

Terra Nullius: Guilford College before Guilford College

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Guilford College is a hard place to pin down. It's Quaker settlement in the slaveholding south in the eighteenth century makes it distinct both from other Quaker settlements in Indiana and Pennsylvania, and from much of the rest of the south. But its elusiveness precedes that.

Prior to the settlement of the Pennsylvania Quakers, the area was sparsely and seasonally inhabited by the Keyauwee and the Saura (often spelled Cheraw, and occasionally applied to the Keyauwee as well). Both groups shared dialects of the Siouan language group, a testament to long ago migrations and cultural contact between indigenous peoples from the northern plains and the upper southeast. Keyauwee territory was further south in present-day Randolph County, while the Saura held territory along the Dan and Haw Rivers in present-day Rockingham, Stokes and Guilford County. The two most important Saura settlements were called, appropriately, Upper Sauratown (near present day Walnut Cove, Stokes County) and Lower Sauratown.¹

The idea of fixed, bounded territories unified under a centralized political system is a European import to the Americas, and often a poor tool to describe indigenous expressions of territoriality. Indigenous peoples organized themselves into a variety of polities, from villages, bands, tribes, nations, to confederacies. They usually cohered around a shared language, but not always. The Saura and Keyauwee were Siouan-speaking, along with the Saponi, Tutelo, and Catawba to the east and south. Sharing a language did not make them allies, but it did suggest some general cultural affiliation. In some ways this echoes the much more well-documented Muskogee (Creek), whose territory was in present-day Alabama and Georgia. Among the Creek, one's *talwa* (or tribal town) defined one's identity. Talwas were grouped into clusters — Upper and Lower Creek, and identity was reckoned maternally, creating a fairly 'open' culture that nonetheless retained a strong sense of Creek identity.

European settler colonial practices altered indigenous life, often forcing nations or tribes to relocate, break into smaller bands, or join together into larger confederacies. In the case of the Saura and Keyauwee, all of these seemed to have happened. The web of economic and cultural ties between towns and peoples formed by seasonal rounds, discrete agricultural and hunting areas, and shared cultural practices connected people to the land in ways that was often invisible to European expectations of fixed territories with clear boundaries. It also helped indigenous people adapt in order to survive. As European settlement and the indigenous conflicts it had ignited pushed south and west into western Virginia and the Piedmont region in the eighteenth century, the indigenous people of the region formed a series of confederacies, shifting alliances, and cultural intermixing to survive the population loss brought by war and disease. The Saura and Keyauwee faced raids by the Iroquois to their north, forcing them to move south around 1711. In 1715, the outbreak of the Yamasee War, which swept up many of the Native tribes and nations of the region, forced the Saura and Keyauwee to move further south and seek shelter with the Catawba, their enemy. The war decimated their numbers. From over 1,000 (maybe 1,200), by the end of the war, the Saura and Keyauwee numbered around 500. They formalized their alliance with the Catawba after the war to protect themselves from renewed attacks by the Iroquois, but the alliance was insufficient to protect them. Over the fifty years following the war, their population declined to about 50-60.

Historian Ethen Arnett, writing in the 1970s claimed that "only a few of [the Saura and Keyauwee] were seen walking around after the 1740's and the 1750's," and those populations centered around the Buffalo Church area.²

¹ The exact location of Lower Sauratown is somewhat elusive. It set along the southern (right) bank of the Dan River, east of (what is now) Eden, NC. I really just wanted to work "East of Eden" in there.

² Ethen Arnett, *The Saura and Keyawee in the Land that became Guilford, Randolph and Rockingham* (1975).

We have to treat such observations skeptically given the deep trope in US history of the disappearing Indian. It is a useful fiction, serving both to “honor” Indians, but only as victims of modern society, whose purported disappearance justified settler colonialism. But in this case, it also seems to depict a historical reality — that directly and indirectly, European settler society fundamentally disrupted Saura and Keyauwee life with devastating demographic effects.

Lore has it that the Quakers purchased the land where they established New Garden Meeting from the Saura, but records are elusive. Hiram Hilty described it this way: “In 1764, a committee was appointed to investigate any Indian claims against lands occupied by New Garden Friends, but after two fruitless months the matter was dropped. *The Indians had long since gone*. In 1791, however, as Friends pressed westward, a minute was adopted that “no Friend settle ... on Indian land unpurchased.”³ [emphasis added]

So, how do we assess the claims made by the Quaker settlers of the region? First, the Quakers were asking questions others were not. They wanted to acquire the land honestly, which can’t be said for most settler societies. But they encountered a greatly weakened polity, making it difficult to fit indigenous communities into their understanding of the authority of territoriality. Even beyond the often incommensurable differences in the ways Europeans and Natives thought about land ownership, in this case, Native land tenure was in a state of rapid, defensive flux.

But at the same time, almost certainly, a group of people or peoples in the region, who understood the land that Guilford College now occupies to be theirs — whether in outright ownership, or in usufruct — came to find it controlled by someone else as a result of a transaction they weren’t party to. And it is this process that is so easy to miscast as inevitable. Hilty wrote, “It was to this ancient Indian settlement, now rapidly filling up with Euro-Americans, that Thomas Beals came to make a home for his family sometime after 1748.” Hilty, writing in the 1980s, casts Indian settlement as “ancient,” rhetorically locating Indians in the past, while naturalizing the process of settler colonialism by describing it like water, “rapidly filling up” an empty and open space. It is important to point out that, while the Saura and Keyauwee no longer exercise political control over the region, their ancestors continue to live in the region, first as refugees, now as kin among the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation (Orange / Alamance Counties), the Waccamaw, (Bladen / Columbus Counties), the Catawba in South Carolina, and numerous other indigenous communities.⁴

There is no way to easily assess the Quaker’s relationship with the indigenous people of the area now occupied by Guilford College. Quaker settlers in the mid-eighteenth century wanted to purchase land legitimately from its Indian “owners,” but they found that the effects of settler colonialism (of which they were a part) had reached the Indians of the region before they did.

³ Hiram Hilty, *New Garden Friends Meeting: The Christian People Called Quakers* (1983, revised edition, 2001) citing New Garden Monthly Meeting Minutes, January 28, 1792.

⁴ I have included this sentence because of the importance of emphasizing, in Gerald Vizenor’s rich term, the *survivance* of indigenous people. The narrative trope of the disappearing Indian is so powerful that if we say nothing, we assent to its power. However, I am somewhat uncomfortable of too casually linking tribal communities in the present with those of the past. Politics pass; people survive.