

REMNANTS OF THE MACHAPUNGA INDIANS
OF NORTH CAROLINA

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ON Roanoke island and some of the adjacent sand islands and on the mainland of Dare and Hyde counties on the coast of North Carolina are a few families of mixed-blood, descendants of the local Indian tribes. Having recently visited these people to rescue, if possible, some facts concerning their early culture and language, I should like to make available to ethnologists the results of my trip, meager as they are.

According to the accounts furnished by Raleigh's Expedition,¹ being the earliest notice that we have of these tribes, the region between Albemarle and Pamlico sound was the home of the Secotan Indians. John White, the artist of Raleigh's expedition, gives some sketches of these people, who, from the evidence of a few place names, and through their relationship to the Weapemeoc and Pamlico bands, of whose language Lawson has left us a vocabulary, we know to be Algonkian, probably one of the southward drifting branches from the Powhatan group of Virginia. Lawson in 1714² has left us some more information bearing on these tribes, while the colonial documents of North Carolina contain a few later notices. Lawson names several local bands inhabiting the area embraced within the territory designated by White as Secotan, among them the Hatteras band occupying the sand banks off the coast, and the Machapunga on the mainland, near Mattamuskeet lake. After the expulsion of the Tuscarora from North Carolina the coast tribes seem to have faded from history and, so far as I can find, we have no definite mention of them in the nineteenth century. Whether the bulk of these natives actually joined the

¹ *Narrative of the First English Plantation of Virginia*, Thomas Hariot, London, 1588—Quaritch Edition, 1893.

² *The History of North Carolina*, John Lawson, London, 1714. Raleigh, 1860.

migrations of the Tuscarora and the Siouan tribes to the north, or whether they scattered and became merged with the negroes and whites, we are at a loss to conclude.

A visit to their old home, however, and persistent inquiry among the settlers of Albemarle and Pamlico sounds, brought to knowledge a few individuals who are descended from Indians who came originally from Pungo river near Mattamuskeet lake, Hyde county. These are evidently remnants of the Machapunga tribe who have left their name to Pungo river. Those whom I met traced their descent from one Israel Pierce, who was known as a Pungo river Indian. That English Christian names were common among the tribes of this general region as early as 1718, is shown by a list of chief's names from the Chowan Indians, neighbors of the Machapunga, given in the colonial documents.¹ I traced Pierce's descendants through Mrs. M. H. Pugh, Pierce's granddaughter, now a very old woman, estimating her age to be about eighty years, who was born and raised in the Pungo river district. Later in her life she moved to Hatteras island. She has four sons, daughters, and numerous grandchildren. At present the dark-skinned people living on Roanoke, Hatteras, and other neighboring islands of the Pugh, Daniels, and Berry families, largely of negro blood, and some of those named Westcott, of a lighter strain, are of this blood.

In appearance they vary greatly, from individuals with pronounced Indian characteristics, through people with noticeable white or negro features, the latter sort predominating in the younger generations. Not one of these people knew a single word of the Indian language and not one knew of any definite Indian customs or traditions, not even the name of their tribe. Unconsciously, however, the natives, in the real sense of the term, are preserving some phases of Indian culture in their present economic life, which is, of course, inseparably associated with local environment. One of these features is fishing; an activity carried on nowadays by the usual methods of the white people. The Machapunga were men-

¹ *North Carolina Colonial Records*, Vol. IV, p. 33-5. Thomas Hoytes, James Bennett, Chas. Beasley, Jeremiah Pushing, chief men of the Chowan Indians who sold land to the settlers in 1713.

tioned in 1713 as expert watermen.¹ The natives, however, make their own nets, the tools of construction being similar to those used by both the white people and the Indians of the Atlantic coast. Some specimens of nets of different sized meshes for herring, drum, and shad, of netting needles for these, and of floats, were obtained from the Indians. Hunting deer, bear, wild turkey, and other wild game is still carried on in the immense swamps of eastern North Carolina, while besides nomadic pursuits, some agriculture is followed. As to native industrial arts, however, everything is gone; basketry being the last art to survive. Until recently, native baskets were made of hickory and oak splints, in the manner prevailing among all the Iroquoian and Algonkian bands of the east. Unfortunately, all actual traces of native culture have been lost among these descendants.

Needless to say, my hopes of finding some remembrance of the ancient family hunting territories which occur in all Algonkian areas where a nomadic hunting life prevails, were futile. I had been led to hope that the wildness of the country and the importance of hunting and fishing along the sparsely settled Carolina coast might have caused the territorial institution to survive.

At such times of the year when they resort to the outlying sandbanks where numbers of half wild ponies are still maintained as a source of supply for the settlers, the natives construct camps of palmetto leaves supported on cross poles. These shelters probably follow the plan of the early Indian palmetto structures. A few items of folklore gleaned from the people may have a native foundation. It is believed that the bite of a rattlesnake may be cured by eating a piece of the snake.

The Yupon bush (*Ilex cassine*) assumes large proportions in this low country and bears an abundance of leaves which remain green all winter. These leaves are dried and steeped to form a tea, which is conspicuous as a regular beverage, thought to have some beneficial medicinal qualities among the people of the locality.

In order to assemble the few specific references to the Machapunga available in the literature of the region, I will quote Lawson's

¹ *North Carolina Colonial Records*, Vol. II, p. 45.

remarks on the tribe. He states that in his time, about 1701, the Machapunga had one town, called Maramuskeet (Mattamuskeet) containing thirty fighting men.¹

Moreover, several customs are found in some families which others keep not; as for example, two families of the Machapunga Indians use the Jewish custom of circumcision, and the rest do not, neither did I ever know any others amongst the Indians that practiced any such thing, and perhaps if you ask them what is the reason they do so, they will make you no answer, which is as much as to say, "I will not tell you."²

Another instance was between the Machapunga Indians and the Coranines (evidently the Corees, who, with the Machapunga later became allies of the Tuscarora) on the sand banks; which was as follows: The Machapunga were invited to a feast by the Coranines; which two nations had been a long time at war together and had lately concluded a peace. Thereupon, the Machapunga Indians took advantage of coming to the Coranines' feast, which was to avoid all suspicion; and their king who, if a savage, is a great politician and very stout, ordered all his men to carry their tomahawks along with them, hidden under their match coats; which they did, and being acquainted when to fall on, by the word given, they all set forward for the feast and came to the Coranine town, where they had gotten victuals, flint and such things as made an Indian entertainment all ready to make these new friends welcome; which they did, and after dinner, towards the evening they went to dancing. . . . So when the Machapunga king saw the best opportunity offer, he gave the word and his men pulled their tomahawks from under the match coats and killed several, and took the rest prisoners.³

Several entries in the State records of North Carolina have a bearing upon the Machapunga, who were also often known as Mattamuskeets, derived from the name of their principal village.

During the Tuscarora war, 1712-1713, the Machapunga, it seems, took sides against the colonists and, together with their neighbors the Corees, went on record several times for their activities. De Graffenried's Manuscript Journal mentions the "Marmuskits" as partaking in plunder and robbery with part of the Tuscarora Nation.⁴ In 1713, they killed and carried away about twenty persons at Roanoke island and at Croatan.⁵ Again the

¹ *Lawson*, p. 383.

² *Lawson*, p. 341.

³ *Lawson*, p. 325.

⁴ *North Carolina Colonial Records*, Vol. 1, p. 933.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 31.

“Mattamuskeets, Catechnee and Corees warriors number about fifty, attacking Alligator River.”¹ The “Mattamuskeets have advantage of such dismal swamps to fly into.” The English came to realize that they had to depend upon auxiliary Indians to drive them out or to place a garrison near them “to hinder them making corn, or discover where they keep their wives and children as a means to make them remove.”² Subsequently, it appears, that the part of the Tuscarora under King Blount, who were friendly to the English, were largely responsible for the destruction of the hostile Mattamuskeets.³ The latter with the “Corees and other enemy Indians” concluded peace February 11th, 1715, and “have liberty to settle at Mattamuskeet.”⁴ An overseer was appointed to reside among them. By 1731, the “Maremuskeets” were among the tribes that did not number more than twenty families. And again in 1753, we find an estimate stating that the Mattamuskeets and other Indians on the islands or “Banks” number some fifteen or twenty.⁵

After all, despite the little that can be gathered concerning these extreme southerly Algonkian, one or two conclusions, I think, may be drawn. One is, that the Machapunga, Pamlico, Chowan and probably the Neuse Indians were ethnically a branch of the Powhatan group. Their range extended southwardly along the coast as far as the territory of the Iroquoian and eastern Siouan tribes with whom apparently they were at first unfriendly. Their numerical paucity is another fact denoted by historical references. Consequently, taking these facts into consideration, I feel warranted in inferring that the Carolina Algonkians were comparatively recent intruders into the region and formed the last offshoot of the general Algonkian movement southwards along the Atlantic coast. Step by step, it seems wherever the advancing bands settled down, the migration appears to have been continued later by a smaller

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

² *Ibid.*, p. 39-40.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. V, p. xli.

offshoot, until the moving force had expended itself. The southward Atlantic drift, illustrated by the Carolina group, is indeed in harmony with a general Algonkian migratory tendency which I have already dealt with in the case of the Micmac, Ojibwa, and Naskapi.⁴

⁴ "The Family Hunting Territories and Social Life of Various Algonkian Bands of the Ottawa Valley," *Memoir 70 (Anthropological Series, no. 8), Geological Survey of Canada, Ottawa.*

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