



Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation

A BRIEF HISTORY

YESÁH (THE PEOPLE)

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE OCCANEECHI BAND OF THE SAPONI NATION

The ancestors of the Occaneechi-Saponi were an ancient people who collectively called themselves **YESAH** or the people. The Yesah originally came from lands to the west, over the Appalachian and Blue Ridge Mountains in an area known today as the Ohio River Valley. Nearly 1,000 years ago, the Yesah came under attack from a powerful enemy. They were forced to migrate over the mountains to their east and settle in lands that they called **Ahkontshuck** or **Amanishuke**, the high or hilly land. As the Yesah settled in the new land they formed numerous villages such as the Sapona, Toter, and Occaneechi.

The village of Occaneechi was located on an island in the Roanoke River near Clarksville, Virginia. This village occupied a position of strategic importance since it was situated on the Great Trading Path (the Occaneechi Trading Path) to the Catawbas and the Cherokees. From their island stronghold, the Occaneechi were able to control trade throughout the southeast. The Occaneechi enforced their power and authority through warfare and intimidation, controlling access to the interior or western tribes. As a result the Yesah were spread far and wide and the general religion of the region was spoken in the Occaneechi dialect.

In May of 1676, the independence of the Occaneechi and their Yesah relatives came to an abrupt end. A rebellion was led by colonist Nathaniel Bacon against the colonial government of Virginia. Bacon was jealous of the lucrative trade in fur and copper which the governor of Virginia enjoyed with the Occaneechi. Bacon led his militia into the land of the Occaneechi in the spring of 1676 and forced a fight that ultimately broke the power of the tribe and scattered the Yesah. After being attacked by Bacon's militia the Occaneechi were forced south and settled along the Eno River in present day Hillsborough, NC. It was at this site that the tribe was visited by the English explorer John Lawson in 1701. Lawson was later lead out of Hillsborough by an Indian named Eno Will. The Occaneechi remained at this location for several decades.

In 1713, the Virginia colony and Great Britain signed a treaty of peace with the Yesah and the Occaneechi returned to Virginia where they were joined by their cousins the Saponi, Tutelo, Stuckeno, and Meiponsky. They were given a reservation in Brunswick County and a trading post called Fort Christianna. The Yesah named their nearby village **Jungatapurse** or the **Horse's Head**. Governor Spotswood of Virginia believed that the tribes at the fort could be educated and converted to Christianity. At that time, because the Saponis were the larger of all of the tribes at the fort, Governor Spotswood designated the title of all the tribes as Saponi and they were thereafter known as the Saponi Nation.

After the fort closed around 1717, the Saponi Nation made several migrations back and forth from Virginia to their kinsmen to the south, the Catawbas. During one of these visits in 1730, the colonial government reclaimed the reservation and patented the land out to colonists who had petitioned for it. Upon their return to Virginia in the year 1732, the tribe discovered that they no longer possessed a reservation. After that date the relationship of the Saponi Nation with the colony of Virginia deteriorated.

After returning from their second sojourn with their relatives in the Catawba Nation (1743-1747), in the mid 1700's the people of the Saponi Nation resettled in the land, which formed the counties of Brunswick, Greenville, Mecklenburg, Granville, and North Hampton on the Virginia-North Carolina border. There the tribe lived in several small associated settlements, the principal settlement in Southside, Virginia located in the section of Brunswick County, which would later become Greenville County. Having acquired European family names such as Corn, Guy, Haithcock, Harris, Hayes, Jeffries, Jones, Scott, Stewart, Watkins, and Whitmore, many of the tribesmen began to receive title to their ancestral

lands. During this period of time, the Saponi Nation remained politically distinct, maintaining relations with nearby tribes such as the Nottoway, Meherrin, and Tuscarora and sending delegates to meet with the governor at Williamsburg in 1757. As late as 1764, this Saponi community was still noted as distinct when they were reported by the Indian Superintendent of the South to have "60 gunman" in combination with their neighbors, the Nottoway. At that time, Lt. Governor Fauquier of Virginia reported that "tho' they dwell in peace in the midst of us ...the Saponi lead in great measure the lives of wild Indians." As late as the year 1775, the author James Adair reported in his book, *The History of the American Indians* that the Saponi were still living in Southside, Virginia.

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, a major split occurred among the Saponi people. As tributaries to Great Britain, the Saponi Nation had remained on good terms with the colonial government. When the colony of Virginia split from England, a part of the tribe under a chief named Harris, decided to remain loyal to the crown. This loyalist faction of the Saponi migrated north to New York where they merged with earlier migrant Saponi who joined loyalist Six Nation Iroquois tribes under Joseph Brandt. The Saponi who remained in Virginia supported the revolution. Several Saponi men fought on the American side of the revolution, serving in colonial forces in Virginia and North Carolina. Some of these veterans were later identified as having been Catawba soldiers. Among these Revolutionary soldiers were Robert Corn, William Guy, John and Simon Jeffries, Briton Jones and Charles Whitmore.

After the end of the Revolutionary War, the Commonwealth of Virginia became the most populous of the original thirteen states. The Saponi people, like other Indians in the South endured tremendous social and political pressures exerted upon them by neighboring whites who had little tolerance for free Indians. Due to growing pressures, full and mixed-blooded, non-reservated Indians were relegated to a broader class known as free persons of color or mulatto. As a result of growing white intolerance towards free persons of color that led to increasingly more discriminatory laws, many Saponi people left Virginia in search of greater freedom. Between the years 1790 and 1820, the bulk of the tribe migrated down the old Occaneechi trading paths unto their former lands near the Eno River in Orange County, NC. They resettled in Saponi communities located in the northwest section of Orange County.

Prior to migrating out of Virginia, many Saponi people had become acquainted with the Quaker faith and the tolerance it espoused. A few Saponi families associated with the Quakers and moved further west with them to Ohio and Indiana. Many of these people were identified at various times as being Catawba Indians. After their arrival west, the racial background of these settlers aroused suspicions by local Whites. To prove their Indian ancestry, between the years 1840 and 1890, several court cases arose which involved the right to vote and to attend public schools. These successful cases proved the Indian ancestry of these migrants.

After the Cherokee Treaty of 1828, part of the tribe sold their lands in Orange County and moved west to the newly opened county of Macon, North Carolina. These settlers maintained close ties with their relatives in Orange County, both corresponding and visiting one another. Unfortunately, they were not spared the vengeance of the Union Army during the close of the Civil War. As a result of their desperate condition, a sympathetic physician wrote to the Indian Commission in Washington, DC on their behalf in 1869 and 1872 seeking assistance to move them west to the Indian territories.

The Indian Commission acknowledged them as being Catawba Indians and as having once been part of the Catawba Nation. However, as they were Catawba Indians they were not eligible for federal assistance and the requests were denied. Afterwards, some of the families returned to Orange and Alamance Counties where they rejoined their relatives. In 1897 the United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs recognized the Macon County Settlement (and by inference their relatives in Orange/Alamance Counties and the diaspora) as being part of the Catawba Nation and include them in a memorial to the Catawba tribe in US Senate Document #144,

The bulk of the Saponi people remained in "Texas" forming an independent Indian community that was based on small-scale farming. However, due to racial intolerance, the Occaneechi-Saponi people continued to live quietly within their own community without publicly drawing attention to themselves. The Occaneechi-Saponi families owned tracts of several thousand acres of land. Some of the larger landowning families were the Jeffries and the Corns. In 1840 the Saponi people opened a single-room log schoolhouse to serve the educational needs of their children. By the 1870's community members opened Jeffries Cross Church and by the turn of the century they founded Martin's Chapel to provide religious and social structure for the community. The Martin's School and other nearby schools succeeded the original log cabin school and continued to serve the educational needs of tribal youth. In spite of Jim Crow laws throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the men of the community registered and voted in political elections.

In recognition of the existence of this distinct community, local maps of Alamance County, NC for over a 100 year period (1892, 1928, 1975, 1978, 1982) designated the Texas Community as a distinct community within the larger township of Pleasant Grove.

As time passed, smaller communities sprang from the Texas Community in nearby Cedar Grove (Orange County) in the 1880's and later in Alamance County in Mebane Oaks in the 1920's. Community activities such as church revivals, family reunions, and group labor parties have continued to keep the local communities united.

Just prior to 1920, the Bureau of Indian Affairs sent an agent to study the Texas Community in Alamance County. During the 1930's Clayton Jeffries and other members of the community made contact with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to ask for assistance in creating an Indian School. Although their efforts were unsuccessful, the Bureau's investigation did recognize both the Indian ethnicity of the people and the continued existence of their Indian community. The Indian identity of the community was reaffirmed in 1938 when a local paper, the Burlington Times News, published an article about the Texas community which described the origin and history of the Indian community. As late as 1941, with the inception of the selective service, Occaneechi men fought to have their identity properly recognized as Indian while they served their country during World War II.

During the 1970's the Guilford Native American Association, a local Native American organization visited the community, and described it as being Indian and reclusive. Several years later the people decided to take a more active role in Indian affairs. The Saponi people formally reorganized in 1984 as the Eno-Occaneechi Indian Association, Inc. The tribe had a tribal council of 12 which represents the tribe at local, state, and national levels and which serves the needs of the community. In February of

1995 the Tribal Council amended the name of the tribe to the *Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation* to more accurately reflect the history and ancestry of the tribe.

The Occaneechi tribe has had numerous accomplishments since their reorganization in 1984. The tribe has held annual summer Powwows and started in 1996 sponsoring spring and late fall festivals and Powwows in Alamance and Orange Counties in North Carolina. Beginning 1993, the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, the Virginia Department of Parks, specifically the Occaneechee State Park held Native American cultural and heritage festivals (powwows) in the state park in Clarksville, Virginia.

The Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation has expressed an interest in uncovering and preserving its rich cultural and historical legacy. Since 1985, the Occaneechi tribe has conducted extensive genealogical and historical research for the preparation of petitions for official state and federal recognition. The Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation was recognized by the state of North Carolina in 2002.

Since the 1980's the Occaneechi tribe has been involved with the research laboratories of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the excavation of the old Occaneechi village on the Eno River in Hillsborough, NC. As a result of this ongoing work the members of the tribe successfully petitioned the State of North Carolina in 1991 to erect a historical marker in honor of the Occaneechi tribe. Plans between Orange County and the UNC Research labs and the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation resulted in the construction of a replica of Occaneechi Town on the banks of the Eno River in Hillsborough, NC.

In August 2002, the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation embarked on an ambitious project; to begin buying back a portion of its ancestral lands in the "Little Texas" Community of NE Alamance County, North Carolina. This was called the Occaneechi Homeland Preservation Project. For the first time in over 250 years, the Occaneechi own land again as a Tribe, to be used for economic development for the tribal community, as well as for tribal administrative offices. These plans began to take shape in February 2004, when the tribe purchased 25 acres of rolling farmland on Daily Store Rd. on the headwaters of Stag Creek. The tribe has worked with the Landscape Architecture Department at North Carolina A & T University and the Rural Initiative Project, Inc. of Winston-Salem to create a master plan for the site, which will include:

- A permanent ceremonial ground (completed Spring 2005)
- Tribal Orchards with heirloom apples, chestnut and paw-paw trees and muscadine grapes
- Reconstructed 1701 Occaneechi Village and 1880's era farm (in construction)
- Educational nature trails (in planning)
- Tribal museum (in planning)
- Administrative office space, community meeting area, classroom space (in planning)

This complex serves as an educational tool, not just for the Tribal members, but for the public as a whole. Each Fall since 2005, the Occaneechi tribe has hosted over 600 area elementary and middle school students on the tribal center property, teaching them about traditional dance, lifeways, outdoor cooking, storytelling, flint-knapping, hunting and fishing, and Southeastern regalia. As the complex develops, this type of cultural/educational activity will be done on a regular basis, employing Tribal members as guides and cultural interpreters. In addition, classes have been conducted in beadwork, pottery making, tribal dance and primitive weaponry and tool making, just to name a few.

Annually, the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation holds Tribal Pow Wows on the ceremonial grounds which are open to the public. These Pow Wows occur in early June and have native dancing, singing, music, and storytelling as well as vendors selling food and Native American made arts and crafts.

Anyone interested in the lifestyle of the Siouan Tribes of the North Carolina and Virginia Piedmont will find the planned complex an invaluable resource, and the tribe is networking with the Alamance County Convention and Visitor's Bureau as it continues to develop the project. As a tourist attraction, it will, in conjunction with the Tribe's Pow-wows, festivals, and historical programs, draw thousands of visitors into the Alamance county area, while helping preserve the quiet rural way of life in the community.

The facility will increase the Tribe's self-sufficiency by bringing income into the tribal community, and providing employment for tribal members, employment that is much needed with the decline of the tobacco and textile industries in the region. It will make the tribe more independent by giving it a place of its own to hold tribal meetings, classes, and ceremonies without having to use the facilities of others. The Tribal Council meets there, as well as the Occaneechi Youth Council. Adult Literacy Classes for Tribal members, Neighborhood Watch, and other programs that benefit both Tribal members as well as the community at large. An in depth study of the Tutelo-Saponi language has been ongoing since 1991 with language classes being taught to the local community. The tribe produces a community newsletter to disseminate information and has its tribal office located on the 25-acre tribal grounds located at 4902 Daily Store Road, Burlington, NC.

The Occaneechi-Saponi people are working towards more unity with our sister tribes - teaching the youth our culture, preserving our language, and learning from and honoring our elders.

We look forward to a bright future for our children.

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For further information about the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation

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