

In 1608, Captain John Smith of Jamestown was the very first unhappy tourist to visit Middlesex County, Virginia. During an exploration of the Chesapeake Bay, he arrived off Stingray Isle, or Stingray Point as it is known today, with 14 other Englishmen in a wooden shallop.

When he was in close to shore, Smith spotted a stingray underwater lying flat on the bottom. The short redhead with a swagger in his step drove his sword through the fish and brought it to the surface. Understandably, the fish didn't take lightly to a sword being driven through its body, and when Smith reached down to dislodge it, the ray almost changed the course of American history as we know it today. The stingray drove its spear-like tail into Smith's arm and the colonist immediately became extremely ill. The doctor aboard feared he was dying. A grave was dug and Smith prepared himself for death.

Anyone who knows Virginia history knows that Captain John Smith did not die at Stingray Point. He recovered and went on to become one of the most famous and colorful characters associated with Jamestown, the first permanent English colony in America. With the 2007 grand celebration of Virginia's 400th anniversary of Jamestown, this little story is Middlesex County's connection to Smith and the first years of English colonization.

As part of that celebration and as



# THE *EXPLORER*

by  
Larry Chowning

a tribute to the county's past, the Deltaville Maritime Museum has built a replica of the shallop used by Smith to explore the Bay region. The *Explorer* was launched in January 2006 with hoopla and celebration on Jackson Creek, just down the road from where Smith met up with that fateful stingray.

"John Smith was a very important person in this area and throughout the Chesapeake Bay region," said Steve Smith, alias "Kaptain Krunch," who spearheaded the museum's shallop construction project.

"As he made his exploration, he named many places on the Bay. Stingray Point got its name from his adventure here," he said. "We saw this as a very important happening here, and as a history-oriented museum we felt this would be an appropriate project to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the settling of America. We also saw it as a continuing example of early pre-colonial construction and a practical hands-on exhibit that you can row and sail and take people for boat rides."

The original Captain John Smith shallop built in England was brought to



Boat designer Jim Thimsen developed the lines on the shallop.



The *Explorer* being blessed before the launching



Governor and Mrs. Holden attending the launching ceremony with Captain Krunch (standing) observing from behind.

America in the hold of the *Susan Constant*. It is believed to have been stored in sections. “We had the good fortune to come upon extensive research done by the Calvert Marine Museum in Solomons, Maryland, that gave us great insight into the way the boat may have looked,” said Smith.

The Calvert Museum had been doing research for years on the John Smith boat with the intent of one day building a replica for reenactments. They had developed plans and had built a model but did not foresee building the boat in the very near future.

“We took their plans and com-

bined it with our own research and came up with the *Explorer*,” he said. “The only thing written down about the boat in John Smith’s day was that it was 30 feet in length, two to three tons burden and would hold 15 people. We also knew where the people were positioned in the boat and we were able to speculate where seats were located and other aspects of the interior were in the vessel,” he said. Boat designer Jim Thimsen took the research from Calvert, fed the information into a computerized yacht design program and developed the lines on the shallop. He generated full-size patterns of ribs and frames and created preview drawings. The

museum then hired Swiss-born boatwright Stefan Auer to do the lion’s share of the construction, and volunteers filled in with many hours on the project.

The main structure of the boat is made of white oak. The side and bottom planking is shaped from juniper, the mast is shaped from fir, and the seats and floorboards are made from yellow pine. *Explorer*’s bottom is painted white to correspond to the tallow (cattle or sheep fat) and white lye mixed together and used in the 1600s to coat bottoms of boats.

*Explorer* can be either rowed or sailed. Eight wooden historically accurate tholepins, used to hold oars in place while



Eight wooden historically accurate tholepins, used to hold oars in place while rowing, are built into the gunnels—four on each side of the boat.

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rowing, are built into the gunnels—four on each side of the boat. The mast is held in place by a rope tied to a seat and a small slot built into the floor. Deadeyes as part of the sail rigging are made from locust wood and are historically authentic.

*Explorer* flies an English flag off the stern and the English cross is mirrored in the sail. The boat carries a 19-foot-wide, 13-foot-tall square sail, and it “sails like an absolute champ,” said Smith.

*Explorer* will be part of Virginia Beach's “First Landing” celebration during the week of April 23-28. The colonists landed at Jamestown in May 1607, but in April 1607, the group made their first landing at Cape Henry. A reenactment will be held near Lynnhaven Inlet, and actors will use *Explorer* to row to shore from the *Godspeed*, *Susan Constant*, and *Discovery* and plant the British flag for king and country. Two other replicas of John Smith's boats have been built by museums and will also participate in the reenactment.

As a reminder of the story that led to the creation of *Explorer*, museum officials crafted the tiller handle appropriately shaped like the body of a stingray. “Aren't we lucky that stingray didn't finish the job and kill John Smith,” said Smith. “We would have lost one of the great American stories of Pocahontas saving the life of Captain John Smith from the hatchet of her father.”

*Explorer* is a reminder of the colorful history that surrounds Tidewater Virginia, the very cradle of America's beginning.

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Larry Chowning is the author of five books, most recently, *Chesapeake Bay Buyboats*. He has had numerous articles and photos published in national and regional magazines and newspapers and has won many Virginia Press Association awards.