

CARDINAL NEWS 250

Virginia's Native Americans were caught in the crossfire of the revolution

Eastern tribes sided with American patriots while Western tribes backed the British.



By Ben Swenson
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Gov. Glenn Youngkin speaks with Chief Mark Fallingstar Custalow as members of the Mattaponi Indian Tribe present a gift of a white-tailed deer for the 346th annual Tax Tribute Ceremony at the Executive Mansion in Richmond in November 2023. Photo by Ben Swensen.

The year 2026 marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Cardinal News has embarked on a three-year project to tell the little-known stories of Virginia's role in the march to independence. This project is supported, in part, by a grant from the [Virginia American Revolution 250 Commission](#). You can [sign up to receive a free monthly newsletter with updates](#). Find all our stories from this project on [the Cardinal News 250 page](#).

Like other Virginians, Native Americans who lived in the Old Dominion at the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775 found themselves at a crossroads. Whom would they side with, if either side at all?

The answer was complicated. For starters, Virginia was then much larger, including what's now West Virginia and much of Kentucky. Also, the Indians who inhabited the vast territory were a diverse collection of tribes who often had uneasy peace, not to mention outright war, with one another. And their relationships with Europeans were likewise tenuous.

But across tribes, they had a couple things in common: Their loyalties in the conflict were influenced by centuries of colonization and their intentions were aimed at preserving whatever advantages they possessed on the cusp of a new era.

Compared to other records from colonial America, documentation for Virginia Indians is relatively sparse; English and other European scribes tended to write more about their own affairs than about others. But there's enough information for historians to piece together a picture of Indian communities in the Revolutionary War.

Indians in the eastern portion of Virginia took up arms for the Patriot cause. Algonquian tribes — those who inhabited the coastal plain — were a small fraction of the size they had been a century-and-a-half earlier and had adopted many elements of colonial culture. Thus, when Powhatan men joined American military forces fighting for independence, it was in the interest of a social and economic system that benefited their livelihoods.

Robert Mush (or Mursh) was a Pamunkey tribesman born around 1758 who as a child had attended the Brafferton Indian School at William & Mary, which aimed to educate, Anglicize and Christianize Indian children in the colonies in the 18th century. Mush served for seven years in three Virginia regiments, fighting in at least three major battles (Brandywine, Germantown and Yorktown), and surviving the winter at Valley Forge.

Pension records, although not very detailed, indicate that numerous other Indians from eastern Virginia enlisted in regiments that fought for American independence.

Native Americans from Souian tribes, who lived in the Piedmont, likewise took part in colonial conflicts, not only in the French and Indian War from 1754 to 1763, but also 20 years later in the American Revolution under the command of George Washington, according to Martin Saniga, a citizen of the Sappony Tribe, whose traditional homelands stretch across the state line separating Person County, N.C., and Halifax County, Va. Saniga is a historian who works as the environmental and cultural resource specialist for the Upper Mattaponi Tribe of King William County.

For other, more westerly Native communities, American independence — and its potential fallout — led them to the side of the British. This was especially true for the Cherokees, who used southwestern Virginia as hunting grounds.

These tribes felt pressure from unrestrained westward expansion and welcomed the Proclamation of 1763, a royal decree that forbid English settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. When pioneers and land-hungry speculators largely ignored this order, Indians no doubt realized that their communities in and beyond Appalachia were threatened.

Thomas Jefferson spelled out prevailing attitudes towards Indians in no uncertain terms in the Declaration of Independence when he complained of the crown's support for "merciless Indian Savages." Natives' cooperation with the British was in large measure a fight for their own survival.

Far western Virginia was known among Native tribes as fertile hunting grounds, not only by the Cherokee, but by other tribes such as the Shawnee and Mingo who occasionally occupied the territory. Westward-expanding Americans, however, saw it as empty land.

"There is a difference between saying nobody lives on land and saying that it's empty," said Woody Holton, a professor of history at the University of South Carolina. Those tribes disagreed with one another about who owned western lands, Holton said, "but they all agreed that the Europeans didn't." (*We profiled Holton, the son of former Virginia Gov. Linwood Holton, [in a previous Cardinal 250 story.](#)*)

Tribes that had harbored longstanding animosities against each other set aside their differences to help the British up until the end of the Revolutionary War. In the Battle of Blue Licks, which occurred in Kentucky ten months after the British surrender at Yorktown, a force of about 300 Indians and 50 British rangers soundly defeated militiamen and killed the son of their leader, Daniel Boone.

The differing responses to the idea of American independence had their roots deep in the commonwealth's history, an era that began long before 104 bedraggled Englishmen stepped ashore at Jamestown.

Virginia at the dawn of the 17th century was home to dozens of Indian tribes that fell into three distinct language families.

Along the coastal plain, Algonquin speakers thrived on the bounty afforded by land and sea. Well-known among this group were tribes such as the Pamunkey, Mattaponi and Nansemond that comprised the Powhatan paramount chiefdom, an affiliation of more than 30 tribes.

Farther inland, west of the fall line, Souian speakers, among them the Monacan, Manahoac, Occaneechi and Sappony, inhabited the Piedmont. These tribes farmed and hunted and were intermediaries with Natives along the coastal plain, trading copper and axes made from greenstone. These were treasured resources that came from points west, Saniga said.

Another feature of some Piedmont tribes at the time of European contact was the way they honored their ancestors. Monacans interred generations of their dead in sizable burial mounds, some of which contained the remains of more than 1,000 individuals.

Iroquoian tribes had two footholds in Virginia. The first was a wedge in the southeast between coastal and Piedmont communities where tribes such as the Nottoway and Meherrin resided. The far southwestern part of Virginia was the domain of the Cherokee, who camped and hunted in the difficult mountainous terrain, but had few settlements of any permanence. Occasionally other tribes made forays into this territory.

The Cherokee had villages and towns farther south and west where significant populations lived, “but they had large, extended areas that they used for hunting and fishing,” among them southwest Virginia, according to Kody Grant, a historian who is Tribal Liaison for the University of Virginia. Grant is an enrolled member of the Pueblo of Isleta and descends from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

The Cherokee were among those who frequently used the Great Indian Warpath, Grant said, a travel and trade route comprised of a network of roads and footpaths that would eventually become modern corridors, such as Interstate 81.

The fate of tribes after European colonists gained a foothold was determined by the location of their home. The fort at Jamestown was in the heart of Tsenacommacah — the Powhatan name for the coastal plain, meaning “densely inhabited land.”

Through decades of intercultural ebb and flow, the scale tilted in one direction. Scholars estimate that the population of some 20,000 Powhatan Indians in what’s now eastern Virginia around 1607 declined by 90% over the next century thanks to disease and warfare. With an irreversible English presence in Tsenacommacah, tribes of the coastal plain had no choice but to engage with the economic and political realities of colonization.

Souian and Iroquoian tribes were somewhat more insulated from the initial wave of displacement and sharp population decline. According to Saniga, the area of Virginia west of the fall line was still considered frontier into the 1700s, which slowed interaction and cultural exchange. “The English had all this really good farmland in and around Tidewater for 100-plus years, so there wasn’t a huge drive to continue to move farther inland until later,” he said.

But waves of settlement and an insatiable hunger for land eventually brought Indians and Europeans in contact with one another in Virginia’s interior. Souian tribes forged trade relationships as colonization crept westward. Fort Christanna in what’s now Brunswick County was founded in 1714 as a trading outpost, among other reasons. But the effect of settlement pressure was the same: Indian communities often dispersed, and those that stayed consolidated into core communities.

Despite those pressures, tribes held fast to their culture. Around the year 1754, Thomas Jefferson observed a group of Monacans visiting a burial mound on the Rivanna River north of Charlottesville, an event he recorded in his 1784 *Notes on the State of Virginia*. He remembered that the indigenous group went to the mound, “without any instructions or enquiry, and having staid about it some time, with expressions which were construed to be those of sorrow, they returned to the high road, which they had left about half a dozen miles to pay this visit and pursued their journey.”

While many inhabitants of Virginia saw American independence as an occasion to celebrate, the milestone achieved in 1783 ushered in even more challenges for Indian communities as they navigated a society that, for almost a couple centuries afterward, would continue to be deeply stratified by race.

The challenges Virginia Indians faced were perhaps best illustrated by the commonwealth's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which acknowledged the existence of only two races in Virginia, "white" and "colored," with no other categories.

"There was physical removal, but then later because of the Racial Integrity Act, there was systematic erasure of identity," Grant said. (See [our previous coverage](#) of the Racial Integrity Act.)

Since the late 20th century, there has been tremendous progress in recognizing and honoring Virginia's indigenous residents. Seven Indian tribes are recognized by the federal government — the Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Monacan, Nansemond, Pamunkey, Rappahannock and Upper Mattaponi. Along with those seven tribes, the government of the commonwealth recognizes an additional four — the Cheroenhaka Nottoway, Mattaponi, Nottoway and Patawomeck.

Nevertheless, there remain vestiges of centuries of discrimination. Virginia Indians today often field questions about their ethnicity. "Americans and foreigners want their Native folks to look like they're from a western with long, straight black hair," Saniga said. "That's not what our communities look like. We've had interactions with Europeans and Africans for 400 years."

In Saniga's previous work as a historical interpreter at museums in Tidewater, guests would often inquire about his proportion of Indianness. "That's a weird question to ask," he said. "Does anyone ever ask what percent English or Irish you are?"

Savannah Baber, who is a descendent of both the Chickahominy Tribe in Charles City County and the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, is coordinator of Virginia Indian Programs for Virginia Humanities, the Charlottesville-based state humanities council that supports civic and cultural development. Baber said that another area where centuries of discrimination against local Native Americans is apparent is in professional opportunities available to them.

"Many of us don't come from long lines of museum curators or researchers because of social inequality and lack of opportunities that happened in years past," Baber said. "Our people want to learn those things. They want to have access to those job opportunities. Having people in those fields open to partnerships is valuable."

That's one of the goals of the Virginia Indian Programs, an initiative spearheaded in 2007 by the late KARENNE WOOD of the Monacan Tribe to foster relationships not only among tribal nations, but also among non-Indians who want to support and learn more about the commonwealth's indigenous people. Virginia Indian Programs has created apprenticeship programs to pass on traditional skills and hosted workshops to support and share Virginia Indian knowledge. Baber encourages Virginians of all backgrounds to find Virginia Indian Programs online to learn more about opportunities to highlight indigenous history and culture.

There are other ways to engage Native communities in the commonwealth, too. Every year on the day before Thanksgiving, the Pamunkey and Mattaponi tribes, in a public ceremony, present gifts and freshly harvested game to the governor, a practice that dates back to the 1677 Treaty of Middle Plantation. The Pamunkey and Mattaponi are the only tribes in Virginia with reservations — the former a 1,600-acre expanse on the Pamunkey River and the latter a 150-acre spread on the Mattaponi River.

Several tribes also have museums that are open to the public, including the Monacan Indian Nation Museum in Amherst, the Patowomeck Museum & Cultural Center near Fredericksburg, and the Pamunkey Indian Museum (which is currently closed undergoing renovations) on the tribe’s reservation.

Appreciating Virginia Indians’ history is as much about acknowledging the present as it is about studying history, according to Grant. “It’s always important, when talking about a historical context, to connect the past with modern people,” he said. “The tribes of the colonial period are here today and are living, active communities.”



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