

A Brief History of the Haliwa-Saponi Indian Tribe

The Haliwa-Saponi Indian people number over 4,000 enrolled members and are descendants of the Saponi, Nansemond, Tuscarora, and some other regional tribes. During the English colonial era, these tribes maintained autonomous villages in what is now northeastern North Carolina and southern Virginia. The Saponi Indians, an eastern Sioux-speaking tribe, were first encountered by colonists on the Staunton (or Roanoke) River in Virginia around 1670. The Saponi were related in language and politically allied with the nearby Occaneechi and Tutelo tribes. The Saponi tribe moved around several times seeking various advantageous alliances, especially from their Sioux-speaking cousins, including the Catawba Nation in what is now South Carolina.

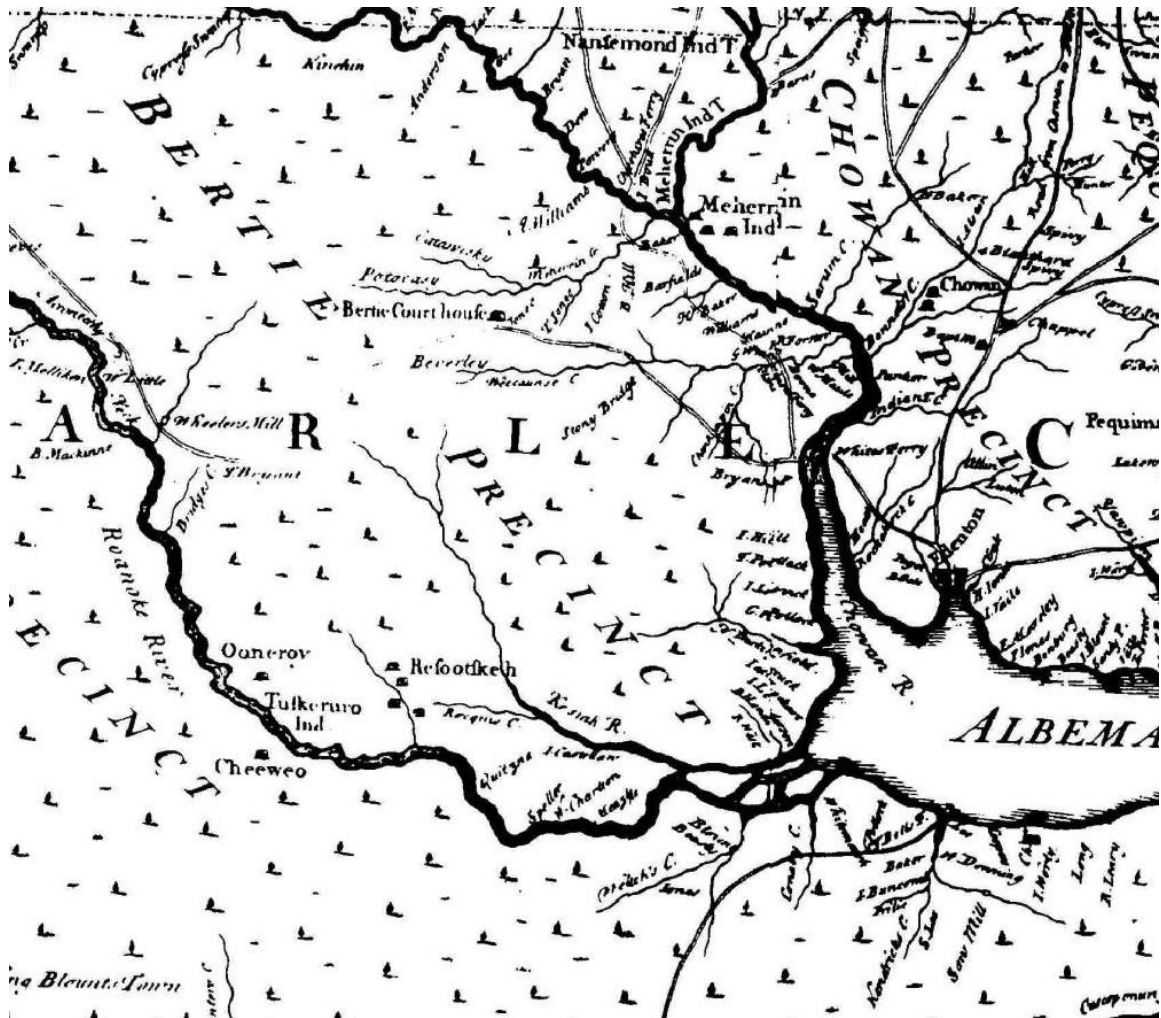


By 1709, after years of war with Iroquois (from New York) the Saponi and their allies the Occaneechi, Tutelo, Keyauwee and Eno-Shakori were much decimated, and this was worsened by bouts with infectious imported diseases. They numbered altogether around 750 souls. The tribes consolidated as the “Saponi Nation”, seeking strength in combination, and moved into northeastern North Carolina to be closer to colonial trade. Population decline continued and by 1714 the Saponi Nation (including now also the

Stuckanox tribe) numbered only about 300. On February 27th, 1714 (n.s.), they met at Williamsburg with the Tuscarora and Nottoway Indians to sign a new treaty of peace and trade with Virginia Governor Alexander Spotswood. That same year, the Virginia Council asked the Nansemond tribe to merge with the Saponi to strengthen their settlements and add to the buffer zone the colony was building between the plantation settlements and hostile northern raiders.

Spotswood convinced the colonial Board of Trade to approve the establishment of Fort Christanna between the Roanoke and Meherrin rivers, about thirty-two miles north of the Haliwa-Saponi Powwow grounds. The fort was to protect the settlers from the aggressive Iroquois Indians from the north, and to Christianize and educate the Saponi and other groups, and served as a major trading post for the corporate Virginia Indian Company. At least seventy Saponi children were educated and Christianized by Missionary teacher Charles Griffin, of North Carolina. By 1717, under charges of monopoly, the Board of Trade lost interest in the Fort and ordered the Virginia Indian Company disbanded. But the Saponi continued in trade relations with the colonists and according to historical documents at least some continued living in the same general Fort Christanna area from

1717 to 1729, while others migrated and scattered. One band of Tutelo, Saponi and Occaneechi made peace with their former enemies, the Iroquois at Albany in 1722 and were eventually adopted into the Iroquois Nations. One group of Saponi migrated south to their cultural allies the Catawba and occupied a village there between 1729 and 1732, afterwards returning with some Cheraw Indians to Virginia in 1733 only to find out their former lands had been patented out to colonists. Upset that their lands were taken, the Saponi made agreements with Virginia for new lands, but also made a separate arrangement with the Tuscarora Indians in April of 1733 to live with and under them.



Edward Mosely Map Depicting Indian Settlements, Tuscarora, Nantemond, Meherrin, and Saponi, 1733

The Tuscarora Reservation, known as Reskooteh Town, Indian Wood, was located in Bertie County, North Carolina, approximately thirty miles east of the modern Haliwa-Saponi community. The reservation consisted initially of 40,000 acres, bordered eastern Halifax County, and included a village known as the Sapona Town. By 1734 some Nantemond were living with the Nottoway Indians in Virginia, and other Nantemond had resettled in North Carolina. Also migrating with these Indians were Virginia traders who wanted to continue their trade relations with these tribes. One of the most noted

traders was Colonel William Eaton, an "Old Granville" (modern day Franklin, Warren, Vance) County resident, who traded with the Saponi, Catawba, and others. Historical documents from the 1730s to the 1770s show close associations between these tribes in the general Haliwa-Saponi area. The Haliwa-Saponi Tribal community began coalescing in southwestern Halifax County a little before the American Revolution.



Alfred Richardson, Jr. and Family, 1896

During the early 1800s these Indian descendants remained isolated in the Meadows area, home of the modern Haliwa-Saponi Tribe, and tried not to make waves, especially in the midst of government policies to remove all Indians living east of the Mississippi River. In 1835 North Carolina amended its constitution and barred people of color from voting and participating in the government. Many Haliwa-Saponi families reacted by migrating to areas north and west such as Chillicothe, Ohio, which had more favorable laws for non-white peoples. Other families chose to continue their lives in the Meadows. Oral tradition and documentation indicates that several families migrated out to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) on their own, some merging into the general population, while others were adopted by one of the Five Civilized Tribes in Oklahoma. Over the course of the 1800s Indians are noted several times in Halifax and Warren County records and other papers indicate a tight-knit, Indian community.

The Haliwa-Saponi spent the late 1800s attempting to organize its tribal government and fighting for separate Indian schools. In the 1870s the Haliwa-Saponi began meeting at Silver Hill, which is a remote location within the Meadows. These early efforts at formal organization resulted in the Bethlehem School (1882) and the Secret Hill School. In 1889, James Mooney of the Bureau of American Ethnology undertook a survey of eastern American Indians that included the Meadows Indians. But because he did not visit the community and perform ethnographic and historic research, scholarship about the Meadows Indians had to wait another fifty years. Gideon Branch Alston, a resident of Warren County, responded to Mooney and observed in Halifax County, North Carolina “a settlement of half-breed Indians numbering 3 to 5 hundred in a poor district called the meadows – Fine formed with straight black hair. Fond of intermarrying.” In 1896 under the leadership of Alfred



Dudley Lynch

Richardson, Jr., Dudley Lynch, Cofield Richardson, T.P. Lynch, Gordon Solomon Hedgepeth, and others 300 Meadows Indians applied to the Dawes Commission for



Tilman P. Lynch

membership in Five Civilized Tribes. Though unsuccessful the effort demonstrated an organized effort to gain recognition and a separate racial status. These leaders tried to formally re-organize the tribe, but found great opposition and little support because many Indians were simply afraid of the backlash they would face from asserting a separate status.

Finally, during the World War II. era tribal leaders took up the mantle to organize the Indian people and gain recognition of their birthright. With the help of Lumbee Indians of Robeson County, whom had already asserted their separate Indian identity and status years before, The Essex Indian Club was organized under the leadership of John C. Hedgepeth, Lonnie Richardson, B.B. Richardson, Percy Richardson, Chief Jerry Richardson, James Mills, Randolph Green. Willie Garland Richardson, and others by 1953. Renamed the Haliwa Indian Club, the organization is the direct predecessor of the contemporary tribal government. Around 1953 [W.R. Richardson](#) moved back home to the community after spending numerous years in Philadelphia, and was elected Chief of the Haliwa-Saponi Indian Tribe. Mr. Percy Richardson was served as Vice-Chief for a number of years.



John C. Hedgepeth



Haliwa Indian Gathering, 1958



Tribal Members at the Haliwa Indian School, ca. 1957

With the founding of their organization tribal members went about establishing separate institutions to proclaim and maintain their indigenous heritage. In 1957, the tribe established the Haliwa Indian School and the Saponi Indian Baptist Church (renamed the Mount Bethel Indian Baptist Church) in 1958. From 1957-1969, the Haliwa-Saponi maintained and operated the Haliwa Indian School, which was the only non-reservation, tribally supported school in the state; in other words, tribal members paid for supplies and materials, the building, maintenance, and teachers out of

their own pockets. During the years of operation, those that attended the school were shielded from the ridicule, taunting, and prejudice from non-Indian students. To this day, the Haliwa Indian School stands as a symbol of the tribe's struggle and success. In 1961 tribal leaders, including Chief W.R. Richardson, Bill McGee, Reverend C.H. Richardson, and others joined the Red



Ground Breaking of the Saponi (Mt. Bethel) Indian Baptist Church, 1958

Power Movement for Native American Rights through the American Indian Chicago Conference. These efforts

propelled the tribe to seek recognition as an Indian Tribe and on April 15, 1965 the State of North Carolina formally recognized the Haliwa Indians. With help from the Chickahominy Indians of Virginia the tribe celebrated its recognition with an annual powwow. The tribe became incorporated in 1974 and added Saponi to its tribal name in 1979 to reflect historical origins of the people. The tribe has since built an administrative building, multipurpose building, and instituted various service programs. Programs include tribal housing, daycare, senior citizens program, community services, Workforce Investment Act, cultural retention, youth programs, and economic development.

Federal recognition through the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs' Branch of Acknowledgement and Research (BAR) remains a top priority of the tribe. The tribe submitted a formal petition in 1989 and is currently seeking and compiling additional information in order to respond to the Office of Federal Acknowledgement (OFA) Letter



Tribal Members at the National Museum of the American Indian Opening, September 2004

The school currently operates grades k-12. The tribe continues to honor its elders and ancestors with its culture and community life.



Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School Students and Faculty

of Obvious Deficiencies (L.O.D.). The tribe continues to perform research, update our files, and monitor the federal acknowledgement process.

One of the tribe's most exceptional accomplishments is the opening of the Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School, which boasts a curriculum based on the standard course of study, small classrooms, technology, and American Indian Studies.