

On March 26, 2022, members of the Mattaponi Tribe participated in the first election for tribal leaders held in more than 40 years. All lineal descendants of those on the tribal roles in 1910 were invited for the first time to participate in a free and fair election for tribal leaders and the adoption of a formal tribal constitution and bylaws. Up to now, women members of the Tribe were excluded from voting and serving on the tribal governing body.

“Our election today was historic,” said newly elected Chief Lionel “Wise Spirit” Custalow. “This is the first election our Tribe has held in more than four decades and the first in which women were allowed to vote and to be elected to serve on our governing body. “In addition, he continued, “it is the first time our Tribe has adopted a constitution that bans discrimination in tribal membership and the allocation of tribal resources.” He concluded, “The new leadership of our Tribe is committed to actively seeking federal recognition, engaging in responsible, open, and inclusive self-governance, and assuring the sovereignty of our tribe as an independent governing body in Virginia with full ownership and responsibility for our ancestral lands.”

The members of the Tribe who voted in the election today disagreed with the recommendations of the unelected body currently governing the Tribe to exclude members of the Tribe not living on the Reservation from voting and tribal governance. They adopted a constitution that gives all lineal descendants of the tribe, including reservation residents and non-residents, full and equal voting rights.

The newly-elected Chief, Assistant Chief and Council members will be actively pursuing recognition by the Commonwealth of Virginia that they are the validly elected governing body of the Mattaponi Tribe as the first step in seeking full recognition of the sovereignty of the Tribe.

The election was overseen and monitored by Cameron Quinn, former head of the Virginia Board of Elections and former Fairfax County Registrar who now serves as an election security advisor.