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Photos: [Rassawek at sunset](#). By Greg Werkheiser
[Governor Northam visits Rassawek](#). By Carrie Pruitt



12,000+ Organizations and Citizens File Opposition to Plan to Construct Water Pump Station Through Historic Native American Capital

RICHMOND, VA – June 8, 2020 – In a massive show of opposition to the James River Water Authority’s (JRWA) plans to destroy the Monacan Indian Nation’s historic capital city of Rassawek in Fluvanna County, Virginia, more than twelve-thousand organizations and private citizens made their voices heard before the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ June 7 public comment deadline.

The Monacan Indian Nation filed [a 1,124-page document](#) asserting multiple legal arguments for why the Corps should deny JRWA’s proposed plans to construct a water pump station and pipeline through a sacred site that was home to Monacan people for 200 generations. Rassawek was mapped by Captain John Smith in 1612. The Smithsonian and numerous professionals have documented extensive evidence of archaeological remains and human burials in the subsequent centuries.

By midnight on Sunday, a broad array of local, state, and national organizations filed comments opposing JRWA’s permit application. Among them are entities representing most of the 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States, including the [National Congress of American Indians](#), [United South and Eastern Tribes](#), and the [Alliance of Colonial Era Tribes](#). The premier voices for historic preservation filed comments, including the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) and [Preservation Virginia](#). Leading environmental advocacy groups weighed in, including the [Southern Environmental Law Center](#) and the [Sierra Club](#). Faith communities expressed opposition, including divisions of the [Episcopal](#) and [Quaker](#) churches. Municipal and political leadership filed letters, including the [City of Richmond](#) and [Congressman Donald McEachin](#).

Kenneth Branham, Chief of the Monacan Indian Nation stated, “In the middle of a global pandemic and nationwide protests against oppression of black and brown people, so many institutions and individuals acted to protect Native culture and American history. It is beautiful and powerful.”

By contrast, not a single organization or citizen has made public comments supporting JRWA’s plans, other than JRWA. Common themes are found in the opposition filings: the proposed project placement is unlawful and unjust, viable alternative sites are being ignored, and the Corps must order a full Environmental Impact Statement and hold a public meeting when the pandemic subsides.

Legal counsel for the tribe, Greg Werkheiser of Cultural Heritage Partners, observed, “I’ve been representing tribes in efforts to protect their heritage for twenty years and rarely have I seen so many speak so unanimously against a destructive project.”

About the Monacan Indian Nation

The Monacan Indian Nation is a federally recognized sovereign tribe and a state-recognized tribe in the Commonwealth of Virginia, headquartered on Bear Mountain in Amherst County. With approximately 2,400 citizens, the Monacan Indian Nation is today the largest federally recognized tribe in Virginia, and the Monacans once occupied half of the Commonwealth. The Monacans had hundreds of villages, but their historic capital, the community to which all other villages paid tribute, was Rassawek. Its archaeological remains are on a point of land where the James and Rivanna rivers meet called Point of Fork.

Excerpts from Comments

- “The proposed project would disturb the remains of buried ancestors of the Monacan Indian Nation, and it would desecrate Rassawek, their historic capital. Furthermore, the project would infringe on the water rights of the City of Richmond, which depends on the James River Basin. It is my belief that a public hearing and EIS would make it clear what many already know: alternative locations for the project can and should be considered that would both honor and respect the ancestral history of the Monacan Indian Nation while also providing for the water and sewer needs of the Zion Crossroads development.” *Congressman A. Donald McEachin*
- “Rassawek is not an appropriate place to build the Project. Alternative sites should be fully explored that balance the need to provide water resources to the local community with the need to preserve this significant historic place.” *National Trust for Historic Preservation*
- “[T]he proposed project will seriously harm highly significant historic properties and cultural resources and substantially diminish the historic and cultural values of the area. The Corps should give special weight to these impacts, as the project’s proposed location...is truly unique.” *Southern Environmental Law Center and Preservation Virginia*
- “The importance of the historical capital of Rassawek and tribal identity lies not only in the material remains of the town and the graves of those who lived there, but also to the sacred place known today as Point of Fork...DHR strongly recommends against pursuing the preferred alternative due to the archaeological and cultural impacts to Rassawek.” *Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Historic Resources*
- “During low flows, the Proposed Project could significantly damage the City’s . . . beneficial uses. Even more troubling hydrologically and legally, the Project’s diversion would be pumped out of the James River Basin.” *City of Richmond*
- “As students of our nation’s history, we know that Virginia’s historical treatment of the Monacan Indian Nation is a story [that] rebounds to our shame. Surely, we can aim to do better, to be respectful of the ancestral home capital of their past. We request that the Army Corps of Engineers require the JRWA to find an alternative that does not destroy Rassawek.” *Lewis & Clark Exploratory Center of Virginia*
- “The Tribe is gravely concerned about the proposal to site a water pumping station on Rassawek, the historic capital of the Monacan Indian Nation. The Tribe supports the Monacan Indian Nation in their request for the Corps to require JRWA to build the project on an alternative that would not disturb the burials of tribal ancestors or destroy Rassawek. The intense impacts on historic properties and cultural resources demand that the Corps prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for this project. In addition, we ask that the Corps hold a public hearing to gather additional input on the project.” *Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe*

- “The decision to site the pumping station at Rassawek and decisions by the JWRA to preemptively locate infrastructure at the Rassawek site prior to permitting have not gone unnoticed by the community. Now is the time to put a pause on the underhanded progress of the JWRA and bring the matter into the light of day.” *Archeological Society of the Virginia Maritime Heritage Chapter*
- “In light of previous archaeological findings, the historic and cultural significance of Rassawek to the Monacan Indian Nation and to the United States, and the potential impacts the proposed project will have on those resources, NCAI requests that USACE conduct an EIS, including full consideration of the “Forsyth Alternative,” as requested by the Monacan Indian Nation.” *National Congress of American Indians*