

Saponi Indians ^[1]

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Saponi Indians

by Michael D. Green, 2006

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The Saponi Indians were a Siouan-speaking people who lived in the Virginia Piedmont near present-day Charlottesville. [John Smith](#) ^[4] found them there, in a region he broadly labeled Monacan, in 1607. Sometime during the next several decades they moved south, seldom remaining stationary until the mid-eighteenth century. A small group of corn farmers and hunters, the Saponi moved to find protection from more powerful enemies.

In 1670 German explorer [John Lederer](#) ^[5] found the Saponi among the Nahyssan on the Staunton River in Virginia. In the 1680s, they were on the upper [Roanoke River](#) ^[6], living adjacent to the [Occaneechi](#) ^[7]. When [John Lawson](#) ^[8] visited them in 1701, the Saponi were on the Yadkin River near present-day Salisbury, along with the Tutelo and [Keyauwee](#) ^[9]. The Saponi chief told Lawson that the three tribes were planning to join and move again. In 1714 the Saponi, Occaneechi, Tutelo, and other small tribes concluded a treaty with Virginia governor Alexander Spotswood to return to that colony and settle on a six-mile-square reservation laid out on the Meherrin River. Named Fort Christanna, the reservation was to be a refuge for [Piedmont](#) ^[10] Indians willing to serve the Virginia settlements as frontier scouts. In 1729 the Saponi and their friends abandoned the fort and headed for the [Catawba River](#) ^[11], where the Catawba Nation offered sanctuary.

In 1731 growing dissatisfaction with their situation caused the Saponi to fragment. A few remained with the Catawba, but most left. Some moved north to join those [Tuscaroras](#) ^[12] who remained in North Carolina after the Tuscarora War (1711-13); others migrated to New York, where the Cayuga, one of the Six Nations of Iroquois, adopted them. Still others drifted toward the English settlements, where they were ultimately absorbed into the general population. By the early 2000s the Haliwa-Saponi tribe was a small, state-recognized tribe with headquarters in the town of Hollister in [Halifax County](#) ^[13].

References:

James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (1989).

Douglas L. Rights, *The American Indian in North Carolina* (2nd ed., 1957).

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