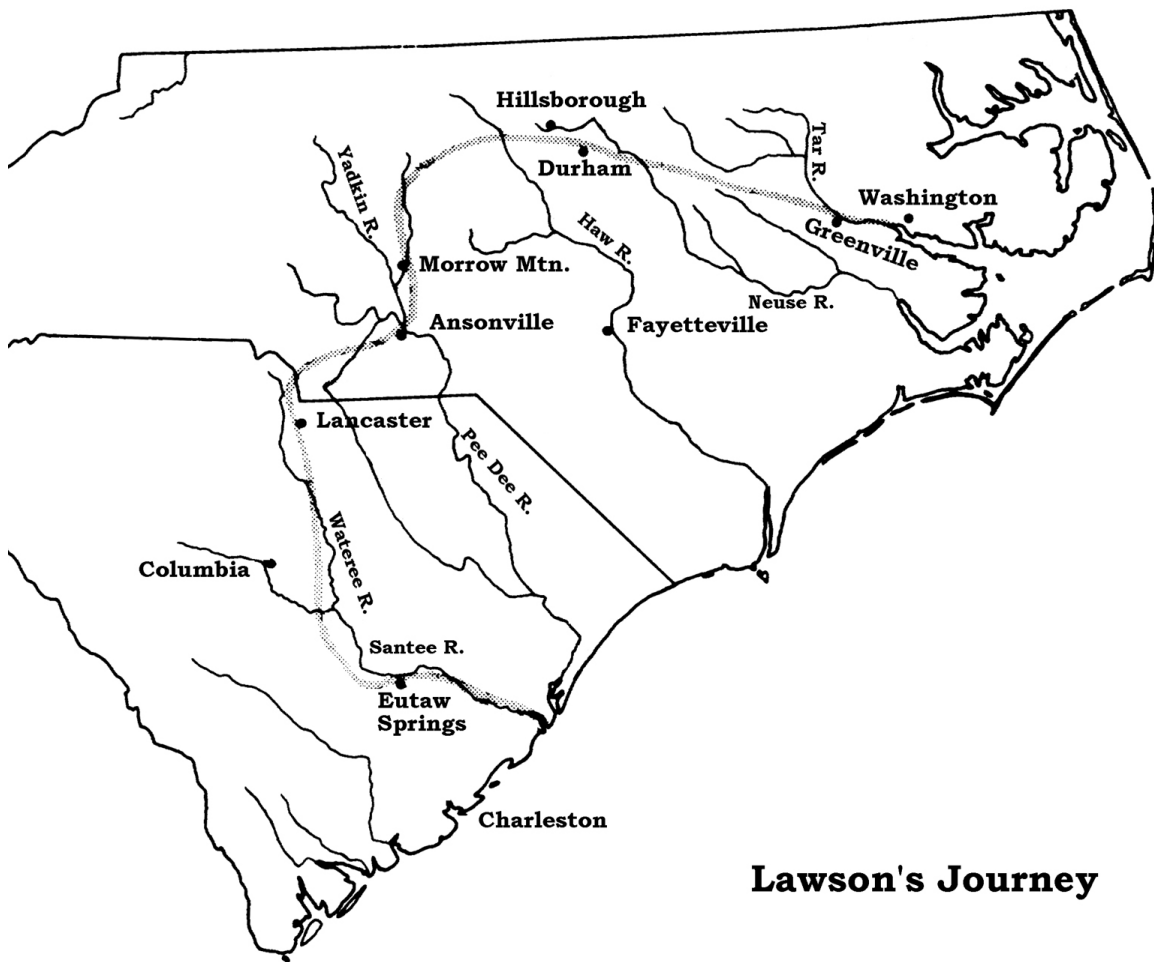


Glimpses of Indian Life, AD 1700

Background

By the 1700s, English colonists had settled in places along the coasts of Virginia and the Carolinas. Their towns included Williamsburg, Virginia and Charleston, South Carolina. Colonial officials in Charleston wanted to know more about the land and the native peoples living in the interior. They asked an Englishman named John Lawson to survey and explore the area. Lawson agreed and left Charleston on December 28, 1700. He took with him five other Englishmen, three Indian men, and one Indian woman. Weaving through the heart of the Carolinas to finish near where Greenville, North Carolina is today, Lawson's journey lasted 59 days. As he traveled, Lawson wrote about the different Indian peoples he met. The following account is based on some of Lawson's observations as he went from village to village.



Lawson's Journey

Lawson's Account

The Indians of North Carolina are of different heights and builds, as the Europeans are. They speak many different languages. Each day, they do the work they need to do to live. Wild plant foods like nuts and berries are gathered; gardens of corn and squash are planted, tended, and harvested; tools, clay pottery, and clothes are made; and animals, like deer and turkey, are hunted for meat. They find and process the plants they need to cure diseases and treat wounds. For example, some people use the oil of acorns to soothe burns.

The people live in villages scattered across the region. Some villages are large and some are small. Some have tall wood fences surrounding them, and others do not. Many villages are along streams and rivers. There is water to drink and water to travel on. The land in these places is easy to work with stone hoes or digging sticks, and the soft soils make fertile gardens for the corn and squash crops. In some places, pumpkins grow and peach trees offer shade as well as fruit. The villagers eat these foods from their gardens with the meats the hunters bring. Venison, which is deer meat, and wild turkey are the meats people eat the most. Many wild plant foods and herbs are gathered, too, which add to the food stores; hickory nuts and acorns; strawberries and blackberries; and grapes and wild onions, to name a few.

Foods like venison and turkey give the people more than meat. Women clean deer skins and use the hides to make clothes and blankets. They weave turkey feathers into soft capes people wear over their shoulders. Many of the animal bones are shaped into tools; turkey bones make good awls, which are tools used to punch holes into tough hides.

In the villages, many of the houses are round or oval. They are covered with cypress, cedar, or pine bark. When people build their houses, they make long poles of any wood that bends. The poles are actually small tree trunks only about three to six inches thick. After they cut the trees and take off the bark and limbs, the people heat the poles in a fire to strengthen them. Then they put the poles side by side in the ground to make the shape of the house they want. The tops of the poles are bent toward the center and tied together by cord made from elm bark or a tough moss that never rots. Finally, the poles of the roof and walls are covered with bark to make the houses warm and tight for the winter. In the summer, the people may leave the walls uncovered to let air come through and cool the house. A hole is left in the center of the roof so that smoke from the hearth inside the house can escape.

At times during the year, people leave their villages and gather together in one place to have feasts and to buy and sell items they want, such as deer skins for clothes or shell for jewelry. It is much like the European markets and fairs. Some people come from as far away as 60 miles. Besides getting the goods they need, the people play games. One game is a sort of arithmetic. Two players use a pack of 51 thin reeds that are about 7 inches long. When they play, one person takes the pack and tosses some of the reeds high into the air. Before the reeds come down, each player has to guess how many reeds are in the air and how many remain in the hand of the person who threw them.

The Indians have different kinds of dances and songs. Some are for war and some celebrate peace. Others honor respected elders. Others are done when people marry. Usually, these kinds of dances and songs are composed especially for the celebration and are not used again. At other celebrations, people use time-honored songs and dances whose words and music always stay the same. When the Harvest of Corn festival ends, for example, the people give thanks for their crops with a special song and dance to the Good Spirit.

Because there are different tribes, marriage customs differ among the Indian people. Lawson tells us about the custom in one tribe; he does not name the tribe. He writes that before people get

married, the man asks the woman's parents if he can marry her. The parents say they will think about it, and the man leaves. He knows, though, that the parents expect him to return. When he does, he brings his relatives along to talk with all the woman's relatives. At the meeting, everybody gives an opinion about whether the match is a good one. If the families agree it is, the marriage is arranged. The man must pay the woman's family for her. Often the payment is in deerskins. He pays because the woman is a good worker, and the family will miss her contribution. He also shows by giving deerskins that he is a good hunter and can provide meat for his family. The woman must agree to the arrangement; she cannot be married unless she wants to.

Death is a time of sadness and people bury their dead with ceremony. Just like at a European wake, some Indian peoples Lawson writes about keep vigil over the body for a time. Later they bury the person with some of the tools and possessions the person used in life. At a man's funeral, people in the village gather, grieve, and listen while a conjurer (who is a priest) tells about the things the man did and what he was like. Because the man was a skilled hunter and loved his village, the conjurer tells the people that he has gone into the Country of Souls. This is a place (like heaven) where a good person goes after death and all wants are satisfied. People who are lazy, bad hunters, or thieves go to a place where snakes crawl and the food is nasty.