

Native American Notes

By Frank Walker in the Orange County Historical Society *Record*:¹

“1. By the beginning of the 17th century, the dynamic Algonquian leader Powhatan, with the help of family members, had formed a powerful confederation in what are today the Tidewater regions of Maryland and Virginia. By 1618, however, Powhatan was dead, and his brother, Opechancanough, had succeeded him as chief. Opechancanough had become alarmed by the growing occupation of his lands by the English settlers, and in 1622, he orchestrated a massacre on Good Friday that year that killed between a third and a quarter of the entire population of the Virginia colony...Author Philip Levy writes, ‘Opechancanough’s attack killed many colonists, but the near total surprise of the assault and the vulnerability it exposed and exploited literally added insult to injury. In the attack’s wake, officials on both sides of the Atlantic began to rethink the colony’s discredited defenses and plan for the future. But first backers and governors took to pointing fingers and shifting blame for the colony’s weakness.

“2. On May 5, 1864, Confederate General A.P. Hill led his troops out of Orange County and into the Wilderness on the Orange Plank Road (Route 621). At a clearing in the Wilderness known as the ‘Widow Tapp Farm,’ Hill and his troops encountered strong Federal resistance, and desperate fighting ensued.

“An interesting sidebar note to the Civil War history created on the Widow Tapp Farm was the Native American connection to this land that had become the final resting place for many a Confederate and Federal soldier. Catherine Dempsey Tapp, almost universally remembered only as the ‘Widow Tapp,’ had been married to Vincent Tapp. Vincent could trace his ancestry to King William Taptico, the last Chief of the Wicomico to be elected in the ancient tribal tradition. The remaining few chiefs were appointed by non-Wicomico authorities. The Wicomico spoke the Algonquian language and were a part of the powerful Powhatan confederation.

“3. When Captain John Smith explored up the Rappahannock River in 1608, his ship could go only as far as the first set of falls (rapids) in the river, the present-day location of Fredericksburg. A delegation of Native Americans from the Rapidan River area, however, came east and met with Smith. Based on their statements, Smith drew a map of the upstream area, and in the process identified a Manahoac village on the Rapidan that he called *Shackaconia*, the name of its chief.

¹ Frank Walker, “Native American Notes,” Orange County Historical Society *Record*, Vol. 36, No.3 (Fall 2005), 3.

“In 1914 when Governor Alexander Spotswood was establishing Fort Germanna in what is today’s eastern Orange County, an abandoned Indian village site was pointed out to him and identified as old Shackaconia. That site was west of Germanna and just across Fox Neck, a narrow point of land created by meander of the Rapidan. The Saponi that Spotswood brought to the Germanna area settled on that site for the short time that they were in Orange County. After the Saponi left, European settlers began to occupy the site. Today it is known as the settlement of ‘Indiantown.’

“4. In the western end of Orange County, there is a Native American burial mound that has been identified as Monacan/Manahoac, related tribes that spoke the Siouan language and were connected with the Sioux of the American Great Plains. Thirteen such mounds have been identified in this part of Virginia, with the ‘Rapidan Mound,’ as it is known, being the largest by far. It has been estimated that the Rapidan Mound could contain as many as two thousand burials. The mound also contains a variety of artifacts.

“Unfortunately, the Rapidan Mound was established right on a bank of the Rapidan River and the river has shifted enough to where the entire mound is likely to be washed away over time. There have been several archeological studies of the mound, however, and a significant body of information about it will exist even after the mound itself is gone. One such study was reported in 1982 in Occasional Paper #2, ‘The Rapidan Mound Revisited,’ by Sandra D. Speiden and others, with copies of the same available at the Orange County Historical Society’s Research Center.”