

KEVIN FLEMING



A dancer in native dress performs at the annual Nanticoke Powwow in September.

Top to bottom: Laila Anderson and Thomas N. Nelson



“We’re Not Hiding Anymore”

AFTER YEARS OF SECLUSION, THE NANTICOKE TRIBES OF DELAWARE AND MARYLAND ARE BRINGING THEIR CULTURE TO THE MAINSTREAM.

BY HOLLY LEWIS MADDUX

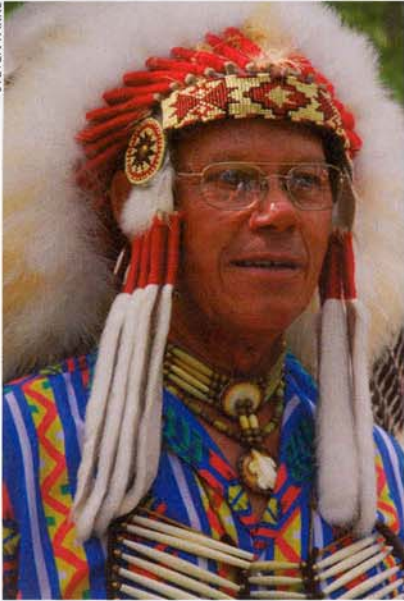
IN A COLD, DAMP NIGHT IN DECEMBER, Sterling Street, sixty-five, a trim man with a shock of white hair offsetting a ruddy complexion, leans against the podium in a room configured as a classroom at the Nanticoke Indian Center, a well-kept one-story stucco building on Route 24 in Millsboro, Del.

“Nee naa-m-m ash-qouke. I see a snake,” he says, beginning an exercise in which each of the four students who have gathered for this language class will formulate sentences in Nanticoke.

“Nee no-oan-tum husquinock. I hear a blackbird,” Pecita Lonewolf, a petite woman of seventy-three, follows.

Sharkey Wright, a sixty-seven-year-old with the dark, craggy looks of a man who fishes and farms for a living, says, “Nee meetsee wammass. I eat fish,” and the group bursts into laughter at an apparent inside joke about a long, dry stretch with a rod and reel that autumn.

Technically, Nanticoke is a “dead” language, buried, as a monument in Oak Orchard, Del., commemorates, with its last



“A few years must totally extinguish the remains of this Tribe and it will be owing to you, Sir, if a trace is left of their language,” he wrote to Jefferson.

known speaker, Lydia Clark, who died in 1856. Yet on this cold December night, the Nanticoke language seems very much alive.

Odette Wright, Sharkey’s wife and an employee of the nearby Nanticoke Indian Museum, which houses a number of private Indian artifact collections, chimes in next: “Nee qui-ah-quup. I sit.” Then finally it’s Kim Robbins’ turn. At forty-three, she is the youngest member of the group by two decades, and her exotic beauty speaks to the mysteries of a complex racial combination. “Nee num-moam. I cry,” she says, which seems poignantly apropos when she explains her interest in learning the language.



In November 2006, Sterling Street (right) developed a teaching curriculum for the Nanticoke language. The Nanticoke Indian Museum houses a collection of private artifacts (above). Indian River Nanticoke Chief, “Tee” Norwood at the annual powwow.

Robbins, who grew up in Wilmington, Del., lived in a predominantly black neighborhood but attended a mostly white school. “Amazingly, no one had ever heard of anyone actually being Indian around there,” she says. She says that living in Millsboro allows her to be more involved in Nanticoke culture and that learning to speak her native tongue is “the last link to my ancestors.”

Sterling Street can identify with Robbins. He also grew up in Wilmington and didn’t feel comfortable until his family moved to Millsboro. He has always had an interest in languages and studied Latin and Spanish in school, and excelled. Then, twenty-five years ago, while conducting research at the Delaware Historical Society, he discovered a 300-word Nanticoke vocabulary that had languished in relative obscurity—unknown but to a few scholars after being published by the American Philosophical Society in 1816. The list was based on an interview that congressman William Vans Murray of Cambridge, Md., conducted in 1792 with a “Mrs. Mulberry,” the widow of a Nanticoke chief, in her wigwam on the banks of the Choptank River. Murray sent a letter, along with a copy of the vocabulary, to fellow scholar and soon-to-be president Thomas Jefferson, who had an enduring interest in preserving indigenous languages and had initiated Murray’s project. Murray noted that the Nanticoke tribe was by then

but a remnant of what it once had been and that their language would soon be extinct. “A few years must totally extinguish the remains of this Tribe and it will be owing to you, Sir, if a trace is left of their language,” he wrote to Jefferson, a prediction that would indeed come to pass.

After his retirement in 1998 from a job as a systems analyst with Conectiv Energy, Street turned his attention to the vocabulary he had discovered so many years before. With the help of Myrelene Ranville of Canada’s Sagkeeng First Nation, fluent in her own native tongue, an Algonquin-based language similar to Nanticoke, Street developed a teaching curriculum. In November 2006, he began teaching Nanticoke to anyone who was interested in learning it. After a few big classes of twenty or so, the group pared down to the four serious students, a small echo of a language that was once spoken by thousands.

In 1606 a powerful and populous Nanticoke Empire existed on what is now Delmarva. It extended from the Nanticoke River north to the Choptank, south to the Pocomoke, and clear across the Delmarva Peninsula to the Atlantic. It boasted a population in the tens of thousands. When the English began settling along the Eastern Shore, conflicts over land ensued. In the wake of English expansion, the Nanticoke were pushed inland to a reservation,





The presence of two modern-day tribes, the Indian River Nanticoke and the Nause-Waiwash band of Dorchester County, attest to the fact that some of the Nanticoke may have become invisible, but they did not disappear.

“Chicone,” created by the Maryland colony in 1704 near present-day Vienna. The English disregarded the boundaries of the reservation—going so far as to burn the Indian settlements that stood in their way while the natives were off on seasonal hunting forays. Subsequently, the Nanticoke moved further inland to the headwaters of the Nanticoke River, where in 1711 a second reservation was formed near present-day Laurel, Del. This,

DAVE HAWKHURST



Nause-Waiwash Indians Lee Hughes and Chief Sewell Fitzhugh (opposite) outside Wesley Chapel Church in Andrews, Md., where Fitzhugh’s great-grandparents are buried (above). Arrowheads and axes on display at the Nanticoke Indian Museum.

too, failed to preserve the Nanticoke, for the beaver and deer populations on which they depended were quickly depleted. Mass starvation ensued. By the 1720s, just a few hundred Nanticoke remained in the region, and according to Maryland colonial records, those who did remain were “pitiful,” “diminished,” “pathetic and living in poverty.”

In the spring of 1748, more than a hundred Nanticoke paddled en masse to the Susquehanna River, then north to the protection of the Iroquois, settling near present-day Binghamton, N.Y. The presence of two modern-day tribes, the Indian River Nanticoke and the Nause-Waiwash band of Dorchester County, attest to the fact that some of the Nanticoke may have become invisible, but they did not disappear.

The Indian River group is the larger of the two, with 700 members who claim descent from the thirteen Nanticoke families that formed the tribe when it organized in 1881. The tribe was later officially recognized by the State of Delaware in 1921. The original thirteen families may have actually descended from a very small group, perhaps consisting of three extended families comprising a clan that broke off from the group that migrated to the Iroquois. Instead, they moved west to the north shore of the Indian River and their winter hunting ground—today’s Millsboro-Oak Orchard area.

While driving me around the parameter of an 800-acre tract that

was amassed in the mid-to-late 1800s by his great-grandfather, eighty-five-year-old tribal historian Bill Davis, a slight man with a neat mustache and a twinkle in his gray-rimmed brown eyes, informs me that obtaining land is how the Nanticoke of Indian River became “permanent.” “When white landowners fell on difficult economic times, around the time of the American Revolution, money lost value and tobacco and wheat became the currency. A number of white folk around here gave up actively farming and went into businesses in town to supplement their incomes, though they continued to own the land. The Nanticoke took advantage, becoming sharecroppers, and when they had enough currency of whatever kind, they bought the land,” he explains.

The Indian River group’s relatively vast land holdings may have led to prosperity, but they did little to ameliorate the separateness they felt from the area’s majority population of European descent. After the Civil War, the Nanticoke began to experience segregation and discrimination due to their dark complexions. They formed their own schools and churches, and married among their own extended families. In this way, the exclusive community was formed, but even today many of the Indian River Nanticoke with whom I spoke, much like Robbins, said they had experienced a feeling of being “different.”

(continued on page 118)



“We’re Not Hiding Anymore”

(continued from page 85)

Some had experienced overt incidents of discrimination all their lives.

“But that is changing,” says elected chief of the Indian River Nanticoke, James “Tee” Norwood. One of Norwood’s primary duties is to serve as the master of ceremonies at the powwow the tribe holds in a fragrant twenty-two-acre cedar grove forest in Millsboro on the weekend after Labor Day each September. “Twenty-five thousand people attend, and it’s not only our people and people from other Indian tribes, but many people from the community at large,” he tells me.

At the 30th Annual Powwow held last September, Norwood wore a brightly patterned Western-style shirt and a magnificent headdress of turkey feathers flowing from a beaded headband that crossed his broad, high brow. As ever-changing rhythms were pounded out by young men seated in circles around giant drums on the parameter of a clearing, dance troops representing Indian tribes from all over the United States and Canada entered the ring and performed traditional, as well as recently created, dances. Women of all ages danced entirely on their toes in coordinated patterns. This, the so-called “Nanticoke Toe Dance,” is believed to be the only Nanticoke women’s dance that survives from ancient times.

Meanwhile, on the western side of the peninsula, the Nause-Waiwash Band of Dorchester County is a smaller but similarly proud and vibrant community. Its 200 members claim descent from five families that, according to modern-day chief, fifty-four-year-old Sewell Fitzhugh, retreated into the marshes and swamps that now comprise the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge after leaving the reservations in the late 1600s and early 1700s. “Our people moved to land that the English didn’t care about because they couldn’t farm it. They survived as they always had by fishing, crabbing, and trapping, and no one really paid them any mind.”

Regardless of his blue eyes, fair

complexion, and white hair worn in a loose, below-the-shoulders style (characteristics he attributes to his Scotch-Irish ancestry), Fitzhugh has distinctly aboriginal features: high cheekbones, broad forehead, and the almond-shaped eyes that are often associated with American Indians. He claims that his activism is rooted in experiences with racial discrimination, which were countered by the stronger influence of his grandmother, who taught him the “old ways” of his forbears. These included how to identify the most tender of the wild asparagus in the marshes and how to mix cedar bark with fragrant herbs and burn the concoction slowly, which produces an incense used to purify sacred places in preparation for prayer and to heal the sick (a ritual he still performs often as the chief of the Dorchester County band).

Fitzhugh recalls a particularly formative incident that occurred when he was a ten-year-old boy: Under his grandmother’s guidance, he crafted a pair of moccasins which he proudly wore to school the next day, only to be taunted and beaten by a group of boys on his way home. “I went home crying and bruised, and my grandmother talked to me, insisting that I value my heritage no matter what. I dug my heels in and decided I was never going to run and hide.”

In 1990, the state of Maryland required that the Nause-Waiwash incorporate as a non-profit organization. An organizational structure consisting of a chief and councilmen was created and an election was held. The women of the group were the only ones allowed to vote for chief, in keeping with the matrilineal traditions of the tribe, and Fitzhugh was elected to the position he has held ever since.

Today the band’s purpose is to reaffirm their native cultural identity. “For years many of us were made to be ashamed, particularly in the 1960s when Dorchester was not the most welcoming place for dark-complexioned people, and that included us in addition to blacks.”

Fitzhugh and other elders of the tribe perform mostly educational functions, appearing at county festivals and making presentations in schools. They are a popular attraction in fourth-grade classrooms, for Maryland

history is the topic of the state’s fourth-grade social studies curriculum. “We go in full regalia, wearing skins and copper and shell ornaments that were worn by the Nanticoke before colonial contact. I usually start out by asking them if anyone likes chocolate. That gets an enthusiastic response, then I go on to tell that that chocolate and 150 other foods like corn, sweet potatoes, green beans, watermelon, all came from the Indians.”

Fitzhugh and the band are waiting expectantly for the state of Maryland to again review a petition that was filed by the Piscataway tribe of Maryland nearly fifteen years ago before deciding whether to seek state recognition themselves, a status that Fitzhugh says would enable the tribe to apply for federal funds that would offset the cost of its educational activities. Fitzhugh says Maryland’s current governor, Martin O’Malley, seems more sympathetic and interested in the Nause-Waiwash band and the state’s Indians in general than former administrations.

O’Malley met with him last November and promised to give the matter of the Piscataway petition close consideration. But for now, the Nause-Waiwash band carries on as an entirely volunteer organization. Their only source of funding is their powwow. Held two weeks after Labor Day, so as to not conflict with the Indian River group’s event, it attracts a few thousand people. This year dancers, drummers, a bake sale, a silent auction and crafts vendors and exhibits will be featured. “The powwow is tangible evidence,” Fitzhugh says, “that after hundreds of years of having to hide, we’re not hiding anymore.”

Freelancer Holly Lewis Maddux lives in Baltimore. In the course of her research, she learned that she is descended from the Nanticoke Indians.

Upcoming Powwows

SEPT. 6 & 7

Nanticoke Indian Tribe of Indian River 31st Annual Powwow. Route 24 and Mount Joy Rd., Millsboro, Del. 302-945-3400.

SEPT. 13 & 14

Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians 16th Annual Powwow. Vienna Ball Park, Vienna, Md. 410-376-3889.