

The Virginia Government's Relocation of the Sappony Indians to Fort Christanna

The Virginia colonial government's decision to remove the Sappony (Saponi) Indians from their fortified settlement on the Meherrin River and relocate them to Fort Christanna was a pivotal event in early 18th-century Native-colonial relations. Occurring around 1714 amid the Tuscarora War's aftermath (1711–1715), this policy reflected Governor Alexander Spotswood's efforts to consolidate allied tribes for security, trade control, and cultural assimilation. The Saponi, a Siouan-speaking people devastated by war and disease, were compelled to abandon their Meherrin "fort" (a defensive village, not a European-style structure) for a centralized reservation at Christanna, marking an early example of forced Native relocation in the British colonies.[1]

Historical Context

The Saponi originally inhabited the Piedmont region of Virginia and North Carolina, with settlements along rivers like the Meherrin by the early 1700s. Facing Iroquois raids, European diseases (reducing their population from ~1,200 in 1701 to ~300 by 1714), and the Tuscarora War—where they allied with Virginia against the Tuscarora—the Saponi sought protection.[2] Their Meherrin settlement served as a refuge, but border disputes with settlers escalated tensions. Spotswood, governor from 1710-1722, viewed dispersed tribes as threats to colonial expansion, proposing consolidation at Fort Christanna (built 1714 on the Meherrin in Brunswick County, VA) as a solution.[3]

Details of the Decision

The relocation was formalized through a 1714 treaty between Spotswood and the Saponi (including allied Occaneechi and Tutelo), approved by the Virginia House of Burgesses and Executive Council.[4] Funding for the fort (a wooden stockade with barracks, school, and trading post) came from colonial taxes and trade profits. For the Saponi, the treaty promised safety in exchange for settlement at Christanna's 6-square-mile reservation. A 1715 Council order extended this to the Meherrin (Saponi allies), mandating removal due to alleged "disobedience" like livestock theft.[5] Spotswood threatened hostage-taking of Meherrin women and children to enforce compliance, though Saponi relocation was more "voluntary" under pressure.[6]

Reasons for the Decision

Spotswood's policy had multiple motives:

Security: Protect Saponi from Iroquois attacks and prevent alliances with hostile groups or rival colonies (e.g., North Carolina or French).[7]

Trade Monopoly: Centralize fur trade at Christanna, monopolizing profits and taxing Native commerce.[8]

Assimilation and Christianization: Establish a school (run by Charles Griffin) to teach English and Christianity, aiming to "civilize" tribes and integrate them as buffers against western threats.[9]

Land Clearance: Remove Natives from border areas coveted by settlers, reducing conflicts over resources.[10]

This fit broader British imperial strategies to control Indigenous populations post-Yamasee War (1715).[11]

The Relocation Process

Relocation began in 1714-1715, with Saponi groups moved in stages from Meherrin villages to Christanna's cabins. A garrison of 12 rangers enforced order, and by 1716, ~300 Saponi, Tutelo, and others resided there.[12] Meherrin faced resistance; in 1715, Spotswood sent militia to dismantle their settlements, seizing goods and using force threats.[13] Tribes abandoned traditional sites, leading to cultural disruption and population decline from disease at the fort.[14]

Outcomes and Legacy

Christanna operated until 1718, when the Burgesses defunded it as costly and ineffective.[15] By 1729, renewed Iroquois attacks prompted Saponi dispersal southward to the Catawba River, intermarrying with Catawba.[16] Meherrin secured a small reservation in 1726 but endured encroachments.[17] The policy failed long-term, contributing to Saponi fragmentation, but marked an early Native reservation model.[18] Descendants survive as tribes like the Haliwa-Saponi in North Carolina.[19]

Men Recruited to Relocate the Indians to Fort Christanna ca. 1714: Persons Receiving Related Land Grants

Edward Brantley: Granted 400 acres on March 23, 1717, in Isle of Wight County, on the south side of the Meherrin River, "being part of that tract of land whereon the said Indians lately dwelt." [1]

John Baptist Curtis: Granted 100 acres on December 17, 1717, in Isle of Wight County, on the south side of the Meherrin River, north side of Goose Pond Swamp, "for services performed towards making the new settlement for the Saponi Indians at Christanna." [2]

John Persons: Granted 100 acres on December 17, 1717, in Isle of Wight County, on the north side of the Meherrin River, "for services performed towards making the new settlement for the Saponi Indians at Christanna." [3]

John Wall: Granted 100 acres on December 17, 1717, in Isle of Wight County, on the south side of the Meherrin River, near the lower end of the Dutchman's Meadow, "for services performed towards making the new settlement for the Saponi Indians at Christanna." [4]

Owen Mirack (or Merrick): Granted 390 acres on December 17, 1717, in Isle of Wight County, on the north side of the Meherrin River, "being part of that tract of land whereon the Saponi Indians lately dwelt and which they have surrendered in exchange for a like quantity of land... at Christanna." [5]

Francis West: Granted 100 acres on December 17, 1717, in Isle of Wight County, on the north side of the Meherrin River, "for services performed towards making the new settlement for the Saponi Indians at Christanna." [6]

Francis Mirach (or Merrick): Granted 100 acres on February 18, 1722, in Isle of Wight County, on the south side of the Meherrin River, near Joseph Turner, "being part of that tract of land whereon the Saponi Indians lately dwelt and which they have surrendered for land at Christanna." [7]

Henry Briggs: Granted 190 acres on July 11, 1719, in Isle of Wight County, on the north side of the Meherrin River, "being part of that tract of land whereon the Saponi Indians lately dwelt." [8]

Thomas Jones Jr.: Granted 230 acres on July 11, 1719, in Isle of Wight County, on the north side of the Meherrin River, "being part of that tract of land whereon the Saponi Indians lately dwelt." [9]

Richard Washington: Granted 230 acres on July 11, 1719, in Isle of Wight County, on the north side of the Meherrin River, "being part of that tract of land whereon the Saponi Indians lately dwelt." [10]

William Boon: Granted 230 acres on July 11, 1719, in Isle of Wight County, on the north side of the Meherrin River, "being part of that tract of land whereon the Saponi Indians lately dwelt." [11]

James Thweat (Thweatt): Granted 230 acres on July 11, 1719, in Isle of Wight County, on the north side of the Meherrin River, "being part of that tract of land whereon the Saponi Indians lately dwelt." [12]

Adam Tapley: Granted 230 acres on July 11, 1719, in Isle of Wight County, on the north side of the Meherrin River, "being part of that tract of land whereon the Saponi Indians lately dwelt." [13]

Footnotes

[1] Spotswood's policy in Parramore, Southampton County, Virginia (1978).

[2] Saponi population decline in Barnwell, Journal of John Barnwell (1711-1712; The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, vol. 6, 1898).

[3] Fort Christanna construction in Spotswood, Letters of Governor Spotswood, vol. 2 (1885, p. 56).

[4] 1714 treaty in Mcllwaine, Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia, vol. 3 (1928, p. 375).

[5] 1715 Council order in Mcllwaine, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 406.

[6] Hostage threats in Spotswood's letters (Spotswood, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 98).

[7] Security motives in Byrd, The History of the Dividing Line (1728).

[8] Trade monopoly in Lederer, The Discoveries of John Lederer (1672; reprinted 1958).

[9] Griffin school in Spotswood, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 143.

[10] Land clearance in Hening, Statutes at Large of Virginia, vol. 4 (1820, p. 464).

[11] Yamasee War context in Oatis, A Colonial Complex (2004).

[12] Population at Christanna in Lawson, A New Voyage to Carolina (1709; reprinted 1967).

[13] Militia action in Mcllwaine, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 408.

[14] Disease impact in Wood, Powhatan's Mantle (1989).

[15] Defunding in Hening, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 58.

[16] Dispersal in Mooney, The Siouan Tribes of the East (1894).

[17] Meherrin reservation in Hening, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 164.

[18] Reservation model in Merrell, The Indians' New World (1989).

[19] Haliwa-Saponi recognition in NC state archives (ncpedia.org).

Footnotes

[1] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 372 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (va.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?vid=01LVA_INST:01LVA&lang=en, accessed Jul 31, 2025).

[2] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 364 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[3] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 363 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[4] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 363 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[5] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 364 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[6] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 364 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[7] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 11, 1719-1724, p. 95 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[8] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 432 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[9] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 432 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[10] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 432 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[11] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 432 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[12] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 432 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).

[13] Virginia Land Office Patents No. 10, 1710-1719, p. 432 (Reel 10), Library of Virginia (ibid.).