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# Female leadership in Powhatan Indian tribes: Changes from first contact with Europeans to the present day

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## Introduction

The negative effects of European colonization on Native American groups have long been observed and studied, but little attention has been given to the impact those negative effects had on the roles of women in the leadership of tribes.

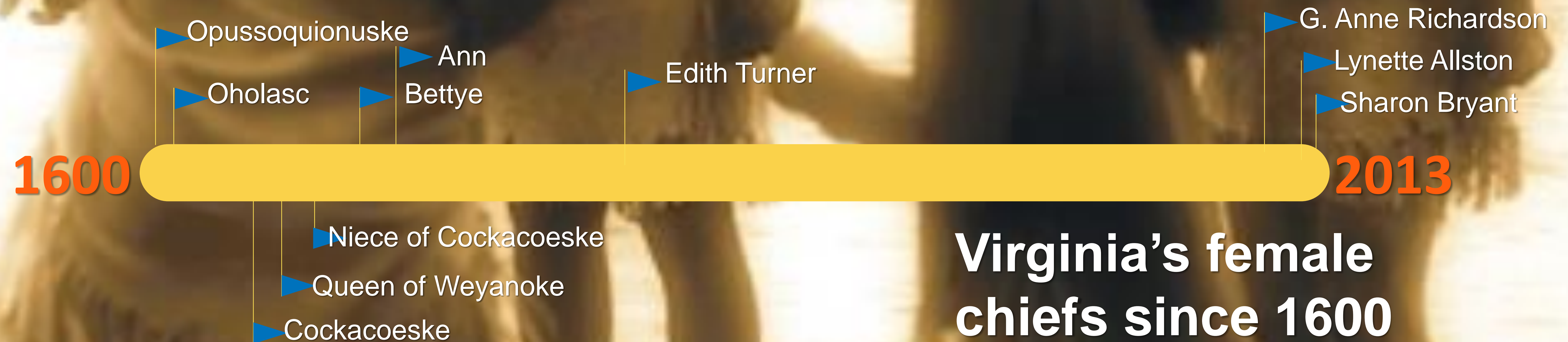
In the century following Virginia Indians' first contact with the Europeans (1607 – 1707), there were seven female chiefs of Powhatan tribes. After 1707, the next female chief in all of Virginia did not come into power until 1798. No Virginia tribes elected women chiefs from the beginning of the 1800s until 1998, when G. Anne Richardson became chief of the Rappahannock Tribe.

Of the eleven current state-recognized Virginia Indian tribes, three currently have women serving as chiefs. The current number of women in positions of leadership within the tribes is striking in comparison to the lack of women chiefs throughout most of the 1700s, 1800s and 1900s, and this research analyzes reasons for this disparity in female leadership.

## Overview

**Objective:** To explain why the number of women in leadership roles decreased at the end of the 1600s and increased beginning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Approach:** Primary sources such as an interview with a female tribal council member and verified lists of tribal council members from several tribes were included in addition to scholarly sources in an effort to balance current information and firsthand experience with the findings of non-Indian researchers. My research takes into consideration ancient tribal politics in comparison to the political workings of contemporary tribes.



## Virginia's female chiefs since 1600

## Results

Females leading tribes was a normal occurrence in the 1600s, as females could and did become chiefs as long as they won the respect and support of the tribal council. A woman's status in a tribe was determined by her lineage (through matriarchal ties to the chief) and her contribution to the tribe in the form of corn cultivation.

Many Virginia tribes began to rely less on corn agriculture throughout the 1700s, 1800s and 1900s as their tribal land bases continued to shrink and other means of subsistence became more profitable. Women struggled to find new avenues of gaining respect in an increasingly blended mix of traditional and assimilated cultures.

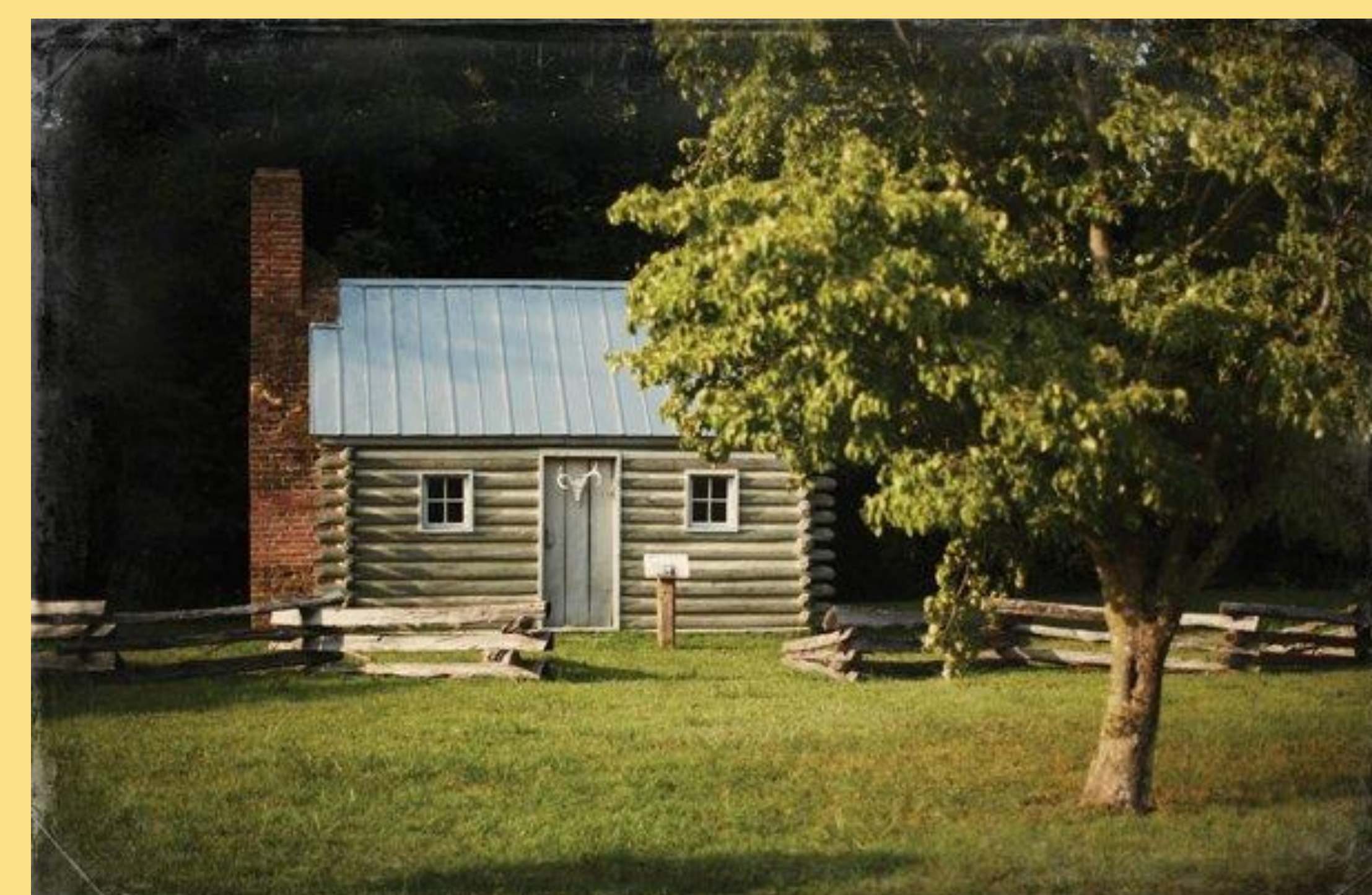
In the 1900s when the necessity for education grew along with the competition for jobs, serious racial prejudices against minorities (including Native Americans) created a barrier to Virginia Indians reaching a high level of education and equality with other citizens.



The Pamunkey and Mattaponi Tribes still pay tribute in the form of game to the Governor of Virginia each year before Thanksgiving, in keeping with the Treaty of Middle Plantation signed in 1677. The tribes pay tribute in lieu of paying state taxes. (Wood 2008)

## Discussion

- Reasons for the lack of Virginia Indian women in politics include removal of their traditional means of gaining respect (corn cultivation) and racial discrimination that made it difficult for both male and female Virginia Indians to attain a high level of education or to hold esteemed jobs.
- Leadership defaulted to men when women could not achieve prestige through traditional or more modern means.
- The recent increase in the number of Virginia women in politics indicates that the tribes are overcoming previous racial obstacles and adjusting to a more balanced ratio of men to women in the leadership of their tribes.



The Pamunkey Tribe maintains a replica log cabin schoolhouse as a reminder of their fight to educate themselves and their children in the decades before schools were integrated. (Wood 2008)

## Conclusion

The high number of Virginia Indian women currently involved in the leadership of their tribes provides evidence of a return to the tribe's gender balance of the pre-European-contact days where it was normal and expected for women to hold esteemed positions within the tribes.

The case of the Virginia tribes may predict the movement of other Indian tribes toward more balanced societies or even parallel the leadership of other minority groups that are recovering from the effects of discrimination.

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