The Judy Project:

History of Powhatan, West African, and Christian Religion at Richmond Hill

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Introduction

Traditionally, the histories of Indigenous and Black people in America have been neglected in favor of the history of White people, which is a detriment to the search for historical truth and racial reconciliation in Richmond.[1] Indigenous people had been the sole inhabitants of Virginia for at least 12,000 years prior to the colonial founding of Jamestown in 1607 CE.[2] Enslaved African Americans made up approximately 40% of Richmond's Antebellum population, a percentage which doesn't include free Black people.[3] These statistics are proof of the disparity between the historical presence of Indigenous and Black people versus the representation of those groups within the historical record. This is to say, a large swathe of history has been overlooked, ignored, or erased, which only serves to benefit a colonial perspective of the past. This includes the religious histories of Indigenous and Black people, which are also sidelined in favor of White religion. With the colonial history of White Europeans in America being–with very few exceptions–that of White Christians, the narrative of American

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[1] The capitalization of Black, White, and Indigenous is to acknowledge all three as racial/ethnic identifiers. Black is the most commonly used and accepted of the three terms as a capitalized proper noun because it identifies a racial group. I capitalize Indigenous wherever I am referring to "peoples of long settlement and connection to specific lands who have been adversely affected by incursions… of their traditional territories by others" which is consistent with the UN's usage of the capitalized term. Lastly, White often goes uncapitalized as an attempt at decentering Whiteness, but I disagree with this sentiment. Not capitalizing White "affirm[s] Whiteness as the standard and… ignores the way Whiteness functions in institutions and communities."
Citations:
Indigenous Foundations, "Terminology," n.d. https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/terminology/.
Kristen Mack and John Palfrey, "Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity," MacFound, August 26, 2020. https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/capitalizing-black-and-white-grammatical-justice-and-equity.

[2] Secretary of the Commonwealth, "Virginia Indians," n.d. https://www.commonwealth.virginia.gov/virginia-indians/.

[3] Antebellum meaning the United States' pre-Civil War period and will be used to refer to American history between mid-fifteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century.
Citations:
C. G. Kennedy, "Map Showing the Distribution of the Slave Population of the Southern States of the United States: Compiled from the Census of 1860," census.gov, September 1861. https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/1860_slave_distribution.pdf.
Sheldon, Marianne Buroff. "Black-White Relations in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1820." *The Journal of Southern History* 45, no. 1 (1979): 27–44. https://doi.org/10.2307/2207900.

religiosity is dominated by a Euro- and American-centric lens of Christianity. While Christianity has had an undeniably large influence on America, the country's past and present religious make-up is diverse beyond Christian faith traditions and deserves to be acknowledged as such. In addition to this, the discussion of non-White interpretations of Christianity is vital to fully exploring even just the Christian history of religion in America. My intent is to use Antebellum Richmond Hill as a site-specific exercise in constructing a historical paradigm that decenters the colonial perspective through the acknowledgement of Indigenous Powhatan and Black religion in Richmond Hill's timeline, and the incorporation of such into its historical canon to help foster fuller appreciation and better understanding of the site as a whole.

Section 1: Powhatan Religion

Prior to the seventeenth century, coastal Virginia was known as Tsenacomoco, a nation of two to three dozen Indigenous tribes united under the Powhatan Chiefdom–named for the chief who created the tribal alliance.[4] Europeans would later colonize this same area and rename it to Virginia while establishing a vast array of settlements–including Richmond. But before "Virginia", "Richmond," and the "James River," there were the falls named Paqwachowng and the village by it.[5] This village on a hill was called Pakwacan (meaning "priest's town" or "town at the falls" in Algonquians) and it was reputed to be Chief Powhatan's hometown.[6] Later, this

[4] A brief note on my use of "Powhatan." Some scholars prefer the term "Virginia Algonquians" to refer to the Indigenous groups who resided in Virginia's coastal plains. I, however, default to Rountree's understanding and explanation of the use of Powhatan as a simple and straightforward way to refer to the Indigenous language, people, and culture of Eastern Virginia as united under the chief commonly known as Powhatan. Citation:
Helen C. Rountree.*The Powhatan Indians of Virginia : Their Traditional Culture*. Vol. 1st ed. The Civilization of the American Indian Series. Norman, Okla: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, 7. http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,cookie,uid&db=nlebk&AN=14928&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_134.
[5] Ibid, 11.
[6] It is more commonly referred to as Powhatan by sources such as Roundtree or Benjamin Campbell. I will refer to it as Pakwacan as that is the name put forth by more recent Indigenous elders and tribal historians.

town would be referred to with a variety of different names by the European colonists such as: Poetan, Powhatan, Nonesuch Place, and Indiantown.[7] There is one archeological and two historical theories on the present-day location of Pakwacan. As of 2012, archeological evidence has indicated Tree Hill Farm in Henrico county as a possible location. Richmond's historical tradition, however, indicates two separate locations South of East Broad Street in the Church Hill district: one where the eighteenth century estate "Powhatan Seat" was located, and the other at St. John's Church–one block away from Richmond Hill.[8] Additionally, the 2020 archeological finds at Richmond Hill included pre-colonial artifacts that most certainly indicate an Indigenous presence at the site.[9] There is clear historical proof of Indigenous habitation of Church Hill, which implies the presence and practice of Indigenous Powhatan religion; additionally, there is anecdotal evidence of more site specific religious expression.[10]

As put forth by anthropologist and expert on Powhatan culture Helen C. Roundtree, the practice of Powhatan religion encompassed all aspects of life for all of the Powhatan people. Though the religion was polytheistic, veneration of, interactions with, and dedications to deities was primarily focused on the deity Okeus, who served as a divine judge for all human actions and dealt out rewards and punishments accordingly. The god was consulted by laymen and

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Citation:
The Decolonial Atlas, "Turtle Island Decolonized: Mapping Indigenous Names across "North America,"' October 19, 2023. https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/turtle-island-decolonized/.

[7] Benjamin Campbell. *Richmond's Unhealed History*. Brandylane Publishers, 2012, 16-18.

[8] Campbell. *Richmond's Unhealed History*, 17-18.

[9] Richmond Hill. *Unearthing Buried Stories: The Exhibit* "Artifacts" & "Original Sins, I" (additional credit to Tim Roberts), 2023.

[10] The overall history of Church Hill, as the district in which Richmond Hill resides, will be used when information regarding only Richmond Hill's site is limited. This is primarily relevant to its pre-colonial history because many of the present-day locations of Indigenous villages are speculative and often reliant upon colonial maps which often cannot provide enough geographical specificity to meaningfully differentiate between different parts of Church Hill.
Citations:
Crumley et al. *Church Hill: The St. John's Church Historic District.* Historic Richmond Foundation, 1991.
Mary Wingfield Scott. *Old Richmond Neighborhoods.* 1950. http://www.rosegill.com/ProjectWinkie/Old%20Richmond%20Neighborhoods.pdf.
Pam Smith. "The History of Richmond Hill," Richmond Hill, n.d. https://www.richmondhillva.org/about/the-history-of-richmond-hill/.

priests alike. Hunters often used omens from Okeus to find game (unfortunately what constituted as an "omen" went unrecorded).[11] Priests could summon and confer with Okeus for the purposes of prophecy and other magics like controlling the weather. Generally, priests had much more personal relationships with deities and supernatural entities than the laity.[12] In addition to this, priests also served as healers, merging "medicine and religion in[to] one category of thought."[13] When acting in the role of healer, the remedy for most maladies would be some form of herbal medicine, or *wisakon* in Powhatan.[14] As a consequence, temples had a multipurpose nature in which they served as a sacred space and an apothecary.[15] Though much of their worship did not reflect it, Powhatan mythology encompassed a variety of deities of which Okeus was not the most powerful. For example, they believed that a great god named Ahone created the world, Moon, and Sun, but was so powerful that offerings need not be made to him.[16] To summarize, Powhatan religion had a pantheon of deities, rituals, priests, temples, and mythology. Spirituality was a part of all aspects of life, from the use of omens in hunting to communing with Okeus, and both laity and clergy were involved. The village of Pakwacan would have been no different, if not even more spiritually engaged on account of a possible translation of Pakwacan being "priest's town."

Section 2: West African Religion

Many of the people who were captured and taken to America as slaves were from the West and the Congo-Angola regions of Africa. This would include the twenty-six known voyages commissioned by Richard Adams, the second owner of Richmond Hill's property,

[11] Rountree.*The Powhatan Indians of Virginia : Their Traditional Culture*, 39.
[12] Ibid, 130.
[13] Ibid, 126.
[14] Rountree.*The Powhatan Indians of Virginia : Their Traditional Culture*, 126.
[15] Ibid, 126.
[16] Ibid, 135.

which stole and enslaved people from various locations of coastal West Africa such as Anomabu, Ghana.[17] According to Albert J. Raboteau, a scholar of African and African American religion, both Islam and—to a lesser extent—Christianity had a presence in Sub-Saharan Africa during the nineteenth century, but the majority of Africans stolen by slave traders believed in traditional indigenous religions.[18] In the process of being brought across the Atlantic, enslaved people would keep their religions—but in order to survive, much of the ritual, mythology, and theology was "attenuated, replaced, and altered, or lost."[19] The adaptation of African religion in the New World varied greatly depending on a number of factors, each of which pertained to where in the New World an individual ended up.[20] Other factors–in relation to location–included: the dominant religious context, the ratio of White enslavers to enslaved African Americans, and the amount of native Africans in a slave population.[21] The dominant religion in a given place would decide how easily African religion could survive and adapt—for example, the syncretism of Catholic and African magic in Haiti resulted in *vaudou*.[22] The ratio of White to Black people

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[17] Citations:
The Judy Project. "Property Owners," n.d. https://thejudyproject.info/enslaved/.
Richmond Hill. *Unearthing Buried Stories: The Exhibit* "Original Sins, II," 2023.

[18] While Raboteau explains that Portuguese attempts to convert West Africa were largely a failure, historian David Chidester insists upon a notable influence in the BaKongo kingdom that reinterpreted the Christianity introduced to them as an indigenous African religion.
Citations:
David Chidester. *Christianity: A Global History*. New York :HarperCollins, 2008, 412-414.
Albert Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University, 1978, 7.
https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/lib/vcu/reader.action?docID=431205&ppg=1.

[19] Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, 16.

[20] For the purposes of keeping this paper short "African religion(s)" will be used to describe all of the Indigenous faith traditions brought over by enslaved people, primarily accounting for the majority West African and Congo-Angola population. These regions together are millions of square miles and to generalize the various religions and local variations of those religions as just "African religion" is a gross oversimplification that doesn't account for enslaved people taken from other regions of Africa. All this being said, I share Raboteau's intent in using the term to account for fundamental similarities between the religious heritage of enslaved Africans as a means to more efficiently write on my topic.
Citation:
Ibid, 7.

[21] Ibid, 92.

[22] Ibid, 25.

decided the amount of supervision there was over the practice of African religions, and therefore how difficult it was to continue practicing them. Finally, and arguably the most important factor, the amount of native Africans in a population decided how connected those born in the New World were to their heritage and religion. Within the United States, the predominance of Protestant Christianity, a more balanced ratio of White to Black people (in comparison to Latin America), and a rapidly growing American-born population of slaves–which greatly outpaced the amount of incoming Africans–resulted in a less overt expression of African culture in North America.[23] Instead, a new African-American culture and theology was developed with more covert expressions of African worship within Protestantism.

The transplant of Indigenous African traditions into America is best summarized in Raboteau's book on slave religion:

> It is important to remember also that no single African culture or religion, once transplanted in alien soil, could have remained intact: it was inevitable that the slaves would build new societies in the Americas which would be structured in part from their diverse backgrounds in different African societies, in part from the experience of enslavement in a new environment. A common religious heritage then resulted from the blending and assimilation of the many discrete religious heritages of Africans in the New World.[24]

The characteristics common amongst many African religions prior to this "transplant" need to be explained before exploring how they influenced Black religion, as relevant to Richmond Hill. Many West and Congo-Angola African cultures believed in a supreme creator of the world or a "High God" that was typically associated with the sky.[25] This God was usually above the affairs

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[23] Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, 92.
[24] Ibid, 8.
[25] Ibid, 8-9.

of mortals–especially when compared to other entities like minor gods or ancestor-spirits–and therefore received less attention and offerings. Below the High God were numerous minor gods, sometimes the High God's spawn, which were more directly worshiped alongside spirits.[26] These lesser gods were often associated with "natural forces and phenomena." There were altars, shrines, and temples which were dedicated to the worship of particular deities and housed their cults. The cults were usually headed by priests who acted as clergy as well as diviner and herbalist.[27] A rather specific overlap between many West African religions was ancestor-worship combined with the notion of rebirth through descendants.[28] Overall, the presence and influence of gods and spirits was a fact of life for native Africans on all levels. In the next section, the specific ways in which African religion was indoctrinated into Christianity and expressed itself through Black Christianity in Antebellum America will be discussed.

Section 3: Christian Religion

Christianity has played an important role throughout the course of the Atlantic slave trade. As early as the fifteenth century, the Portuguese used Christian apologetics to justify the enslavement of Africans who they believed would benefit from spiritual and material exposure to Western civilization.[29] Similarly, divine providence was a key motivator for the colonization of the New World and many countries shared a zealous drive to '"facilitate and encourage the Conversion of Negroes and Indians" to Christianity."[30] The race between Catholics and Protestants to enlighten "pagans" was competitive and had an unexpected obstacle: many early colonists themselves–particularly Protestants–were apathetic or even fully against the conversion

[26] Ibid, 9-11.
[27] Ibid, 10.
[28] Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, 12.
[29] Ibid, 96.
[30] Ibid, 97.

of enslaved individuals to Christianity for a number of reasons. The primary reason was a fear that baptism would emancipate enslaved catechumens.[31] Even after legislation was passed to alleviate that concern, there was the issue of the time and money it cost to properly convert an enslaved person and racist beliefs that Africans simply could not be converted in an intellectual capacity.[32]

Nevertheless, the evangelical efforts of some clergymen converted many Black enslaved people to Christianity, much to the chagrin of their enslavers. According to scholar Midori Takagi, Richmond's slave rebellion led by Gabriel in 1800 may have been inspired by the radical notion of equality between White and Black people in the eyes of God.[33] In addition to Takagi, Raboteau also touches on Gabriel's Rebellion; he goes further and claims that planning and recruitment for the insurrection was done through religious meetings because Gabriel's brother Martin was a preacher. Additionally, explicit references to African religion were made by a different organizer who wished to enlist the help of native Africans to use magic to see if any future calamity would befall them.[34] The fallout of Gabriel's Rebellion was serial legislation passed in the South, banning Black people from assembling between sunset and sunrise.[35] Despite this, Richmond's religious community specifically allowed for free and enslaved Black people to attend services at "Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, and Baptist churches, as well as a Jewish temple."[36] By far, the Baptist tradition was the most popular among both free

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[31] Cox et al. "Faith Among Black Americans," Pew Research Center, February 16, 2021, section 10. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/a-brief-overview-of-black-religious-history-in-the-u-s/#fnref-34217-24.
[32] Raboteau. Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South, 99.
[33] Midori Takagi. *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction: Slavery in Richmond Virginia, 1782–1865*. University of Virginia Press, 2000, 52. https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/lib/vcu/reader.action?docID=3444049&ppg=1.
[34] Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, 147.
[35] Ibid, 147.
[36] Takagi. *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction: Slavery in Richmond Virginia, 1782–1865*, 53.

and enslaved Black people and once the Great Awakening started, Black membership increased even more.[37] Again, Raboteau's words:

> The powerful emotionalism, ecstatic behavior, and congregational response of the revival were amenable to the African religious heritage of the slaves, and forms of African dance and song remained in the shout and spirituals of Afro-American converts to evangelical Protestantism. In addition, the slaves' rich heritage of folk belief and folk expression was not destroyed but was augmented by conversion.[38]

Black religion in Antebellum South, while having synthesized Indigenous African traditions into their practices, was primarily expressed through various forms of Protestant Christianity; the enslaved people of Richmond Hill would have been no exception to this rule. In fact, Benjamin H. Wilkins—of the last family to reside in the Adams-Taylor house—said that, "many of the slaves were only one generation away from African slaves captured on the Western coast of Africa" that still spoke "the jungle language" and his mammy, Aunt Judy, was rumored to be the daughter of an enslaved African princess.[39] Additionally, it can be assumed that because Adams' commissioned his own slave voyages and had special privileges in picking which people he reserved for himself, that African religion was most certainly brought to Richmond Hill—a generation before the Wilkins—directly by the people who he enslaved. In turn, those people

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[37] In contrast, the Catholic and Episcopal churches of Richmond had minimal Black membership, which Takagi credits to Luther Porter Jackson's theory that nonevangelical religions' have a lack of emotionalism which makes them less appealing to the masses. However, it is possible that at least some of the enslaved people owned by the Ellett family–the third owners of Richmond Hill property–were members of St. John's Episcopal Church as there is record of an enslaved woman named Martha getting married there, though it is certainly possible that she was a unique case or that St. John's was her only option because that was the church of her enslaver.
Citation:
Richmond Hill. *Unearthing Buried Stories: The Exhibit* "Families & Lost Friends," 2023.

[38] Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, 149.

[39] B. H. Wilkins. *War Boy: A True Story of the Civil War and Re-Construction Days*. Wilson Bros. Print. Co., 1938, 9-10. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89062346853&seq=27

would have to adapt their religion into the more “acceptable” Christian framework in order to keep any of their African roots.

Conclusion

This essay has reviewed the known prehistoric and historical religions present at Richmond Hill up until the Civil War. These religions were categorized into the Powhatan, West African, and Christian traditions but did not include the nuance necessary to explore spiritual differences between Powhatan tribes, specific West African religions, or the many relevant denominations of Christian Protestantism to an extent that fully acknowledges the complexities within each category. I hope that with more time, I can expand upon each to an extent that better illustrates the relationships within and between Powhatan, West African, and Christian religion and continue my mission of decentralizing the colonial perspective on history. In addition to this, I would like to expand my research to go beyond the Antebellum period and include Richmond Hill’s time as a Roman Catholic monastery and, of course, its present-day incarnation as a ecumenical Christian institution. Exploration of the post-Civil War religious landscape at Richmond Hill would provide a richer and more well-rounded understanding of the site’s timeline. Overall, this essay can be used as a general model for approaching history from a non-colonial perspective and serves as a solid foundation and starting point for more in-depth research to be done by myself and (hopefully) others in the future.

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