**The Pee Dee Indian Tribe of Beaver Creek**

By J. Michelle Schohn

The Pee Dee people of South Carolina are a Muskogean people who live today in several separate bands in South Carolina. Some live in the traditional homelands on the Pee Dee River, while others live in the vicinity of a 1738 reservation that was established for the tribe.

**The PeeDee at the Arrival of the Spanish:**

The Pee Dee Indians are the descendants of the Vehidi mentioned by Juan de la

Bandera, notary for Juan Pardo’s second expedition to South Carolina and his visit to the Chiefdom of Cofitachequi in the late 1560s. The Vehidi were part of the larger chiefdom of Cofitachequi and lived all along the Pee Dee River, from Town Creek in North Carolina to the mouth of the river at Winyah Bay. Within the chiefdom was the PeeDee town of Ilapi, known variously as Ylasi, Lapi, Herape, Hilapi, and Hilibi, on the Pee Dee River in the vicinity of Marlboro County. The likely location of the city is a site on the Pee Dee River marked by a series of mounds and protected by a two-mile-long mound known through oral tradition as the snake mound.

Pardo entered South Carolina in 1566 on a mission to Christianize the Indians and claim the land for Spain. When he reached Cofitachequi, sometime between 1567 and 1568, he called a meeting of the chiefs there. Vehidi Orata, chief of the Vehidi, as well as the chief of the town of Ylasi, were among those that attended the assembly near present-day Camden. The group agreed to build a house for the Spanish at Ylasi and to bring regular tributes of corn. Pardo was later visited by the Herape Orata as he headed northward to Gueca.

**The Pee Dee during Colonial Times:**

By the time the first colonists began arriving in Charleston in 1670, the Pee Dee had already established trade with the Virginia settlements and was also working well with its nearest Indian neighbors. The Pee Dee were among the first to welcome the English to the area, meeting with Capt. Maurice Matthews, who was sent among the Indians by the Charles Town government to establish relations. In a letter to Lord Ashley dated August 30, 1671, Matthews includes the Elasie [Ilapi or Ilapi] among a list of friendly tribes interested in trade.

The Pee Dee quickly proved themselves committed allies, fighting alongside the colonists in the Tuscarora and Yamassee Wars. Not long after the conclusion of the worst of the Yamassee War, the first attempts at establishing a trading post among the Pee Dee were made. The land the Pee Dee had for this trading post would ultimately cause the removal of the Beaver Creek Pee Dee from their traditional homeland. On July 10, 1716, discussions with Landgrave Thomas Smith led to a resolution ordering that a trading post be constructed on the Black River at Winneau and William Watis was appointed to manage the post. On behalf of the Pee Dee, Watis asked that the post be built at Saukee Bluff, now Britton’s Ferry, which is located on the southwest side of the Great Pee Dee River. The site, located on the boundary between present-day Georgetown and Williamsburg Counties, was considered to be more advantageous to the Pee Dee. The Commissioners on Indian Trade agreed.

Before construction, however, Watis asked the Commissioners to move the post again, this time to Uauenee (present-day Yauhanna). Uauenee was less remote than Saukee, which would only be protected by the Pee Dee and would therefore be exposed to threats from the Cheraw. Uauenee was contiguous to the Waccamaw, who were a more populous tribe and could offer the post greater protection. The Commissioners agreed and the location was changed.

Sometime in 1737, Landgrave Thomas Smith II decided he desired the lands at the original trading post site at Saukee. At an August 1737 meeting of the South Carolina Council, his son-in-law Col. Benjamin Waring, requested that the Council issue a warrant of resurvey on a tract of 500 acres of land on Sawkee Bluff on the Pee Dee River and convey it to Smith.

A reservation near the lands of Benjamin Coachman was initially considered as a place for the Natchez, who were already living in that vicinity. No mention of the Pee Dee is made in William Bull’s initial request to the Council in 1738 for the reservation. However, the problem for Landgrave Smith was that the lands at Saukey/Sawkee belonged to the Pee Dee, and he would need for them to be moved to take possession. He was aware, however, that other Pee Dee lived in the vicinity, and possibly on the lands of Benjamin’s father, James Coachman. James Coachman had good relations with the tribe, having acted as their advocate, writing letters on their behalf and defending them in the capital. They in turn became known as Captain Coachman’s Indians and served him faithfully as slave catchers and traders.

It seems likely therefore, given that Benjamin Coachman was Landgrave Smith’s son-in-law (having married Smith’s daughter Margaret), that Smith was involved in the inclusion of the Pee Dee on the Natchez reservation. The Council agreed to establish a 100-acre reservation for the Pee Dee and Natchez on lands belonging to James Coachman, Benjamin’s father. The Pee Dee Indian Tribe of Beaver Creek lives just upriver from the original location of this reservation. The resurvey of the lands at Saukey was issued but no plat recorded. However, the fact that the tract ultimately ended up in the hands of Smith’s son-in-law Benjamin Waring suggests that Smith took possession of the 500 acres.

**The American Revolution:**

The Beaver Creek Pee Dee lived for a short time on the reservation, but then moved just upriver to the lands around Deer and Rocky Swamps on the Edisto River. Other bands lived across the state, each maintaining a separate chief. One chief, Lewis Johns (or Jones) served as a leader of all of the bands. The onset of the Revolutionary War would mark for the Pee Dee, however, the last time all of the bands came together and functioned as one tribe.

In 1775, Capt. John Allston, a Pee Dee River plantation owner who was aware of the Pee Dee living in his area, requested that he be placed in command of a military company. That request was denied. Undeterred, Allston recruited from the Pee Dee Indians living near the Great Pee Dee River to form his company of “Foot Rovers,” also called “Foot Rangers” or “Raccoon Company.” In exchange for recruiting additional Pee Dee from the band living in the vicinity of the Edisto River and Four Holes Swamp, Allston offered the rank of Lieutenant to Benjamin Coachman, son of the James Coachman (who had sold his land of a Pee Dee/Natchez reservation). This company of 50 riflemen was composed entirely of Pee Dee Indians. The company’s existence was short-lived, as Allston proved no better at leading Indians than he had at leading non-Indians. Within a year, the company was absorbed into the regiments serving under Colonel William Thompson.

The majority of Allston’s company was absorbed into Thompson’s 3rd Regiment, with others going to either the 2nd or 4th Regiments or into the companies of Captain Hopkins, Captain Felix Warley, Captain Joseph Warley, or Captain Smith. It is worth noting that Captain Felix Warley was the son-in-law of Lt. Benjamin Coachman, co-founder of the Pee Dee Indian “Foot Rangers,” the same Benjamin Coachman who was the son of James Coachman, with whom the Pee Dee helped quell a slave revolt, who gave the Pee Dee a place to stay in 1738, and who ultimately sold that land to be used as their reservation. Most of the modern day Beaver Creek Pee Dee are descended from the Pee Dee members of Thompson’s regiments.

**The PeeDee during the Federal Period:**

Following the Revolution, the son of Pee Dee chief Lewis Johns, also named Lewis Jones, received a 2,000 acre land grant for the services of the tribe during the war. That grant, though divided among individuals, is still in the hands of the Pee Dee who continue to live in the area.

On that land in Orangeburg County, in the Deer and Rocky Swamps, live the descendants of the men who fought in Raccoon Company. It was there that they established Indian churches where they still worship and Indian schools that many attended before they were absorbed into the larger South Carolina school systems. The core of the band of PeeDee that moved to the Edisto River in 1738 still remain within a few miles of that reservation in the towns of Neeses, North, and Springfield in Orangeburg County.