

Indian Life

Archaeological evidence indicates that Indians were living in North Carolina at least 10,000 years ago. For centuries before European contact, these native people lived in harmony with the natural environment, taking no more from the land than they needed to survive. Individual ownership of land was completely alien to them. Fishing, hunting and farming provided food for their tribal groups.

Early Encounters

Indians of the Virginia and North Carolina coast were hosts to the first English-speaking explorers and settlers. Initial contact between these peoples was generally peaceful and friendly. The natives taught the newcomers fishing and agricultural techniques, introduced them to corn and tobacco cultivation, demonstrated methods of land clearing and showed them efficient use of the forest's bounty. White settlers exchanged manufactured goods for the Indian's knowledge. Too late did the Indians realize that they had sacrificed their self-reliance for the white man's conveniences. The European concept of land was total possession, not sharing. Hostile feelings developed between the Indians and the settlers, setting the stage for continued clashes.

Coastal Plains Indians

At this time, the coastal plains Indians of North Carolina numbered approximately 35,000 or about 30 tribes geographically separated by linguistic groups. Along the northeastern and central coast were the Algonquians. To the south resided those of Siouan lineage. And to the west lived the Iroquoian-related Tuscarora. For these Indian tribes, early contact with white men often was followed by early extinction. Among the causes were warfare and disease. By 1710, the coastal Indian population had dwindled to no more than 5,000.

Tuscarora War

The Tuscarora War in 1711 marked the last significant effort of the eastern Indians to halt the white tidal wave that was sweeping them off the land. For two years the Tuscarora fought the many military expeditions sent against them, but in 1713 they suffered a major defeat which broke their power forever.

Indian Removal Bill

By the 1760s, white settlement had reached the mountain foothills of North Carolina, the home of the Cherokee. In 1838, under the authority of the Indian Removal Bill, nearly 17,000 Cherokee were forcibly removed from their ancestral home. Nearly one-fourth of the Cherokee resisted removal, however, and it is from this nucleus that the Eastern Band of the Cherokee was formed.

Present-Day Tribes

By the mid-1800s, European settlement had spread across the central piedmont. Small tribes fled before the invasion and most joined kinsmen in eastern and southern North Carolina, southern Virginia or South Carolina. It is from these last surviving groups that the present-day, state-recognized tribes of North Carolina -- the Coharie, Haliwa-Saponi, Indians of Person County, Lumbee, Meherrin and Waccamaw-Siouan -- trace their ancestry.

Little Recorded History in 1700s

Little history is recorded regarding the surviving eastern Indians between the early 1700s and the early 1800s. However, it must be remembered that for these Indians, survival depended largely on their ability to withstand the state's policy of forced anonymity for their kind and their ability to accept their designated place in the white social order.

Reconstruction

During Reconstruction, political equality was supposedly restored when the vote was extended to all men regardless of color. However, when Reconstruction ended in North Carolina, the N. C. General Assembly established separate schools for whites and blacks. No schools were established for Indians.

Indian Schools

In 1885, however, the N. C. General Assembly passed legislation which established separate schools for the Indians of Robeson County. In 1887, Croatan Normal School opened its doors to Indian students of Robeson County. Over the next 70 years other Indian communities in the state were successful in their aims to establish schools.

Indian Recognition

Beginning in the late 1800s and continuing into the early 1970s, Indians in North Carolina re-established their formal tribal identities and sought recognition from the state and federal governments. In 1889, the federally recognized Eastern Band of the Cherokee was incorporated under North Carolina law. In 1910, the Lumbee were formally recognized by the State of North Carolina. The "Lumbee Bill," passed by the U.S. Congress in 1956, recognized the Lumbee as an Indian tribe but denied them access to services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In 1965, the Haliwa-Saponi received state recognition, as did the Coharie and Waccamaw-Siouan in 1971. In 1979, the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs was authorized to establish procedures for state recognition of North Carolina Indian tribes and organizations. Under these procedures, state recognition was granted to the Meherrin Tribe of Hertford County in 1986 and the Triangle Native American Society in Wake County in 2000. The Indians of Person County gained recognition through the General Assembly in 1913.

More Progress

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the Indians of North Carolina continued to make progress despite still prevalent discrimination and many obstacles. Seven Indian organizations, chartered by the State of North Carolina during this time, currently provide a variety of services to Indian people in North Carolina. Pembroke State College for Indians, the first four-year institution for Indians in the nation, became a member of the University of North Carolina system and its name was changed to Pembroke State University. Also during this period, Indians became lawyers and doctors, gained seats on local boards, were hired or appointed to important federal and state positions, and were elected to the N. C. General Assembly.

Commission of Indian Affairs Formed

In 1971, the N. C. Commission of Indian Affairs was established by the N. C. General Assembly to advocate for the rights of the state's Indian population, a population which in 1990 numbered over 80,000, was the largest Indian population east of the Mississippi River and the seventh largest in the nation.

A Look at the Future

Despite the advances of the Indian people of North Carolina during the last 200 years, serious health, social, economic and educational problems still remain to be faced. These problems, however, have not caused the Indians of North Carolina to lose their confidence or hopes in the future. They have continued into the new millennium with their struggles for equality and recognition.