

SEEKING TRUTH IN HISTORY: THE 1666 MASSACRE OF THE PATAWOMECK INDIANS

Have you ever read or heard something about history and wondered where the information originated? Have you ever taken the initiative to track down the original source material behind it? Few of us have and the more compelling the story, the less inclined we may be to question it. For the many ones of us who have no formal training in historical research, the thought of chasing down centuries-old sources would never enter our heads – where does one even begin? A good starting point is to understand the difference between oral history/tradition and primary source documentation.

Oral history, while sometimes bearing a thread of truth, tends to change over time and cannot reasonably be depended upon for documentable facts. While often compelling and engaging, it is rarely accurate on its face. For the true historian, “Granddaddy always said...” or “I grew up knowing...” are woefully inadequate in the search for historical truth. While oral history should always be considered in the exploration of past events, the serious researcher demands solid paper documentation to validate it. In the absence of verifiable original documents, oral history is little more than entertaining story telling. Difficulties may arise when people want so badly to believe something that they are willing to ignore anything that draws their long-held beliefs into doubt.

A primary source is defined as a “first-hand or contemporary account of an event or topic. They are the most direct evidence of a time or event because they were created by people or things that were there at the time or event. These sources have not been modified by interpretation and offer original thought or new information” (Seaton Hall University Library). Careful use of primary source documents may confirm oral tradition, refute it, or illuminate certain facts that have become muddled with the repeated telling. A good general rule is: You cannot KNOW what you cannot DOCUMENT. And, as White House historian Dr. William Seale said, “Now and then you just have to say, ‘I don’t believe that’ or discount it because it is obviously slanted, illogical, or not true or just glitz.”

Generational Staffordians have long shared orally what they understood to be the county’s history. The re-telling of these stories over a period of years engrained into the minds of the listeners what may be, in some cases, misinformation and, for some of them, it became fact. In more recent times, access to previously unknown original documents has enabled researchers to confirm or to disprove some of these long-held oral traditions.

An example of this involves an alleged 1666 massacre of the Patawomeck and Dogue Indians by the English. The account claims that most or all of the braves were killed and the surviving women and children were sold as slaves or taken in by local English families. Part of this is based upon an order recorded in the minutes of the Council and General Court of Virginia and dated July 10, 1666. It reads, “It is therefore ordered for revenge of the former and for the prevention of future mischiefs that the towns of Monzation, Nanzimond, and Port Tobacco with the whole nation of the Doegs and Potomacks be forthwith prosecuted with war to their utter destruction if possible and that their women and children and their goods or as much of it as shall be taken to be disposed of according to such instructions as shall be issued from the Right Honourable the Governor. And it is further ordered that the said war be managed by such officers with such numbers of men and by such ways and means as the Governor shall think fit” (McIlwaine, p. 488). That the English sought to be rid of the Indians once and for all is irrefutable. However, the problem is that there is no known follow-up information confirming that the order

was actually carried out. Furthermore, the writer has seen no primary source documentation regarding the capture and sale of Patawomeck Indian women and children made homeless by such an attack.

Despite Stafford's loss of records during the Civil War, the county's court records from 1664 to 1668 survive and they include no mention of such an event. In fact, the word "Indian" is mentioned five times in the volume. On Apr. 11, 1666 (before the alleged massacre), "Capt. Thomson the Indian" was involved with a load of tobacco. There are no elucidating details. On Aug. 23, 1667 (after the alleged massacre), three local residents petitioned the county court, each asking for permission to "Imploy an Indian...according to Act of Assembly in that case provided." A somewhat cryptic entry made on that same day reads, "The Court doth order that William Greene concerning the entertainment of Indians be reversed and that Liberty be given to all persons as in other places according to Act of Assembly" (Stafford County Court Order Book, 1664-1668, pp. 46, 83, 84). None of these 1667 entries make sense in light of the massacre story. Unless additional documents proving otherwise are brought forward, there seems to be no proof that the 1666 massacre actually occurred or that the surviving women and children were rescued by kind local families.