THE ONLY LAND I KNOW:
A HISTORY OF THE LUMBEE INDIANS

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A Prayer for Strength
Oh Father, Whose voice I hear in the winds and Whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me. I am a man before You, one of Your many children. I am small and weak. I need Your strength and wisdom. Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunsets. Make my hands respect the things You have made, my ears sharp to hear Your voice. Make me wise so that I may know the things You have taught my people, the lessons You have hidden in every leaf and rock. I seek strength, Father, not to be superior to my brothers, but to be able to fight my greatest enemy, myself. Make me ever ready to come to You with clean hands and straight eyes, so that when life fades as the setting sun, my spirit may come to You without shame.

—CHIEF TOM WHITE CLOUD
Ojibway Indian

Out of Darkness

Although Reconstruction was characterized in Robeson County by the bloodshed and terror of the “Lowrie War,” and at the state level by confused politics, the era made one positive contribution to North Carolina’s history. Out of a Republican-controlled convention came the Constitution of 1868, a document that remains essentially the organic law of the state. This constitution affected the Indians of Robeson County in two ways. First, it restored a measure of political equality in the state; everyone who met the legal requirements was entitled to vote and hold office. Second, it provided for a public school term of four months for all children, regardless of race. It said nothing about segregated schools. Because of the corruption and confusion of the period, and because there was no separation by races, the public schools foundered, rather than flourished. Not until 1875, when Reconstruction ended at the state level and the Democrats revised the constitution, did North Carolina begin in earnest to establish schools for its citizens. They were segregated schools, and none were established for Indians. The ten years from 1875 to 1885 can aptly be called the “Decade of Despair” for the Indians of Robeson County. Not only were they denied schools of their own, but they were now made brutally aware of their lack of recognition as a people. They were
unacceptable to the white community, and resisted being fitted into the mold of segregation which was then being shaped for the Negro. The Robeson Indians responded with determination to improve their situation. They set as their goals the development of educational facilities for their children. Their goals in education were to become a basis for pride and dignity, as well as providing recognition of the people as an identifiable race with deep roots as original owners of the land, as well as part of the beginnings of the nation.

The Indians, fortunately, had an advocate of their cause in the North Carolina General Assembly in the person of the Honorable Hamilton McMillan of Red Springs, representative from Robeson County. As noted in Chapter One, McMillan investigated the origins of the Robeson Indians and concluded that they were descendants of the “Lost Colony” and a tribe of coastal Indians he mislabeled the “Croatans.” Consequently, he sponsored and successfully supported legislation giving the Indians of Robeson County a legal designation and the privilege of having their own public schools, under their own direction. The two significant provisions of the law were: Section 1. “That the said Indians and their descendants shall hereafter be designated and known as the Croatan Indians;” and Section 2. “That said Indians and their descendants shall have separate schools for their children, school committees of their own race and color and shall be allowed to select teachers of their own choice…”

There is no evidence, however, that any public schools were immediately established for their benefit. This was due in part to the limited funds provided for that purpose, but primarily to the lack of qualified teachers. Because there had been no schools open to Indians since 1835, the illiteracy rate was extremely high. There were a few people who possessed sufficient education to teach others. Leaders of the Indian community knew that what they really needed, in order to make progress in education, was a centralized institution offering studies from the elementary to the normal (teacher-training) level. At the urging of the Indians, Hamilton McMillan sponsored, and the legislature passed “An Act to establish a normal school in the county of Robeson.”

This initial act created a corporation under the control of seven trustees, charged with the responsibility of “maintaining a school of high grade for teachers of the Croatan race in North Carolina.” The law specified that “all those who shall enjoy the privileges of said school as students shall previously obligate themselves to teach the youth of the Croatan race for a stated period.” Finally, the legislature appropriated five hundred dollars for the “payment of services rendered for teaching and for other purposes.” The responsibility for obtaining a suitable structure and for acquiring other needed facilities was left to the trustees. The first Board of Trustees was composed of The Reverend W. L. Moore, Preston Locklear, James Oxendine, James Dial, Sr., J. J. Oxendine, Isaac Brayboy, and Olin Oxendine. All of these men worked diligently to turn this legislation into reality. The end product was the Croatan Normal School.

Since neither the state nor the federal government had ever before assumed any responsibility for their welfare, most of the Indians were wary about the legislation establishing the Normal School. The majority shared suspicions borne of fifty years of discrimination. It was difficult for them to believe that the whites would do something for their advancement. As a result, when W. L. Moore called a meeting to implement the provisions of this law, very few attended. Only with great difficulty could Moore arouse interest in the project and raise funds for land acquisition and construction of a building. Even then, he found it necessary to contribute $200 of his own funds and to devote his energies full time to the school, so that it could open.

The first college building, a two-story structure, was located on a one-acre site purchased for $8. The original building would have cost about $1,000, had not the people given so much of the material and labor. The Croatan Normal School opened its doors in the fall of 1887 with an enrollment of fifteen students, the first state-supported school of any type for the Robeson Indians. From this extremely modest beginning, Pembroke State University has emerged. Since W. L. Moore had completed four years of normal

1. See Appendix B for pertinent legislation concerning the problems of education and identity among the Lumbee Indians.
The first building of the Indian Normal School. This building was constructed by the Indian people in 1887, with an enrollment of fifteen. It served as their principal educational facility until the school was moved to its present site in 1909.

—Photo courtesy of Elmer Hunt

Frank H. Epps, Lumbee educator who served the people for more than thirty years. He is well remembered as principal of Magnolia High School in Robeson County, North Carolina.

The first years of the Croatan Normal School are a record of continued struggle and frustration. Although the 1889 state legislature increased the school's annual appropriation to $1,000, a sum it would continue to receive for many years afterwards, the school was still inadequately funded in order to erase the educational deficiencies of the Indian community, a condition caused by many years of neglect. In 1890, Moore wrote to the Office of Indian Affairs in Washington, seeking financial assistance, saying, "The people for which I am officially interested have as a general thing grown up without so much as the rudiments of education, yet the youth who have had (to some degree) better opportunities for educating themselves show that the moral, intellectual, and social aptitudes in them are real. Can not something be obtained to assist them in a normal school for them?" The answer Moore received was disheartening. T. J. Morgan, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, replied, "While I regret exceedingly that the provisions made by the State of North Carolina seem to be entirely inadequate, I find it quite impracticable to render any assistance at this time. The Government is responsible for the education of something like 36,000 Indian children and has provisions for less than half this number. So long as the immediate wards of the Government are so insufficiently provided for, I do not see how I can consistently render any assistance to the Croatans or any other civilized tribes." A shortage of money continued to be a critical problem for the Croatan School for many years to come.

During its early history, the school, reflecting existing conditions, offered mainly elementary-level work, although some normal classes were provided. In 1905, Mr. D. F. Lowry received the first diploma issued by the Croatan Normal School, for completing its "Scientific Course." He was the first graduate of the Indian school. Early in 1974, the Reverend D. F. Lowry, now 94 years of age and still active, recalled his student days and noted that the class work offered in those first years of the school had not been

school prior to moving to Robeson County, and had played a major role in founding the school, it was only natural that he was elected to be the first principal and teacher, a position he filled for the next three years.

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standardized. Students were allowed to study “anything they could handle.”

In 1909, the decision was made to move the school nearer to Pembroke, center of the Lumbee Indian community. Land was purchased at the site now occupied by the university. With $3,000 appropriated by the legislature, a new building was constructed. From this point on, the institution slowly but steadily improved, both in quality of instruction and in number of students.

In 1911, because the name “Croatan” had become a label of derision, the General Assembly changed the name of the people to “Indians of Robeson County,” and the name of the school to “Indian Normal School of Robeson County,” a change that pleased nobody and settled nothing. The Indians wanted a more clearly identifiable name for themselves, and in 1913 the legislature renamed them the “Cherokee Indians of Robeson County.” The school became the “Cherokee Indian Normal School of Robeson County,” a name it would bear for the next twenty-eight years. Moreover, the legislature enacted a law transferring, by deed, the property of the Indian Normal School to the State Board of Education. This agency was also given the authority to appoint the Board of Trustees.

The first surge of progress for the college came during the superintendency of Prof. T. C. Henderson (1918-1922). As a result of Henderson’s energetic policies, the faculty was increased, new high school courses were offered, vocational courses were introduced, and a summer school was begun. Also, in 1921, due to the efforts of Judge L. R. Varser of Lumberton, member of the state legislature, the state appropriated $75,000 for a new and more modern building. This structure, completed in 1923, became “Old Main,” the oldest building on the campus of Pembroke State University, a controversial structure partially destroyed by fire in 1973.

The progressive policies of Henderson were carried on by two noteworthy successors: Prof. A. B. Riley (1922-1926), and Prof. S. B. Smithy (1926-1929). Under Mr. Riley, construction of needed facilities was carried forward, the summer school enlarged, and, in 1924, the high school was accredited by the State Board of Education. The decision was also made to phase out the elementary grades still being taught at the school by 1928. In 1925, legislation was enacted placing the Board of Trustees under the control of the governor, where it remains to this day. Finally, in August, 1926, the Board of Trustees determined that the school should begin to fulfill the purpose for which it had been established—teacher preparation and training. A regular two-year normal course was added to the curriculum. Professor Smithy, who came from the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, inaugurated the first full-fledged normal class at the Pembroke institution in the fall of 1926. With steady improvement in normal work, the school graduated its first class of ten members on June 1, 1928, and Prof. Smithy was able to announce at the commencement exercises that the institution had been accredited by the State as a “Standard Normal School.” By the fall of 1928 the school was offering only secondary and normal school courses.

Throughout the early history of the institution, few men served it more faithfully or had a more profound impact on it than the Reverend Oscar R. Sampson. He was associated with the school as a student, teacher, and trustee for more than thirty years. His greatest contributions were unquestionably his recognition of the value of education as a means to advancement, and the encouragement he gave his people to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the school. The death of Mr. Sampson in 1928 deprived the school and the community of a positive guiding influence.

The coming of the “Great Depression” in 1929 definitely had an adverse effect on the progress of the Pembroke institution, but adversity was nothing new. Under superintendents J. E. Sawyer (1929-1935) and G. C. Maughon (1935-1940) the school, frequently operating with reduced funds, nevertheless continued to take steps that augured well for the future. During this decade of economic crisis, a college curriculum was gradually added, and at the spring commencement of 1940, the first four-year college degrees were awarded to five members of the graduating class. In 1936 the college added its first full-time librarian. Also, it began a
program of instruction for deaf students, but this program was unfortunately discontinued in 1939 because of its expense and the difficulty of securing trained teachers. The high school, long an integral part of the institution, was moved to a new, off-campus site in 1939. In recognition of the fact that the school was truly an institution of higher learning, the 1941 state legislature officially changed the name of the school to Pembroke State College for Indians, later shortened to Pembroke State College.

In 1942, the board of trustees selected Dr. Ralph Wellons as president of the college. The choice was an excellent one. Dr. Wellons brought to the position a strong academic background. At least three major developments marked his administration. First, like all institutions of higher learning, Pembroke State had to cope with an influx of students following the end of World War II. Indian veterans returned home more aware than ever of the need for education and many took advantage of the G.I. Bill to gain a college degree. For those students who desired a skill, the college operated a trade school for a period of several years. Second, the need for an enlarged physical plant became obvious. The result was the addition of a new administration-library building, two classroom buildings, a president’s house, and plans for future expansion. And third, it was during Dr. Wellons’ administration that the college was opened to all races on an equal basis.

From the founding of the institution to the year 1945, enrollment was limited to Indians of Robeson County. In 1945, the privilege of admission was extended to include persons from any Indian group recognized by the federal government. From 1940 to 1953 Pembroke was the only state-supported, four-year college for Indians in the nation. Then, in 1953, the legislature amended the statutes giving the trustees of the college the authority to admit “any other persons of the Indian or white races” who may be approved by that governing board. In May, 1953, the board approved admission of whites up to a maximum of forty percent of the total enrollment. The United States Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in 1954 prompted the board to remove all racial restrictions. Pembroke State was one of the first southern colleges to take this step. Today, it serves all races equally in the
effort to understand and to cope with modern society and its demands.

In 1956, Dr. Wellons retired. As his successor, the board of trustees chose Dr. Walter J. Gale (1956-1962). The six years that Dr. Gale directed the affairs of the college were primarily years of consolidation, strengthening of the academic program, and preparation for future growth. In September, 1962, Dr. Gale resigned to work in the student aid division of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in Washington, D.C. He was replaced by Dr. English E. Jones, the first Lumbee to head the institution since W. L. Moore, the first to serve as president of the college, and the first to serve as chancellor of the college since it was made a campus of the Consolidated University of North Carolina. This latter change was brought about in 1971, when the state's system of higher education was reorganized.

Paralleling the development of a four-year institution of higher education was the evolution of a system of elementary and secondary schools to serve the Lumbee people. In the 1920's, as the college performed its primary function of training teachers, and phased out its non-college level programs, a network of schools began to grow up which ultimately made the Lumbees, taken as a group, the best-educated Indians in America. In fact, by the 1930's there were six all Indian high schools and more than a dozen elementary feeder schools operating in Robeson County. Most of the Indian high school graduates who chose to attend college, enrolled at Pembroke State. The few who went away did so because they believed they could receive a more specialized education out of the area.

While the Lumbees have been proud of their educational achievements as a people, they have long known that these achievements came at great cost and at a slower pace than was necessary. This was particularly true concerning the matter of public schools. During the 1920's, the question of Indian schools was of overriding importance partly because of the tri-racial nature of Robeson County and partly because of the existence of a group known as the “Smilings.”

Although the origin of the “Smilings” is uncertain, they appear to have been the product of miscegenation and to have migrated to Robeson County from the area of Sumter, South Carolina, after World War I. While the Lumbees sympathized with the plight and problems of this group, they were unwilling to allow them into the schools they had fought so hard and suffered so grievously to get. In 1921, because of Lumbee determination to preserve their schools, the General Assembly of North Carolina passed “An Act for the Protection of the Indian Public Schools of Robeson County.” The act, which established a powerful committee composed totally of Indians, provided that: “...all questions affecting the race of those applying for admission to public schools of Robeson County for the Indian race only, and all such questions coming from the County Board of Education, or any school board in the county shall be forthwith removed before said (Indian) committee for hearing.” The law further stated that in case of a vacancy, the remaining committee members were to appoint an Indian to fill the position. The group was commonly referred to as the “Committee of Five” and was originally comprised of Ralph Lowery, James B. Oxendine, J. E. Woodell, W. M. Wilkins, and Calvin Locklear.

The law assuring the Lumbees control over admission policies in their schools was amended in 1929. The size of the committee was increased to seven, and the normal school was made subject to its power. This committee technically existed until 1954, when the United States Supreme Court issued its desegregation order. The “Smilings” were eventually provided a one-teacher elementary school, but their educational needs were not fully met until 1957, when they were admitted to schools of their choice. For this group’s lack of educational opportunity, the Robeson County Board of Education, the whites, and the Indians must all share responsibility. Only the Blacks are blameless in this matter.

The power to determine who was eligible to attend their schools did not, however, mean that the Lumbees controlled finances, the appointment of teachers, or many other facets of the local educational system that directly affected them. A review of the minutes of the county board of education reveals many of the petty frustrations and absurdities with which the Lumbees had to
Lumbees and their horses. In recent years horseback riding has returned as a favorite pastime.
—Photo by William P. Revels

Prospect High School basketball team and cheerleaders, 1973-1974. Lumbee Indians compose both the basketball team and the cheerleading squad. Out of a total of 978 students, less than one percent are non-Indian.
—Photo by William P. Revels

cope. For much of the twentieth century the board was all white and it generally dealt with the Indians in a patronizing fashion. As only one example, when a vacancy occurred on a local school committee, the Indians were generally expected to appear before the board, usually accompanied by a white lawyer, in order to get an Indian, equally as qualified as the former incumbent, appointed to the position. It would appear that the board played this game to remind the Indians that it had control over their schools, and that they were second-class citizens in terms of the power structure. In 1942, a Lumbee was hired by a local committee to teach at the school they supervised, but the county board refused to approve him. Despite the board’s negative action, the man taught in the local school for the entire year, receiving no compensation. He was an excellent teacher, a respected gentleman, and a church leader in his community, but he was also an Indian Republican in a solidly Democratic area. That was enough to disqualify him for the teaching post he sought. Sometimes the Indians obtained facilities because it was advantageous for certain whites. For example, a school was approved for the children of an Indian community when its delegation was accompanied by a white politician who went before the board and pointed out that “...the lack of the convenience of a community school in that area is working a hardship on the landowners in that they cannot secure the better Indian tenants because of the lack of school facilities.” While this speaks well for the Indian parents who wanted education for their children, it is a bitter condemnation of the system that controlled their lives.

In the 1970’s the Lumbees moved vigorously to acquire a greater voice in the administration of the county schools, an issue of special concern because at the time sixty percent of the students in the system were Indian. Of the eleven-member county school board, there were four Indian members, two black, and five white. A related issue of concern to the Lumbees has been the “double-voting” system. Under this system, the townspeople, their own schools controlled by city boards of education, also vote for

2. Local committees were appointed by the County Board of Education which was all white. Local committeemen directed the affairs of the community schools under the supervision of the County Board of Education.
county board members, frequently determining the winners. As a result of this situation, the composition of the board has generally been such that the county people, and especially the Indians, found it to be unrepresentative and unresponsive to their needs and wishes. The legality of this system has been questioned. Adequate representation on policy-making boards is essential to the development of programs designed to meet the needs of the people. It should be stated, however, that the Lumbees have always sought justice, not necessarily “all-Indian” schools. The teaching of Indian history, culture, and heritage in the public school curriculum, as a rich addition to the learning process, has always been the Lumbees’ goal. They have worked to create first-rate public schools of high quality, providing a curriculum of practical usefulness in a complex world. But educational changes in Robeson county, just as is the case elsewhere, have been achieved only with immense effort and patience.

Pembroke State University is the apex of the area’s educational system. Now open to all races, considerable pride is taken in its growth and progress, and the multi-racial composition of its student body has been accepted. At the same time, the “de-Indianization” of a university founded by Indians was distressing. The Indian people have strongly supported the concept that the university ought not to forget its past, nor its special relationship to the Lumbee people. It should serve the state without ceasing to be a part of the Indian community.

Much of the growth of Pembroke State University can be attributed to the efforts of Chancellor English Jones. During his tenure as a chief executive officer, the school has been transformed from a small, relatively unknown college to a progressive, regional university. The physical plant has been enlarged. The student population has grown, and the quality of the academic program has been improved. The university is a cornerstone of Indian achievement and exemplifies the ability of the Lumbees to move with the times, involving all of the people in the success of this unique educational institution. It is a matter of pride that the following accomplishments can be credited to the leadership of Dr. Jones, Lumbee Chancellor: Thirteen new academic or service structures have been built, including a science building, business administration building, library, six-story women’s dormitory, and a physical education complex. Construction of a $1,800,000 auditorium has been assured and a $1,300,000 classroom building funded for this biennium. The restoration and renovation of the oldest building on campus, officially known as “Memorial Auditorium” but affectionately called Old Main has been assured. In 1974, the total value of university facilities and land was $15,000,000. The campus occupies 63 acres located along the western edge of the town of Pembroke. Student enrollment was approximately 1,950 in the 1973-74 academic year. The university’s summer school serves an estimated 2,100 students during two five-week sessions. Each year the new students who begin their studies at Pembroke State University come better prepared to do college-level work. The university’s Human Services Center involves faculty, students, and townspeople in a broad program of community involvement.

The Lumbee Indians, together with the public and academic community, have noted that rapid growth could weaken a school academically by diluting the quality of instruction, but this has not happened at Pembroke State. To the contrary, the quality of the academic program has improved steadily over the last decade. In 1974, of 115 faculty members, approximately 45 percent held doctorates; the rest had at least masters’ degrees, with the exception of two who held equivalencies. All faculty members were brought down to a teaching load of twelve semester hours in 1974, giving the individual teacher more time for preparation, for his professional activities, and for attention to his personal students. New, more relevant programs, such as minority studies with an emphasis on Indian history and culture, were introduced.

The university established a Continuing Education Division, designed to offer educational opportunities to mature members of the community who are unable to meet the demands of a regular academic year program. Under this division, individuals within commuting distance can complete their first year of college study by enrolling in evening classes on the Pembroke State University campus. Also under consideration in 1974 was a graduate program.
The university serves a thirteen-county area in the state. It is a fully accredited member of the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities in good standing. In 1969 this accreditation was extended for an additional ten years. The university has also been accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. This means that the teacher-preparation program meets national standards. Certainly the founders of this educational institution would be proud of its achievements. A high point of Pembroke State's recent history was the gaining of university status in 1969. To achieve this goal, the entire college community, students, faculty and administration, joined hands and worked together for the common good. The college was supported by its board of trustees, by the citizens of the area, and by local representatives in both Houses of the General Assembly. University status meant added prestige, a broadening and enlargement of the academic program, and a chance to gain better financial assistance from the federal government and from private sources. It also meant new responsibilities and opportunities to prepare the students for their chosen professions.

One of the least appreciated aspects of the university is its economic contribution to the region it serves. The students who attend Pembroke State bring thousands of dollars into the area. The university itself employed 224 people in 1974, including faculty, with an average monthly payroll of $160,000. For the 1973-75 biennium, the capital improvements budget was $2 million, at least some of which remains in the county as wages, or spent for local services and materials. Pembroke State University had an asset of approximately $18 million to Robeson and surrounding counties during 1974, including the physical plant, the land, and all budgets for maintenance and operation.

Despite the obstacles they have had to overcome, the Lumbee Indians have enjoyed remarkable success in acquiring educational facilities and in using these facilities to change and improve their situation. There have always been problems, and doubtless there will always be problems. But rarely has the promise of education been more clearly perceived by a people, nor more advantageously used. Those Lumbee forefathers who founded what is now Pemb-
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broke State University have good reason for pride in “what their hands hath wrought.”