

THE STORY OF VIRGINIA: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A Long-term Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

<http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/homeplace.htm>

Becoming a Homeplace

Until recently, experts believed the first humans came to Virginia from Asia about 11,000 years ago. The theory was that they came overland across North America through a corridor between two great glacial masses that dominated the continent. Their culture was called Clovis after their distinctive type of projectile points, found near Clovis, N.M. However, archaeological discoveries at Cactus Hill, Virginia, show that people were here much earlier, at least 16,000 years ago. These first Virginians must have come here a different way, because at that time there was no corridor between the glaciers covering most of North America. Probably, the people leapfrogged down the western coastlines of North America and moved gradually from west to east.

Both the pre-Clovis and Clovis peoples came during the time of the great northern glaciers. These masses of ice did not reach as far south as Virginia, but they did cause the climate to be much cooler than now. There was not yet even a Chesapeake Bay, merely the lower end of the Susquehanna River as it flowed out to sea. For perhaps 8,000 years, small bands of people roamed the grass- and pine-covered land, hunting bison, elk, deer, and small mammals and gathering a variety of edible plants. They developed stone tools to bring down game, butcher the carcasses, and dress the hides.

New Technology

A rapid environmental change occurred after 8,000 B.C. The Ice Age gave way to a warmer, drier climate. By 6,000 B.C. the people had adapted to the new oak and chestnut forests that arose, and they relied more on plants, nuts, and fruits, and on fish and small animals such as deer, rabbit, and turkey. Nurtured by the milder environment and longer growing season, populations grew rapidly.

One thing remained the same. People still foraged for their food, gathering according to the seasons. Over time they developed new technologies. The spear thrower added range and power to the hunter's arm. The axe enabled people to fell trees. The mortar and pestle made it easy to pound and grind nuts, seeds, and roots. Families lived in large bands and remained nomadic, but within a smaller, more fertile area than during the Ice Age.

Early Settlements

After about 2,500 B.C. the people of Virginia became less mobile and more sedentary. By focusing their hunting and gathering on the rich flood plains of Virginia's rivers, they could stay longer in one place. They learned to domesticate such plants as sunflowers, amaranth, and squash. They developed the bow and arrow for hunting, and they fired clay vessels for cooking and storage. Social changes followed. Small bands merged through bonds of marriage and

trade to form hamlets that took on tribal identities under the guidance of an elder. As people created specialized crafts and increased production, they accumulated a surplus for trade. A ranked social structure emerged in which status was conferred on certain individuals and families. This was a stage of development in almost all world civilization—the idea that all men were not created equal.

After about 900 A.D. these so-called Woodland people of Virginia settled into large villages of hundreds of inhabitants. The discovery of agriculture and the cultivation of corn, beans, squash, and tobacco made such large, permanent settlements possible. Corn introduced from Mexico became a staple crop for the expanding population. Tobacco also came by way of Mexico. By 1000 A.D. beans had arrived from the Southwest, joining corn and squash as major crops. People depended mostly on gardening for their food, although they still supplemented it with their old hunting and gathering practices.

Groups of villages numbering thousands of residents became united into complex economic, social, and political structures known as chiefdoms. By the time of European contact, there may have been 50,000 people in Virginia. From 15,000 to 20,000 of them were subject to one man, Wahunsenacawh, whom the English called Powhatan. This was actually his title rather than his name. The Powhatan empire (not confederation) of eastern Virginia consisted of about thirty-two tribes or sub-chiefdoms whose people spoke Algonquian. Outside this domain were the Iroquoian-speaking Meherrin and Nottoway tribes south of the James River, the Siouan-speaking Monacan, Manahoac, Nahyssan, Occaneechi, Saponi, and Tutelo Saponi tribes of the Piedmont, and Cherokees in far southwest Virginia.

The Rise of the Powhatan People

The Powhatan empire emerged from late Woodland culture, perhaps in response to Spanish incursions into Chesapeake Bay in the 1570s. The Powhatans are the best-documented Virginia Indians because of their early and sustained contact—and conflict—with the English. By 1607, when the English arrived in Virginia, there were more than 150 Powhatan villages. According to their tradition, they had been in Virginia for 300 years, but it may have been as long as 1,500 years. The paramount chief or emperor was known as the Powhatan. His chiefs were called werowances. Inheritance followed the mother's line, and the status of women was higher in Powhatan than in English society, though Powhatan men were allowed to have several wives. Men were hunters and warriors. Women and children did almost everything else.

The Powhatan Indians also had complex religious ideas. From their accounts we know that they conceived the world as a flat circle, with themselves (naturally) at the center and other people on the periphery. Ahone made the earth and sun, which was a key element in their ritual and prayer. Ahone, however, was an aloof and benevolent god who required no sacrifices or offerings. His antithesis, Okeus, however, was ever present in people's lives, demanding ritual respect and rewarding and punishing behavior. Because Okeus was associated with thunder, storms, and destruction, the English equated him with Satan and surmised that the Powhatans practiced devil worship.