

## *Chapter 1*

# Dwelling in Tsenacomacoh

When the Virginia Company established James Fort in 1607, the English colonists settled amidst the Powhatan chiefdom, a powerful polity of Algonquian-speakers centered on the James and York Rivers.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with the construction of James Fort, the history of Native societies in the Chesapeake has been framed largely by colonists' firsthand accounts produced for European audiences. Such stories often tell us more about the seventeenth-century conceptions of literate Europeans than they do about the people they seek to explain. Today scholars rely heavily on colonists' accounts, often projecting a static "ethnographic present" into the precontact past. Where change has been the focus of study, archaeologists have long favored cultural ecological models. These approaches typically offer only a narrow opening for Native agency, American Indians' capacity to shape their own histories. Cultural ecological interpretations often assume that forces driving social changes in the Chesapeake were primarily adaptive or political, that is, to make the greatest use of the environment or to achieve dominance over the widest area.

This book aims at a different perspective on the Virginia Algonquian past by foregrounding the archaeology of Native settlements from the second through the seventeenth centuries AD. The primary goal is to shift the frame of reference from English accounts of the colonial era toward a longer narrative describing Virginia Algonquians' construction of places, communities, and connections in between. In this shift, archaeology serves as a method for developing a deep history of a Native landscape and a basis for reassessing colonial-era documents.<sup>2</sup> With its access to regional-scale

patterns, material practices, built environments, and a Native past beyond European archives, archaeology has much to offer in this regard.

## Reorienting the Archaeology of the Chesapeake

The move toward an archaeological history of Algonquian places responds, in part, to the “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences, scholarship that emphasizes the often-overlooked spatial dimensions of human experience.<sup>3</sup> *Spatiality*—the effect that space has on people’s perceptions, practices, and interactions—has in recent years become a focus of inquiry in disciplines ranging from art history to neuroscience. With the spatial turn, researchers have directed their inquiries toward the spatiality of human life, giving *space* and *place* the same attention that has long been paid to *time* and *history* and to *social relations* and *society*.<sup>4</sup> Lived spaces are not simply a neutral backdrop that can be neatly captured by an objective geometry or universal Cartesian logic, with its x, y, and z dimensions. Rather, as French sociologist Henri Lefebvre put it, each society has its own way of making space collectively, as the product of interactions among people.<sup>5</sup> In this understanding of space as a social product, *places* are created through acts of naming and the distinctive histories associated with particular locations.<sup>6</sup> Places acquire their significance in relation to other locations and connective pathways in a broader landscape.<sup>7</sup>

As a network of spaces connected by people’s activities, landscapes include not only settlements, activity areas, and natural places. Landscapes also incorporate *memories* acquired, as Julian Thomas put it, “through the closeness and affinity that [people] have developed for some locations, and through the important events, festivals, calamities, and surprises which have drawn other spots to their attention, causing them to be remembered.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, landscapes combine geography with a sense of the past. Built environments are frequently reworked, though rebuilding is often influenced by the constraints and possibilities of previous construction.<sup>9</sup> As a result, some locations retain their importance through time as *persistent places*. These enduring locations, including Athens, Cairo, Quito, and Cahokia, serve as reservoirs of accumulated history.<sup>10</sup>

Archaeologists have in recent years begun to pay closer attention to conversations among geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, and environmental historians about space and place, resulting in archaeologies of land-

scape that differ from what came before. Of course, archaeologists have had considerable success unpacking settlement patterns and tracing human adaptations to natural environments for more than a century.<sup>11</sup> More recently, though, understandings of regional settings as either a passive backdrop or the principal determinant of change have given way to more subtle notions of social space and its *active* role in the human past.<sup>12</sup> Emerging from the recent archaeologies of landscape are two key concerns: how people turn spaces into meaningful places, and how cultural memories are shaped through histories of placemaking.<sup>13</sup>

The resulting archaeologies of landscape vary considerably in their orientations and even their definitions of basic terms. Several approaches, though, seek to integrate evidence concerning both the physical environments that people inhabit and the meaningful locations in which they lived their lives.<sup>14</sup> Inherent tensions exist between *objective* characterizations of topographic features and ecological settings, on the one hand, and efforts to recover evidence bearing on *subjective* experiences of a place. Various archaeological schools of thought emphasize distinct orientations toward space and place. A remaining challenge is to find approaches that move beyond facile dichotomies and bring together different aspects of landscapes in compelling ways.

Archaeological studies framed in terms of historical ecology, for example, take landscapes (rather than sites or social groups) as the primary focus of inquiry. Historical ecologists understand landscapes as objective, physical forms modified by people such that human intentions and actions may be read from them.<sup>15</sup> Seeking to rectify the tendency of a previous generation of *cultural* ecologists to overlook or downplay human intentionality, *historical* ecologists understand landscapes as a product of the interplay between cultural acts and acts of nature in a particular setting.<sup>16</sup> There is no *cultural* landscape distinct from *natural* landscape in historical ecology—only landscape, a socionatural artifact that records the fusion of nature and history, biotic communities and human societies.<sup>17</sup> Historical ecology considers processes that transform landscapes on multiple scales and the ways these transformations are understood locally.<sup>18</sup> Historical ecologists frequently emphasize that settlement and subsistence practices are not necessarily adaptive or even sustainable, as demonstrated by recent climate instability and its destructive impacts. Landscapes are, instead, viewed as tangible manifestations of human and environmental history as they inter-

twine. For historical ecologists, landscapes record both *intentional* acts and *unintentional* consequences, revealing humans' role in the modification of ecosystems and the ways natural processes influence human history.

Historical ecological approaches have, for example, challenged the assumption that the Amazon's ecological parameters defined the pre-Columbian societies living there.<sup>19</sup> By tracing the construction of earthworks, the management of forests, and the enhancement of soils, researchers have argued persuasively that the late prehistoric Amazon was composed of "saturated anthropogenic landscapes," engineered and managed for centuries.<sup>20</sup> Such landscapes signal the *contingency* of the Amazonian past, which includes diverse and unpredictable histories dependent on a complicated blend of socionatural factors.

Other scholars, including those influenced by ideas drawn from phenomenological philosophy, turn toward the meaningful dimension of space. Phenomenology, the study of human experience, emphasizes structures of perception and consciousness. A research tradition rooted in the twentieth-century philosophy of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology examines the ways spaces and objects were experienced from a first-person perspective.<sup>21</sup> Heidegger's approach focused on people's regular engagement with the world around them, suggesting a phenomenology aimed at the meanings embedded in everyday life.<sup>22</sup> In this approach, human experience is understood in terms of a notion of "dwelling."<sup>23</sup> For Heidegger, to dwell in a house is not simply to spend time there. Dwelling means to belong, to be content and at home, to have a sense of place.

Tim Ingold has built on these ideas by developing a "dwelling perspective" on landscape that seeks to bridge the gap between humans as social persons and as biological organisms.<sup>24</sup> Echoing ideas from historical ecology, Ingold suggests that what we refer to as "the environment" might be better understood as a tangle of pathways that continually intertwine then unravel. People do not *occupy* the world as something apart from it, rather "they *inhabit* it, and in so doing—in threading their own paths through the meshwork—they contribute to its ever-evolving weave."<sup>25</sup> In this approach meaning is "gathered" from a landscape as people perform shared tasks that orient them to specific places and to one another. The dwelling perspective emphasizes, above all, movement within social space. In Ingold's formulation, the process of working out meanings through activity