

The Indians, or First Americans, of Virginia

1. American Indians were the first Americans. We call them Indians because when Christopher Columbus landed in the New World, he called the people he found living there “Indians.” He thought he had found a western route to the “Indies” (Asia). American Indians were also the first people living in the state of Virginia. We know that at one time they lived all over our state because of the artifacts they left behind. Some of these artifacts include arrowheads and pottery. Archaeologists have recently discovered new material evidence about Werowocomoco. Werowocomoco was a large Indian town used by Indian leaders for several hundred years before the English settlers came. It was the headquarters of the leader Powhatan in 1607.
2. When the settlers came to Virginia in 1607 there were thousands of American Indians living in a land they called “Pamahsawuh.” These Indians were called the Eastern Woodlands Indians because they lived in areas covered by dense forests. The Eastern Woodlands Indians were divided into three main groups based on the language they spoke.
3. The Algonquian language was spoken by the largest group of Eastern Woodlands Indians. Their tribes were found mainly around the Chesapeake Bay and its surrounding rivers in the *Coastal Plain* or *Tidewater region* of Virginia. One of the Algonquian tribes was the Powhatan Indians.
4. The Iroquoian language was spoken by Eastern Woodlands tribes that lived in the southern parts of Virginia along the North Carolina border and in the Appalachian Plateau region located in southwestern Virginia. One of the Iroquoian tribes was the Cherokee Indians.
5. The third group of Eastern Woodlands Indians spoke the Siouan (soon) language. These Indians lived mainly in the Piedmont region of Virginia.
6. The Woodlands Indians were influenced by Virginia’s climate and geography. The kinds of food they ate, the clothing they wore, and the homes they built were influenced by Virginia’s relatively mild climate and four distinct seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter. In the winter, they hunted birds and animals for food and clothing. Deerskin was the most common material used to make clothing. In the spring, they fished and picked berries. In the summer, they grew crops like beans, corn, and squash. This combination of vegetables is still called by its Algonquian name today – succotash. In the fall, they harvested their crops. Their shelters were made from the materials around them. Because most of early Virginia was covered by thick forests, the homes of the Woodlands Indians were made from tree limbs, vines, reeds, and bark.

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1. Virginia Indians live and work as modern Americans. Many practice ancient traditions and crafts while incorporating new customs over time.

2. The current state-recognized American Indian tribes are in regions throughout Virginia. The Monacan tribe can still be found in the Piedmont region today. Many tribes can also be found in the Coastal Plain region. The tribes maintain tribal museums and lands on which they hold public festivals called powwows. The powwow is a way of teaching American Indians and visitors about American Indian culture, past and present. Today, Virginia Indians maintain their vibrant cultural heritage through drumming, singing, dance, art, jewelry, clothing, crafts, pottery and storytelling. Virginia Indians contribute to American society as active citizens who vote, hold office and work in communities.