

Poosepatuck (Unkechaug Nation)

The Poosepatucks are one of the most misunderstood Algonquian groups in southeastern New England. Recognized as the Unkechaug Nation by the state of New York, the Poosepatucks are synonymous with the fifty-two-acre reservation they occupy on Long Island, New York, in the northeast portion of the town of Mastic in Suffolk County.

The Unkechaug village of Poosepatuck is the sole remainder of 175 acres designated for the Unkechaugs by the deed of July 2, 1700, from Colonel William "Tangier" Smith. The deed allocated acreage so that Unkechaug settlements were surrounded by Euro-American land claims, thereby deliberately preventing Unkechaug unity. Further disruptions attended the arrival of the first Presbyterian missionaries in North America at Poosepatuck in 1741.

Early ethnological interest in the tribe was expressed by Thomas Jefferson, who visited Poosepatuck in 1791 to collect and translate examples of Unkechaug vocabulary. Often called one of the thirteen Long Island "tribes," the Poosepatucks initially constituted one of numerous Amerindian autonomous villages linked by kinship to a conciliar association or confederacy that stretched across Long Island and southern New England. These relationships still connect the Poosepatucks, Montauks, Shinnecocks, and Matinnecocks. Poosepatuck affiliations extend also to the Mohegans, Narragansetts, Pequots, and Wampanoags. Moreover, the Poosepatucks share cultural traits with the Lenape/Delaware and Iroquois peoples.

From 1718 to 1935, the Poosepatucks' proximity to the forty-four-hundred-acre William Floyd estate or plantation proved a serious impediment to independence and visibility. The isolation of the peninsula, the lack of opportunity, and the sentiment of the times limited Poosepatuck employment to subsistence laborers for the Floyds and other white settlers. Prior to 1799 some Poosepatucks were enslaved by the Floyds and other wealthy landowners; many became indentured ("bound out") and free laborers.

Between 1830 and 1945, most census takers and other nonnatives presumptuously assumed that European and African intermarriage among the Poosepatucks meant the death of their culture. Accordingly, their biological makeup exacerbated the lack of federal recognition. This resulted in the Poosepatucks' exclusion from voting in the Wheeler-Howard Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Nonetheless, the Poosepatucks consistently retain a Native American identity. This has been heightened by postwar developments such as religious and cultural revitalization. Moreover, a challenge to the 1700 Smith deed was struck down in the Suffolk County (New York) court decision *William Shepherd Dana v. Luther Maynes, Frances Maynes, Edward Gales and Elaine Gales* (March 5, 1936), which reinforced the status of Poosepatuck as a viable New York State Indian reservation.

Important Poosepatuck rituals and social practices include the annual June Meeting (the Feast of the Dead), and the autumn Corn Festival. The June Meeting (also called the Feast of the Moon of Flowers or the Feast of the Strawberry Moon) is held at the Poosepatuck Reservation on the second weekend of June. June Meeting is a post-1790 Christian adaptation of an ancient honoring of all Long Island Amerindian ancestors. Christian and indigenous rites are observed. Traditional foods are prepared from resources available on the reservation. Flora, particularly lilacs, conveying the Poosepatuck sacred colors—including purple, white, red, green, and black—are displayed. The Poosepatuck autumn Corn Festival differs from similar eastern woodlands corn rites in its origins as a yearly tribute of "two yellow ears of corn" to the Smiths, as specified in the Smith deed. It can include powwow dancing, naming ceremonies, and the installation of tribal officers.

Currently the Poosepatuck Reservation has five core families and a population of approximately two hundred fifty. The Poosepatuck tribe is administered by a chief, land trustees, and a tribal council and headed by a titular chief who presides over tribal council meetings and ceremonies. The tribal council enforces Poosepatuck constitutional law and administers local and state Native American programs for the Poosepatucks. The division of reservation land is by vote of the tribal trustees exclusively. Contemporary efforts at revitalization have focused on the Poosepatuck language and on sweat lodges. The issues of tax-free tobacco sales, of gaming enterprises, and of other entrepreneurial efforts on the reservation, as well as the continuing need for improvements in water and sewage services from the town of Mastic, have forced nonnative authorities to deal seriously with a previously "invisible" tribe.

The current Chief of the Unkechaug Indian Tribe is Harry B Wallace.

Credits:

Laura E. Conkey, *Handbook of North American Indians* Ethel Boissevain, and Ives Goddard, "Indians of Southern New England and Long Island: Late Period," ed. William C. Sturtevant, vol. 15, *Northeast*, ed. Bruce Trigger (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978); Gaynell Stone and Nancy Bonvillain, eds., *Languages and Lore of the Long Island Indians* (Lexington, Mass.: Ginn, 1980); Donald Treadwell, *My People the Unkechaug: The Story of a Long Island Indian Tribe* (Amsterdam: De Kiva, 1992).

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