

THE POCOMOKE NATION

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BACKGROUND

The Pocomoke is one of several indigenous nations who called present-day Delmarva their home. Its people were culturally aligned with the Algonquian language family and regionally identified as a Northeastern Woodland group. It is likely the Pocomoke had prehistoric roots to the Shawnee, an Algonquin group who traditionally considered the Lenape as “their grandfathers.”

Giovanni da Verrazano in 1524 observed the native people on the Assateague peninsula. In 1649 Norwood's ship became stranded off the coast and he and a party of men rowed ashore and requested assistance from the natives to reach the western shore and the English settlement at Jamestown. In 1608 Captain John Smith explored the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay and visited a palisaded town and King's house on the Wighco Flu, now known as the Pocomoke River. According to Capt. Smith these People and its northern neighbor, the Nanticoke, spoke a different dialect than the Accomac and Accohannock groups who he noted were politically and culturally associated with the Powhatan Empire across the Chesapeake Bay. Verrazano's observations, Norwood's detailed account and Smith's journals present an early view of Pocomoke hospitality to strangers and a window in its culture prior to English colonization.

SUBTRIBES & TOWNS

Early records identify the sub-tribes of the Pocomoke Paramountcy as Annemessee, Acquintica, Gingoteague, Manoakin, Monie, Morumscu, Nusswattux, Pocomoke and Quandanquan, and its towns and villages as Askiminokansen, Arrocoo, Monie, Manoakin, Parahockin, and Wighcocomoco.

TERRITORY

The Pocomoke paramount chiefdom and territory ran from the Chesapeake Bay to the confluence of the Nanticoke and Wicomico rivers, then northeasterly to the Ocean, encompassing forests, swamps, coastal bays and seaside islands. Its territory extended some distance south of the present Maryland-Virginia border. A map of the Pocomoke Paramountcy would include present-day Somerset County and part of Worcester, Wicomico, Sussex, and Accomac Counties.

LIFESTYLE

Pocomoke's spiritual and political leaders were revered by other nations along the Atlantic seaboard. As noted in church records and newspapers, Pocomoke descendants continue to heed a call to the ministry and public service. Pocomoke leadership was traditionally carried through the Pocomoke band. Subject tribes or bands delivered annual tribute of corn and other staples to the Pocomoke storehouses. Resources of clam, conch, mussel and terrapin shell for making roanoke and peake or wampum and cypress trees for making dugout canoes provided the Pocomoke with goods for trading with other nations to acquire articles of copper and stone and a red dye called puccoon.

Wigwams were constructed with bent saplings and covered with cattail mats or thatch and bark. A smoke hole was left at the top and was adjusted by a long pole connected to a leather flap. Sleeping platforms covered with mats were on either side of the center fire pit. Cooking and food preparation was usually done outside; the fire in the wigwam used mostly for comfort. Antlers and animal bones were fastened on the inside for hanging tools, bows and arrows, and other necessities. A palisaded Pocomoke town would have many wigwams, possibly longhouses, and a number of structures for storage and utilitarian uses. It was a common practice for clans to be separated, often on opposite sides of a creek, or river.

Climate varied from cold winter to wet spring and from hot summer and to moderate autumn. This variance of seasons provided the Pocomoke with an annual bounty of corn, squash and beans. Winter was a time for hunting and trapping game, springtime for planting and fishing, summer for gardening, making pots and clothing, and fall for harvesting, celebrations, and preparing for the coming winter. All took part in picking berries, gathering nuts in the woods, and scavenging for eggs along the bays and sounds.

Inter-tribal activities were held during the fall after harvesting and storing the corn and keeps. These traditions have continued in rural Delmarva. Other traditions that survive are giving-away ceremonies “pot-latch” and honoring those who have passed “feast of the dead.” Another tradition that continues is the giving of names. The name given by the tribe’s name-giver would sometimes be kept secret, in keeping with the legend, to avoid evil intentions by spiritual enemies. Pocomoke People believe in an afterlife and show respect to all of nature by blessing all which is taken.

EUROPEAN CONTACT

Europeans began trading with the Pocomoke by the early seventeenth century. Trading was mutually beneficial; furs and skins being traded for steel tools, blankets, and other commodities. English colonists established plantations on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay which necessitated the transportation of craftsmen and laborers to build and maintain their dwellings. This was followed by a huge introduction of Negro slaves for field labor. These traders, colonists, craftsmen, and laborers brought numerous diseases upon the Pocomoke who, lacking immunities, succumbed to their ill effects in large numbers.

Virginia Eastern Shore colonists patented land on Pocomoke towns and on Pocomoke hunting and foraging areas. Some of these Virginia patents fell within lands and waters granted to Lord Baltimore under a 1632 royal grant. This encroachment continued until the border was marked in 1668 according to an agreement between Phillip Calvert, Esq. and Colonel Edmund Scarborough. The marked boundary and its arbitrary division cut through some Pocomoke territory; leaving Pocomoke towns and its hunting and foraging areas on both sides of the boundary line. Virginia colonists had previously raided Pocomoke towns, harassing and slaughtering its men, women and children. Now with a marked line, separating Virginia and Maryland, the Pocomoke, with a few exceptions, concentrated its people on the Maryland side of the line. Following the 1668 agreement, Maryland created a commission to issue its own patents and appointed this same Edmund Scarborough as one of the commissioners. Virginia land patents that encroached on Maryland’s charter were honored or reissued as Maryland patents, apparently an appeasement to Scarborough and his cohorts.

Maryland continued the removal of the Pocomoke People; culminating with the majority of Pocomoke, along with some neighboring Assateague People, taking refuge in Askiminokansen, one of several reservations established by Maryland. The Askiminokansen reservation failed to provide refuge from injustices by the colonists; who had designs on the reserved land and the aspiration to carve out their own county. Maryland’s reluctance to address these injustices and undeterred invasions allowed Askiminokansen to be patented out and accordingly, the Pocomoke were dispossessed of this reserved land.

Treaties between the Pocomoke and the Province of Maryland occurred from 1678 to 1742. The treaties were, in fact, a roadmap for removing the Pocomoke Nation from its homeland by congregating its people onto untenable reserves, disarming its men, applying English law and dominion, and interfering with its political and social intercourse with other nations. It can be rightly assumed that the treaties were designed to assuage the colonist’s fear of reprisals by the Pocomoke, and the loss of their ill acquired land and resources. A provision in the treaties for the Pocomoke’s “inviolable” right to hunt and fish was ignored and violated, even to this day. That “inviolable” right is diminished when put against the treaties as a whole.

The Pocomoke people have survived as descendant communities of remnants living along the necks of land between rivers, creeks and coastal bays, land found unsuitable for the colonist’s plantations. Family legends abound of marriages of Pocomoke to white and black persons; with only a few unions ever finding their way into official records and local church histories. Nevertheless, surviving Pocomoke descendants continue to proclaim their heritage and their recognition as a great nation.

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“Inviolable”: never to be broken, infringed, or dishonored