

INDIGENOUS DC

MANAHOAC

To the west and south of this point lived the unrelated Siouan-speaking Manahoac people.

MASSOWOMECK

To the northwest of here lived the highly mobile Iroquoian-language speaking Massowomeck, whose lands stretched from present-day Pennsylvania to the West Virginia Panhandle.

SUSQUEHANNOCK

To the north and east of here lived the unrelated Iroquoian-speaking Susquehannock people.

NANTICOKE

On the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake lived the related Nanticoke people, who spoke a similar language. The Piscataways trace their lineage back to them.

THE ORIGINAL DC NATIVES

The land on which sits the capital of the United States is the ancestral land of the Algonquian-language speaking Nacotchtank people, an ethnic and linguistic subgroup of the larger Piscataway tribe of southern Maryland, with whom they were joined in a loose confederation. Thousands of Piscataway still live in the larger DC area. Relatively little is known about the Nacotchtank subgroup of the Piscataway, and most of their land, which is more or less synonymous with the original borders of DC, is now covered with dense urban areas and difficult to excavate.

No markers anywhere in the District of Columbia mention or recognize the Nacotchtank people. The name of the Anacostia River and the Anacostia area of DC are among the only acknowledgements of this tribe's heritage here, which is thought to date back at least 3,000 years. The name Anacostia comes from (A)naquash(a)tan(i)k, thought to be the name of the main Nacotchtank village, which means "Town of Traders." It was first recorded by some early colonizers prior to spelling conventions, and was later latinized by Jesuit priests as "Anacostine" and eventually "Anacostia."

The Nacotchtank were a wealthy and powerful trading people, controlling the confluence of two important rivers. Iroquois from as far away as present-day New York would make annual treks to Nacotchtank villages for fur-trading purposes. The Nacotchtank held a monopoly on the fur trade in this area around the time of colonization.

KEY TO NUMBERS

- 1 Artifacts thought to belong to the ancestors of the Nacotchtank were discovered during construction of the White House pool during the Ford Administration.
- 2 Pre-colonialism, the banks of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers were much different than today. Notably, two entire creeks, the Goose or Tiber Creek (depending on the source) and the James Creek were placed underground and now flow partially under Constitution Avenue in order to control flooding, creating the Tidal Basin.
- 3 The Anacostia River, the center of Nacotchtank civilization, was also very different than today. The Anacostia was a wider, much more free-flowing river. Due to deforestation, farming and pollution upstream it was slowly filled in with silt and mud, significantly slowing and narrowing the river.
- 4 In the late 1660s the Nacotchtank *weroance* (chief) and his entourage moved to Anacostan Island (present-day Roosevelt Island) after a period of pressure from settlers in the area. They are thought to have eventually merged with the larger Piscataway people and moved north. At least some of the Nacotchtank likely left relatives in the area.
- 5 During construction of the Whitehurst Freeway, a burial site was found of a woman aged 30 to 40 who was entered with numerous artifacts sometime between 640-790 CE. It is one of the most archeologically significant of such sites found on the East Coast.

LEGEND

- Inhabited site ———— ○
- Estimated site of villages ———— ●●● **Nacotchtank**
- Ossuary ———— □
- Workshops and quarries ———— Workshop
- Tribe or ethnic group ———— **NACOTCHTANK**

MAJOR LANGUAGE FAMILIES

The Nacotchtank language is part of the large Algonquian language family, which runs up the East Coast. Numerous Algonquian languages are found in the Great Lakes, Northern Rockies, and from the Canadian Prairies across to northern Ontario and Quebec. The Nacotchtank very likely spoke either the same language or a dialect of the language spoken by the larger Piscataway people, who still have thousands of members in the DC area.



DOEG Tauxent

The main village of the Doeg people, who were (like the Nacotchtank) also a subgroup of the Piscataway and allied with them, located in present-day Mason Neck, Va.

Assomeck

Present-day shorelines

PISCATAWAY Moyaone

The Nacotchtank *weroance* (chief) payed tribute to the Piscataway *tayac* (high chief) located in this village in present-day Piscataway Park in Prince George's County, Md. Further to the south was the rival Algonquian-language speaking Powhatan Confederacy.

Notes: This map is by undoubtedly incomplete. The names and locations of villages and inhabited sites are best estimates taken from scholarly work. Names and locations of many villages are unknown, as archeologists don't agree on their precise location. Most villages were small, with the majority of people living in small groups dispersed outside of villages, spread out along the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers. The estimated population varies, but based on colonial accounts there may have been around 300 or so people living in the Anacostia River Valley alone around the time of John Smith's visit in the early 1600s.

NACOTCHTANK (PISCATAWAY)

This quarry was the most important local source of soapstone, used for making things like bowls and pottery.

Rose Hill Quarry

Piney Branch Workshop

Quartzite was gathered here for generations to be shaped into spearpoints and arrowheads.

Workshop

Tohoga

Nameroughquena

Nacotchtank

Workshops & quarries

The Nacotchtank and their ancestors used several local quarries for thousands of years to mine quartzite, used for sharp objects like arrow and spearheads; and soapstone, for things like bowls and pipes.

River of plenty

The Anacostia was a main source of food for the Nacotchtank, being described as full of fish like enormous sturgeon (critically endangered here today). Most homes were within a couple hundred feet of the river's edge.

Three Sisters

The Nacotchtank supplemented their diet of plentiful fish from the healthy and wild rivers where they lived by farming corn, squash and beans, known as the three sisters.