

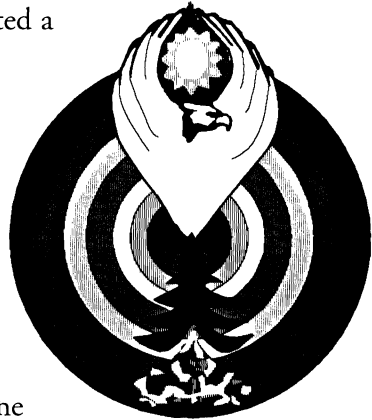
POWHATAN RENAPE



The Powhatan are a branch of the Algonquin-speaking Indians living in the northeast at the time of the colonization of North America. *Powhatan* is an Algonquin word meaning “at the falls”, describing the homeland of these people (ENAT, 198-200). *Renape* means “human beings”.

At their peak, the Powhatan were part of the Powhatan Confederacy based in today’s Virginia. In 1646 they became signatories to the first treaty written in America by England. Those Powhatan Renape who remain today are a small part of the bands that once formed the great confederation.

The Powhatan Renape Nation adopted a flag in 1982, after receiving recognition from the State of New Jersey. The flag was white with the tribal seal in the center. The seal was divided in quarters, the upper left and lower right black, the other two white. Over the horizontal axis was a Powhatan long-house. In front of it and covering the vertical axis was the great Sacred Tree borne on the back of a turtle, a reference to the legend that the earth itself was a turtle with people living upon its back. In the upper-left quarter was a crescent moon, in the other quarters, clockwise, were a blazing sun, a display of native fruits and vegetables, and an overhead view of a turtle’s back. Circling the four quarters was a bright blue ring with a ghost eagle, a bird sacred to most Indians, at the top. A running bear straddled the right side, a Powhatan warrior stretched along the left side and at the base lay a turtle.



About 1990 the nation modified its seal and its flag. The flag’s background remains white; the new seal retains several elements of the original seal while eliminating much of the ancillary design. The main element is a rainbow, forming a nearly complete circle [see Navajo].

Its seven colors run from red at the center to violet at the outer edge; narrow white lines separate the colors. Centered on this rainbow is the “sacred tree” atop the shell of the turtle, and the white ghost eagle rises from the Sacred Tree. The eagle’s wings arch upward to encircle a yellow-and-orange sun against a red background.

The symbols have deep and multiple meanings for the Powhatan Renape (“Symbols of the Powhatan Renape Nation”, *NAVA News*, Jan./Feb. 1989, 1,6). Chief Roy Crazy Horse explains its symbolism:

“The Powhatan Renape flag is based upon the circle and the number four. The circle symbolizes life, the cycle of life, and the shapes of living things. It is wholeness, completion, the all embracing, the people, the Great Hoop of the Nation, and the universe, all in one. The circle appears in this painting as a rainbow, the sun, the eye of the eagle, and the eyes, nostrils, scales and entire body of the turtle. The number four symbolizes the four seasons, four times of the day, and the four ages of humankind. It manifests here as the four entities which we see—the turtle, the sacred tree, the white eagle and the sun.

“The turtle represents Turtle Island, the ancient native name for the continent now called North America. I also represents the entire earth, for many traditional cultures here and elsewhere in the world refer to the earth as a giant turtle . . . like riding on the back of a great turtle.

“The sacred tree symbolizes all life, and it grows at the center of the universe. Its condition is a reflection of the health and happiness of all living things in general. The left or right side of the sacred tree mirror each other, yet they are also opposite, but they are one in the oneness of the tree. This principle, which appears throughout this drawing, and everywhere in the outer world, is represented by the number, being both the duality of the one and the unity of the two. Thus multiplying 3 by itself, this sacred tree has nine tiers, or levels of leaves.

“The white eagle is a spirit eagle, a traditional American Indian symbol of sacredness, transformation, and watchfulness for the well being of the coming generations. Some traditional elders say that there was once a great native American leader and spiritual leader named White Eagle, who traveled across this turtle island bringing a message of peace and unity to the people. As with the turtle and the sacred

tree, the white eagle is a universal symbol, representing physical life taking spirit form and soaring skyward. Here we see the scales of the turtle, which represent the physical world, evaporating through the trunk of the sacred tree, which is rooted on this turtle island, to become the spirit being of the white eagle, whose head is turned sunwise as it looks towards rebirth.

“The fourth entity is the sun, perhaps the most universally prominent of all symbols, which in unity with the earth is a giver of life. Its twelve rays represent the principles of three times four, which has many applications. Unity is expressed through the children as the third element. Also, there are legends among the native people here and elsewhere that tell of twelve clans, twelve nations, etc., that make up the whole of their kind, and great leaders are often spoken of as having twelve disciples. The sun is a great leader symbol. Twelve also plays a role in the turtle’s make up, with its twelve main scales, and the one in the center, which like the ball of the sun, symbolizes their oneness.

“Thus we have four entities with their opposing, yet mirroring qualities—earth (turtle), sun, plant (tree), and animal (eagle). Turtle and tree of the land, eagle and sun of the sky. These four entities also represent the four elements; turtle—as water, tree—as earth, eagle—as air, and sun—as fire.

“But there is also a fifth entity here, the rainbow, whose seven spectrum colors represent the principles of three and four together. As the fifth entity, it serves to unify the four, the duality of dualities, as the rainbow unifies the duality of earth and sky. Five also manifests in this painting as the five fingers of the turtle’s hand and the eagle’s wings. The circle of the rainbow connects all these beings into one ever-flowing life stream. Universally, the rainbow is a symbol of hope, the future, the beauty of the world, and the realization of our highest dreams.

“Powhatan Chief Wahunsonakeh once said ‘One must learn how to live. Not just how to make a living, but how to find a path of beauty in this life. We begin by knowing who we are.’ By understanding the symbols of the Powhatan Renape, we can begin to understand who they are.” ☪

[Thanks to Chief Roy Crazy Horse and the Powhatan Renape Nation of the Rankokas Reservation for information on the seal and flag.]