

Native Americans of Maryland: Tidewater Indians

Provided courtesy of MdMN Program Instructor F. Kirk Dreier, kdreier@baltimorecountymd.gov

Objectives: To bring to light the complex tribal and social interrelationships the tidewater Indians had amongst themselves, their neighbors, and their environment. I want to blend what is known with anecdotal references by the earliest explorers and writers.

What are some of the things that people think, they know about Indians of tidewater MD today?

Where did these people come from originally? – Archeologists suggest that there had been a native presence within Maryland between 10 and 12 thousand years. One main tribe of Southern MD, the Piscataway had been living in the Baltimore region from 1300 AD to 1600 AD. 300 years or so.

John Smith visited the area of Baltimore County and beyond on July 24th 1608. Groups he met along the way were the Mattapaniest, the Patuxent's, Nanticoke's and the land areas were the Bolus (Gunpowder River) and Patapsco flues (rivers). Smith created a map of the bay, and noted that the Baltimore region was virtually uninhabited at that time. * Native villages tended to be way up stream in order to have fresh water a mile or more and may have been overlooked by Smith. Many groups in this area were under constant attack by Northern tribes.

As Smith travelled north he encountered Massawomecks, and the Tockwoghs. He noted (correctly) that the language changed. The upper end of the bay was inhabited by Iroquoian speaking groups. The Susquehannocks controlled the northern bay area and parts of the eastern shore. But they too, were in constant conflict with the group known as the Massawomecks. Another reason that Smith didn't see anyone was because of the conflict with the Massawomecks. As Smith and his crew travelled up the bay, they spent one night offshore Calvert Cliffs. The next day they went ashore but encountered no one.

In general the English were encountering one of the most politically complex Indian groups along the Atlantic coast. The Piscataway were a large tribe in Southern and Central Maryland. The Indians had a well-developed system of government. In some cases, four to six tribes would be organized under one leader. A paramount chief known as a Werowance (if male) or Werowansqua (if female) would be the paramount Chief. Under them were the Tyacs or lesser chiefs of other villages who were under the authority of the Werowance's (male or female). Individual native villages had their own advisors and leaders. Tyacs depended upon their Weeso (peace councils) for advice and also had leaders known as Cockarouse's or (war captain) who's authority was proven in battle or other exploits to provide advice.

Major village decisions were made by a council of men and woman and these were known as (matchacomicos) with the objective to reach consensus. The Tyacs and their "subjects" were subjected to "taxes "at various times by the Werowance. Eight parts in ten would be taken which allowed the Werowance to gain status, respect and allegiances by redistribution to allies.

Seasons

The Algonquin of Tidewater Maryland divided their year according the things that happened in nature around them or their activities due to those seasonal changes.

- The budding of spring
- The earring of corn or mahiz
- The highest sun
- The corn gathering or falling of leaf
- The winter or “cohonk” (sound of geese)

Corn or mahiz, (Spanish Name), had many uses in early summer. Corn was roasted in the ears as a vegetable. Some dried for winter use, some shelled and cooked with ashes to make hominy, some saved for seed, and some cut off cobs when green and dried (parched corn).

Subsistence Pattern

Piscataway – subsistence patterns were based on seasonal movement which included fishing rivers, streams and the bay, gathering wild plants and practicing horticulture or corn, beans and squash. Along the estuarine rivers, massive shell heaps (middens) have been found, many at Back River sites in Baltimore County. In September indigenous people often burned the forest and the barren areas, to regenerate new growth, clear the understory and attract deer, elk and bear.

Hunting

Late autumn entire villages moved to hunting grounds, with women and children setting up temporary camps. Working cooperatively villages would create huge fire drives for game. Deer would be shot with arrows, spears or chased out into the river to be clubbed or speared, and as many animals as possible would be killed.

Fishing

Smith said that in the spring and early summer they live off the fish that they catch in weirs. They also harvest oysters and clams and crabs. They use nets and spear for the larger sort.

Homes

Their villages were often located near springs or rivers of fresh water, and good soil for crops. During the time that Smith explores the bay, they lived in villages in MD called “Witch-ot”’s semi rectangular structures made of poles and lashed together and covered with mats or bark. Some villages were in a scattered arrangements and others were in an orderly pattern within a walled palisade or (stockade fence).

Tools

The Indians made tools from those things from their environment. Their technology was based on stone, bone, wood and fire. Thus they made tools from clay (ceramics), bones, antlers, stone tools, shell and fibers.* Copper was one metal they had obtained from trade to the far north. It was a status symbol most often worn by the paramount chief and his or her deputies.

Money and Trade

The natives made shell beads that were highly prized by all woodland Indians. Hard clams (quahogs) were made into wampumpeag or a strand of white beads. There could be two types of Wampumpeag. One was (peake) which were finished smooth polished beads white or purple which was highly prized. There was also (roanoke) which were broken pieces of shell drilled and strung on a string. Wampum was incredibly important and belts of these beads were used to seal peace treaties, commemorate an event enact war, or used for personal decoration, especially among the Werowance or Werowansqua's and their deputies.

Families and Kinship

Families were often based on matrilineal line. Children were considered their mothers, but fathers were only thought to be casually related to the father. Their maternal uncle would train the son and taught him hunting, fishing, tracking and other related skills. Daughters were trained by their mothers, maternal aunts. Clans were associated with animals or natural phenomenon. Many villages might use the same clan name. If a male member of the wolf clan met another member of a wolf clan from a distant town, they called one another brother.

Marriages often were arranged via the mother's sister. The maternal Aunt was sent to discuss their possible union from another clan. Fathers were not consulted since they were not, considered blood relatives. Marriages were arranged, but not forced and could even be dissolved at the annual green corn ceremony. This summer ceremony which coincided with feasts of green corn, was considered a time of purification and renewal.

Though the Piscataway had been one of the larger and more powerful tribes on the Western shore in 1608, Warfare may have been a major factor in the loss of population amongst the Piscataway. But certainly by 1699 their population, due to disease, alcoholism, and warfare had been reduced 99%. By the beginning of the 18th century the Piscataway had been reduced to 20 men, 20 women and about 30 children.