



The Algonquian-Speaking Indians of Maryland

The Algonquian-speaking Indians of the Chesapeake Bay region have left a lasting legacy in our language, place names, food, history and culture in Maryland. The Algonquian family of languages was widespread throughout the eastern United States, extending along the Atlantic shore from North Carolina to Maine. Archaeological research reveals evidence of spring oyster and fishing camps, summer and fall villages along the rivers, and winter hunting camps in the interior forest.

The most powerful Algonquian-speaking Indian political organization on the Western Shore of Maryland was the Piscataway chiefdom located along the Potomac River. The name Piscataway Creek reflects the location of the principal territory of the Tayac, the supreme chief of the Piscataway. Other smaller groups who were part of the Piscataway chiefdom were the Anacostians, the Mattawomen, the Nanjemoy and the Potapoco. Two chiefdoms on the lower Potomac River were independent of the Piscataway. They were called the Choptico and the Yaocomico.

Four smaller chiefdoms of Algonquian speaking people lived along the Patuxent River. In 1608 John Smith recorded 17 villages along the tidewater part of the river. The most powerful of the four chiefdoms was the Patuxent chiefdom of today's Calvert County. The word Patuxent in Algonquian means "at the falls or rapids in the stream," which was a geographic reference to the location of the chief village on Battle Creek.

The up-river chiefdom, the Mattapanient, lived in today's northern Calvert and eastern Prince George's counties. The Mattapanient welcomed the other Patuxent chiefdoms to join their reservation, established in the 1650's. The combined population stayed here until 1692, when they resettled with the Choptico Indians at their reservation along Choptico (Chaptico) Creek in St. Mary's County.

The chiefdoms on the lower Eastern Shore included the Assateagues along the Atlantic shore, as well as the Pocomoke along the Pocomoke River. Other chiefdoms for which rivers are named in Maryland included the Annemessex, Monie, Manokin, Nanticoke and Choptank. The Nanticoke was the most powerful paramount chiefdom on the Eastern Shore and the oldest paramount chiefdom documented for the entire Bay region. On the upper Eastern Shore, additional chiefdoms included the Mattapeake and Monoposon on Kent Island, Ozine/Wicomiss on the Chester River, and the Toghwoh on the Sassafras River.

The Algonquian Indian population declined throughout the 17th century as a result of European introduced illness, loss of land, and warfare. Many of the Piscataway and associated Indians migrated out of Maryland between 1690 to 1710 due to pressure from both the English and the Five Nation Iroquois and Susquehannocks. Some families stayed behind, and the descendents of those families live in Southern Maryland and the Eastern Shore today.

The Indians of the lower Eastern Shore remained independent of and maintained their reservations for a longer time because the English waited until the 1660's to settle the lower Eastern Shore. The Nanticoke began migrating out of Maryland in large numbers by the 1740's and by 1822, the last reservation lands of the Choptank Indians were sold by Maryland. Nanticoke, Assateaque and Pocomoke descendents reside today in Delaware and parts of Maryland.