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“THE INDIAN GRAVE”—A MONACAN SITE IN  
ALBEMARLE COUNTY, VIRGINIA

The Jamestown colonists, and others at a later day, appear to have regarded the country westward from the falls of the James, now the site of Richmond, as a distant land, the home of a people different from those with whom they first became acquainted. The territory beyond the falls was first visited during the autumn of 1608, when a party numbering about one hundred and twenty and led by Newport, followed the course of the James to a point some forty miles beyond the falls and discovered the Monacan villages of Massinacak and Mowhemenchouch. Two years later a letter written by George Yardley to Sir Henry Payton, then in London, and dated “James town, this XVIII of November 1610,” referred to an expedition planned by the Governor who intended going “up unto a famous fall or cataract of waters, where leaving his pinnasses & Boates safe riding, so purposely to loade up and go into the Land called the Monscane.”<sup>1</sup>

This “Land called the Monscane” was the area occupied by the Monacan and confederated tribes, mentioned by the early writers, but of whom we have very little definite knowledge. They were of the Siouan stock and the recognized enemies of the Algonquian tribes which formed the Powhatan confederacy of the Tidewater section of Virginia. It is quite evident the Monacan were at one time a numerous people, occupying many villages on the banks of the streams westward from the falls of the James and Rappahannock, but as a result of the wars with the English and the native tribes of the north, they were greatly reduced in numbers and soon lost their power, and before the close of the seventeenth century ceased to be recognized as a tribe. An important town of the Monacan, probably one of the principal settlements of the confederated tribes, stood at the mouth of the Rivanna, on the left or north bank of the James,

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<sup>1</sup> MS. *Eng. Hist.*, C. 4, fol. 3, in Bodleian Library, Oxford. Copied in part in *Am. Anthropologist*, 1907, p. 37.

in the present Fluvanna County, Virginia. It appears on Smith's map as *Rassawck*, while northward is *Monassukapanough*, to which we shall again refer. Human remains have been discovered on the site of *Rassawck*, and many objects of stone have been found scattered over the surface, being evidence of the site of an Indian village.

The valley of the Rivanna was about the center of the Monacan country and may have been comparatively thickly peopled. Small streams and springs are numerous, and fish and game must have been plentiful and easily taken. Quantities of wild fruits, berries, and nuts were obtainable in the proper seasons. The country was well adapted to the wants and requirements of the native tribes.

Settlers entered the section about the year 1730, at which time a few Indians seemed to have lived in, or frequented, the present Albemarle County. In 1735 six hundred acres of land were granted to Thomas Moorman. This land was on the south or right bank of the Rivanna and included the "Indian Grave low grounds." The site has now been identified a few miles north of the University of Virginia. The term "Indian Grave" was applied to a large burial mound which at that time stood on the lowland a short distance south of the river. This mound was later examined and described by Jefferson, whose home, Monticello, was only a few miles distant. The description is quoted in full:

"It was situated on the low grounds of the Rivanna, about two miles above its principal fork, and opposite to some hills, on which had been an Indian town. It was of a spheroidal form, of about forty feet diameter at the base, and had been of about twelve feet altitude, though now reduced by the plough to seven and a half, having been under cultivation about a dozen years. Before this it was covered with trees of twelve inches diameter, and round the base was an excavation of five feet depth and width, from whence the earth had been taken of which the hillock was formed. I first dug superficially in several parts of it, and came to collections of human bones, at different depths, from six inches to three feet below the surface. These were lying in the utmost confusion, some vertical, some oblique, some horizontal, and directed to every point of the compass, entangled, and held together in clusters by the earth. Bones of

the most distant parts were found together; as, for instance, the small bones of the foot in the hollow of a skull, many skulls would sometimes be in contact, lying on the face, on the side, on the back, top or bottom, so as, on the whole, to give the idea of bones emptied promiscuously from a bag or basket, and covered over with earth, without any attention to their order. The bones of which the greatest numbers remained, were skulls, jaw-bones, teeth, the bones of the arms, thighs, legs, feet, and hands. A few ribs remained, some vertebrae of the neck and spine, without their processes, and one instance only of the bone which serves as a base for the vertebral column. The skulls were so tender, that they generally fell to pieces on being touched. The other bones were stronger. There were some teeth which were judged to be smaller than those of an adult; a skull, which, on a slight view, appeared to be that of an infant, but it fell to pieces on being taken out, so as to prevent satisfactory examination; a rib, and a fragment of the under-jaw of a person about half grown; another rib of an infant; and part of the jaw of a child, which had not yet cut its teeth. This last furnishing the most decisive proof of the burial of children here, I was particular in my attention to it. It was part of the right half of the under jaw. The processes, by which it was articulated to the temporal bones, was entire; and the bone itself firm to where it had been broken off, which, as nearly as I could judge, was about the place of the eye-tooth. Its upper edge, wherein would have been the sockets of the teeth, was perfectly smooth. Measuring it with that of an adult, by placing their hinder processes together, its broken end extended to the penultimate grinder of the adult. This bone was white, all the others of a sand colour. The bones of infants being soft, they probably decay sooner, which might be the cause so few were found here. I proceeded then to make a perpendicular cut through the body of the barrow, that I might examine its internal structure. This passed about three feet from its center, was opened to the former surface of the earth, and was wide enough for a man to walk through and examine its sides. At the bottom, that is, on the level of the circumjacent plain, I found bones; above these a few stones, brought from a cliff a quarter of a mile off, and from the river one-eighth of a mile off; then a large interval of earth, then a stratum of bones, and so on. At one end of the section were four strata of bones plainly distinguishable; at the other, three; the strata in one part not ranging with those in another. The bones nearest the surface were least decayed. No holes were discovered in any of them, as if made with bullets, arrows, or other weapons. I conjectured that in this barrow might have been a thousand skeletons.

. . . Appearances certainly indicate that its has derived both origin and growth from the accustomed collection of bones, and deposition of them together; that the first collection had been deposited on the common surface of the earth, a few stones put over it, and then a covering of earth, that the second had been laid on this, had covered more or less of

it in proportion to the number of bones, and was then also covered with earth; and so on." <sup>2</sup>

From the foregoing statement it is evident the mound had been greatly reduced by the plow at the time of Jefferson's exploration of the site; since then it has entirely disappeared. However, it is an interesting and curious fact, that although the place of burial has been destroyed the name still remains, and an area of several acres is now referred to as "the Indian Grave." It was for the purpose of determining the true nature of "the Indian Grave" that the writer examined the site under the auspices of the Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution. The work was carried on during June, 1911.

As already stated, the area in question occupies a portion of a broad and fertile bottom on the south bank of the Rivanna. At this point the river curves from west to southeast, the cliff, south of the river, extends in a rather straight line, close to the stream at both ends of the lowland, but distant nearly one-half miles near the middle of the plain. The "Indian Grave" is about midway of the level area.

Some forty years ago there was exceptionally high water in the Rivanna, much of the lowland was submerged, the banks fell in and deep gullies were formed. The surface, to a depth of two or more feet, and at one point extending for more than two hundred feet from the river bank, was washed away. When the waters receded many objects of Indian origin were discovered in the vicinity of "the Indian Grave," and at one place human remains were encountered. In 1911 that part of the site just south of the area washed over by the floods of forty years ago was examined. A trench thirty feet in length, connecting two excavations each about six feet square, was made parallel with the line of erosion. Five excavations were made at intervals of about forty feet, in a line extending south from the first trench, these averaged about eight feet square. Three trenches running south from the line of erosion were opened west of the first excavation. All were carried to a depth of three feet

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<sup>2</sup> *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Philadelphia, 1788, pp. 103-106.

or more. No human remains were discovered; no evidence of burials was encountered. In seven of the nine excavations small fragments of pottery were found at an average depth of twenty inches; a few pieces of quartz and quartzite and pieces of charcoal occurred in the same excavations. No animal bones were discovered. This was evidently the site of a village, and the surface at the time the area was occupied was some twenty inches lower than at the present time. This increase represents the amount of alluvium deposited by the waters during periods of flood, but is no indication of great age. According to an old negro who has been on or about the site for more than sixty years, innumerable objects of aboriginal origin have, from time to time, been revealed by the plow. He described celts and grooved axes, discoidals, pestles, and other forms. This was an extensive aboriginal settlement, undoubtedly the site of an important town of the Monacan. The burial mound probably stood at the edge of the village.

We have already seen how, before the year 1700, the Monacan ceased being recognized as a tribe, and no longer figured in the history of the colony. The remaining members of the tribe were probably widely scattered, some wondering from place to place, others living with neighboring tribes. But it is evident that scattered as they were, they for many years retained memories or traditions of their old homes. The burial places of their ancestors were sacred spots, and were visited long after the villages had disappeared. Such was the mound at "the Indian Grave." Jefferson, referring to mounds in general, but to the one he opened in particular, wrote:

"But on whatever occasion they may have been made, they are of considerable notoriety among the Indians; for a party passing, about thirty years ago, through the part of the country where this barrow is, went through the woods directly to it, without any instructions or enquiry, and having staid about it some time, with expressions which were construed to be those of sorrow, they returned to the high road, which they had left about half a dozen miles to pay this visit, and pursued their journey."

This visit to the burial place was evidently made about the year Moorman obtained his grant to the area, the year 1735.

And it is within reason to suppose the party consisted of some who had formerly lived in the nearby village. But we have record of another visit to the site, one made a century later. An old negro woman, reputed to have passed her hundredth birthday, and who was raised on the plantation, has related to the writer that when a child she several times saw parties of Indians stop there, and at night dance around a fire on, or near, "the Indian Grave."

The name of this ancient settlement is not known, unless it is the site of *Monassukapanough*, shown on Smith's map a short distance north of *Rassarwck*; however, on the map it is not placed on the river bank but a short way eastward. But it must be remembered Smith had not visited the country, and that much of his information was derived from Indians and others.

The eastern boundary of the Siouan territory was clearly defined, but its western limits were rather obscure, although it undoubtedly extended beyond Jackson River. It is quite evident that when Europeans first reached the coasts of Virginia the interior country, now included within the limits of Louisa, Albemarle, and Bath counties, though separated, was occupied by people of the same stock representing one cultural group. The custom of erecting mounds, similar to the one described by Jefferson, prevailed throughout the territory. We have already mentioned the visit to the mound on the Rivanna by a party of Indians after the neighboring village ceased to exist, and the people greatly reduced in numbers and scattered. In this connection it is of the greatest interest to know of visits to two other burial mounds by parties of Indians, both visits were probably made early in the nineteenth century. In a communication to the Bureau of Ethnology some years ago, the late W. M. Ambler, of Louisa County, wrote regarding a burial mound on the bank of Dirty Swamp Creek:

"I was told by Abner Harris, now deceased, that some Indians from the southwest visited this mound many years ago. They left their direct route to Washington at Staunton, and reached the exact spot traveling through the woods on foot. This has made me suppose that this mound was a noted one in Indian annals."

And again we have this most interesting reference to a large burial mound which stood on the lowland near the Cowpasture, or Wallawhutoola River, on the land of Warwick Gatewood, in Bath County:

"Some years since, Col. Adam Dickinson, who then owned and lived on the land, in a conversation I had with him, related to me, that many years before that time, as he was sitting in his porch one afternoon, his attention was arrested by a company of strange looking men coming up the bottom lands of the river. They seemed to him to be in quest of something, when, all at once, they made a sudden angle, and went straight to the mound. He saw them walking over it and round and round; seeming to be engaged in earnest talk. After remaining a length of time, they left it and came to the house. The company, I think he told me, consisted of ten or twelve Indians; all young men except one, who seemed to be born down with extreme old age. By signs they asked for something to eat; which was soon given them; after which they immediately departed."<sup>3</sup>

It is to be regretted that apparently no attempt was made to learn the names of the Indians, whence they came, or the reasons for the visit. But it is plausible to consider the different parties to have been formed of some whose forefathers were buried in the mounds. These and no others would have retained traditions of the sites of the villages of their ancestors, and no others would have made pilgrimages to their tombs. Therefore it is evident that descendants of the ancient Monacan were living in Virginia within a century, and still retained knowledge of their ancient settlements. As the party visiting the mound in Louisa County traveled from the southwest it may be they were from the settlement in Amherst County. At the present time there are living along the foot of the Blue Ridge, in Amherst, a number of families who possess Indian features and other characteristics of the aborigines. Their language contains many Indian words; but as yet no study has been made of the language. While these people may represent the last remnants of various tribes, still it is highly probable that among them are living the last of the Monacan.

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<sup>3</sup> "Montanus," *Virginia Historical Register*, Vol. III., 1850, pp. 91-92.