

## **Virginia Indians: Our Story**

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According to archeologists, Native people have lived in the area we now call Virginia for as many as 15,000 years. However, if you ask Virginia Indians how long our people have been here, they will say, “We have always been here.” Our histories, our ancestral connections, and our traditions are intertwined with the land known as *Tsenacommacah* to the Powhatan peoples. It is a bountiful place given to us by the Creator as the place most fitting for us to live.

The early inhabitants of Virginia were hunter-gatherers who followed the migratory patterns of large game, but over time, they settled into specific regions and outlined their territories. Our people developed intimate, balanced relationships with the animals, plants, and geographic formations that characterized our homelands. History books seldom refer to the sophisticated agricultural techniques we practiced for more than 900 years or to the culturally managed landscapes we developed, where hunting and fishing areas alternated with townships and croplands arranged along the waterways. They seldom note that our nutrition was far superior to what was available in Europe before the colonial era, or that our knowledge of astronomy informed our farming calendar as well as navigation by night. Virginia was not a wilderness to us, nor was it a “New World”; it was a known and loved home place, and we shared our resources with strangers who came among us as well as within our communities. That is the Native way.

When the English colonists arrived in our homeland in the spring of 1607, some 20,000 Algonquian-speaking peoples were incorporated into the paramount chiefdom of Powhatan, who was the tributary and spiritual leader of 32 tribes that ranged throughout the coastal plain and Chesapeake Bay areas. A similar number of Siouan-speaking people were located to the west, in the piedmont and mountain regions, in tribal groups that included the Monacan, Mannahoac, Saponi, Tutelo (or Toter), and Occaneechi. In the southwestern area of what is now Virginia lived Cherokee people, who speak an Iroquoian language, and to the southeast of Powhatan’s domain lived the Nottoway and Meherrin tribes, also Iroquoian speakers.

Powhatan, a brilliant strategist, probably intended to incorporate the English into his polity, but he could not have known then that they intended to establish a permanent colony and eventually to usurp his lands. Within a hundred years, the Powhatan tribes were reduced to just several hundred individuals. Similar depopulations occurred among the Monacan peoples and throughout the East coast and inland regions as European settlements spread westward. Through disease and then warfare, Native peoples of this continent were decimated, and their lands were taken from them.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Virginia Indian people found themselves policed by the colonial government, reduced to poverty as their landholdings eroded or were stolen outright. The first Race Laws were passed in Virginia in 1705; more followed in 1866, and the Racial Integrity Act passed in 1924. It prohibited marriage to whites by people of color, including Indians.

In Virginia Indian history, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is dominated by the figure of Walter Plecker, who became the state registrar of the division of Vital Statistics in Richmond in 1912 and remained in his position until 1946. He was a staunch advocate for the eugenics movement, the pseudo-science of race. Plecker believed that there should be only two races of people in Virginia, white and “colored,” and that white people were superior. By 1925 he had developed a list of surnames, people he believed to be “mixed,” and he sent instructions to local clerks of courts, hospital personnel, school administrators and others, informing them that persons with these names were not to associate with white people. He altered numerous birth certificates of Indian people, without proof, noting their race as “colored.”

Most of the current tribes in Virginia established churches and sometimes mission schools during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the people accepted Christianity. The schools provided up to a seventh-grade education for those children who were able to attend. Indians were not allowed to attend white schools, and they refused to attend black schools. Many Indian children were needed to help at home or in the fields and could not finish even elementary school. High school education was not available to Indians in Virginia. Some of the Powhatan tribes sent their children to the Bacone School in Oklahoma and similar facilities in other states, where they could complete high school and the equivalent of a community college degree. Public schooling was not made available to Virginia Indians until 1963.

Beginning in 1919, many of the Powhatan tribes were visited by an anthropologist, Frank Speck, who compiled notes and descriptions of their communities. With Speck’s encouragement, they attempted to revive the “Powhatan Confederacy” in the 1920s, and the first efforts toward political activism began. During the 1980s eight tribes obtained formal recognition from the Commonwealth, although the Pamunkey and Mattaponi had retained their reservations and had been observing their treaty relationship all along. The other state-recognized tribes are the Chickahominy, the Chickahominy Eastern Division, the Monacan, the Nansemond, the Rappahannock, and the Upper Mattaponi.

Among the Virginia Indian tribes, several traditional cultural forms are still practiced, and new traditions have developed as well. A few artists make their living solely from their art; generally speaking, however, these practices are a part-time endeavor. Tribal artists are involved in beadwork, leather crafting, wood carving, pottery, and basket weaving. Tribal dancing has continued as a tradition, and the Virginia Indians practice not only their own traditional dances, such as the Green Corn Dance and the Canoe Dance, but they also participate in intertribal contemporary powwow dancing as well.

Since the 1980s, the Virginia tribes have taken great strides to retain and reclaim our cultural practices and improve economic conditions for our people. Chiefs are elected from among the tribal members, and tribal councils meet regularly to address issues of concern and interest. Several tribes have established heritage classes for their young people and programs for elders. Almost all have purchased land in their homeland areas. Some are working on language reclamation. Six of the eight tribes are currently pursuing

federal acknowledgement through a bill introduced in Congress. Together the eight tribes have worked to organize events for the Jamestown 2007 commemoration, and in July 2006 we completed a historical circle when 55 tribal delegates visited Kent County, England. It was the first time a delegation of Virginia Indians had visited England in almost 400 years.

Virginia Indian people are justifiably proud of our history, our traditions, our survival, and our record of contributions to our state and country. We love our homelands, and we have fought to defend them over the centuries. We teach our children that we are made of this land, and we belong here. We come from this earth, this ground, and we will always be here.

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