

Meherrin: People of the Water ^[1]

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by Michael Coffey

Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History, 2018.

See also: [The Meherrin](#) ^[2], The NC Humanities Council and the UNC American Indian Center

The Meherrin call themselves “People of the Water,” or Kauwets’a:ka (pronounced gau went ch-AAga). They are an Iroquois people, and thus share language, culture, traditions, and allegiance with the Haudenosaunee or Six Nations (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora), the Cherokee, and the Nottoway. Mohawk tradition states that in ancient times all Iroquoian people lived beside the Mississippi River. Around a thousand years ago, the ancestors of the Meherrin, the Tuscarora and the Nottoway left this area and traveled down the Kanawha River. The Tuscarora settled in what is now North Carolina, while the Meherrin and the Nottoway settled in southern Virginia. The Meherrin, Tuscarora and Nottoway were referred to as Mangoac /Mangoak, a generic term used by the Algonquin Nations to denote Iroquoian speaking people.

On August 29, 1650, an expedition from Fort Henry (Petersburg, Va.) led by English merchant and explorer Sir Edward Bland visited the Meherrin village of Cowonchahawkon (Emporia). Bland’s account of his visit, contained in his history of the expedition, is the first known written account of the Meherrin people. By the mid-seventeenth century, encroaching European settlements placed increasing pressure on the native peoples, including the Meherrin. Following Bacon’s Rebellion, all Virginia tribes signed the Middle Plantation Treaty of 1677, which subjugated them to Charles II of England and the governor of Virginia. Shortly thereafter, the Meherrin left the area of Cowonchahawkon and settled on Tawarra/Taurura Creek near Boykins, Virginia. Other members of the tribe moved north of the Blackwater River, but in 1687 they were ordered by the Virginia Council of State ordered to return to the south of the river. About 1691, the tribe moved across the border into North Carolina.

In 1705, the Meherrin were assigned a reservation (Maharineck) by the Virginia Assembly in an area that was subject to a boundary dispute between Virginia and North Carolina. As a result, the question of which colony had a say in Meherrin affairs became a part of the borderline dispute. In 1707, the Virginia Council of State supported the Meherrin against pressures from the North Carolina government over control of the Meherrin land and whether the tribe should pay tribute to the colony. In 1715, an agreement was made on the general boundary line, although the details were to be agreed upon following a survey. If confirmed, the Meherrin would now be on the North Carolina side of the borderline. To protect their lands from the claims of settlers, the Meherrin successfully petitioned the North Carolina government to grant them a reservation. After a joint surveying expedition mounted by both colonies in 1728, the North Carolina-Virginia border was finalized. The Meherrin became tributaries of North Carolina in 1729 through an act of the colonial legislature.

By 1770, the Meherrin had moved to Potecasi Creek which was called at the time, by the English, “Meherrin Creek.” The last Meherrin town is shown on the Samuel Lewis map of 1795. In 1802, some Meherrin left and went north with the Tuscarora and were taken under the protection of the Haudenosaunee. The remaining Meherrin stayed near Potecasi Creek and Union, Winton, Ahoskie and Archer Town. The Meherrin have fought in defense of the United States (or “Turtle Island”) in every major conflict. In 1757, during the French and Indian War, Meherrin and members of other local native peoples were recruited by Colonel George Washington to fight the French. Later Meherrin fought in the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. In 1975, a modern tribal government was created, led by a chief and seven elected council members.

The Meherrin received formal recognition from the North Carolina government in 1986. On the first week of October, an annual powwow is held on the tribal grounds between Ahoskie and Murfreesboro on Highway 11 North.

For a more complete history of the Meherrin Tribe visit www.meherrinnation.org [3].

Tribal Leaders: [4]

Chief Wayne Brown

Tribal Chairman Jonathan Caudill

References:

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Thomas E. Ross, *American Indians in North Carolina: Geographic Interpretations* (1999).

Subjects:

[American Indians](#) [9]

[Meherrin Indians](#) [10]

Authors:

[Coffey, Michael W.](#) [11]

Origin - location:

[Hertford County](#) [12]

From:

[Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History.](#) [13]

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