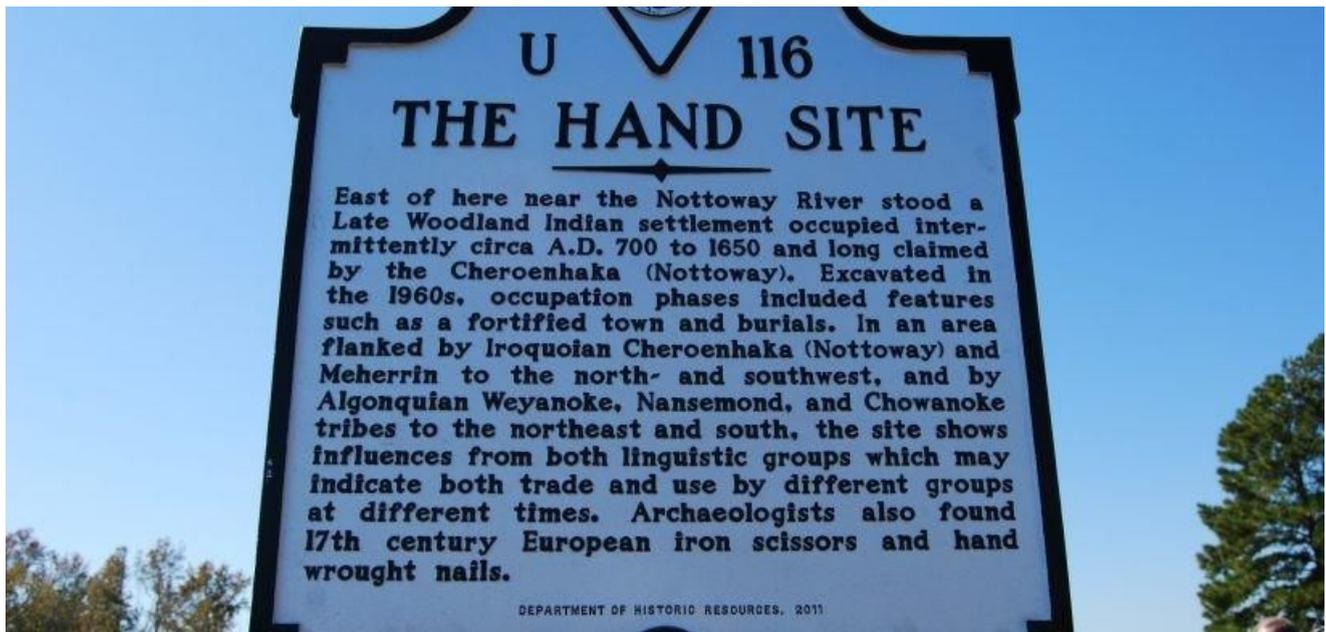


# Cheroenhaka Nottoway Indian Oral History Supported by Archeological Finds At The Hand Site



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Cheroenhaka Nottoway Indian Oral History Supported by Archeological Finds At The Hand Site (44SN22)

Written by: Chief Walt "Red Hawk" Brown and Theresa Preston

All photos courtesy of Bert Wendell (ASV)

It's sad but true that the oral histories of Native First Peoples are hardly ever taken seriously. It's rare to hear an oral history and immediately recognize that there is physical evidence to support the claim. But that's exactly what happened when Archeological Society of Virginia (ASV) member, Russell Darden, of Courtland VA, heard Chief Walt "Red Hawk" Brown recount the oral history of the Cheroenhaka Nottoway Tribe of Southampton County Virginia.

A story had been passed down by the tribal elders that there had been a "saving mission" down river, into the region known today as the Outer Banks of North Carolina. People from far away had come by boat into the region. The boat off loaded many people and supplies and then left. Those remaining behind struggled to survive. They needed to be taught basic survival skills. Their sheer numbers had overwhelmed the capability of the local Native People. Abundant food resources were available, but not the necessary man power to devote to daily mentoring of such a large group. The language barrier didn't help. Thus neighboring tribes up river were called to come and take some of these new people.

The Cheroenhaka Nottoway was one of the tribes who responded.

Mr. Darden knew that archeological evidence had been found that proves that at least one, a European woman, lived, and was buried in the tribal burial grounds along with grave goods consisting of her European scissors, hair comb and a handmade wrought iron carpentry nail.

Mr. Darden had worked on the excavation as a young man and he recounted to Chief Brown how the site had been excavated under the combined cooperative efforts of the land owner, Union Camp Corporation, the Virginia State Library, under the guidance of their only archeologist, Col. Howard MacCord, Sr. (ret. USA Colonel) and an little know program of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 called The Neighborhood Youth Corp. AS part of President Johnson's "War on Poverty", the Corp was designed to fund projects that would mobilize the human and financial resources of the nation to combat poverty in the United States, expand educational opportunities, and it focused on at risk youth. Col. MacCord applied and received funding for excavations. He hired youth who didn't have summer jobs and introduced them to archeology and supporting sciences.

The excavation was labeled 44SN22 which is archeological code that translates as: 44 is the archeological number for Virginia, SN identifies Southampton County, and 22 means it was the twenty-second archeological site recorded in Southampton County. All items excavated would be labeled with 44SN22.

The crew called it "The Hand Site". It was named because the long closed Handsome Virginia Post Office was the closest landmark to the site. Col. MacCord hired Gerald Smith to run the excavations and introduced the idea to the college student majoring in archeology that perhaps the site would provide the perfect topic for his theses, which explains why the excavations were conducted in 1965, 1966 and 1969.

Excavations revealed the footprint of a square palisade structure. Numerous pottery fragments and stone artifacts determined that the site was that of an Iroquoian village, with three stages of primary occupation that dated from approximately 700 A.D to 1650 A.D. The skeleton remains of 131 individuals were estimated to date to approximately 1580 A.D. 130 of the skeleton remains were Indigenous (Native) Americans.

Chief Brown recalled that when he was in his early twenties and home briefly because of his military career, he remembered the old post office building being used as a type of support center for excavations going on down on the Nottoway River.

Chief Brown acquired a copy of the book, ASV Special Publication Number 11, Titled: The Hand Site Southampton County Virginia (1984) by Gerald Smith, and began researching what had been archeologically documented about the site and how it might support the tribe's oral tradition.

Chief Brown was constantly on the lookout for other research on The Hand Site. Ten years after ASV published Dr. Smith's report on The Hand Site, another paper was published which was the equivalent of getting a second opinion from a specialist. The 1994 Executive Summary, Inventory and Assessment of Human Remains from The Hand Site (44SN22), Southampton County, Virginia in the National Museum of Natural History, was a major peer review of Dr. Smith's excavations and written report. This second opinion supported the identity of the site and concluded; "This region is identified in the ethno-historic record as being occupied by the Iroquoian Nottoway (Cheroenhaka true name of the Nottoway...WDB) in the 16-17th centuries." The report continued; "An assessment of mortuary practices, house size and ethno historic documentation indicates that the inhabitants of the Hand Site were Iroquoian. This supports the conclusions of the excavators that this was a Nottoway Site."

"A Nottoway site"... "Nottoway" is a derogatory name given the tribe by Jamestown explorers who made the first ethno historic contact in 1609. Mr. Sicklemore journeyed to the town of Chowanoke in 1609 searching for survivors of the Roanoke Colony of 1585 (Smith, 1710b:474). Minimal details of the trip are recorded, but a route down either the Nottoway or Blackwater Rivers to access the Chowan River required entering areas containing Cheroenhaka (Nottoway)

Indian settlements. The search party was led by two Algonquin speaking braves from the Powhatan tribe. The Algonquin speakers called the Cheroenhaka people “Na-Da-Wa”, a derogatory term used for people who did not speak Algonquin. It also had many other meanings, like “Snake”, “Adder” or the one that was actually a compliment, “Stealthy Warrior”. The Colonials logically thought “Na-Da-Wa” was the name of the tribe, but it wasn’t. The true name, Cheroenhaka, is Iroquoian and means “People at the Fork of the Stream”.

The tribe took two trips to discover what else might be available in this quest to verify the historical footprint of their ancestors. The first trip was to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) in Richmond, Virginia where all physical evidence, except human remains, has been permanently archived. There were the European scissors, the remnants of a hair comb, the wrought iron nail, and the stone points and pottery shards which helped date the site. This evidence showed a long term occupation period that spanned 900 years, beginning around 750 A.D. and ending around 1650 A.D.

The second trip was to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. on October 14, 2005. Chief Brown, along with Vice Chief Ellis Wright, and numerous other tribal members, visited by appointment, and viewed the bones of the Iroquoian ancestors who had been removed from Southampton County VA.

Thirteen years later, upon learning that the bones had been moved to a new facility, a return trip was scheduled on July 30, 2018 to the new location at the Smithsonian Resource Center in Suitland, Maryland. This afforded younger tribal members an opportunity to visit the remains. Chief Brown also invited former Virginia Governor and U.S. Senator George Allen to accompany the tribe. Discussions pertaining to the possible return of the remains for re-interment on the tribal land in Courtland, Virginia were raised once again.

The “Hand Site” remains were neatly stored in white archival boxes about the size of the average shoe box. Prayers were said and a smudging ceremony conducted in memory of the ancestors. It was a very somber ceremony and many tribal members were moved to tears to see the bones of their ancestors from centuries ago not resting in Mother Earth as is the Native tradition of burial; but stored in boxes on a shelf.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of November 16, 1990 was passed 28 years too late to prevent the removal of the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) ancestors in 1965. Now the tribe has to be Federally Recognized to claim their ancestors and have them reinterred back in the grounds from whence they came.

The Iroquoian speaking tribes of Virginia faced this same identity eradication yet, as of this writing, are still not federally recognized. This blocks the Cheroenhaka Nottoway tribe from repatriation at this time even though the Smithsonian identifies these bones from The Hand Site excavations as “Iroquoian Nottoway”. In the years that have followed, Chief Walt “Red Hawk” Brown continues working for federal recognition which is the barrier to having the ancestors bones repatriated back to Southampton County and laid to rest in Mother Earth on the 263 acres owned by the Tribe in Courtland, Virginia.



The Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) tribe searched for a way to protect The Hand Site and keep it in the memory of all who lived or traveled in Southampton County Virginia. A quick read of the Department of Transportation’s Memorial Marker criteria revealed that the archeological excavation alone would qualify since they were over fifty years old. Protecting the site was a high priority since it is unlikely that 100% of the tribal ancestors buried were located and excavated. However, to meet all the memorial marker criteria GPS coordinates

were needed. GPS technology was invented in 1973 for the military, and not allowed for civilian use until the 1980’s. All we had to do was find a way to officially GPS The Hand Site.

On July 28th, 2009, Chief Walt "Red Hawk" Brown, along with members from the Nansemond Chapter of the Archeological Society of Virginia (ASV), met with Tom Reed (Southern Rivers Forestry Consultants, LLC) representing the owner of the Hand Site, and Harvey Darden and Scott Bachman from the United States Forestry Service. Walking The Hand Site, we discussed how to best protect the site during future tree harvesting operations. To protect the site it needed to be professionally surveyed and verified by field testing. GPS coordinates would be plotted noting the boundaries of the site. This would be accomplished at no cost to the owner. The ASV conducts Certification Field Schools each year at selected sites around Virginia under the strict supervision of a professional archeologist. The Hand Site was a logical candidate for such a school.



Chief Brown and the ASV Hand Site Committee worked diligently to coordinate the required participants: (1) the property owner, (2) the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, (3) Virginia State Archaeologist, Michael B. Barber, PHD, RPA, and (4) the ASV Field School.

A field school was conducted at The Hand Site on May 10th – 14th, 2010. ASV Nansemond Chapter members, who are also tribal members of the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Indian Tribe, participated in the field school.

The triangular points pictured here are from The Hand Site excavations in the 1960's. They are stored at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources in Richmond, VA.



The same rectangular style points were found during the 2010 Field School excavations. Chief Walt "Red Hawk" Brown is shown holding a newly discovered point from the 2010 excavation in the photo to the right.

With the new GPS coordinates in hand, Chief Brown and the ASV Hand Site Committee officially began the memorial marker paperwork. The VA Department of Transportation determined that the best and safest location for the memorial marker would be a spot near the intersection of Handsome Road (VA St. Rt. 734) and General Thomas Boulevard (VA St. Rt. 671) approximately four miles south of the city of Franklin in Southampton Co. VA.



It was a joint effort to raise the \$1,500 for the casting of the marker, the Tribe funded \$1,000 and ASV contributed \$500.

We made three trips to VDHR in Richmond and worked on the "approved" text which was limited to a prescribed number of words.

We tracked down Dr. Gerald Smith, the Hand Site archeologist, and flew him from Georgia to Virginia in a snow storm so he could testify at the final VDHR hearing, because this was a one shot deal. The committee's decision would be final. Our hearts were pounding as the VDHR committee voted and nearly burst with happiness and relief when it got approved!

On November 1, 2011 the formal dedication ceremony was held for the unveiling of The Hand Site marker (44SN22) and what a celebration it was.

State and local County officials attended. The Virginia State Police directed traffic. Along with members of the Archeological Society of Virginia from all over the state were community leaders and neighbors. In full Native Regalia the members of the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Tribe of Southampton County Virginia filed in and assembled



into their respective duties. Smudging ceremonies were performed by Alvin “Strong Heart” Suter. The hand drum and rattle accompanied our Native singers.



Then the members of the ASV Hand Site Committee marched toward the covered marker and with help from the tallest men, were able to unveil the new marker. This portion of our work was completed. The site and the Cheroenhaka Nottoway people would be remembered but the remaining chapter, bringing the ancestors home, is still to be written. It is noted that the marker read that the site was LONG Claimed by the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Indians.



