

# INDIANS OF THE EASTERN SHORE OF MARYLAND.



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**Richard Hill, Chief of the Canadian  
Nanticoke.**

= Sketch map of  
Chesapeake Bay region =



Map showing the location of the Algonkian peoples of Maryland.  
(Triangles indicate known settlements where their mixed-blood descendants still reside.)

# INDIANS OF THE EASTERN SHORE OF MARYLAND.

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There are few events in the history of the eastern colonies more striking to the imagination or less generally known than the incursion of the Algonkian speaking peoples from the central states into the region of the Atlantic seaboard. That the historic Algonkian tribes, however, did emerge from across the Alleghanies and invade the coastal regions is a truth vouched for in many forms, among which the traditional testimony of the people themselves is by no means the least important. The Delawares, the Mohegan, Shawnee, and Conoy, all had more or less corresponding versions of a general migration legend, which may have referred to an event that took place not much anterior to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, let us say. Who the original and previous human inhabitants of the Chesapeake tidewater region could then have been is a matter of serious doubt, even if we assume that in this immediate region of the Atlantic coast any such existed. We have good reason to believe, however, that to the north in New Jersey, New York and New England and again southward in the Carolinas and Florida, human occupation was much earlier than here, since the faunal, floral and geological conditions there are rather different. Archæological disclosures, moreover, which have been made in the Chesapeake tidewater region do not point to any great age of human industry or to human inhabitation of great antiquity. We are, accordingly, concerned with the problem of the outside culture identity and affinities of the historic tribes whose residence in the region is so interesting to us.

Where did they come from if, like a number of other tribes in the eastern United States, the Nanticoke and their relatives were not of ancient descent in the region where they were found by the first white people who came to the shores of the Chesapeake? Even the Powhatans of Virginia told the Jamestown authorities that their ancestors had been in Virginia only about 300 years before the coming of the English. The traditions of the Nanticoke claim that they had their earlier situations somewhere in the central regions of the United States, where they dwelt as members of a great tribal group before its subdivision into the branches which later became known to the first white explorers. Without actually knowing when or how the first movement toward the east began among these people, our imagination is left to picture to itself the causes and circumstances of its inception. We are told in the national migration legend of the Delawares which has come down to us in the form of a text, accompanied by a pictorial record, published by Dr. Brinton, and called the *Walam Olum*, that warfare began the movement across the central prairies in Indiana and Ohio, and that subsequently the Alleghanies were crossed, at which point the Shawnee and Nanticoke went south. The main migration kept on eastward ultimately reaching the Atlantic ocean and settling down on the rivers of eastern Pennsylvania and in New Jersey. This accounts well enough for the Delawares, the neighbors of the Chesapeake bay tribes on the north, but it tells us little about the further movements and whereabouts of the Nanticoke in whom we are now interested. That they occupied the country about the upper Chesapeake region we know by the fact that at the time of European contact these bands became known under the name of Nanticoke and appear to have formed a confederacy with the Nanticoke chief or "emperor," as he was called by the Marylanders, at its head. A branch of this division separating from the main stream passed to the western shore of the bay and occupied the region between it and the Potomac, acquiring the name of Conoy, but nevertheless retaining its political affiliations with the Nanticoke. The dialect of the Conoy was not recorded in those days so we have no means of knowing accurately in how far it differed from that of the Nanticoke proper.

The Nanticoke Indians of Maryland were first encountered in 1608 by Captain John Smith. They then occupied the peninsula between the Atlantic ocean and Chesapeake bay. Smith spoke of them in the following terms:

"We set saile for the maine; and fel with a faire river on the

East called Kuskarawaocke. By it inhabit the people of Soraphanigh, Nause, Arsek, Nautaque; that much extolled a great nation called Massawomekes.

"On the east side of the Bay, is the river Tockwhogh, and upon it live a people that can make 100 men, seated some seaven myles within the river; where they have a Fort very well pallisadoed and mantelled with barks of trees. Next them is Ozinies with 60 men. More to the South of that East side of the Bay, the river Rapahanock, neere unto which is the river Kuskarawaock. Upon which is seated a people with 200 men. After that, is the river Tants Wighcocomoco and on it a people with 100 men. The people of these rivers are of little stature, of another language from the rest (referring to the Powhatans), and very rude. But they are on the river Acohanock with 40 men, and they of Accomack 80 men doth equalize any of the territories of Powhatan, and speaks his language who over all doth rule as King."

Subsequently the Nanticoke are heard of through their connection with the related tribes along the Susquehanna and on the western shore of Chesapeake bay. References bearing exclusively on the Indians who remained on the eastern shore are scanty and convey little information concerning their mode of life. From 1641 to 1648 they were at war with the colonists. By 1748 most of the Nanticoke and Conoy of Maryland had moved up the Susquehanna to the Iroquois, with whom they gradually became affiliated. By 1799 the Nanticoke had sold all their land in Maryland. Since it is not the intention in this paper to deal with the bands of the western shore, nor with the Nanticoke in general after their adoption by the Iroquois in 1753, we shall have to leave the historical documents and depend on local traditions of the people of the region.

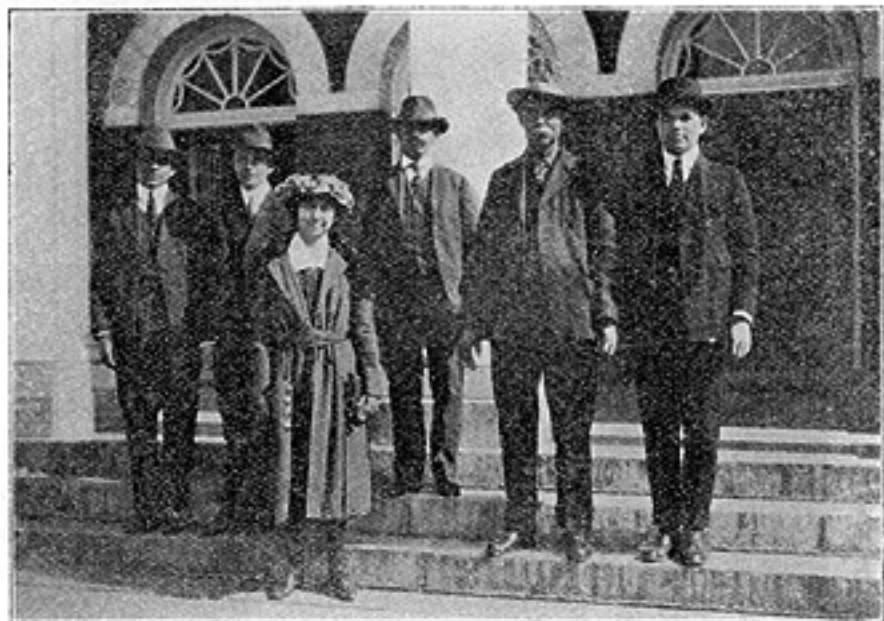
The northward movement of the confederated Nanticoke tribes forms nevertheless a dramatic chapter in the history of the region. For many generations these bands, harassed by the warlike and indomitable Iroquois of central New York, had suffered between the encroachments of their white and Indian neighbors. Yet after all they found a safer haven among their former Iroquoian enemies than among the Christians who occupied their land, for the political idealism of the Iroquois league, harsh though the methods may have been, showed forth in the policy of adopting subjugated peoples and giving them complete freedom besides inviting them to reside in their midst. Thus the Nanticoke began to draw away from their old lands and

their Christian neighbors. We hear of them, joined by the Conoy residing at several points along the Susquehanna where they were visited by several famous Pennsylvania missionaries.

The subsequent events in the history of the two tribes then in their last migration northward to the council fires of their later friends, the Iroquois, shows them located in 1742 at Conestoga. They gradually made their way up the Susquehanna stopping at the present sites of Harrisburg, Shamokin, Catawissa, and Wyoming. By 1765 they had worked up across the New York State line and were settled respectively at Owego, Chugnut and Chenango. They had come completely under the dominance of the Six Nations and were recognized as one of the "props" of the famous league of the Iroquois.

Now in far-off Ontario they reside with the nation which adopted them. They have become almost completely denationalized by the Iroquois. Not one, so far as I know, can speak the Nanticoke language. The languages they speak are Iroquois and English. Nevertheless, in 1914, I visited the Nanticoke incorporated with the Six Nations at their village near Brantford, Ontario, in order to learn something of the present state of the tribe. There are about two hundred who class themselves as Nanticoke, and they are very proud and tenacious of the name. Few of their old customs are remembered, although they have a keen interest in the country of their extraction. No doubt an intensive study of the tribe today would reveal many beliefs and perhaps some customs which were brought from old Maryland. About sixty years ago the Nanticoke sent a delegation to Maryland to trace other members of the tribe, but they found none. Had they however, gone over to Delaware they would have found some of the descendants for whom they were searching. In Canada the tribe is governed by its own officers. The head man still bears the name of "Emperor," which carries over the old custom of naming chiefs prevailing in colonial days in Maryland. One point of interest may be noted in connection with the Canadian branch of the tribe, namely, that the words which have been recovered in their language seem to differ somewhat from those recorded in Delaware in 1792. Both are supposed to be Nanticoke, yet a dialectic difference undoubtedly is met with and, since the tribes of the western shore of Chesapeake bay contributed largely to the make-up of the Canadian Nanticoke, I feel inclined to classify the present-day Canadian branch of the tribe as largely consisting of Conoy.

The last authentic literary reference, however, to the Nanticoke



Chiefs and councilmen; group of Nanticoke delegates from Indian River, Delaware, visiting Dover.



Council house of the Six Nations at Ohsweken, Ontario, Canada, where the Canadian Nanticoke hold their meetings.





Mrs. E. A. Johnson, Secretary of the  
Nanticoke Indian Association.



Mrs. Burton Street and children, with wooden  
mortar for pounding corn.

NANTICOKE TYPES IN DELAWARE.



Mrs'. Nan Thompson and Nan Harmon.



Mrs. Nan Thompson.

NANTICOKE TYPES IN DELAWARE.



A boy of the Nanticoke at Indian River, Delaware.



Chief W. R. Clark of the Nanticoke in Delaware.

NANTICOKE TYPES IN DELAWARE.

in their old haunts, and the one to which we are indebted for knowledge of the language, is that by William Vans Murray who in 1792 sent in a few ethnological notes and a vocabulary collected at the Nanticoke village Locust Neck Town, Goose creek, Choptank river, Dorchester county, Maryland, at the instance of Thomas Jefferson. In a letter accompanying the vocabulary he wrote that the tribe had then dwindled to nine persons. They lived in "four genuine old wigwams thatched over with the bark of the cedar." They were governed by a "queen," Mrs. Mulberry. The rest had removed to "the Six Nations . . . . . They went to the Senecas often." A note to their vocabulary adds that Wyniaco, their last "king," had died about 75 or 80 years before and that his body was kept preserved in a mortuary house. The custom of preserving the bones of the dead was early recorded of the Nanticoke. The names of two Nanticoke villages are given in this notice. "Ama-Namo-quun, the name of the Indian town of Locust Neck, Mattappenen the name of the Nanticoke Indian town," Beverly in 1722 mentioned the principal village of the tribe as Nanduge, with 100 inhabitants, ruled by an "empress."

Regarding tribal identity and history, a few interesting fragments of tradition still survive among the descendants on Indian River. The Nanticoke are said to have inhabited the coast and inlets not much farther north than Indian River. Inland, however, they ranged westward across to Chesapeake bay. Evidently the present Nanticoke at Indian River are descendants of the nucleus which originally stayed in Delaware after the general break-up of national life about 1748. The country north of the Indian River district, according to surviving tradition, was neutral ground between the Nanticoke and the Delawares proper, who, the former assert, were not always on the best of terms with the Nanticoke of Indian River. This would make the ancestry of the Cheswold branch of the Indian descendants in Delaware not fundamentally Nanticoke, but Delaware. Of course it should be remembered that intermarriage and removals have been frequent between the two bands, so that now, to all intents, they are practically the same, differing only in the degree of white and negro intermixture. According to Chief Clark's testimony, early in the last century many families emigrated from Indian River to the west, for the purpose of joining some tribes across the Alleghanies. This probably refers to the general Indian emigration from the coast to the adjacent slope, during the middle of the eighteenth century, in company with the Delawares and others.

Subsequent to this movement representatives from the departed band occasionally returned to Indian River to visit their friends and relatives; particularly to visit old Mrs. Lydia Clark, the grandmother of the present chief, W. R. Clark, who was then the only person who spoke the Nanticoke language and who wore in part the native costume. After her death, probably between 1840 and 1850, these Indians did not come again, and the Indian River remnant was left without communication with its kin. Again, however, a number of families emigrated from Indian River.

These seem to have been the last important events in the history of the community, excepting the occasion of a church quarrel over the admission of negroes to church and school privileges, which resulted in the division of the band into two factions. The original exclusive party is still known as the Indian River or Warwick Indian community, the seceders, who admit social rights to outsiders, calling themselves the Harmonia people. These later distinctions, however, are of minor importance.

The present-day Nanticoke in Delaware form self-recognized communities, with their own schools and churches, and possess a decidedly endogamous tendency which refuses particularly to recognize marriage with negroes. They style themselves variously "Nanticokes," "Moors," and "Indians." This feeling of local seclusiveness is a marked trait among them and was noted by Babcock who visited the tribe in 1899 and wrote a short but interesting account of what he saw.

Physically the community exhibits a great lack of racial homogeneity, the types of physiognomy, color, and hair ranging from the European, the Mulatto, and the Indian through all the usual gradations. Some individuals have straight hair, fair skin, and blue eyes; some have brown skin, brown eyes and curly hair; others have broad faces and straight, black hair, the color and general appearance of Indians. As might be expected among people of mixed blood, it is common to find these characteristics divided irregularly among the members of the same family.

One interesting tradition current among the members of the band is that they are descended in part from a crew of Moorish sailors who were shipwrecked near Indian River inlet, escaped to the shore, and intermarried with the Indians who were then living there. This story is well known in the region and is repeated with several variations. One states that on board the wrecked vessel was an Irish princess; another claims that the vessel was owned by a Moorish prince; another

that the Moors were pirates from the Spanish main, and to this they attribute their local name of "Moors." As important as this story seems to be, I was unable to secure any consecutive version worth recording as testimony in the words of the narrator. Those who know of it give only the general facts as mentioned above. A few discredit the story altogether. On the whole, however, I am inclined to credit the general claim that Moorish sailors might have been shipwrecked on the treacherous shoals along the Maryland or Delaware coast and sought the shelter of the Indian natives. When this might have happened it is difficult to say, unless we assume that it was during the years of piracy on the high seas in the seventeenth and the early part of the eighteenth century (1650--1720 approximately). The importance of the term "Moors" in connection with the pirates of the West Indies suggests relationship in this case.

Heckewelder states that the Nanticoke were distinguished from neighboring tribes by a darker color. Writing at this date, if we assume the story of the Moorish admixture to have some foundation in truth, one does not have to seek far for an explanation of the dark complexion of the Nanticoke. The "Moor" story would then date from about 1700, which is indeed the most likely period for it.

At the present time these descendants, who have become domiciled in the pleasant country just north of Indian River in Delaware, near Millsboro, have effected an organization incorporated under the laws of the state, which they have called the Nanticoke Indian Association, under the leadership of Chief W. R. Clark, Assistant Chief Lincoln Harmon; Treasurer, Howard Johnson; Secretary, Mrs. E. A. Johnson, and councilmen Warren Wright, Ferdinand Clark, Clinton Johnson. Their object is to perpetuate the identity of their tribe and to achieve social and educational benefit by holding themselves together under the recognition of their proper name. Ultimately they aspire to the opening of communications along social lines with that part of their tribe which so long ago moved away to Canada. Another small remnant of the Conoy is reported from Prince George and Charles counties, Maryland, southeast of Washington. Mr. Mooney considered these to be descendants of the Piscataway band which was christened by Lord Baltimore's colonists in 1634. Another small mixed group is reported from Port Tobacco, Maryland, but the numbers of these two bands have never been taken. The location of the various mixed groups is indicated by triangles on the accompanying chart which shows the territories of the larger tribal bodies.

We may now turn to a consideration of such customs as have survived in the knowledge of the Indian descendants themselves and those which have been recorded by early travelers in the eastern shore country as the distinguishing features of Nanticoke ethnology.

Upon the arrival of the people who became known as Nanticoke into the region of the Maryland and Delaware coastal plain, an adaptation to local conditions must have developed a specialized form of culture among them. The absence of stone material in the eastern shore region, for instance, is undoubtedly responsible for the rise of trade with tribes on the western shore and in the foothills. The difficulty of bringing stone into the region to be worked into implements made stone material of great value in much the same way as wood is regarded as a precious substance among the Arctic Eskimo. Very likely none of it was imported thoughtlessly and none of that which was brought in wasted. This would account for the smallness of the stone implements, arrow-heads, knives, axes and the like, which characterizes Nanticoke industry among those groups toward the Atlantic side. Moreover, the tools are marked with a finished technique, a delicate form, and display great experience in the choice of material. The selection of material seems to have followed not only the demand for utility but a regard for beauty. For, judging by what has already been found in the Indian River country, few lots of stone tools could be found in the eastern states to surpass them in the respects just mentioned. We might even say that the eastern shore natives were forced by the nature of their surrounding circumstances to develop the stone industry beyond the stage reached by neighboring cultures. John Widgon, a descendant of the Accomac of the lower peninsular who is extensively acquainted with eastern shore archæology says that the natives obtained stone material from boulders left on the shore by stranded ice blocks brought down the Susquehanna in the spring floods. A word or two may be vouchsafed concerning the art in wood of the Nanticoke. Owing to the impossibility of obtaining large masses of stone out of which to construct heavy stone tools like which we find in other parts of the east, it seems that wherever hardwood could have served in industrial processes it was employed instead of stone. For example, the heavy stone pestles used by the eastern Algonkian everywhere for the purpose of crushing corn into flour in a wooden log mortar, are everywhere absent from the soil in the Nanticoke country, while they abound in an astonishing degree even as near as the mouth of the Susquehanna. From the present-day descendants of the Nanti-

coke, we learn that wooden corn-pounders are the rule, for they are still used by the Indian remnants in Delaware. Another instance showing considerable ingenuity of thought appears in the use of little bags of sand tied to the lower end of fish-nets to provide sinkers instead of the stone net-sinkers used everywhere in regions where stone can be found.

Among the customs which are recorded for the Nanticoke in early times is the interesting and complicated form of burial which seems to have prevailed in early times among the tribes bordering the Gulf of Mexico. That the Nanticoke had acquired some of their early culture by contact with the southeastern tribes is clearly evident from this and other similarities. The form of burial referred to is the practice of burying only the bones of the deceased, the flesh having been removed from the skeleton by professional priests who picked the skeletons carefully with their finger-nails and preserved the flesh separate from the bones. The skeletons were then kept in the family of the deceased as sacred heirlooms. When these became too abundant the families conveyed them to burial pits where they were deposited with others and oftentimes covered with earth to form a mound. Such ossuaries are found occasionally on the eastern shore. John Widgon reports finding these communal burials occasionally in his surveys, and his material is exhibited in the collections of the Maryland Academy of Sciences in Baltimore. He states that he has found indications of as many as seventy burials in one cluster. Occasionally, moreover, he discovers them in shell-heaps in which case he has made a most interesting observation, namely, that the shells are found turned with the concave side upward in shell-heaps containing burials. This, he thinks, was to prevent the entrance of rain and surface water as much as possible. The Nanticoke maintained the practice of bone burial even after they had left Maryland, for the missionaries, Zeisberger as well as Brainerd, both mentioned the custom among the Nanticoke when they were living on the middle Susquehanna near Shamokin. Among the descendants of these Indians, however, the custom seems to have been entirely forgotten, as burial customs of Christian form have for a long time been observed by them.

We have mention of one other specific trait in connection with the customs and behavior of the early Nanticoke. They were accredited by several early writers, with the knowledge of concocting vegetable poisons. The fact that three or four times at least in colonial literature allusion was made to such knowledge among the tribes of the eastern



shore seems to make it a somewhat emphatic property. In Capt. John Smith's narrative he relates how Powhatan had engaged an Indian to go to the eastern shore and secure poison there with which to destroy his enemy at Jamestown. This belief in respect of the Nanticoke has survived among modern Indians. Even the Delawares, who are now residents of Oklahoma, far from their native haunts in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, relate the story of how they obtained their knowledge of witchcraft and conjuring from the Nanticoke. The descendants of the tribe today, however, seem to know nothing of the formula which made their ancestors famous among both Indians and Marylanders. To be sure they preserve the knowledge of a good many medicinal plants but I have not succeeded in getting a legitimate poison formula. Among them yet a deep-rooted prejudice against certain innocent herbs and weeds may be a sign of former concern along these lines.

One practice, however, has survived from ancient times. That is the custom of head-flattening. The Nanticoke mother even today believes that by exerting a pressure upon the frontal and occipital region of the infant's skull for about the first three weeks of its life she can enhance the beauty of its form. Here again we have an extension of native practices which seem to be more characteristic of the tribes nearer to the Gulf, and I dare say that, even from what little we know of the ethnology of the original people of the eastern shore, a considerable influence from the tribes of the southeast had reached them. Their intensive agriculture, certain industries mentioned in connection with it, and some of the social and religious peculiarities just noted seem to bear to the south. In other respects, particularly in that of language, the tribes of the eastern shore were a branch of the Delaware group which inhabited Pennsylvania and New Jersey, whose ancestry converges with the tribes about the Great Lakes from whence their tradition points to migration.



A Nanticoke of the Canadian branch.