

Margaret Moore

### The Sappony Tribe of Person County

The Sappony tribe has been known to inhabit Person County since the early 1700s. Currently, the tribe is divided into seven main families, and reside in the areas surrounding the towns of Roxboro and Virgilina, on both sides of the North Carolina-Virginia border. These people were living in North Carolina far before it was settled, and they have helped shape the state and the counties they reside in. Settlers encountered the Sappony tribe in 1728, when William Byrd was surveying what is now North Carolina. Ned Bearskin, a member of the tribe, assisted Byrd and his crew. His contributions led to the successful establishment of the North Carolina-Virginia border line. Additionally, he showed Byrd how to make a natural bug repellent, taught him how to safely approach wolves, and even hunted for him and his crew. Byrd recorded in his journal that the Sappony people “ had the reputation of being the honestest, as well as the bravest Indians we have ever been acquainted with ” (Byrd 88).

As time progressed, the Sapponyes were displaced due to increased British occupation, which moved the tribe to an area around Virgilina, Virginia known as High Plains. Despite the mistreatment the tribe experienced at the hands of the settlers, many Sappony people decided to fight on behalf of America during the Revolutionary War. After the war, life for the Sappony continued as it had before, with the exception of the presence of the new Americans.

A few decades after the establishment of High Plains, the Sappony moved back to Person County. The tribe went on to establish their own church, Christ Church Mayo Chapel, in 1830, which ended up becoming the location of the tribe’s first official school. However, due to the horrors of segregation, the local government decided that members of the tribe were not allowed to attend schools for white children or Black children, and any appeals that the tribe made to

receive funding for their school were ignored. This was becoming an issue, because the size of the school was struggling to meet the educational needs of the Sappony students. This problem was finally resolved by a generous member of the tribe, Green Martin. Martin donated some of his land for a new school to be built on. As a result, High Plains Indian School was established in 1911. That year, North Carolina finally recognized the Sappony as an official tribe, and offered them state funding for their school.

Little is known about the day-to-day lives of the Sappony during the first two centuries of North Carolina's existence. However, it is known that the tribe "traded fur and skins for land and protection from the Colonial government" (Person County Museum of History, n.d.). Later, likely around the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Sappony tribe developed a community that was dependent on agriculture. The main crop grown was tobacco, which was traded with colonists. Until the end of the twentieth century, tobacco farming was one of the main sources of income for members of the tribe. Due to racist policies and segregation, farming was one of the only professions that Native people in Person County were allowed to have.

Work, worship, and school were the main facets of life for the Sappony people. Quilting was also a large part of their culture and daily routines. Women from each family would prepare their own quilting squares, and then meet in a house to assemble a quilt. Each night in the weeks preceding winter, they would move as a group from house to house to ensure that each family had their own beautiful, handmade quilt to combat the cold weather. This tradition continues today, during the tribe's annual Quilting Bee. The Person County Museum of History houses some of these quilts, as well as maps, tools, and photographs that depict centuries of Sappony life.

It is obvious that the Sappony tribe has had an undeniable impact on Person County, and the states of North Carolina and Virginia. They are an amazing community who have always prioritized family, hard work, and heritage, while combating unbelievable challenges. They are a group of people who should be celebrated, respected, and recognized.



*The official Sappony insignia*

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