Keeping the Circle

American Indian Identity in Eastern North Carolina, 1885–2004

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the country. North Carolina was no different. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Native Americans in the state stood up for their rights as both Natives and Americans.

In the wake of these changes, the 1980s and 1990s were a period of acclimation for North Carolina Indians, a time to adjust to the developments of the previous two decades. The transition was often difficult. School integration, for example, presented a large obstacle for many. One year a ten-year-old Indian boy or girl was in a small classroom with teachers and students that he or she knew. The next year, that same student was bused to a much larger school where he or she was surrounded by strangers. Native Americans also had to learn how to participate in the political system. Having been excluded since the nineteenth century, many were ignorant of the intricacies of American democracy. At the same time, Indians had to adjust to the economic changes. No longer would they arise and go to work in the nearby fields with family members and then return home in the evenings, rarely interacting with outsiders. Now they woke up and commuted to factories where they worked for eight to ten hours a day beside strangers.

Native Americans in eastern North Carolina responded to these changes in numerous ways. They formed pan-Indian or supratribal groups to facilitate the transition. Business groups helped Indians move into the new industrial economy, while political groups formed to give Indians a united voice in government. Now that Indians could vote, white politicians had to pay attention to their complaints (or at least pretend to) or risk losing a close election. Through these organizations, Native Americans were learning how to survive in their new environment. More than anything, they wanted autonomy and self-sufficiency, a goal that had eluded them since the 1800s.

But perhaps the biggest development of the 1980s and 1990s was the aggressive pursuit of official government acknowledgment. Some Indian communities in the state applied for state recognition through the NCIC, while others chased the big prize, full federal recognition. Despite all of the successes of the 1970s, North Carolina Indians remained, at least according to the U.S. government, uncertified. When the BIA established the FAP process in the late 1970s, North Carolina Indians immediately started the application process. Recognition partly meant access to federal funds, but it was mostly about cultural pride. To many Indians in the state, federal certification was like a government stamp of approval, unequivocal proof of their identity. Their pursuit of acknowledgment quickly ran into stiff resistance, from the BIA, from politicians, and from other Indians. Driven by the postwar economic, social, and political changes, a new definition of Indian identity was taking shape, and official government acknowledgment was a major component of that new definition.

Conclusion
Keeping the Circle Strong

Keeping the circle represents generation after generation. . . . Keeping tradition alive, visiting with each other is all a part of the circle. – Senora Lynch (Haliwa-Saponi), 1998

In 2004, more than four hundred years after the “Lost Colonists” landed at Roanoke Island, one hundred thousand people in North Carolina identified as Native Americans. Although dispersed all over the state, the Indian population remained concentrated in several areas. In the mountains more than ten thousand resided on the Cherokee reservation. In the southeastern part of the state, about sixty-three thousand lived in Bladen, Columbus, Cumberland, Hoke, Robeson, Sampson, and Scotland counties. Another seven thousand lived in the upper central counties of Alamance, Guilford, Halifax, Hertford, Orange, Person, and Warren. In addition, several thousand now resided in urban areas. The majority of these Native Americans were affiliated with one of the state’s recognized tribes. There were about thirteen thousand Cherokees, twelve hundred Coharies, thirty-five hundred Haliwas, fifty thousand Lumbees, six hundred Meherrins, one thousand Occaneechis, four hundred Person County Indians, and three thousand Waccamaws. A few smaller groups, such as the Hattadares and the Cherokee Indians of Hoke County, were seeking state recognition, as were a few thousand Tuscaroras in Robeson County. In addition, several thousand other Indians in North Carolina were either affiliated with tribes from outside the state or were not members of any group.
A New Millennium

Despite the progress of the 1980s and 1990s, contemporary North Carolina Native Americans still faced economic problems. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the median income for Indians was nine thousand dollars less than that of whites in the state. About one-fifth of Native American families lived below the poverty line, compared to less than 9 percent of whites, and their unemployment rate was almost double the state average. There was some good news, however; the gap between Indians and others in the state was slowly shrinking. In the 1990s most Indians were still blue-collar workers—almost 40 percent were employed in the construction industry alone—but more than 15 percent worked in professional jobs, and that number was increasing yearly. In 2001 the North Carolina Indian Economic Development Initiative and the University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler Business School collaborated to study ways to promote economic growth for Native Americans in the state. After decades of poverty and deprivation, Native Americans appeared to be turning a corner.

By the early 2000s the North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs was firmly entrenched as a significant part of the state government. Operating with an annual budget of about five million dollars, the NCICA consisted of representatives from the eight state-recognized tribes and four urban associations. Five non-Indian state officials, an appointee from both the lieutenant governor and the speaker of the house, and ex officio representatives from the North Carolina Native American Youth Organization and the North Carolina Native American Council on Higher Education also sat on the commission. The Eastern Band of Cherokees officially joined the NCICA in the 1970s, but, more concerned with federal policies, they were never very active, occasionally leaving their seat vacant. Each tribe and urban group elected its own representative and set the term of office, usually between one and three years. Along with its primary economic objectives, the NCICA actively entered the political field, issuing a statement in 2001 calling for a temporary moratorium on state executions because a disproportionate percentage of individuals on death row were Native Americans.

That same year the NCICA also pushed legislation giving state-recognized tribes more social and political sovereignty. One bill, for example, legally honored any marriage sanctioned by a state tribe. According to Greg Richardson, the current executive director, the NCICA adopted two new areas of emphasis in the early twenty-first century. First, the commission wanted to develop and train future tribal and community leaders. The individuals who directed the organizational movement of the 1960s and 1970s were rapidly aging, and Richardson was concerned about the future. The generation of tribal founders—people like Chief Richardson (Haliwa) and Chief Freeman (Waccamaw)—was no longer able to govern, and Indian communities needed new leaders. In July 2003 Lonnie Revels passed away. Born in Robeson County in the 1930s, Revels moved to Greensboro in the 1960s, where he and his wife, Ruth, helped establish the Guilford Native American Association. Revels, who had a political science degree from Wake Forest University, also was instrumental in forming the NCICA and served for two terms on the Greensboro City Council in the 1980s. The NCICA looked for fresh faces to replace Revels, Freeman, Richardson, and others who had worked so hard during the 1960s and 1970s to effect change. After all, the opportunities that many Indians had in the 1990s—opportunities that their grandparents never had—were a direct result of these men and women.

The NCICA also targeted Native American health-care issues, a longtime problem in many communities. Indians experienced more health problems than other groups, a fact partially attributable to poverty and lack of access to affordable health care. In the late 1990s the life expectancy for Indians was 71.1 years, compared to 76.3 for whites and 75.5 for all races in the state. Native Americans suffered from high rates of asthma, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and substance abuse. In May 2001 the NCICA sponsored the first North Carolina American Indian Health Summit, subtitled “Keeping the Circle Healthy.” The two-day event included seminars and guest lecturers who spoke on various health issues, from infant care, to proper nutrition, to the prevention of heart disease. The health-care conference subsequently became an annual event.

Despite the loss of Indian-only schools, educational issues remained important to North Carolina Native Americans. The Haliwa-Saponis recently established their own charter school in Halifax County, thus regaining some control over their children’s education. As economic and technological changes placed a new premium on college degrees, more Indians enrolled in universities. Many still entered UNCW-Pembroke, but some went elsewhere, where they often experienced culture shock and struggled to overcome long-standing stereotypes. “I came here from a three stoplight town,” one Robeson County native and University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill student told a reporter. “So coming to this school I felt lonely in that I was different. I was asked if I lived in a teepee—did I have running water.” In 2001 there were only about two hundred Indian students at Chapel Hill out of a total enrollment of twenty-five thousand. At UNCW-Chapel Hill and other large colleges in the state, American Indians formed support groups to help ease their adjustments, such as the Carolina Indian Circle and Alpha Pi Omega, an all-Indian sorority. “Coming to Carolina was a culture shock,” according to one UNC undergrad from the small
Despite the failures of the 1990s, North Carolina Indians continued to pursue federal recognition. In 2002 Elizabeth Dole opted to run for the Senate seat left vacant by the retirement of fellow Republican Jesse Helms. Dole actively campaigned in Robeson County and, unlike Helms, promised to support Lumbee recognition. Dole won the election and kept her promise in February 2003 by initiating a bill in the Senate to grant the Lumbees full acknowledgment. The Democrat John Edwards, the other North Carolina senator, also supported the legislation. In the House, Mike McIntyre, a Democrat representing southeastern North Carolina, authored a similar bill.

Opponents of Lumbee recognition quickly rallied to attack the proposed legislation. Congressman Charles Taylor, who represented the Cherokees' district in western North Carolina, introduced a competing bill that would require the Lumbees to go through the FAP process. Taylor's legislation also set a time limit, after which the Lumbees would be ineligible for certification. Critics attacked the pro-Lumbee bill using an old argument and a new one. First, they claimed that recognizing more than forty thousand new Indians would cost the government seventy to eighty million dollars each year. Second, opponents contended that if recognized, the Lumbees would push for legalized gaming in eastern North Carolina. In the 1990s the Eastern Band of Cherokees had used their status as a federal tribe to establish gambling on their reservation. Harrah's Casino, which opened in Cherokee in 1997, was a source of controversy in the state. The prospect of a Las Vegas-type casino in eastern North Carolina, traditionally a socially and culturally conservative region, scared many Tar Heels, which was the strategy of Lumbee opponents. Representative Walter Jones Jr., one of the North Carolina delegates who opposed recognition, predicted that “ten years down the road, if there is an attempt to get approval for a casino, it would create a problem that would be almost uncontrollable.” William Brooks, president of the North Carolina Family Policy Council, attacked the bill by focusing on the possible side effects of gambling. “As a major part of the economy of the coastal region depends on tourism and retirement, the negative economic impact on the region from gambling would be significant,” he contended in April 2004. Moreover, according to Brooks, “Easy access to gambling means that a significant number of citizens would develop a pathological gambling problem.”

Supporters of the Lumbees responded to these charges with their own three-prong attack. First, they contended that recognition was about cultural identity and pride, not gambling and money. The financial benefits were significant, but not the primary motivation for pursuing acknowledgment. “I could care less about the money,” one Lumbee told a Raleigh reporter in 2003. “I want the recognition as a Native American because of our background and our ancestry.” Second, proponents argued that Lumbee certification would be good for the entire region, not just Native Americans. It would spur economic growth in eastern North Carolina, which was struggling in the late 1990s and early 2000s because of the loss of manufacturing jobs to factories overseas. “If this goes through, you’ll be able to draw a circle from downtown Pembroke to 50 or 60 miles out, in which the whole landscape will change,” claimed the executive director of the NCCIA. “You’re talking about jobs, new industry, improved health care and education in a place that desperately needs them. This would help everybody.” And finally, supporters refuted the accusation that recognition would lead to casino gambling. “Our folks [Lumbee Indians] live in a very conservative part of North Carolina,” the tribal lawyer Arlinda Locklear responded in April 2004. “The tribe has expressed no interest in a casino at all.”

For perhaps the first time, the movement to recognize the Lumbees appeared to be gaining widespread support. More than one-half of the representatives in the House cosponsored McIntyre's bill, virtually guaranteeing it would pass if it could get out of committee. Both North Carolina senators supported it, again for the first time. Dole authored an enthusiastic endorsement of Lumbee certification that appeared in the Raleigh News and Observer in September 2003. “Now, more than ever,” she wrote, “it’s time for the federal government to do what’s fair and give recognition to the Lumbees.” Members of the relevant committees also appeared to be leaning toward supporting the bill. Nick Rahall, ranking member of the House Resources Committee, charged that the Lumbees have been “trapped inside a cruel carnival that never ends . . . the treatment of the Lumbee tribe is starting to make me sick.” Eni Faleomavaega, a delegate from American Samoa, noted the bureaucratic problems that the Lumbee faced. “The [FAP] process, in layman’s terms, sucks,” she succinctly and eloquently stated in April 2004. “It is impractical and does not work.”

The North Carolina media also started to back the Lumbees. In 2003 and 2004 several major newspapers, including the News and Observer and the Greensboro News and Record, published editorials supporting Lumbee acknowledgment. Consequently, optimism spread quickly across Robeson County. In September 2003 a busload of Lumbees went to Washington to lobby before a House committee. “We are so excited . . . that we might finally be seeing the fruits of the hard work that has gone on for 115 years,” one woman told a reporter. “We can’t help but believe our time is now.” For the Lumbees, the significance of federal
recognition cannot be overstated. “Recognition will make us free,” claimed the Reverend Weldon Lowry. “We’ll be just like other Indians.”

Other Native Americans in the state also wanted to be “just like other Indians.” Because of the potential economic and social benefits, almost every Native American group, even those without state acknowledgment, pursued federal certification in the early 2000s. Recognition partly meant access to funds and participation in special Indian programs, but, according to many, it was mostly about pride, respect, and community solidarity. “The economic benefits of federal recognition cannot be ignored, but perhaps most important are the issues of human dignity and human rights,” according to Bruce Jones, former executive director of the NCCIA. “North Carolina’s non-reservation Indian people have a right to have their heritage recognized by the federal government.”

At the same time, many North Carolina Indians appreciated the problem of placing so much importance on recognition. In effect, government certification meant relying on others for acknowledgment of one’s identity, a very disempowering position. Moreover, the process pitted tribe versus tribe in a contest over “Indianness,” and the arguments over recognition could be heated. One reaction to state certification of the Occaneechis was illustrative, if extreme. Shortly after the tribe earned acknowledgment, an Occaneechi leader received a threatening letter in the mail. “You like to play American Indian, and that’s fine,” the letter read. “But here in Hollister, NC, we will not Tolerate it. Keep your Turkey feathers, Jerry curls, and your raggedy Drum teams away from our community.” Haliwa tribal leaders quickly dismissed the letter as the opinion of a few individuals, not of the tribe. “That letter in no way, shape, form or fashion was generated by our tribal council or any of the leadership,” the Haliwa chief responded. “Whoever did it was not a spokesperson for the tribe.” Indeed, the majority of Haliwas did not agree with the sentiment of the letter, but it was symbolic of the contentiousness over recognition within the North Carolina Indian community. Recognition inevitably divided Native Americans into the haves and the have-nots. The process has “created deep divisions between the Indian people of this state,” the Occaneechi chief Beverly Payne-Betts complained. “These divisions only serve to hurt Indian people further at a time when we should be striving to work together for the benefit of all Indian people in this state.”

The fight over federal acknowledgment alienated North Carolina Native Americans from tribes in other states. When traveling in the West, Cynthia Hunt noted the antipathy toward the Lumbees from other Indians. One Shoshone councilman told her that the Lumbees were not real Indians because they did not live on a reservation, a circular argument at best since a tribe needed recognition in order to establish a reservation. Hunt found little sympathy for the struggles of her people. “The Indians out west can’t accept us because we ain’t got feathers and beads,” she remarked in the mid-1990s. “You can’t expect anything from non-Indian society, but you’d expect Indians to empathize, to understand what you’re going through. But now they’ve got a chance to go down on somebody else. I know that I am an Indian, and I want them to acknowledge that I am an Indian.”

Modern Native American identity, rightly or wrongly, was partially defined by government acknowledgment. Some Indian tribes and individuals have internalized the process, basing their own definition of Indianness on government authentication. Recognition of tribes was in turn based on reparations, or the belief that the U.S. government owed Native Americans for broken treaties and other past injustices. This presented a problem: could individual Native Americans or unrecognized tribes be “real” Indians? In theory, of course, the answer was yes. Personal identity and tribal eligibility for special benefits were separate issues. Whether the definition was based on biology or culture, one could be an Indian but not a member of an acknowledged tribe. The reality was more complex. In modern America, Indian identity and acknowledgment were interconnected. To most Americans, to be an Indian was to be an enrolled member of a federally recognized tribe. The identity of noncertified Native Americans was therefore constantly questioned, no matter how valid their claim.

The Federal Acknowledgment Process did not recognize this problem; nor was it designed to do so. The BIA established the FAP to recognize Native American tribes that had a historical relationship with the U.S. government. The process was not designed to define identity or certify all Native Americans. But in the 1980s federal acknowledgment became something more. Ultimately, recognition was about defining Indianness: Who were Indians? What did it mean to be Indian? What were tribes? And who decided? These were difficult questions, and the answers had serious ramifications. The BIA and state governments attempted to address these questions through a bureaucratic system of guidelines, which, fairly or not, defined contemporary Indianness. In the late twentieth century, North Carolina Native Americans, like other Indians in the nation, confronted this reality as they always had, by fighting to maintain their identity.

Conclusion

From the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century, the United States changed dramatically. North Carolina was no exception. Primarily rural and agrarian in the late 1800s, by 2004 North Carolina had become an urban com-
commercial and industrial state. The technological changes alone—automobiles, telephones, airplanes, and computers—transformed the daily lives of every citizen. These material changes were accompanied by changes in racial ideology. Social Darwinism was dead, or at least dormant, replaced by cultural pluralism and a growing belief in racial equality. These changes forced Native Americans in eastern North Carolina to alter their definition of Indianness. In short, Indian identity—or what it meant to be a Native American—changed in the twentieth century. In the early 1900s being Indian in eastern North Carolina meant living in a certain community, being related to certain families, belonging to certain churches, and attending certain schools. By 2000 Indian churches still existed and played important social roles but were less important in terms of identity—individuals who did not go to church could still be Indians. In the 1960s federally mandated integration had closed Indian-only schools, erasing the most definitive external marker of Indianness. Home communities were still important, but Native Americans had moved all over the state, especially into urban areas to find jobs. Family history remained a factor in defining identity, but new elements had also been added to the definition. Being Indian in North Carolina in the twenty-first century meant being an enrolled member of a recognized tribe or organization and regularly participating in cultural events and celebrations. North Carolina Native Americans, in other words, had added new “boundaries” to their definition of Indian identity. Not mere happenstance, these changes were a strategic response to postwar society. In 2004 Native Americans not only needed to protect their identity within their own communities, which was their primary objective before World War II, but they also needed to assert and prove it to outsiders.

From the first day Columbus waded ashore in the “New World,” Europeans, and later Americans, failed to understand the diversity of Native American cultures. Whites consistently tried to group all indigenous peoples under one umbrella. But there was no such thing as an “Indian,” at least culturally, until the twentieth century. In the post—World War II era, however, Native Americans used the stereotype of the “Indian” to create a generalized identity. In many ways, Native Americans became, for the first time, truly part of the United States. They began to see themselves as a single minority group, rather than just a collection of separate communities and tribes. In other words, they wanted political and economic equality, but they also sought to retain their social and cultural distinctiveness.

The emerging pan-Indianism in the postwar era was based on a combination of biological and cultural factors. Some Native Americans accepted the significance of biology in defining Indianness, despite the fact that traditionally race had nothing to do with identity. But modern Indian identity was also determined by other characteristics, such as lifestyle, tribal membership, and cultural awareness. Race alone did not define Indianness, therefore, but neither did community, kinship, or worldview. In the future, the significance of quantum in defining Indian identity will most likely change, as the number of “full-bloods” decreases rapidly. According to one government study, by 2080 less than 10 percent of those claiming to be Indians will be more than “one-half,” and 60 percent will be less than “one-quarter.” According to the author Fergus Bordewich, a critic of such biological definitions, “It is plain that the principle, or the pretense, that blood should be a central defining fact of being Indian will soon become untenable.”

Despite criticisms to the contrary, political and economic assimilation and Native American identity were not inherent contradictions. Ethnic groups can be part of a pluralistic liberal democracy without giving up their cultural identity. Ethnic groups, in other words, do not have to be segregated in order to survive. Boundaries were needed to define these groups, but these boundaries could be symbolic or ideological, rather than simply geographical. Moreover, individuals could flow across the boundaries—which certainly happened among Indians in North Carolina in the 1960s and 1970s—without threatening the identity of the ethnic group. Consequently, despite stereotypes, contrasting and distinctive social, cultural, economic, and political systems are not necessary to define ethnic boundaries. Even further, the preservation of ethnicity in a large multicultural society is not only possible but perhaps even desirable; ethnic groups unite communities, promote stability, and inculcate values.

Modern Native American identity is a dialectical process involving both internal and external factors. This is not unique to Native Americans but applies to the formation of all group identities. In North Carolina these external and internal forces clashed in the second half of the twentieth century to reshape definitions of Indian identity. The world changed for Native Americans in North Carolina following World War II, but they changed with it. They adopted and employed new boundaries to mark their distinctiveness. In doing so, they were remarkably successful—Native American identity appeared safer in 2004 than at any point in the previous two hundred years. North Carolina Indians honored their past by keeping the circle strong, protecting their identity by reshaping it. As one southern Native American author put it, “We have always been here and we are here forever.”