

The Accokeek Foundation's Piscataway Cultural Landscape Initiative

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IF YOU HAVE EVER TRAVELED TO GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT VERNON, you probably remember standing on the porch, admiring the view of the river and the wooded landscape across the river, perhaps thinking "I wonder what's over there?" The answer is Piscataway Park, a national park situated on the Maryland shore of the Potomac River, about 15 miles south of the iconic monuments of Washington, DC. The park is named after the Piscataway Indians, the Eastern Woodland Indian nation that lived here at the time of first contact and still considers this land sacred.

The Accokeek Foundation (the Foundation), a non-profit founded in the late 1950s to preserve this land and the view from Mount Vernon, was instrumental in the creation of Piscataway Park in the 1960s. The Foundation stewards 200 acres of the 5000-acre park through a cooperative agreement with the National Park Service (NPS). The initial vision for preservation was to make the park a working landscape that would complement the story told at Mount Vernon. The Foundation created the National Colonial Farm to demonstrate and interpret what life was like for an ordinary small tobacco planter in Maryland on the eve of the American Revolution. Twenty years ago, this agricultural theme was extended to the contemporary story of sustainable agriculture when the Foundation created the Ecosystem Farm, an 8-acre organic vegetable farm that provides fresh produce to local families, through a Community Supported Agriculture program, and provides training to new farmers. Arguably the most significant aspect of this place, its identity as the homeland of the Piscataway people, went largely unaddressed. The Foundation has begun efforts to change this.

When Captain John Smith explored this region in 1608, he found a complex social world of Chesapeake area Indians. The map he created from his voyages shows 200 Indian towns and their names. In June of 1608, Smith came ashore in the region now encompassed by Piscataway Park, where he met the Piscataway Indians in a town called Moyaone. Moyaone was the seat of government for the Piscataway, whose territory stretched from present day Washington, D.C. to Maryland's St. Mary's County. In less than twenty-five years, this land became part of the newly chartered British colony of Maryland. As the seventeenth century progressed, one Indian nation

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after another in the Chesapeake region was dispossessed, losing land through (often illegal) sales, and through white settlers squatting on their lands.

Attacks from tribes to the north prompted the Piscataway to leave this particular piece of land. The Susquehannocks took up residence, until an attack by Virginian colonists seemed imminent during Bacon's rebellion prompted them to slip away under cover of night. Some Piscataways gave up on the region altogether, following the hereditary chief in allying themselves with the Five Nations and William Penn, and settling in a new town on the Susquehanna River. Part of the nation remained in Southern Maryland, living together in communities but, for the most part, not identifying themselves as Indian until the American Indian Movement of the 1970s. Piscataway member Turkey Tayac was a leader in that movement. He was present at the dedication of Piscataway Park in 1968, and was chosen as the leader of the first Piscataway tribal organization when it was incorporated in 1974. After his death in 1978, three separate Piscataway groups emerged: the Piscataway Indian Nation, the Piscataway-Conoy Confederacy, and the Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians.

Five years ago, the Accokeek Foundation convened a scholarly colloquium that included presentations by scholars of indigenous history in the region, as well as by representatives of the three bands of the Piscataway Indians. At the end of the first day of the colloquium, a group of participants decided to visit the grave of Chief Turkey Tayac, who was buried in Piscataway Park thanks to congressional legislation passed in 1979. Dr. Gabrielle Tayac, Turkey's granddaughter and a scholar at the National Museum of the American Indian, described this walk: "we were walking down the boardwalk, there were three adult eagles and one juvenile flying right there... It's like we're coming back to life... We were all able to leave tobacco at the gravesite, at Turkey's gravesite. And there was this very golden light... It was a powerful moment."

Out of this momentous gathering came a commitment to work together in developing interpretative materials and programs at Piscataway Park that would reflect the culture of the Piscataway people, both in the past and in the present. The Foundation created a brochure about the Piscataway, the theme of which is "We are still here." Piscataway values became the focus of a poster for school children. These were fine efforts, but we recognized this rich history deserved much more than a brochure and poster.

Searching for what could come next, I realized that the concept of cultural landscapes could frame a much bigger effort to recognize our site's significance. Thus was born the Piscataway Cultural Landscape Initiative. With the help of Deanna Beacham's work on indigenous cultural landscapes, we identified the goal of our initiative: "to create a national model in Piscataway Park of connecting people to the environment through interpretation of the indigenous cultural landscape of the Piscataway people."

Dr. Tayac, who also sits on our Board of Trustees, describes the Accokeek Foundation's role in dealing with the enduring Piscataway presence at this place as one of sacred stewardship. As she said at the Colloquium, "The ancient chiefdom and its contemporary descendants carry forward a deeply held vow to protect the land and the ancestors sleeping near here. The environmental trust that is woven into all actions at the Accokeek Foundation broadens now to include the cultural aboriginality of this place as well. Piscataway society, as an indigenous society, was and still is one that traditionally integrates the sacred relationship to the living world in all other aspects of our lives."

The Foundation began in a small way, by weaving Piscataway culture into a tour of our Pumpkin Ash Trail, where students learn about the importance to the Piscataway of the fruit of the pawpaw tree, and the tuckahoe that grows in the wetland through which the trail winds. The Foundation received a grant from the Maryland Traditions program of the Maryland Arts Council

for a small oral history project we are currently conducting, called “Piscataway Connections to the Land.” The goal of this project is to explore the cultural meanings and memories of the land for Piscataway people today. From these stories, we can begin to draw connections between twentieth century traditions of Piscataway communities in Southern Maryland, whose lives centered around agriculture, and to the contact and pre-contact era lifeways of their ancestors.

The Foundation faces several challenges as we grapple with how to translate this research into exhibits and visitor experiences on the land. The Foundation has an enormous responsibility to the Piscataway people to get this “right.” How do we acknowledge contemporary Piscataway culture in a way that honors the fact that many of the ceremonies and traditions now practiced reflect a rediscovery and recovery of culture among a people who lost their language, and had to hide their identity for many generations? As we have learned from the oral histories conducted so far, the Piscataway did not acknowledge their Indian heritage until the American Indian Movement of the 1970s. While there are historical references to ceremonies and practices, these were generally written by white men. Out of necessity, descendant communities have had to infer and reconstruct these practices through the experience of tribes who did not face the challenges of white occupation until nearly two hundred years after their eastern counterparts.

How can we reflect both the historical and the contemporary Piscataway connection to mother earth on the landscape? How do we highlight this story, and weave it into the complex tapestry of history that is embedded in this land? We want to get beyond the “this is the colonial farm story, this is the American Indian story, this is the African American story, this is the contemporary agriculture story” approach to interpretation. These stories did not, and do not, happen in isolation from each other, and trying to tackle interpretive approaches in a segregated way perpetuates a kind of tension between them. Our quest is to find ways to provide visitors with a meaningful experience in the park through an inclusive, multi-layered narrative that honors all of the stories.

The Foundation has applied for funding to convene a series of cultural conversations that will draw together scholars, heritage professionals, community members, and park stakeholders in facilitated conversations that focus on three themes that are central to the current and potential visitor experience of the park: agriculture, the environment (including the river, woodlands, wildlife), and foodways. The Foundation has engaged a cultural landscape architect to help understand how they can use the landscape to put the Piscataway story front and center. As a key site on the NPS’s Captain John Smith water trail, we will soon be installing an interpretive kiosk about Smith’s voyage, and the story of the Piscataway people, in the context of other tribes along the Potomac. This comes at an exciting time for us, since we will soon have completed rebuilding our boat dock, making the park accessible by water.

The Piscataway Cultural Landscape Initiative is very much a work in progress. I can imagine arriving by boat, seeing interpretive signs that share the important role that the Potomac River played in the lives of Maryland’s indigenous people, visiting a three sisters garden in our Museum Garden, and perhaps reading how students from Prince George’s County public schools have been learning about the agricultural legacy of the Piscataway people. Walking through the many ecosystems of the Pumpkin Ash Trail, and sitting on a bench created by a native artist.

One of our board members was a part of that group that walked to Turkey Tayac’s grave at the end of the first day of the scholarly colloquium that I mentioned. She couldn’t attend the second day, but sent this message:

Dear Gabrielle and all, I awoke in the middle of this night, hence this email at 2:30 am, thinking, You have an amazing story to tell, right here, right now, right here in Piscataway and it’s a story about today, a real living breathing story about today. Your story ties all the pieces together of how

peoples lived here for thousands of years, and then were dispersed from their home grounds, which lead to the loss of language and identity. Yet they come back together here multiple times a year at the convergence of two rivers to celebrate, to pray, to be in physical contact with their ancestors. As we walked to Turkey Tayac's burial site, Karen pointed out plants in the estuary that are tubers once eaten by Native Americans. Gabrielle told us how her grandfather came here to collect herbs. I wanted to ask What herbs? How are they used? Rico gave us tobacco to spread over the burial site. What is the significance of tobacco? Why is it still so important?... I had no idea the site was of such spiritual and historic significance, and here it is right across from Mount Vernon and downstream from the Nation's capitol. The stories underscore two of Accokeek's themes: one being the relevance of the past to the present, and two being the need for land stewardship and preservation. What would happen if those burial grounds had been covered in an asphalt shopping mall parking lot? How much would be lost? The story about stewardship is different from the Ecosystem Farm, which is about food nourishment and healthy bodies. This story is about the need for stewardship for spiritual nourishment. The two stories are not really different, but rather perhaps one is a continuation of and connection to the other.... There's a lot that can be told here and the stories are right before us.