – ecologically and socially between the northeastern Woodland societies and the southeastern Mississippian societies.

Rice begins his history of the Potomac in AD 700, just prior to the advent of agriculture. Weaving together evidentiary strands from archaeology, ecology, and paleo-environmental studies, and his own informed imagining of every-day life, Rice presents these early people of the Potomac as flesh and blood people, utilizing an abundant landscape that dictated much about daily life. The population at this time was relatively small, and most people were nomadic fisherfolk living on the coastal plain with occasional forays into the uplands for other foodstuffs and resources. By 900, however, life on the Potomac began to change as people gradually incorporated agriculture into their subsistence. Rice's argument – that the appearance of maize and other domesticated crops coincided with a general warming trend known as the 'Medieval Optimum' is well taken. Maize soon transformed life on the Potomac – the people saw an increase in their populations, a new reliance on flood plain soils, and an emerging localism reflected in localized ceramic traditions. They also began to live in farming villages.

By 1300, the prolonged warming trend gave way to a long cold spell known as the 'Little Ice Age,' and once again life on the Potomac was transformed. As temperatures dropped, the growing season was shortened. For those on the Potomac this was not a serious problem; however, for the northern Iroquoian speakers, a shortened growing season meant hardship for those farmers. In response, some congregated into large towns and polities, such as the Five Nations Iroquois, and others began migrating to more suitable farming country, with some moving into the Potomac. As these newcomers arrived in the Potomac, they settled on vacant lands with access to good hunting, gathering, and arable soils. In response, local populations repositioned themselves, and whereas before towns were mostly located in the coastal plain regions, new towns now sprang up in the inner coastal plain and the interior. And although these various towns were tied together through an expansive trade network, they also became protective and guarded and wary of one another. Rice then offers a detailed reconstruction of life on the Potomac at this time, describing the subsistence cycles that structured life, work, and power. He also offers some interesting propositions as to why we see the rise of hierarchal political structures at this time.

By 1500, the interior farming villages were abandoned – this is the 'hole in the map' that piqued Rice's inquiry. Rice presents a convincing argument that as the Little Ice Age continued, the disruptions to agricultural life in the north and northwest intensified, and the Five Nations Iroquois solidified into a formidable confederacy intent on controlling the region. Those around them soon felt the brunt of Iroquois warfare and suffered a prolonged period of Iroquois raiding, resulting in an increase in migrations through and out of the northern regions. By 1608 the Potomac basin above the fall line was almost entirely abandoned. Those below the fall line, in order to withstand the migrations and warfare, consolidated into large, hierarchal polities known as chiefdoms. Rice understands the formation of such polities, although in response to the social and ecological disruptions, also to have been predicated on location – the largest polities formed in the inner coastal plains where one finds the best soils, fishing, and wild plant life. Sometime between 1440 and 1530 the chiefdoms began to consolidate into larger paramount chiefdoms, and the first, known as the Piscataway tayac, emerged. By the mid 16th century an even more powerful

paramount chiefdom formed, that of Powhatan. At the time of first European contact in the Chesapeake, almost all of the chiefdoms along the Potomac, save the Chickahominies, were subsumed within one of these two polities.

When moving into the colonial era, Rice makes a point well worth remembering – that Europeans, as well as Native people, knew their landscapes because both had to do so in order to survive. Most Europeans who came to Virginia came from rural farming backgrounds, and they knew land and how to wrest a living from it. Hence, although Europeans assuredly brought a different understanding of the environment and their place in it, their lives were still intertwined with the environment as much as Indian lives. In fact, after having deftly explained the rise of Powhatan within a cultural, political, and environmental matrix, Rice shows how this matrix also influenced English settlement. Rice argues that the earliest settlers did not necessarily want to remake England, and instead that they saw Jamestown and the Chesapeake as a trading depot and a granary, respectively, and they understood themselves to be surrounded by Indian polities that could provide them with both food and furs. They also became involved in Indian politics when some groups, such as the Patawomeck, sought English alliances in their effort to break away from Powhatan. Rice's environmental perspective gives him a unique take on Indian and European relations and especially on that of the Powhatan War of 1622 – he understands corn and tobacco to have been the central issues in the conflict.

Rice adds a much needed corrective to the usual narrative of Jamestown in his examination of the Indian fur trade and his insistence that Jamestown for the first several decades was a fur-trade colony, and not a plantation colony. In good detail, Rice traces the inter-colonial rivalry between Maryland, Virginia, and Carolina for the Indian fur trade. In his treatment, Rice highlights the agency and determination of individual European traders and their many Indian partners to control and shape the trade system. Although scholars have known for some time that the Indian trade played a prominent role in Virginia's early history, most narratives of Virginia move from the relations with Powhatan to tobacco plantations with barely a mention of the Indian trade. Rice, however, opens up this era in no uncertain terms.

Rice also argues, quite persuasively, that the contest between Maryland and Virginia over the Indian trade eventually led to the Virginia leadership turning their attention south, to the trade between the James and Savannah rivers. By the 1650s, their interest in the northern Chesapeake and outer coastal plain would now focus entirely on tobacco and their Indian trade interests were now to the south. This is a key point for Rice, because with their interest and ecological imaginings of the Chesapeake as a fur-bearing animal reserve and granary, European settlers had little impact on the land. According to Rice, as late as 1650, the Potomac environment was not substantially changed from its pre-contact days. However, after 1650, this would change. Not only did Old World diseases sweep through the region over the next 50 years, leaving many Indian communities severely depopulated, but a swarm of new colonists began to transform the landscape, and tobacco now moved to the center of the Potomac economy. As Rice makes clear, though, it was not necessarily the farming practices of the middling settlers that changed the landscape – these, in fact, resembled closely those of their Algonquin neighbors. Nor was it the placement of English settlements since they sought out the same freshwater springs, fertile soils, and good hunting and fishing as the Algonquins. Rather it was the introduction of large numbers of domesticated animals, English laws on land ownership and use, and the English surveying and allocation of land plots that would transform the Potomac countryside. And most of these practices were introduced and done in service to the growing tobacco economy. Such changes also ushered in changes in Indian-settler relations. In particular, disputes over land with local Algonquians erupted time and again. With the Indian trade now focused elsewhere, local Indian people entered into other sorts of economic relations with settlers, usually that of wage laborer or servant. They also began a series of migrations out of the Potomac region.

All of this only exacerbated growing tensions between the Potomac Indians and settlers. When the Susquehannock's war against Maryland settlers turned in favor of the Marylanders, Susquehannocks moved into the Potomac Piedmont, and Governor Berkeley responded by building a series of forts along the fall line designed to quell Indian unrest. Local Virginians voiced opposition to Berkeley's plan, and Bacon's Rebellion erupted when Nathaniel Bacon sought revenge against some Susquehannocks who had killed 2

members of his household. Not limiting his wrath to the Susquehannocks, Bacon and his followers decried all Indian people living in the Potomac thus erasing any distinctions between Indian friend and foe. As this attitude spread throughout the colony, Indian and settler relations continued to deteriorate, and over the next decade settlers became increasingly brazen in their taking of Indian lands. Both Virginia and Maryland leadership, by now realizing that they no longer needed Indian allies, instituted the reservation system for Indian people in an effort to staunch the land disputes. However, as Rice documents, settlers soon began to eye the reservations, forcing many Algonquin groups to once again relocate, away from their English neighbors and some with the northern Iroquoian-speakers. By the 1690s, according to Rice, 'the Potomac nations were no more' (p. 173).

Clearly the Potomac nations did not disappear, as some of them are still here today. Rice's point, however, is not that they disappeared from history, but that they no longer occupied the Potomac basin, especially the interior, which was now opened for English settlement. Here, Rice again challenges an age-old narrative of seamless westward expansion when Indian lands were opened. As Rice shows, European colonization of the interior was slow, in part because of the unfamiliarity of the land to settlers, because this was still a boundary zone between the northern and southern Indian groups and therefore subject to hostile incursions from both, because ownership of these lands, according to English law, was quite sketchy and took several years to straighten out, and finally because the tobacco economy, which was becoming concentrated into the hands of a few elites, could not be profitably expanded into the interior at this time.

Rice argues that, despite the quickening Indian wars in the region, the first wave of settlement into the interior was a cadre of European traders intent on expanding Virginia and Maryland trade westward. According to Rice the interior, as a north-south crossroads, was inviting because traders, who were less fearful of Indians than most settlers, could trade with Indians from all through the eastern Woodlands who trekked into and out of this transitional zone. Rice devotes only a few pages to the Virginia trade at this time, but clearly the westward expansion of the trade was important to colonial leaders. In fact, they were in continual conflict over it, and, as we have seen, Bacon's Rebellion was sparked over trade issues. Another omission here is that Rice does not treat with the 17th-century colonial Indian slave trade, which in recent years, scholars have shown to have been part of the Virginia 17th-century economy. Rice acknowledges the buying and selling of Indian slaves by Europeans, but his focus is squarely on the fur trade.

As the 18th century got underway, however, the problems for European settlement into the Potomac basin interior began to be resolved. The Indian wars ceased with the Treaty of 1722, which set off a scramble for the interior lands between Indian groups as well as between Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Wealthy low country tobacco planters and speculators especially took a keen interest in how these lands were parceled out. Still it was not until the 1744 Treaty of Lancaster that the boundary disputes were finally settled, and Europeans began a large migration into the interior. But these were not all wealthy elites moving into the interior. Rice documents that most of them were yeoman farmers, practicing sustainable agricultural techniques, and subsisting largely on the proceeds from their small farms.

These interior farmers were drawn into the Atlantic market economy with the Seven Years War and Pontiac's War of the 1760s. As Rice argues, the two wars, much of which were fought in the Ohio and interior Potomac basins, precipitated an infusion of cash into the region as the armies paid locals for goods and services as well as the development of the infrastructure needed to connect the region to the Atlantic ports. Numerous towns emerged at this time and after the war farmers increased the production of commercial crops, especially wheat. Farmers also began to see profits from their commercial activities. All of this also meant that the interior landscape was transformed as towns, connected by thoroughfares, emerged across the region. Farmers expanded their land holdings and now modeled their farms after their European counterparts. By the late 18th century, then, one can see that all of the Potomac had been transformed. The interior was now a European-like agrarian landscape; the inner coastal plain was dotted with small urban centers surrounded by mostly tobacco-and-slave plantations; the outer coastal plain, with soils now barely suitable for tobacco planting, was only sparsely inhabited by slaves working any fields that could still produce.

Although Rice does not take the step, one can also see that this book goes far in filling a hole in the historiography of Virginia and Maryland – this is one of the first full-length treatments of Indians and Europeans in the Chesapeake that deal with Indians other than the Powhatans. If one were to read Virginia history, one could easily draw the conclusion that, after Opechancanough's wars of the mid 17th century, the Indians in the Potomac more or less disappeared. Rice's book is one of the first in a series of forthcoming books that are beginning to correct this impression.

As an environmental history, though, *Nature and History in the Potomac Country*, is somewhat uneven. The book starts strong with an emphasis on how nature and Indian social systems worked together to create and re-create the Indians' world. However, once he enters the colonial era, Rice picks up other tendrils of the story that sometimes obscure the environmental story. One could conceivably pick up the book hoping to learn about tobacco farming, crop rotations, estuary resource use in the colonial era, and so forth – and that would be a reasonable expectation. Such a reader would perhaps come away somewhat disappointed. Even so, one should not be detracted from the fact that Rice's focal point – that ‘the Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples who had forged that regional diplomatic configuration over the centuries had effectively regulated the timing, extent, and character of European colonization in the backcountry’ (p. 207) – is firmly established in the relationship between nature and society.

#### **Other reviews:**

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