

One of Virginia's best Colonial Governors, Colonel Alexander Spotswood, founded Fort Christanna just four years after arriving in Virginia in June 1710. He found the colony anticipating an Indian war. Though forbidden by the Queen and restricted by a peace treaty, some inhabitants of North Carolina were causing trouble by settling in an area within three miles of the Meherrin Indian Town. The Meherrins were harassing the settlers in return.

After the Tuscarora and other border Indians massacred the white settlers in eastern North Carolina, Governor Spotswood sent some of the militia out to prevent the Virginia Indians from joining them. He made arrangements to meet with the heads of the Tuscarora Indians who had not been involved in the war. He and 1600 militiamen from Prince George, Surry, and Isle of Wight Counties (900 on foot and 700 on horse) went to Nottoway Town.

The Governor appointed a guard of about one hundred men for the fort outside the Town. He sent thirty horsemen to meet the Tuscarora Indians at the Saponie town, probably at Unety (Unote) on Meherrin River. The next day he divided the militia into companies of fifty men each with captains over them. The Tuscaroras came with their guard and PETER POYTHRESS, an Indian trader and interpreter. The Governor reviewed the cavalry, drew up the militia in formation, and made the Indians walk from one end to the other. This impressed the Indians greatly. They agreed to deliver two children of the great men of each Indian town to remain as hostages and be educated at the school for Indians at William and Mary College. This proposal was renewed to the Virginia Tributary Indians who already had sent some children there because if freed them from paying the yearly tax of twenty beaver skins.

As a result of the Indian disturbances in North Carolina and Virginia, the General Assembly passed, in November 1711, the Act Appointing Rangers of the frontiers. The commanders, appointed by Spotswood, could choose their own eleven men with horses, arms and ammunition. The Assembly voted the sum of L1000 to be used by the militia and Tributary Indians to help North Carolina. It was not needed at this time, but the money was used later.

Some of the Senecas who had helped the Tuscaroras were killed by a party of Tributary Indians. This caused the Northern Indians to raid the frontiers, steal from the Indian traders, and murder some of the frontier settlers. As a result, parties of Rangers were kept in each frontier

county.

In December 1713 Governor Spotswood told the Assembly of his plans for forts on the frontiers. After making treaties with the Sapony, Nottoway, and Tuscarora Indians who agreed to make peace and come under the protection of Virginia, the Council and Governor decided that the forts should be built at the proposed Indian settlements. However, the Tuscaroras who had fled to the upper Roanoke and who had intimated they would like to settle in Virginia and become tributaries, changed their minds and returned to North Carolina.

In July 1714, Governor Spotswood started out on his six-week expedition to the southern frontier to carry out the provisions of the treaties he had made. At this time Colonel John Allen, of Surry, laid out the tract of land, six miles square (23,040 acres) on both sides of Meherrin River, on which the Indians would settle. This was in later Brunswick County, near Lawrenceville [in present-day Brunswick County]. The Sapony, Occaneechee, Stuckanox, and Totero Indians were to settle on the south side of the river. They spoke the same language but preserved their different rules. The Nottoways and Meherrins were to settle on the north. They could not live peacefully with their traditional enemies, the Saponies. The Nottoways and Meherrins, however, decided not to move from their old lands but to remain where they were.

Governor Spotswood named the settlement Christ-Anna (or Christanna) in honor of Christ and Queen Anne. He placed there a guard of twelve white men and an officer. They were to range, two or three of them at a time, with ten or twelve Indians. In times of danger they would range the woods between the settlements from Roanoke River to the Appomattox.

The Guard of the Fort and the men of the Virginia Indian Company were entitled to use the land within the six mile limit. At this time the nearest inhabitants lived fifteen miles east, at Hicksford [present-day Emporia, county seat of Greensville County].

In 1714 the Assembly decided to reduce the Rangers to four troops consisting each of six men and an officer, besides the guard at Fort Christanna. The guard was paid for two years out of the unused money that had been raised to help North Carolina. The remainder of the money was to go towards finishing the fortifications and for other services. At the end of two years the Indian Company would pay the guard. None of the twenty-eight Rangers were ever employed to keep guard in Christanna, but some would have visited there for supplies.

Some of the Indians settled at Christanna while Spotswood was there in the summer of 1714. At this time he placed a teacher among them, Charles Griffin, whose salary of ?50 a year he paid. He later wrote to the Bishop of London that he had also conferred with Mr. Forbes, a clergyman, to settle there, but 'his retiring soon after into a married State, has chang'd his inclinations.'

The Virginia Indian Company, 'a joint stock company open to all Virginians then engaged in the Indian trade,' was established by an act of the Assembly in 1714, with headquarters at Christanna. The twenty members, paying between ?50 and ?100 per member, elected Spotswood as president of the company. Its purpose was to regulate and conduct the trade between the Indians and the Virginians. Formerly the Virginia Assembly had licensed men as Indian Traders in an effort to control their conduct. Some of the traders had cheated the Indians, sometimes by getting them drunk. The Indians knew of no other way to avenge themselves other than by killing any whites they met, or by stealing from them. Now the Indians were required to bring their goods to one place, Fort Christanna, for trading in open market, under the regulation of the Indian Company.

Among the obligations of this Company was that of building, at its own expense, a school house for the Indian children. In 1720 a reference is made to Griffin's school on a creek about six miles west of Fort Christanna, at one of the Indian towns, probably on Genito Creek or on Avent's Creek. Whether this was the same as the original remains to be seen.

In March 1715 the Governor went again to Christanna. This time he settled 300 Saponies there. They had seventy children at the school where the children learned to read, write and speak English, and were taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. They soon learned to say the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed.

On this trip he completed the building of the fort itself, 'on a high eminence' on the south side of Meherrin River (now just south of Lawrenceville, on route 686). It was a few miles east of the old Occaneechee or Western Trading Path, the main artery of trade and travel from North to South.

In 1716 a man wrote from Chowan, North Carolina, to Richard Beresford, 'I am just returned from Virginia where I was informed that the fort built at Christ Anna by Col. Spotswood was finished. It lyes on Meherrin River abough a small dies march from Moratoke [old name for Roanoke River], and about 50 or 60 miles from some part of James River and Appamatocks River.'

The fort consists of five large pentagonal log-houses which serve for bastions, and a curtain of mault [split] wood with earth on the inside from one house to another. Each house has a great gun 1400 lb. Each, etc?

"I say [saw] abundance of iron, steel, and other utensils carrying thither. There is a couple of forges sett upp?"

This description coincides with that of Jacques Fontaine who accompanied Governor Spotswood to Christanna in 1716. In his 'Memoirs' he said it was an 'inclosure of five sides, made only with palisades, and instead of five bastions, there are five houses; each side of the five sides is 100 yards long.'

The Virginia Indian Company had built bridges and roads and constructed the wooden building at the Fort. At the center of the fort was the magazine. Here were kept the powder, ammunition, guns, and small cannon ordered to be sent there in May 1715. This building may have been eight-sided, about twelve feet high and fifteen feet across, with a pole at the top for the flag. It would have had a floor about two feet above ground to insure keeping the powder dry.

It had been ordered that the cannon already at the fort be mounted. These large pieces of cannon (five or six feet long) were mounted on wooden carriages within each of the five pentagonal buildings. These buildings must have been at least fifteen feet wide to accommodate and use the cannon. A supply of round ball for the cannon and a keg of powder were also kept on a wooden floor in each building. After the cannon was loaded, its barrel was projected through a gun port.

The Guard fired the morning gun each day, to establish the time and test the powder. It might also have impressed on the Indians that there were guns defending the Fort.

Within the fort were warehouses for the furs bought from the Indians and for the supply of European trade goods. There would have been a crib for corn to feed the horses, a building to store smoked meat and other food, such as the 'two thousand weight of Bisquet' ordered to be sent to the Fort in May 1715 'for the subsistence of the forces drawn there for the security of the frontiers.' There would have been a building for them to cook and eat in, with a well nearby. Other buildings would have been one and two room sleeping quarters, and a building to house any slaves who grew the supply of hay and corn for the horses and food for the men. There was at least one blacksmith shop.

The land for the fort, and the land around it, was cleared as far as a 'musket shot' - at least 100 yards. All large trees within one-half mile would have been cut down, as the cannon at that time was accurate for at least one-half mile, although their projected range was one mile.

Fontaine wrote that while at Christanna, he and the Governor laid out an avenue one-half mile long. The Chowan letter-writer stated: 'The Gov. is now building a handsome house near Christanna, where he intends to live when he shall be out of the government. It will cost him 5 or L600 sterl. and divers other people encouraged by the governor's example are settling plantations that way ? it is expected to be a place of note.' Apparently the Governor hoped to establish a town here.

Spotswood wrote to the Bishop of London on 3 May 1716 asking for a contribution towards building a church at Christanna and establishing a minister there. He said, 'Abundance of people, tempted by the goodness of the Land, are seating near that place, but are above 60 Miles from any parish Church. These would willingly contribute as much as they are able towards the support of a Minister, and in a few years, I dout not, their Number will be so increas'd as that a parish may be erected there. I have already set apart a Tract of very good land for a Glebe, and am now building a house which a Minister may have the use of for his residence, and I am perswaded if a good man be sent in, the Indian Company will not be wanting on their part to give him all suitable Encouragement ?'

Fontaine told of the headmen of the Sapony Indians bringing skins to the Governor at the fort. He said they were fond of ceremony. Even if they could speak English, when they spoke of anything concerning their nation, it was spoken in their tongue through an interpreter. They would not answer any questions unless they were asked in their own language.

Governor Spotswood and Fontaine 'went to a nearby Saponey village, about a musketshot away [from the fort]. It lieth on a plain by the river, the houses join all the one to the other, and altogether make a circle. All doors [are] on [the] inside of [the] circle, and the ground with-inside is common between all people to divert themselves. In [the] center is [a] great stump of a tree - for one of their headmen to stand on when he makes a talk.'

The houses were large, with no light except from the doors, and had holes in the roof to let out the smoke. They used pots, wooden dishes and trays. There were small divisions in the houses to sleep in, mats of bullrushes, and bedsteads raised about two feet from the ground, upon which lay skins

and blankets.

"Between the town and the river are several whittle [sic] huts built of wattles [grass plastered with clay] in the form of an oven - big enough to hold a man - sweating houses.'

It was the custom for the Indians to surrender their arms whenever they entered the Fort. On 9 April 1717 the Governor went to Christanna to meet the Great Men of the Catawbas and other Western Indians who, having been promised goods at cheap rates at the Fort, had brought with them some of their children to be hostages and educated at the school. Next day the Indians, lying unarmed in their camp about 50 yards from the Fort, were attacked suddenly at dawn by a party of the Senecas and Tuscaroras, who killed five, one of whom was Queen of the Catawbas. They wounded two, and carried off five prisoners including the Chief of the Catawbas, one of the greatest and most influential Indians in the South. The Indians suspected the English of being traitors. They were finally persuaded otherwise, and left eleven children at the school. One the prisoners who escaped reported later that the Iroquois had come down to surprise the Saponies, and threatened to return soon to massacre the whole tribe and any of the whites who might try to befriend them."

True or not, this caused great fear among the English settlers and traders. The men hired by the Indian Company to guard their caravans and cargo were so afraid that it was hard to find one who would go out on that service. The Indian Company had spent nearly L3000 for horses, supplies, and provisions, and advanced money to several of the men. Now it was doubtful that they would be able to send out their cargo this summer because they lacked enough men to guard it. Usually about forty men went out together to trade with the Western Indians.

Soon after this, the Act for Better Regulating the Indian Trade was repealed and the Virginia Indian Company was dissolved. On 12 November 1717 the Governor reminded the Council that formerly the Indian Company had kept up the Fort of Christanna, maintained the Guard, and supported the hostages of the Southern Indians, and asked how these would be taken care of in the future. The Northern Indians were threatening to destroy the Tributary Indians settled at the Fort, and recently they had murdered some of the English settled at Roanoke River. The Fort was intended to defend them.

The Council recommended to the former members of the Indian Company that they continue repairing the fortifications, keep the same Guard as in the past, and take care of the hostages until the General Assembly should make

some decision about them. The Government would reimburse the Company for their expenses. The Council also recommended that the Governor encourage members of the late Indian Company to continue their trade, and that he continue the same allowance to the school master as he had in the past.

On 31 May 1718 the General Assembly decided not to keep up the Fort. There was nothing the Council could do about it.

As a result, several men employed by the Indian Company for the Guard of Fort Christanna became mutinous and disorderly, refused sentinel duty, and so exposed the Fort and the hostages there to great danger because the northern Indians were again on the frontier. The Council ordered that the commander, Captain Robert Hicks or any other person the late company had employed for the management of their affairs, be given power to correct or punish any of the Company servants who refused to do their duty. If they tried to desert, Captain Hicks was to order out parties of Indians to pursue and bring them back.

The northern Indians went so far as to send a message to the officer who commanded the Fort, demanding that the Sapony Indians (their enemies) be delivered over to them. Therefore, in the summer of 1718, Spotswood moved all of the Sapony Indians into the Fort for their protection.

In 1719 the Governor of Pennsylvania wrote to the Virginia Council that the northern Indians had marched toward Virginia with the intention of testing the strength of the English at Fort Christanna. The Council decided to halt any attempted march through Virginia. The Militia was ordered not to shoot until shot at. The Virginia Tributary Indians were ordered to notify the Government if any northern Indians arrived at their towns.

There are local traditions of a fierce fight between the Saponies and the Genitoes (northern Indians). Bullets have been plowed up in the low grounds on the north side of the Meherrin River, opposite the Fort site.

After the creation of Brunswick County in 1720, the region around the Fort and beyond was becoming well-settled. All Indians were required to get a passport to go through settled country.

On 13 June 1723 the Council heard a petition of Thomas Jones in behalf of the late Virginia Indian Company, in which the former members asked to be reimbursed for their expenses in repairing the fortifications of Christanna, according to the orders of the Governor, dated 12 November 1717. The Council ordered that they be paid. This seems to be about the

time that the officers and men left the Fort permanently.

The Sapony Indians were still occupying the Fort in 1728 when Colonel William Byrd went on the expedition to lay out the dividing line between North Carolina and Virginia. On his return trip, he stopped at the plantation of George Hix (Hicks) on Meherrin River, near present Diamond Grove. The Grandees of the Sapony Nation came to the plantation to meet him, as one of their number, Bearskin, had gone on the journey as guide and hunter. Byrd wrote that the Indians had come on horseback, which, he said 'was certainly a Piece of State, because the Distance was but three Miles, and 'tis likely they had walk't a foot twice as far to catch their Horses.'

In the spring of 1729 the Governor received news that the Sapony Indians had made no preparation for planting corn; it seemed probable that they were preparing to leave the Fort. The inhabitants of Brunswick County were apprehensive, fearing that the Indians might make trouble as they left. The Council appointed someone to go with the interpreter, Charles Kinball, to the Indian Town to observe what preparations they were making to continue there, so that suitable measures might be taken for protecting the inhabitants. The Journals of the Executive Council, in October 1729, state that 'the Sapony ? have lately deserted their settlement ? [in Virginia] and joined the ? Cattawba Indians.'

In 1730 the members of the late Virginia Indian Company petitioned for 1000 acres 'where Fort Christanna stood,' on the south side of the Meherrin River and back into the woods, and 1000 acres on the north side of the river. They also requested that 23,040 acres of land formerly assigned for the Sapony Indians be laid out and granted to the petitioners who pointed out that they had invested money in buildings and improvements at the Fort. This was done.

In June 1733 the Sapony and Nottoway Indians met with the Governor and Council. The Saponies were given permission to join the Tuscaroras if they wished, provided that neither Nation would hunt on any lands patented in Virginia, nor go among the inhabitants in groups of more than three. The Saponies were permitted to stay at their town until their corn was gathered. If they decided not to join the Tuscaroras, they were to move to some place beyond the inhabitants between the Roanoke and Appomattox rivers.

Soon after this they all left the Fort. Some joined the Catawbas, and some eventually joined the Five Nations of the Iroquois in New York.



After the Indians left the region, all their former lands were taken up in grants. The site of the Fort became known as Fort Hill Plantation. In 1847 an iron cannon was still on the hill. One cannon exploded in Lawrenceville when fired during Cleveland's inauguration; another was taken to William and Mary College. Tradition says three are in the Fort's old well.

The road that went by the Fort, from Gholsonville to the lower-cut banks on Nottoway River, became known as Fort Road, eastward it crossed the Meherrin at Hickford (Emporia), then on to James River. Among the owners of Fort Hill Plantation, by which the road went, was the Jones family, descendants of Benjamin Jones of Greensville. The present owner is Mr. Clyde Butler of Lawrenceville.

On 24 September 1923 the Colonial Dames purchased from T. E. Jones, N. S. Jones, and W. M. McAden 3 1/2 acres 'being that portion of the tract of land known as 'Fort Hill' plantation, which includes the site of the frontier fort erected in the year 1714?' However, recent topographical studies indicate that the actual Fort site is not at the monument but is nearby.

The Colonial Dames brought the story of Christanna to a fitting conclusion. On 24 May 1924 they had a dedication ceremony at the site where they placed a cannon as a monument. Pamunkey Indians from the reservation in King William County were present in tribal dress.

*Brown, Douglas Summers, "Historical and Biographical Sketches of Greensville County, Virginia, 1650-1967," pp. 31-38*