



It Happened Near Me: First Europeans on the Virginia Frontier

County: Loudoun

Date: 1699

Background: Giles Vandercastel and Burr Harrison were sent from the colonial Virginia capital at Williamsburg by Governor Nicholson to confer with the “Emperor” of the Piscataways at Conoy Island in the Potomac River near Point of Rocks, Maryland. Point of Rocks is just across the Potomac from Loudoun County, Virginia, and is today where U.S. Route 15 crosses the river twelve miles north of Leesburg. Burr and Vandercastel’s mission came after several English settlers had been murdered in attacks by Native Americans. This is their report.

. . The sixteenth of this instance April [1699], we set out from the Inhabitation [*Alexandria*], and found a good Track for five miles, all the rest of the days’s Journey very Grubby and hilly, Except sum small patches, but very well for horses, tho not good for cartes, and but one Runn of any danger in a frish, and then very bad; that night lay at the sugar land, which Judge to be forty miles. We generally kept about one mile from the river, and a bout seven or Eight miles above the sugar land, we came to a broad Branch of a bout fifty or sixty yards wide, a still or small streeme, it tooke our horses up to the Belleys, very good going in and out; about six miles farther came to another greate branch of a bout sixty or seventy yards wide, with a strong streeme, making fall with large stones that caused our horses sume times to be up to their Bellyes and sume times nott above their Knees; So we conceave it a freish [freshet], then not fordable, thence in a small Track to a smaller Runn, a bout six miles [Limestone Branch?] Indefereent very, and soe held on till we came within six or seven miles of the forte or Island [at Point or Rocks], and then very Grubby, and greate stones standing Above the ground . . . they hold for three or ffoure miles, and then shorte Ridgges with small Runns, untill we came to ye forte or Island [*fort of the Piscataway they were sent to instruct to send their chief to Williamsburg*] . . . After consultation of almost two oures, they told us they were very bussey and could not possibly come up or goe downe, but if his Excellency would be pleased to come to him, sume of his greate men should be glad to see him...”

Your Excellency’s Most Dutifull Servants,
Giles Vandercastle and Burr Harrison

Making Sense of Evidence from the Past

1. How far west had Virginians moved by 1699? How do you know?
2. How far east did Virginia's native American tribes still live by 1699?
How do you know?
3. For a white traveler coming west in 1699 into what is Loudoun today, what were the roads and bridges like? Give us evidence!
4. What place names/locations do you recognize that we still see in modern Loudoun?
5. What does having a "fort" on Conoy Island in the Potomac tell us of the situation for the Piscataway Indians near Point of Rocks in 1699? Do you have any ideas on why they might have a fort? Need a fort?
6. What are the Piscataway leaders basically telling Burr and Vandercastel?
7. Any other observations you can pull from this official 1699 report?

Views of two Loudoun sights viewed by Burr and Vandercastel



Goose Creek in Loudoun County. Today there are many bridges over Goose Creek, which can be deep, rocky, and dangerous in places.



Point of Rocks from the Loudoun shore. Point of Rocks was a key Native American meeting place near the Picataways' island fort, 200 yards down the Potomac on Conoy Island