

The Occaneechi People: Experiencing a Cultural Renaissance

By Forest Hazel

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The Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, descended from the Siouan-speaking tribes who greeted John Lawson and other early explorers of the Carolina Piedmont, has come a long way in a relatively short time. Since formally reorganizing in 1984, the tribe has:

- written a tribal constitution;
- achieved official state recognition in 2002 as North Carolina's eighth and smallest tribe;
- purchased twenty-five acres of land in the tribal community in northeast Alamance County for a Tribal Center/Heritage Tourism complex;
- conducted a study of the Tutelo/Saponi language;
- prepared a nearly complete petition for federal acknowledgment;
- implemented a successful annual benefit golf tournament;
- planted orchards utilizing heirloom apples, pawpaws, and hybrid chestnuts to assist in community economic development.

With fewer than 700 enrolled tribal members, the Occaneechi are working to improve economic and educational opportunities for tribal members, particularly in view of the decline of tobacco as a cash crop, one on which the community once depended greatly.

Plans for the Heritage Tourism complex include a museum, which will tell the story of the Occaneechi-Saponi people from Pre-Contact times up to the present; a reconstructed Occaneechi Village modeled on the one John Lawson visited in 1701; and an 1880s-era reconstructed farm, complete with log cabin, tobacco barns, smokehouse, and corn cribs. Visitors from across the region will be able to visit the facility and learn about how the Piedmont Siouan peoples lived, led by trained Occaneechi guides dressed in historically accurate clothing. The facility also will include nature trails, a garden, and picnic areas, as well as administrative office space and a meeting area for the community.

The Occaneechi tribe has constructed a permanent powwow ground in Pleasant Grove—its first in more than 250 years—where it holds a yearly festival as well as a school-day program for area students. To learn much more about the tribe, access its Web site at www.occaneechi-saponi.org.

At the time of the publication of this article, Forest Hazel served as the federal acknowledgment officer and the tribal historian for the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation.