The Catawba Indian Nation

The Catawba Indians have lived on their ancestral lands along the banks of the Catawba River dating back at least 6000 years. Before contact with the Europeans it is believed that the tribe inhabited most of the Piedmont area of South Carolina, North Carolina, and parts of Virginia.

Early Catawbas lived in villages which were surrounded by a wooden palisade or wall. There was a large council house in the village as well as a sweat lodge, homes, and an open plaza for meetings, games, and dances. The homes were rounded on top and made of bark. The dwellings were small with extended families living in a single structure. Catawbas were farmers. They planted crops like corn and squash along the banks of the river. They also fished and hunted. The Catawbas were a large and powerful group and waged war with neighboring tribes, especially the Cherokee.

First contact with the Catawbas was recorded in 1540 when the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto marched his troops through the Piedmont while headed west looking for gold. There was little contact between the tribe and early settlers because the new colonies were barely surviving. Once the Virginia colony of Jamestown and the Carolina colony of Charles Town became more established this changed.

The tribal people called themselves “yeh is-wah h’reh”, meaning “people of the river.” The colonists who came to trade began calling all the tribes along the Catawba River Valley by the name Catawba. By the late 17th century, trade began having a major impact on the Catawba society. The Catawba traded deerskins to the Europeans for goods such as muskets, knives, kettles, and cloth. The Catawba villages became a major hub in the trade system between the Virginia traders and the Carolina traders.

Settlers began to move into the Piedmont during the 18th century. The tribe always carried a philosophy of brotherly love and peace when it came to the settlers. This did not serve them well because the settlers brought disease with them. In 1759, smallpox swept through the Catawba villages for a fourth time in a century bringing the population of the tribe to less than 1,000 by 1760. Colonists believed the tribe was dying out.

Catawba warriors were known as the fiercest in the land. The tribe claimed at least eleven other tribes as enemies. Leaders of the state of South Carolina knew this and kept relations with the tribe friendly. King Hagler was chief from 1750 to 1763. He is remembered as a friend to the English but also a firm defender of the rights of his people. The tribe’s friendship with the English helped both sides. The colonists received protection from other tribes that may threaten them and the tribe received supplies that aided in their survival. In 1763 the Catawbas received title to 144,000 acres from the King of England. It was hard for the tribe to protect the land from colonists and eventually they began renting land to settlers. The first tenant was Thomas Spratt who leased several thousand acres of farmland.

Eventually the settlers who had leased land from the tribe wanted the land for themselves. They put pressure on South Carolina to negotiate with the tribe. This was during the Removal Period when many tribes were being moved west. In order to avoid this, the tribe and South Carolina negotiated the Treaty at Nation Ford. The treaty stipulated that the Catawbas relinquish to the State of South Carolina their 144,000 acres of land. In return, South Carolina promised the tribe a new tract of land in a less populated area and to pay the Catawbas money. By 1847, South Carolina Governor David Johnson said, “They are, in effect, dissolved.” However, that was not the end of the Catawbas.

Of the 566 federally recognized tribes in the United States, the Catawba Indian Nation is the only one located in the state of South Carolina. The modern day tribal lands are located in York County, South Carolina. There are currently over 2800 enrolled members of the Nation. The tribe has a long history and a rich culture that lives on today.

**Path to Recognition**

During the Franklin Roosevelt administration, the federal government tried to improve conditions for tribes. Under the Indian Reorganization Act, the tribe created a constitution in 1944 to help them govern themselves. Government policy toward tribes changed in the 1950’s and many tribes were asked to terminate their federal status. In 1959 the Catawba tribe was terminated in the eyes of the federal government. After some time the tribe determined that they preferred to be seen as a community and decided to fight another battle; the battle to regain federal recognition.

In 1973, the Catawbas filed their petition with Congress for federal recognition. They also updated and adopted their constitution in 1975. The Catawbas had a strong argument in this fight. The Treaty of Nation Ford with South Carolina was illegal because it was not ratified by the federal government. The federal government should have protected the rights of the tribe. It took 20 years, but on November 20, 1993, the land claim settlement with the state of South Carolina and the federal government finally came to an end. The Catawbas agreed to give up claims on land taken from them by the state of South Carolina. In return, the Catawba Indian Nation received federal recognition and $50 million for economic development, education, social services, and land purchases.