



Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina

Federal Recognition



Even as the People recognized a need for Indian teachers in the first year following the Normal School's inception, they also realized a tremendous financial need.¹ They petitioned Congress for federal recognition in December of 1888 to "gain educational assistance" to "compensate for the state's unequal funding of the Normal School".² Ultimately, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs declined to recognize the People and cited a lack of funds to assist the Lumbee ancestors, or "any other civilized tribes".³ Thus began a long road to federal recognition fraught with political landmines, intergovernmental conflict and simple discrimination.



An ongoing tension existed between who should be responsible for the education of the Indians of Robeson County - the state or the federal government. In 1911, echoing the reluctance that the federal government demonstrated earlier in 1888, the Supervisor of Indian Schools, Charles F. Pierce, made the following remarks on legislation introduced to provide educational funds for the Lumbee ancestors:

"At the present time it is the avowed policy of the [Federal] Government to require the states having an Indian population to assume the burden & responsibility for their education..."

Pierce goes on to list other tribes that might also want recognition and become a 'burden' if an appropriation was made for the Lumbee ancestors. Each of the other tribes listed have since been federally recognized, except for the Lumbee. However, one fortunate opportunity did emerge from the bill to which Pierce spoke - the Lumbee ancestors were deemed eligible to attend federal Indian boarding schools, such as Carlisle Indian Industrial School - and some did.⁴

The ancestors of the Lumbee continued to strive for recognition, simultaneously building up their Normal School with their own limited resources while exploring all avenues available to further the People.

The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 offered a new avenue to both recognition and improved economic prospects.⁵ Commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier, encouraged the Indians of Robeson County to seek assistance from the Resettlement Administration. Two other federal officials also suggested that a request for a resettlement project could be granted "on the basis of their status as Indians, provided they could prove their eligibility".⁶ Under the IRA, a resettlement project could lead to federal recognition.



Chairman Godwin continues the fight for recognition that his great-grandfather Quinny Godwin began in 1888, meeting with members of Congress and speaking to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C.



A resettlement project was established, but the need to prove eligibility resurrected blood quantum issues among a People who were continually navigating racial discrimination in the segregated South. In an effort to establish their eligibility status, some of the Indians of Robeson County did submit to anthropometric testing. These pseudoscientific tests had little accuracy and "the OIA did not apply anthropometry equally with respect to unrecognized tribes; they only applied it to Robeson County Indians..."⁷ Robeson County Indians that did 'pass the test' were recognized individually but that recognition did not lead to organization and recognition as a tribe.

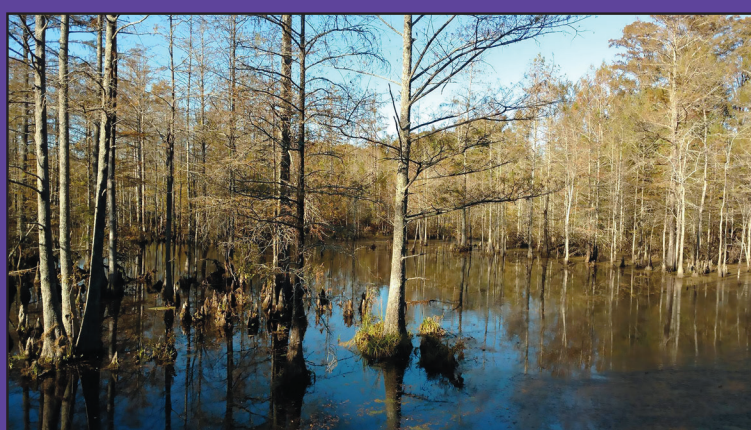
In 1956, the Lumbee finally won a partial recognition that placed them in a limbo from which they are still trying to

extricate themselves. During termination, a time when the federal government was essentially dismantling tribal structures - Congress recognized the Lumbee as an Indian tribe while denying the People any federal benefits that are associated with such recognition. Fortunately, Congressional views and Indian policy continue to evolve. Congress has repealed all legislation that was interpreted as termination from this era EXCEPT for the Lumbee Act.



Robeson County Delegation fighting for recognition in Washington, D.C. - c. 1925
Collection of the Museum of the Southeast American Indian

The Lumbee continue to fight for full federal recognition.



Moss Neck Swamp in Robeson County