

## First Peoples of Virginia

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During this Native American Heritage Month, let's go back through history to learn about the tribes and traditions that have been present in the Hampton Roads area. We are often taught about large villages, tribes, and kingdoms with imagery that frequently refers to a nineteenth century history of tepees and warriors on horseback. Though these images are found in the mid- and southwest, there is a vast and rich history of First Peoples here in Virginia. Not only did we have a neighboring Powhatan Chiefdom led by Wahunsonacock, there were also large villages located in modern day Virginia Beach. Archeological evidence shows that the Indian Village of Apasus was located near the Thoroughgood House, with remains found off Shore Drive and on the grounds of the house as well.

Historians rely on the archeological remains to tell us about the people who lived here. This is largely helpful for understanding the Chesapeake villages of Apasus, Chesepiuc, and Skicoac, which were mentioned in writings and drawings from the Roanoke Expedition, but were gone by the time Jamestown was settled.<sup>1</sup> During construction around the Lynnhaven inlet, archaeologists found human remains, one of which was buried with 30,000 shell beads.<sup>2</sup> Beads found at the burial site had a religious and political significance to the Algonquin people, which was the larger language group found in the eastern portion of modern day United States. The Chesapeake Indians were part of trade network that valued the colors found on conch, mussel, clam, and scallop shells. The wealth that villages could amass from trading meant that chiefs could provide for thousands of people, done through a redistributive system. The Chesapeakes lived outside of the control of the Powhatan, and their numbers as well as their resource supply made them competition for Chief Powhatan, who had solidified control over 30 tribes and villages. Though



*This 1585 map shows the Chesapeake villages of Apasus, Chesepiuc, and Skicoac.*

*Map of the coast of Virginia in 1585  
Engraving by Theodor de Bry after watercolor  
by John White*

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*



their numbers would not match those amassed under Chief Powhatan, the Chesapeake's ties to tribes in modern day North Carolina made their position contentious.

By 1600, Chief Powhatan's priests convinced him that a group of people would rise and be the downfall of Powhatan's kingdom. Believing this threat to be the Chesapeake, Powhatan responded by decimating the village of Apasus. The men were killed and neighboring villages incorporated the women and children, effectively ending a town of over 3,000 people.<sup>3</sup> With limited firsthand accounts of Apasus, archeological evidence like what is displayed at the Thoroughgood House is crucial to the understanding of the Chesapeake Indians, who met their end in the late woodland period. Much of what we know about the people of Apasus is achieved by comparing neighboring tribes and villages. Seventeenth century writing indicates that settlement structures as well as language and cultural practices had large similarities amongst Algonquin peoples.<sup>4</sup> Historians use this idea to make educated assumptions as to what life was like at Apasus and other surrounding villages.

The people of Apasus would have lived in Yahakens, which were oval houses that consisted of sapling posts and tightly sewn together mats made from marsh reeds such as Bull Rush or Cattails. Their homes were waterproof and lasted roughly 20 years. Homes were clustered together, and often had nuclear families living inside rather than multigenerational longhouses found further north. Their homes were close to the fields their family worked and spread out depending on how extensive those fields were. They were a largely agricultural society and relied on beans and other sources of protein in addition to what they could fish and hunt. The main crops grown were beans, squash, corn, and sunflowers. Tidewater is full of abundant natural resources that provided great access to fish such as sturgeon, catfish, garfish, and perch, nutritious wild plants such as Tuckahoe, hickory, and grapes, and animals such as deer, bear, elk and rabbits that provided food, shelter, and clothing.<sup>5</sup> Women would farm and forage while men hunted, fished, warred, and traded.

Though we do not have extensive knowledge of the First Peoples found along the Lynnhaven River, we do know much about the cultural practices of neighboring tribes. This knowledge paired with archeological evidence gives us an understanding of those who lived here hundreds of years ago. As Native American Heritage month comes to an end, take time to think about and reflect on the cultures that came before yours,

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and how similar or different they can be. And though as a museum we discuss the past, it is important to remember that the First Peoples of Virginia are still here today and are active members of the community.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Michael Moran, "Thomas Hariot (ca. 1560-1621)," in *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities (June 5, 2014), accessed November 21, 2020, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/hariot\\_thomas\\_ca\\_1560-1621#start\\_entry](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/hariot_thomas_ca_1560-1621#start_entry).
- <sup>2</sup> Ben Swenson, "First Landing State Park and the Last Trace of a Vanquished Nation," *Abandoned Country* (April 1, 2013), accessed November 21, 2020, <http://www.abandonedcountry.com/2013/04/01/first-landing-state-park-and-the-last-trace-of-a-vanquished-nation/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Karen Kupperman, *Indians and English: Facing Off in Early America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000, 129-130.
- <sup>4</sup> Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010, A3-A6.
- <sup>5</sup> Bernard Means, "Late Woodland Period (AD 900-1650), in *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities (May 30, 2014), accessed November 21, 2020, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Late\\_Woodland\\_Period\\_AD\\_900-1650#start\\_entry](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Late_Woodland_Period_AD_900-1650#start_entry).

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