

## The Monacans Fact Sheet<sup>1</sup>

### Life in the Floodplain

- The Monacan Indians chose to live along the ***James River***, which was essential for transportation, trade, farming, and fishing.
- They settled in the ***flood plain*** of the James River because the soil was especially rich with nutrients for planting crops.
  - The river sometimes flooded, but there were more trees and no paved roads, which meant that the soil was better able to absorb water.

### The River and the Rhythm of Life

- The Monacans have lived in the ***Piedmont region*** of Virginia for more than 10,000 years. There are still Monacans living in Virginia today!
- Before 900 AD they lived in small, nomadic groups that moved around to hunt and gather food. Around 900 AD, they began to establish permanent villages along major rivers.
- The ***major crops*** that the Monacans grew were maize (corn), beans, squash, and tobacco. They also ate fish, shellfish, deer, rabbit, turkey, nuts, grapes and wild plants.

### Worlds Collide

- ***Capt. John Smith*** founded Jamestown in 1607, but did not have contact with Monacan Indians until 1608. He described the Monacans as “neighbors and friends” and included their settlement on the ***Map of Virginia*** that he published in 1612.
- Europeans brought ***diseases*** to which the Monacan Indians had never been exposed, and many Monacans died as a result.
- ***Trade relationships*** between the Monacan Indians and other tribes changed when the British arrived, especially the Siouan-speaking Monacans and the Algonquian-speaking tribes led by ***Chief Powhatan***.
  - ***Copper*** was important to Chief Powhatan’s people for its spiritual power, but it was found on land that belonged to the Monacan people. Chief Powhatan had to stay friendly with the Monacans to get copper, but when the British settlers brought to trade, he did not have to rely on the Monacans anymore.

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<sup>1</sup> Information on this sheet is adapted from the exhibit text developed by Lauren Turek and Julie Schiff.

## Modern Monacans

- ***War and disease* were two main problems for the Monacans in the 1600s and 1700s. Many Monacans died, and others found new places to live.**
  - **Some stayed in small communities in the Piedmont region, some left the area and merged with other Indian tribes, and some married European or African settlers.**
- **Monacan Indians established one settlement near Lynchburg, VA in the late 1700s and a second settlement on *Bear Mountain* in the 1800s. Reverend Arthur Gray built an Episcopal mission on Bear Mountain in 1907 and brought a new religion and schools to the Monacans.**
  - ***Prejudice and racism* made it hard for Monacans to find schools, jobs, and houses that would accept them. Virginia's state government also passed laws denying Monacan Indians the opportunity to attend public schools and for fair employment and housing.**
  - **In 1964, the Amherst County school system let Monacans, who lived on Bear Mountain, go to public schools.**
- **Virginia *officially recognized* the Monacan Indians as a tribe in 1989. The federal government *officially recognized* the Monacans as a tribe in 2018.**
- **Today (2021), there are more than 2400 members of the Monacan tribe. They still have a settlement on Bear Mountain with a *tribal museum* where visitors can learn about their history.**
  - **There is a powwow on Bear Mountain each May and a homecoming celebration each October to celebrate the culture of the Monacan Indians.**

**Game Questions**  
**Station 1: Monacans**

**Name three reasons why the Monacans settled along the James River.**

**List two main crops grown by the Monacan Indians.**

**In what region of Virginia did the Monacans settle?**

**Who published a *Map of Virginia* in 1612 with the Monacan settlement listed?**

**What is one reason that the arrival of the British affected the Monacans (either directly or indirectly)?**

**What important metal encouraged Chief Powhatan to maintain a friendly relationship with the Monacans until the British arrived?**

**Identify one major problem that the Monacans faced in the 1600s or 1700s as a result of their interaction with the British and other Indian tribes.**

**Where is there an active Monacan population in Virginia today?**

**Why was it difficult for Monacans to attend school, and find jobs and housing in the 1900s?**

**What is one way that members of the Monacan tribe continue to educate people about their culture and history?**

**A**

## Learn about a Monacan Indian village in Virginia



You can see this highway marker at the intersection of Route 29 and Rio Mills Road in Charlottesville, Virginia. It tells of the original Monacan Indian Village, Monasukapanough, which John Smith listed on a map of Virginia that he made in 1612 and the Monacan village that still exists in Virginia today.

### Activities:

- B. Try to find the Monacan village, Monasukapanough, on John Smith's 1612 *Map of Virginia*.
- C. Make your own historical marker to take home or be displayed at the Scottsville Museum.

Marker located at: 38° 6.183' N, 78° 27.612' W in Charlottesville, Virginia, in Albemarle County (source: <http://www.hmdb.org>)

Original image by J. J. Prats, June 15, 2008 (permission granted by photographer) Photo Source: <http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=19841>

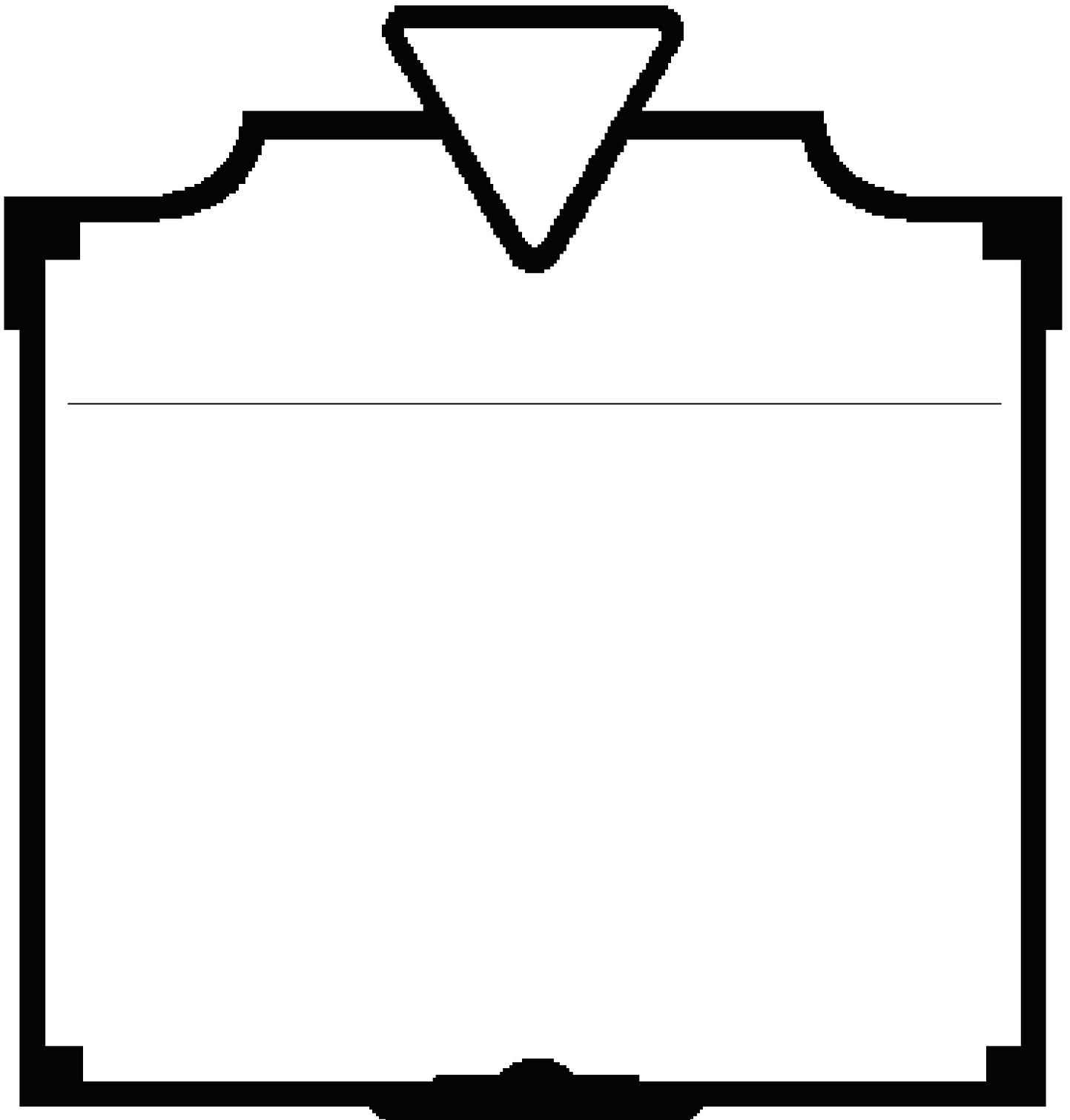
**“Near here, on both sides of the Rivanna River, was located the Monacan Indian village of Monasukapanough. This village was one of give Monacan towns that Captain John Smith recorded by name on his 1612 *Map of Virginia*, though many more existed. Monasukapanough was a chief’s village and was occupied for several centuries until it was abandoned in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Monacan descendants still reside throughout the central Virginia area. The tribe’s headquarters today is on Bear Mountain in Amherst County.” – inscription on highway marker**



# C

## Create your own historical marker!

- Write 2-4 sentences about your town and draw a picture using the materials in the bin.  
*(Use the historical marker from Activity A as an example)*
- Don't forget to write the name of your town and the state if it's not in Virginia.
- Be a part of preserving local history! Give your historical marker to the docent before you leave and it will be displayed so other visitors can learn about your town.



## WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

The Monacans used the rich resources of their native Virginia for a varied menu of fruits, vegetables, grains and meats. As farmers, they grew the “three sisters,” squash, corn and beans, in their fields, as well as sunflowers. As gatherers of wild foods, they knew where to find wild grapes, persimmons, pawpaws, blackberries, huckleberries, plums, black raspberries, walnuts, hickory nuts and hazelnuts in season. All of these delicious fruits and nuts can still be found growing wild in central Virginia. They preserved some of the fruits for winter by drying them in the sun. When they wanted to eat them, the fruit could be reconstituted with boiling water.

Chestnuts were another important food. Unfortunately a blight affected chestnut trees in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and although they come up as young tree, they never reach maturity. They also ate acorns, which had to be processed in boiling water and then dried and pounded into flour to become edible. Raw acorns are toxic to humans.

Corn was eaten fresh—roasted ears just as we like it today—but was also removed from the cob and parched in the fire for winter use. Once dried it could be cooked in a kind of stew or ground into cornmeal. Corn cakes, which the early European settlers learned to love as “johnny cakes,” were made of corn meal mixed with hot water and then fried on a soapstone griddle or flat stone.

The meat from small animals, such as rabbit and squirrel, was usually consumed fresh. When a deer was killed, however, there was too much meat to eat before it spoiled. After roasting the best cuts, the rest was dried, like jerky. This was good to eat later and also handy for carrying on a journey. Turkey was another favorite meat.

Cooking was done out of doors in warm weather. Food was cooked in clay or soapstone pots, which could be put in the ashes. Meat was roasted on a spit or a rack over the fire. Wood was used for plates and serving dishes, and gourds made good storage bowls and ladles—see two examples in the Monacan case.

The James River and its tributary streams were rich in fish and shellfish, such as mussels (clams) and crayfish. Some fish like shad, bass, herring, and bream can still be caught, while others, like the native American sturgeon are almost extinct. Run-off from fields and lawns has filled our rivers with silt, which is not a good environment for many fish. Fish have also been wiped out by other kinds of pollution, such as chemical pesticides and herbicides, as well as sewage. Sometime you will see a warning not to eat fish from our rivers, due to a chemical spill or other problems.

Fishermen caught their prey with nets, fishing lines and hooks, and with weirs, or fish traps, built in the river. Look for some fishhooks made from bone or deer antler in the Monacan case. Also look at the fancy lures used in more recent times in the recreation case.

Having to rely on their own ingenuity, unlike we supermarket-shopping folks, Native Americans in Virginia used some foods that you probably have never tasted, such as Snapping Turtle Stew. The account below comes from the book, *We're Still Here: Contemporary Virginia Indians Tell Their Story*, by Sandra Waugaman.

“Turtle hunting, or trapping, is only done in the warmer months, July through October. When it gets cold the turtles stay in the warmer water at the bottom of the river, but when it’s warm, they like to sun themselves on trees or rocks. The hunt begins with a special ceremony. Assistant Chief Fortune (of the Rappahannock tribe) says, ‘We ask the Great Creator for a good hunt, and we always give thanks for whatever we catch. That’s something we have to do. That was the way I was brought up. A few other men and I pick a spot and walk around and look for turtles. You very rarely see a really big one sitting out there in the river, but if you see smaller ones sunning themselves, nine times out of ten you’ll find bigger ones you don’t see. That’s where we set our traps. Our ancestors used small sapling trees, sharpened the ends, ran twine through a notch, and put bait, eel or cut up fish on it. Nowadays some use metal poles, but I still use a sapling. The reason for the sharpened end is that you need to stab it into the dirt at the bottom of the river, and you need to stick it in pretty deep. You have to be careful and not put it too close to the bank, because if the turtle can get his claws into anything he can pull the whole thing out. So you want to put the trap in pretty deep water where he can’t touch bottom, so he can’t get a grip on anything to pull the pole out. After the traps are set, we check them twice a day, morning and evening.

‘Once we’ve caught a turtle, we bring it home and put it in a barrel or tub of water and keep it there for seven days. We purify them by giving them just a little lettuce or cabbage to eat, no meat or anything like that. This purifies their system; it cleans their insides out. Before we kill the turtle we do another ceremony, a blessing for the turtle. That means something to us because he’s giving his life for us. Once he’s been killed we put him in scalding water for a few minutes. That loosens the skin from the shell so we can cut the shell off. Then we cut the meat out. Nothing is wasted, everything is used. Sometimes we use the shell for a shield.’

“Assistant Chief Fortune says the turtle meat can be fried or made into a stew. ‘My mom would add water, potatoes, and corn, and cook it in a big iron pot over an open fire. We did this when my brother got married. A lot of people from Richmond who were friends of my brother and his wife came, and they sat around eating it, but they didn’t know what it was. They probably wouldn’t have tried it if they knew it was turtle stew, but after they learned what it was they said they really enjoyed it.’” [pp. 90-91]

Before you think of trying this, Fortune warns us that snapping turtles are very dangerous if provoked. “It can take two or three people to get those big ones in the boat,” he says.

**Would you like to plan a Monacan dinner? Here is one menu:**

Roast turkey (over an open fire)

Stewed dried corn

Baked squash

For dessert: whatever nuts or berries are in season.

**Or, design another menu from the foods listed in this article and write the menu below:**