Roots of Virginia Culture: Virginia Tribes Yesterday and Today

NATIVE PEOPLE have lived in the area now called Virginia for close to 15,000 years, but Virginia tribal elders say, “We have always been here.”

The early inhabitants of Virginia were hunter-gatherers. Over time, they settled into specific regions and outlined their territories. About 20,000 Algonquian-speaking people were incorporated into the chiefdom of Powhatan, the spiritual leader of thirty-two tribes in the Chesapeake Bay region. A similar number of Siouan-speaking people lived in the western Piedmont and mountain regions of Virginia; other tribes inhabited the south.

The tribes practiced agriculture and shared resources with the English colonists who arrived in 1607. However, relations between the English settlers and the tribes soon deteriorated. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Virginia Indians were policed by the colonial government and reduced to poverty as their landholdings dwindled. A number of laws were passed that restricted the civil rights of tribal members. Public schools were not open to Virginia Indians until 1963.

Since the 1980s, the Virginia tribes have worked to reclaim and retain their cultural practices and improve economic conditions. Chiefs are elected, and tribal councils address issues of concern and interest. Six tribes are pursuing federal acknowledgement through a bill introduced in Congress.

Several tribes have established heritage classes, purchased land in their homeland areas, and reclaimed their languages. Tribal artists practice beadwork, leather crafting, wood carving, pottery, basket weaving, and traditional dance.

In 2006, fifty-five tribal delegates traveled to Kent County, England—the first time a delegation of Virginia Indians visited England in more than 250 years. Their trip embodied the hope that tribal elders have for the future: “We will always be here.”