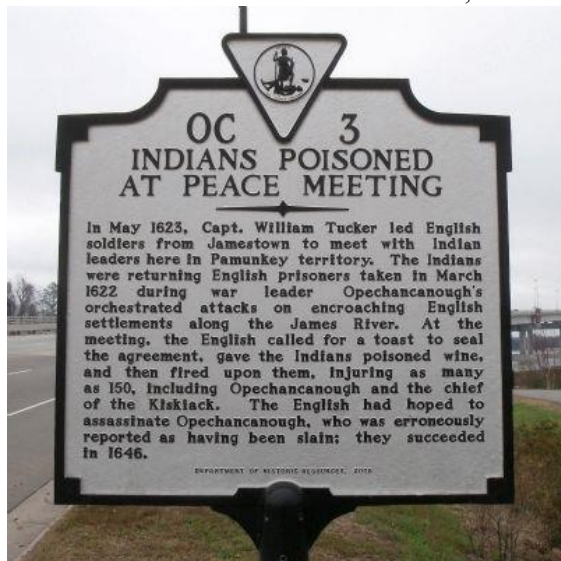


THE 1623 POISONING OF THE INDIANS

In our previous two “Seeking Truth in History” columns, we explored (1) primary source documentation versus oral history and (2) modern misinterpretation of primary source information. This quarter, we will explore an instance in which an historical event that took place elsewhere in Virginia was somehow “borrowed” and blended into Stafford County’s history. If such accounts are re-told a few times and if they make it to the internet, they soon become accepted as truth and few people will think to question them.

An historical marker placed at Patawomeck Memorial Park, which is located near the intersection of Brooke Road and Canterbury Drive and near Aquia Landing, shows a “timeline” of Patawomeck Indian history. While there are several entries on this timeline that might benefit from additional scholarly research, the one under consideration here pertains to a vicious attack perpetrated by the English on the Indians in 1623. The marker text reads, “1623 Capt. William Tucker held a peace party at Patawomeck Village in order to make Opechancanough believe that the English wanted to make peace. The Indians were tricked into drinking poison which killed over 150 of them, including several chiefs. Chief Japasaw probably died at that time.” This marker, along with its text, is also included on the “Historical Marker Database” website (HMdb.org), which makes the information available world-wide. Additionally, an article titled “Our Patawomeck Ancestors” is featured on the Patawomeck Indian Tribe of Virginia’s website and includes mention of the likely death of the “Great King of Patawomeck...on 22 May 1623 at the famous Poison Plot, in which Dr. John Pott prepared a poison punch that killed over 200 Indians at Patawomeck, including many chiefs.”



The problem is that the state historical marker for this event stands in King William County near the Pamunkey River and the town of West Point. Thus, either the King William or the Stafford Indian history is incorrect. Both cannot be true.

In his book, *Nature and History in the Potomac Country*, Dr. James D. Rice wrote, “Opechancanough agreed to meet Captain William Tucker at Patawomeck [author’s emphasis] in May 1623, apparently confident that Madison’s rampage there in the summer of 1622 had rendered the Patawomecks neutral or hostile to the English. The Patawomecks, however, had lured Opechancanough into a trap; after the negotiations Captain Tucker provided poisoned drinks to toast the accord then fired on the deathly ill Powhatan delegates. Some of the English took scalps, and Tucker bragged (mistakenly) of killing Opechancanough” (pp. 89-90).

Dr. Rice was careful to source this information to an original document, though he did not quote from it. The additional step in the research process would have been to locate the full text of the source and read it carefully. Dr. Rice sourced the material to a letter dated June 9, 1623 in which Robert Bennett of Isle of Wight County wrote to his brother, Edward Bennett, in England. While the letter was largely concerned with matters of trade, Robert also told his brother about the recent poisoning. He wrote, “...I have not anye worthe the writing but onlye this. The 22 of Maye Captin Tucker was sent with 12 men into Potomacke Ryver [author’s emphasis] to feche some of our Englishe which the Indians detained...Soe thene the kinge with the of Cheskacke, their sonnes and all the great men, were drunk how manye we cannot wryte of but yt is thought some tooe hundred were poysoned and thaye coming back killed som 50 more...” (*William & Mary Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2 (April 1933), pp. 121-122).

Seventeenth century records are notoriously vague, difficult to decipher, and rarely refer to landmarks that are clearly identifiable today; such is the case with the above Bennett letter that gets us no further than the Potomac River, which is quite an extensive body of water. The letter clearly does not say anything about the Village of Patawomeck. Could Bennett have been mistaken as to the location of the attack? Are there any other sources that might clarify exactly where this horrific event occurred? W. Noel Sainsbury’s *Calendar of State*

Papers, Colonial Series, 1575-1660 includes a letter from Depehibus Canne to John Deldridge, July 2, 1623, that records that 13 people went in a shallop to Pamunkey (vol. 2, p. 48). Another period source titled “Two Tragicall Events: The Voyage of Anthony Chester, Made in the Year 1620” mentions the poisoning, but not the precise location. In an editor’s note on page 214 of this document, Leon Tyler places the incident at Opechancanough’s “town of Pamunkey” at the site of what is now West Point, but without citing documentation for that statement. These are all vague enough to suggest (but not prove) that the poisoning happened somewhere other than at Indian Point in Stafford.

Finally, though, a fourth source seems to end the debate. In 1624, Gov. Francis Wyatt and others offered “The Answer of the Govern[ou]r and Councell in Virginia to the false informac[i]ons concerning the poysoning of the Indians.” This report states, “Besides the act is made prodigious by the number, two hundred being said to be destroyed by poyson at a feast when there was neither feast made nor any man poyson’d, the same Opachancano, treating with the Governour at Pawmunky the last som[m]er, and fiftie said to be shott to death, when there were but nine.” The report noted that the Indians had sent a messenger asking for permission to plant their “corne quietly, p[ro]missing the redelivery of those English w[hi]ch he had held prisoners ever since the Massacre, we thought good to lay hold of that means w[hi]ch god had put into our hands, for redeeming those miserable soules out of bondage.” The English became convinced that the Indians were “then plotting and contriveing” another attack and “...we resolved to prevent them, and give the first blowe, so after some treaties by a messenger that went by land, and one or two of the Captives being returned, the Indians desiring that a boate might be sent into Pamaunkie river, w[i]th but a few men in hir [to] fetch hoame the rest.” The English sent “a shallop w[i]th a Commander and twelve shott.” The writer of the report mentions “poison carried along, w[hi]ch in defect of all other meanes was to be used, whither it were or no we know not” (Blackstone, Bernard, ed. *The Ferrar Papers*. Cambridge University Press, 2015, Document #556).

The Bennett letter, Sainsbury, and Gov. Wyatt’s explanation all include mention of the shallop and 12 or 13 men. Sainsbury and Wyatt clearly put the event on the Pamunkey River, not in Stafford. It was because of these last two sources that the Virginia Department of Historic Resources placed the state marker in King William County.

In gathering the information contained in this article, the writer spent several months in dialog with an historian with the Jamestown Settlement; with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources; and with the noted authority on Virginia Indians, Dr. Helen C. Rountree. It was a time-consuming effort to eke out minute details contained in documents written some 400 years ago. If we believe our history is important, then the details are also important. In the end, the early records are our best window on past events and they must take precedence over handed-down stories.