Sumter Band of Cheraw Indians

The Cheraw Indians are a Siouan people who speak a dialect of the Dakota Sioux language very similar to the Catawba tribe.

From ancient times the Cheraw maintained villages stretching from the north central section of North Carolina to the upper reaches of the Pee Dee River in South Carolina.

In 1710 the Cheraw were forced out of their northern villages by repeated raids from the Iroquois. The Cheraw lived here at the border of North and South Carolina for many generations and maintained villages spread from Robeson County, North Carolina to as far south as the Wateree river.

In 1712 nearly every able-bodied Cheraw male joined with the South Carolina colonists in their war against the Tuscarora, a tribe that had long been an enemy of the Cheraw. Early historian Rivers estimated the Cheraw population in 1715 to be approximately 140 fighting age men and 370 women, children, and elderly.

In 1701 Welsh Baptists arrived on the ship William & Mary in Philadelphia. 30 years later they removed as a group to the south and settled briefly in Marion County, South Carolina. Here many of the Welsh encountered the Cheraw Indians who were suffering greatly from disease, constant raids by the Seneca and other Northern Indians, and several years of failed crops. A large number of Cheraw had already begun moving west to join their friends, the Catawba, as early as 1726, and the remainder greatly desired disposing of their lands and joining their tribesmen among the Catawba. In 1737 the Welsh and the South Carolina House of Commons treated with the Cheraw Indians and negotiated the relinquishment of a large parcel of land that became known as the “Welsh Tract.” Here in 1738 they erected the “Welsh Neck Baptist Church” which, in 1782, was renamed the “Cheraw Hill Baptist Church.”

In 1759 a party of 45 Cheraw warriors, under the leadership of their chief “King Johnny”, joined the English in the expedition against Fort Duquesne. After the conclusion of the French and Indian War in 1763 a large number of Cheraw decided not to return to the Catawba reservation, but instead resettled in their ancient homeland in north central North Carolina between the Tar and Roanoke rivers, and it is here, at the border between Northampton and Halifax counties, that many of them later volunteered for service in the American Revolution.

In 1776, three Cheraw Indian men, James Scott, David Scott, and Isham Scott, all close cousins, joined the North Carolina Continental Line. James was assigned to the 3rd Regiment, David to the 2nd Regiment, and Isham to the 10th Regiment.

All three of these Cheraw Scotts, while serving in the North Carolina Continental Line, had spent some time training in the High Hills of Santee between 1779 and 1780. They must have found the area to their liking as, after the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, all three brought their families down from North Carolina. Tagging along with the Scotts was Aaron Oxendine, a Cheraw Indian of Robeson, North Carolina, son-in-law of James Scott and nephew of Isham Scott’s wife. And thus the Cheraw Indians returned to mid-lands South Carolina after a nearly 50-year absence.

In consideration of their veteran status, General Thomas Sumter employed these Indian-blooded families in his farming and manufacturing endeavors, testified in support of their Revolutionary War veterans’ pensions, and allowed them to reside on his land. In 1809 General Sumter deeded 24 acres of his personal land as a gift to James Scott, one of the few non family members to inherit land from the famous General.

We descendants of those Cheraw Indians continued to reside in Sumter County, and maintained our own distinct community for over 150 years. We built a church, and general store to serve our people, and the State established a "special school" for us, separate from the white and black schools of the County.

The Sumter tribe of Cheraw Indians is a modern political representation of that ancient Cheraw Indian inheritance. Our goal is to educate the public regarding our history, culture, traditions, crafts, and unique way of life.