



*Unison Preservation Society*

# NEWSLETTER

*Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside*

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UNISON, VIRGINIA

## Unison: Who was here first



*By Travis Shaw*

*Shaw is Director of Education for the Virginia Piedmont Heritage Area Association. He holds a BA in history from St. Mary's College of Maryland and an MA in history from American University. We thought that made him the perfect person to answer the question: Who lived in the Unison area before the European settlers got here? Here is his answer:*

Broadly speaking, pre-contact Native history in the Loudoun Valley is divided into three periods. The earliest, known as the Paleoindian period, began around 16,000 BC and continued up to around 8,000 BC.\*

The world of the Paleoindians was much colder and wetter than ours. People lived in family bands that ranged over large distances hunting game. Larger temporary gatherings occurred, particularly at sites that provided natural resources. Two of the most important Paleoindian sites in Virginia are located at nearby Thoroughfare Gap and the Thunderbird site near Front Royal.

As the landscape and climate changed, the Paleoindian period gave way to the Archaic Period (ca. 8000 BC-1000 BC). Retreating glaciers and gradual warming allowed Native people to settle into a semi-nomadic lifestyle. Limited agriculture and fishing began to augment hunter-gatherer sustenance. Societies became more complex as people began living together in larger groups, and wide-ranging trade networks formed.

An engraving based off of an eyewitness painting of a native village in the VA/NC area by John White in the late 1500s. shows what villages would have looked like in this area at the time. Image from the Library of Congress collection





Artifacts typical of Late Woodland cultures in the northern Virginia Piedmont (from left to right): Keyser type pottery; Levanna projectile point; Shepard type pottery. (Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab at Jefferson Patterson Park)

Around 1000 BC the Archaic Period gave way to the Woodland Period, the final period of pre-contact Native civilization in Virginia. The creation of pottery, widespread adoption of agriculture, trade networks stretching thousands of miles, and increasingly elaborate social hierarchies developed during this period. Larger villages were established, sometimes bound together as tributaries to a powerful local ruler. The “three sisters” agriculture of corn, beans and squash, was grown in areas cleared for planting by handmade stone tools. Hunters abandoned spears for the bow and arrow.

This was the Native world encountered by John Smith during his visits to the Chesapeake. Almost everything we know about the Woodland Period in the Loudoun Valley comes from carefully conducted archaeological excavations. The Natives of the area left no written record, and by the time Europeans arrived in the region, the original cultural groups had largely been displaced or dispersed by warfare and migration and decimated by disease. To get a glimpse at what this area would have looked like, we rely on the archaeological record.

During the Late Woodland Period (900-1650 AD) the Loudoun Valley was occupied by a number of different groups. Since we have no record of what they called themselves, archaeologists differentiate them by the types of pottery and tools they made, their settlement patterns, burial customs, and so on.

Three of the most significant in the region were the Montgomery Complex, Mason Island Complex, and Luray Complex. These groups overlapped in both time and space, occupying the middle Potomac Valley and surrounding areas from around 900 AD to 1400 AD.

Although there were many distinctions between these groups, they did share many common cultural traits. They all used similar styles of projectile points for hunting and war. Although the materials for making their pottery varied, they were similar in shape and shared common decorations. In addition to pottery and stone tools, archaeologists have also recovered decorative beads made from shells and bone, as well as personal items like tobacco pipes. Their villages consisted of wood and bark wigwams built in oval shapes, sometimes surrounded by wooden palisades for protection. These people used well established trade routes through the gaps in the Blue Ridge—routes that correspond with modern Route 50 and Route 7.

These cultural groups dominated the region for several centuries, but around 1450 their presence began to wane. Some unknown upheaval caused these people to migrate further east, into the Tidewater. Archaeologists speculate that the growth of powerful nations to the north and west pushed them from the Piedmont. Settling along the tributaries of the Chesapeake, the former Piedmont inhabitants were likely the ancestors of the people encountered by colonists in the 17th century.

Clues to their identity can be found in the records of early European visitors. In 1608 John Smith recorded meeting a group known as the Manahoac along the Rappahannock. Their territory extended northward through the Piedmont to the Potomac. These people spoke a Sioulian language similar to their allies, the Monocans of the James River valley. Together these nations were often at war with their Algonkian speaking neighbors to the east. As the 17th century wore on, they came under increased pressure from the Iroquoian nations to their north. During the

Beaver Wars, the Iroquois waged war against their neighbors in order to monopolize the fur trade, and by the end of the century it appears that the Loudoun Valley was a “no man’s land” caught between warring factions. War, disruption, and disease had reduced and scattered the Manahoac, and survivors were absorbed into other nearby nations.

Another people to make their mark on the Loudoun Valley were the Piscataway. Weakened by disease and pushed west by European settlement, some of the Piscataway left Maryland and settled temporarily on Heater’s Island, near Point of Rocks, at the end of the 17th century. In 1699 they were visited by Giles Vandercastle and Burr Harrison in the first recorded European/Native interaction in Loudoun County.

Six years after their visit from Harrison and Vandercastle, the Piscataway at Heater’s Island were struck by illness. Their numbers were so reduced that by 1712 they had abandoned their settlement and moved north to join other refugee groups driven from the tidewater.

The experience of the Manahoac and Piscataway provides an important lesson in how we look at Native lands today. Native populations were not static, and migrations, war, and upheaval caused these populations to ebb and flow long before European contact. Many of the groups encountered by Europeans may have been relative newcomers to the area. With the coming of Europeans, this process was accelerated, and many nations became refugees far from their ancestral lands. With so little written evidence, the archaeological evidence is crucial to learning about these people.

Archaeological excavations are a painstaking process, requiring an exacting level of detail and meticulous record keeping. The recovery of the artifacts themselves is important, but even more so is recording the exact context that they are discovered in.

The relationship of artifacts to each other and to features on the site, like post holes or storage pits, allows archaeologists to piece together how these people lived and interacted with the landscape. Removing artifacts without recording this information destroys the ability to learn more from them.

Although the evidence is below our feet, preserving our archaeological heritage is just as important as the buildings and battlefields we fight to protect above ground.

\* Recent research has shown conclusive evidence of Pre-Paleoindian inhabitants in North America, but information on these people is extremely limited.

# Letter from the President

**To our Unison Preservation Society supporters:**

Well, another year has gone by without a Heritage Day celebration, once again because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the time we needed to make decisions about tents, food, beverages and auction items, the Delta variant was picking up speed and booster vaccines were not yet available. Caution won the debate and we cancelled.

During the discussion, the Board of Directors of the Unison Preservation Society (UPS) recognized the importance of Heritage Day not only to our organization but also for our community. It's a really great opportunity for Unison residents and the people who love the village to get together, catch up, eat great food and do a little spending for a good cause and then get ready to hunker down for the holidays and the cold weather.

For UPS, it's our only chance for some serious fund raising.

For everyone, it is a missed opportunity. So let me assure you that I believe Heritage Day will be back next year. And I can also tell you that UPS is working hard at its core mission—preservation—and now is planning more frequent, smaller events in the village in order to connect better and regularly with residents of the community we are working hard to preserve.

As you all know, the Unison Preservation Society's goal is to help preserve and protect the historic village of Unison and the surrounding countryside. But what are we protecting it from and what does that actually look like?

In the past couple of years, the villages of Western Loudoun have come under enormous pressure from the county government and from developers as land in the eastern part of the county has been more crowded and urbanized. Developers need open land for housing subdivisions. The county needs affordable housing. The transition area between East and West has filled up with revenue-positive data centers. Revenue positive, at least for the time being.

St. Louis, Aldie, Bluemont, Lucketts and Philomont all have been faced with private and governmental decisions that have affected their villages look and way of life. In 2019, the Loudoun Historic Village Alliance was formed to coordinate responses to this pressure. Unison is represented through the Unison Preservation Society.

This year, Unison has spoken out against an inappropriately sized and located hous-

ing development in St. Louis, a cell tower illegally placed on a ridgeline in the Short Hills north of Bluemont and against the placement of an 18,000 square-foot fire station on Philomont's Horse Show grounds without proper community input. All of these issues potentially affected Unison or Unison residents.

The St. Louis development blew up into an issue for Aldie when the Board of Supervisors attempted to link the two communities in a solution that was a negative for both: paying the offending St. Louis

developer with land for development in Aldie. We joined the other villagers (and many others) in protesting that, and the BOS backed off.

The cell tower also was voted down by the Board of Supervisors but most of the other battles are ongoing and UPS remains vocally and visibly in the fight. Overall, our demand consistently is for community conversation and consent to major decisions that affect the villages.

But taking stands against actions by developers and the Board are not enough. We need for form a cocoon of protection around Unison and our other villages. Because villages in Virginia are not

## Native Grasses: the Answer for Obesity-Prone Horses?

Each month the Smithsonian Institute's *Virginia Working Landscapes* (VWL), which is doing extensive research work throughout Virginia on grassland birds, puts out a newsletter reporting on cutting edge research in conservation science taking place all over the world. A VWL newsletter this past spring caught our attention. It reported on research that had taken place at the MARE Center in Middleburg on whether native grasses could be the answer to keeping horses from getting too fat. Half the horses in Virginia apparently are overweight or obese! The VWL summary of this research follows:



***"Voluntary intake of [native warm-season] forages was lower than orchardgrass intake in our study and lower than reported values for other species. However, this may be ideal for horse owners struggling to find optimal forages for horses prone to obesity and laminitis."***

- The introduced cool-season grasses that dominate Virginia's pastures are highly digestible for horses but can increase risk for obesity and laminitis-prone horses. Native warm-season grasses may have lower risk, but their palatability, digestibility, and toxicity to horses is understudied.

- A hay-feeding trial using native indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) and big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) hays found that horses voluntarily ate less warm-season grass hay than orchardgrass hay. The digestibility of the

native grass hays was comparable to non-native orchardgrass (*Dactylis glomerata*) hay, and the native hays had lower levels of carbohydrates that pose risk to laminitis-prone horses.

- A grazing trial found that horses that grazed on the same native grasses (indiangrass and big bluestem) lost weight at a rate of 0.5 to 1.5 kg per day during both experimental treatments. This change in bodyweight is considered an optimal rate of weight loss in overweight horses.

- These results suggest that while native warm-season grasses are not ideal for maintaining weight in adult horses, they may be useful for managing obese and laminitic horses if fed with calcium and protein supplements.

Read the full article by S.M. Ghajar and colleagues from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University at <https://academic.oup.com/tas/article/5/1/txaa224/6017816>

Sign up for the Virginia Working Landscapes monthly newsletter at <https://www.vaworkinglandscapes.org/education/newsletters/>.



## Unison Preservation Society Newsletter

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### How to Support the Unison Preservation Society (UPS):

UPS depends upon contributions from people living in our community who want to preserve our historic village and the countryside surrounding it. Since the UPS is a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation registered in Virginia, all contributions are tax deductible. Contributions should be made to the Unison Preservation Society and sent to the post office box listed above.

### Ideas for Newsletter Articles:

We are particularly interested in gathering material about Unison for future UPS newsletters. If you have ideas for newsletter stories, please e-mail us at [unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org](mailto:unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org).



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legal entities like towns or cities, residents more and more are finding they have little say in some of the critical decisions involving their communities. Zoning plays a huge part in those decisions.

As a result, the Village Alliance—and UPS—are involved in discussions involving the current rewrite of the Zoning Code as it pertains to villages. One change that at this point seems likely: Villages will be able to write their own “Small Area Plans” and to decide how their villages will develop going forward.

One wrinkle in this for Unison is that we were left off the list of official Historic Villages, which means we won’t get a Small Area Plan. That is an omission we are working to change, provided residents consent to that change. To fix that, we need to create an official map of Unison, apply to the Board of Supervisors and perhaps change our zoning. Another layer of protection could also be placing part of Unison in an Historic District. All of which is complicated and a moving target, thanks to the county’s zoning ordinance rewrite. UPS—as part of the Loudoun Coalition—is staying on top of that.

Meanwhile, another project underway in Unison aided by UPS is the possibility of bringing water and/or sewer to the village via a county program. A feasibility study of the village began on November 1 and should last about a year. The study will delve in depth into what Unison residents have now in terms of wells and septic and what could be possible (or not) if the county provides alternatives.

One reason UPS is involved in that project is that the organization owns and operates the historic Unison Store in the center of the village. The store, which has had trouble with water access for years, has an apartment on the second floor, and meeting space on the first floor which is loaned out for yoga and art classes and to some non-profits for meetings. Water access can affect tenants, students and meetings.

All of which brings me to my fund-raising mission. Maintaining the store and its grounds costs money. Some of our preservation work also involves expense, which means UPS needs your support. If you believe in our mission, please send a check or money order to **Unison Preservation Society, PO Box 606, Middleburg, VA 20118.**

You also can go to [unisonva.org](http://unisonva.org) and act through PayPal.

You will also get to see our redesigned Web site, see some lovely photographs of the village we all love and read about its history.

Thank you, and see you next year at Heritage Day. Fingers crossed.

*Tara J. Connell*

*President, Unison Preservation Society*

## Unison Updates

### St. Louis

Sympathy for St. Louis’ problematic wells—issues that surfaced during the village’s fight with developer MOJAX—prompted the Board of Supervisors on Sept. 8 to pass a resolution approving St. Louis’ entry into the County’s Water and Sewer program. That’s the self-same approval Unison won after a couple of years of mapping/village meetings/interactions with the county etc. The difference? St. Louis has yet to apply. The reason for the advance approval was the Board’s desire to do something—anything—to help the village after all efforts to stop MOJAX failed. MOJAX’ applications to build some 27 houses in a subdivision across from Banneker School are still pending. Part two of the resolution was the closely watched Comprehensive Plan or Zoning Ordinance amendment calling for the development of a “village plan” for St. Louis. The action paves the way for “small area plans” for Loudoun’s Rural Historic Villages—a concept still under discussion in the county’s Zoning Ordinance Rewrite.

### Redistricting

Loudoun’s rural West could wind up with just one supervisor after the county’s election districts are redrawn based on the adjusted 2020 census data. Currently the West has two: Tony Buffington of the Blue Ridge District (Unison’s supervisor) and Caleb Kershner of the Catoctin District, who represents the northern part of the rural area. The Board of Supervisors has asked the public to view sample redistricting plans and submit their own ideas during November at <https://loudoun-county-redistricting-2021-loudoungis.hub.arcgis.com/>.