



## Origins of Lumbee No Mystery

[S. Pony Hill](#), 2006

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Since the early nineteenth century scholars, ethnologists, anthropologists and historians have been pondering the origins of a population of mixed-bloods residing in and around Robeson County, North Carolina. These self-labeled “Lumbee Indians” now comprise the largest single Indian group east of the Mississippi. The theories of the origins of these people are as many, and varied, as the academics who have studied them. Though obviously of mixed ancestry, the Lumbee themselves have consistently self-identified as “Indian” since the earliest contact, as they still do today.

One of the earliest and longest standing, theories of Lumbee origin, is descendance from the “Lost Colony.” This theory proposes that the Robeson mixed-bloods descend from the stranded colony of Roanoke who were absorbed by nearby Indian tribes. Though based on no solid evidence, it remains the most wide-spread theory even today. Modern genealogical research has sufficiently proved this theory to be a wild flight of fancy, and the origins of the Lumbee seem to be a far cry less romantic. The preponderance of evidence shows that the Lumbee bloodlines are composed primarily of two types; those of Indian-White mixture (primarily of mixed tribal bands residing on the Bertie County ‘Tuscarora’ reservation), and those of White-Indian-and a dubious third stock described in many records as “Portuguese.”

During the Tuscarora War of 1711-13 in North Carolina, a division of the Tuscarora (called the “Northern Tuscarora” at that time) under chief Tom Blount remained friendly to the whites and were settled at Fort Christanna, Virginia, along with several remnant Siouan tribes and at least one small band of Chowan-Nansemond. At the Close of the War, the Tuscarora under Blount in addition to “remnants of allied tribes still remaining in that country”(1) were moved to a reservation in present-day Bertie County, North Carolina along the banks of the Roanoke River. The Blount Tuscarora and other Fort Christanna Indians by this time were heavily acculturated, predominantly Christian, and the vast majority English speaking. Lumped together here under the title “Tuscarora” were many varied bands of Algonquin, Siouan, and Iroquian descendant mixed-bloods. On this reservation is where we discover the roots of the majority of the Robeson people.

The founding families of Robeson mixed-bloods arrived in the Drowning Creek area during the era 1750 to 1770. Early land grants and wills can trace these individuals back to Bertie and Edgecombe Counties on the banks of the Roanoke River. Migration from the Tuscarora reservation was a well accepted fact among the historians of the area as recounted in newspapers and memoirs. (2) Indeed, even a Lumbee elder was quoted as

recounting “We have always been the friends of white men. We were a free people long before the white men came to our land. Our tribe was always free. They lived in Roanoke in Virginia.”(3) as well as an Act of the General Assembly of North Carolina in 1885 stated “Whereas the Indians now living in Robeson County claim to be descendants of a friendly tribe who once resided in eastern North Carolina, on the Roanoke River...”(4) Non-Tuscarora bands residing on, or near, the Bertie reservation had little or no voice in tribal affairs, and also may have been rendered homeless by the sale of 8,000 reservation acres in 1766. These factors, as well as others may have influenced the migration of Indian families down to the Drowning Creek area. The Lowry family, arguably the most well-known of all the Lumbee stock, are all descended James Lowry who arrived in Robeson in the mid-1750’s and by 1772 owned over a thousand acres in the area. James’ wife was Sarah Kersey, described as a “half-breed Tuscarora Indian.” Thomas Lowry (son of James) married Nancy Deas, a “white woman”; William Lowry (son of James) married Betty Locklear, also a “Half-breed Tuscarora Indian”, and Allen Lowry (son of James), married Polly Cumbo (sic Cumbaa), a “Portuguese woman.” (5) (the Portuguese connection will be discussed later) The Oxendine family, also prominent among the Lumbee, descend from John Oxendine who arrived in the early 1750’s. Oxendine’s exact blood-mixture is impossible to determine but evidence would seem to indicate mostly a Indian-White descent, and he was most certainly married to a white woman.. (6)The Ivey, Chavis, Locklear, Bass, Gibson, and Sweat families all owned land along the Roanoke River area of Edgecombe and Bertie in the 1720-30 era before moving down to Robeson, and it was there that they undoubtedly also intermarried with the reservation Indians.

The Sweat, Gibson and Bass families bore Indian blood prior to residing in Bertie County. Of Pamunkey Indian origin, the Sweats were prominent in that tribe’s affairs, as was the Bass family among the Nansemond. The Bass’s apparently picked up a Siouan bloodline after marriage into the Harris family in Bertie. (7) The Gibson’s were Siouan Indian inhabitants of the Tuscarora reservation, and also shared a common ancestry with the Chavis family. (8) Later migrations of Indian-White mixed families such as the Jacobs’ also served to bolster the Indian identity of the Drowning Creek community. (9)

The final Lumbee puzzle piece is the so-called “Portuguese” origins. Throughout the 1800’s, and across three states, this tri-racial identifier has been used by the mixed-blood families to explain physical features their white neighbors attempted to classify as resulting from Negro ancestry. For the most part the Lumbee and related families claimed to be solely of Indian-White mixture, but would occasionally claim Portuguese ancestry to justify non-Indian and non-White characteristics such as bushy hair, thick lips, etc. Jacob Perkins of Tennessee made this claim of Indian-White-Portuguese ancestry in 1858 through his grandfather, Joshua Perkins, who had resided in Robeson and married Polly Black, a “fair-skinned Scotch woman.” (10) Polly Cumbaa was described as a “Portuguese woman” while married to Allen Lowry in Robeson. (11) Finally Thomas Hagans claimed the same Indian-White-Portuguese mixture in 1809 South Carolina through his grandfather, Thomas Ivey of Drowning Creek who was described as “of Portuguese descent, that his complexion was swarthy, his hair black and strait – that his wife was a Free White woman, very clear complexion.” (12) Early accounts of the Lumbee in Robeson seem to agree with this Indian-White-Portuguese identity. (13) Two surnames common among the Lumbee and their cousins in South Carolina appear to have roots in the Spanish-Portuguese; Chavis from ‘Chavez’ and Driggers from ‘Rodrigus’ as it was originally in Northampton, Virginia.

The shorelines of the Chesapeake Bay area in Virginia appears to be area from which this Portuguese bloodline sprung, including Nothampton, York, and Surry Counties. Portuguese slaves such as Francisco Payne, Phillip Mongon, King Toney, Peter George, Emmanuel Rodrigus, and Bashaw Fernando were imported here in the 1640’s by land-owning gentlemen such as Nathaniel Littleton, Francis Pott, Capt. William Hawley, John Custis, John Eyres, and William Taylor. Being identified as Portuguese during this era almost assuredly implies that these individuals were already mixed-blooded before settling foot on American soil. Portuguese slaves in the early 1600’s were most often a myriad of racial backgrounds, including Brazilian Natives, Canary Islanders, Mediterranean Arabs, East Indians, and of course West Coast Africans. Regardless of their actual

racial makeup these Portuguese 'slaves' enjoyed a social and legal existence much more like sharecroppers, as they maintained their own property and enjoyed legal protections equal to whites. A description of their life is reflected by one slave;

"Now Mr. Taylor and I divided our Corne and I am very glad of it now I know myne...owne ground I will work when I please and play when I please." (14)

By the 1680's most of these Portuguese slaves and their children were living on the lands of the Gingaskin Indian tribe in Northampton. Court records reveal that the Portuguese Payne, George, Driggers (shortened from Rodrigus), and Francis/Cisco (shortened from Fransico) families had married into the Cross, Press, Bingham, Jacobs, and Jeffery Indian families of Gingaskin, and also that the white servant families of Harmon, Webb, Brooks, Beckett, and Carter had intermarried heavily with both Portuguese and Indian. Out-migrations of some of these individuals to such areas as Surry and Louisa Counties in the mid 1700's resulted in intermarriage with the Bunch and Goins families who later also resided in Robeson and surrounding areas. The Francis family intermarried with the Chavis family in North Carolina in the early 1740's, just as the Jacobs, Jefferys, George, Harmon, Carter, and Driggers did with the Bass, Perkins, Gibson, and Sweat families. It is quite obvious that the Indian-White-Portuguese mixture was pronounced even before exposure to the reservation Indians in Bertie County. (15)

As we have discovered, the origins of the mixed-blood population of Robeson County (and its subsequent offshoots) is no mystery. Adequate historical documentation exists to identify the roots of their Indian-White-Portuguese ancestors. The record is clear that their ancestors were early Virginia and North Carolina white settlers, Indians residing on the Gingaskin reservation in Northampton County, Indians of various tribes residing on the Tuscarora reservation in Bertie County, and also dark-skinned 'Portuguese' servants of the Chesapeake Bay area.

(1) Hodge, Fredrick, "Handbook of American Indians", 1906

(2) 1875 Jno Gurman Memoirs, "A century ago, a few members of the Tuscarora tribe of Indians lived upon the banks of the Roanoke River in Halifax Co. NC..they removed to Robeson." And the Feb 12, 1885 Fayetteville Observer "...the Croatan Indians (though they do not recognize that name as that of a tribe, but only a village, and that they were Tuscarora), were friendly to the whites."

(3) Lowrie, George, as quoted in "Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony" by Hamilton McMillan

(4) Act of the General Assembly of North Carolina, February 10, 1885

(5) Norment, Mary C., "The Lowrie History", 1895

(6) based on the fact that John Oxendine was excused from paying the "Free Negro" tax, his wife was taxed as a "white" woman, John's grandson, Charles Oxendine, convinced the Supreme Court of NC that he was not a "Free Negro", and Nancy Oxendine was described as a "mustie servant woman" in 1795 edition of the North Carolina Central and Fayetteville Gazette.

(7) Cheraw tribal origin of the Harris family confirmed through Catawba tribal records.

(8) Gibson surname appears among Tuscarora lease records. Chavis-Gibson connection via Heinigg, Paul, "Free African Americans."

- (9) Jacobs family descends from Tabitha Jacobs, an Indian of Northampton, VA. The Jacobs family were Indian servants living on, and around, the Gingaskin reservation prior to gaining their freedom and migrating to Robeson via Bertie and Sampson Counties.
- (10) 17 July 1858 Johnson County, Tennessee Court. Jacob F. Perkins sued John R. White for slander because he called him a “Free Negro.”
- (11) Norment, Mary C., “The Lowrie History”, 1895
- (12) 14 August 1809 Marion Dist. SC. Thomas Hagans refused to pay toll tax on “all Free Negros, Mulatoes & Mestizos.”
- (13) Saturday March 30, 1872 edition Harper’s Weekly. The North Carolina Bandits, “..said to be intermixed with Tuscarora Indian blood...were almost uniformly of light skins, and with traces of some novel intermixture which gave them the look of gypsies. It has been suggested that Spanish, Portuguese, or “Romany” blood flows in the viens of these mulattoes of Scuffletown.” Also 1871 NC Joint Senate and House committee interview of Robeson County Judge Giles Leitch, “I think they are a mixture of Spanish, Portuguese and Indian...they are called ‘mulattoes’ that is the name they are known by, as contradistinguished from negroes...I think they are of Indian origin.”
- (14) Northampton Orders (1640-45, 457)
- (15) Northampton County, VA Orders and Court Minutes 1690 to 1774. Records consistently identify the Payne, Francis, Cisco, Harmon, Mongon, Beckett, George, Driggers, Webb families as “mulattoe”, while the Bingham, Cross, Sunkett, West, Daniel, Fisherman, Jacobs, Jeffery families are identified as “Indian.” Records show that all of these families intermarried heavily, had extensive social interaction, and all resided on the Gingaskin reservation land.

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Nancy Ash: In Bertie County, NC in 1785, Nancy Ash petitions for her children and her own release from slavery held by a John Gardner on the grounds she was a “Free-born Indian woman.” John Gardner counterclaims that “Jenny Ash is not an Indian nor is she free born but that she is a mustee, and a slave...”

Sampson: Pennsylvania Journal 1747: “...a very lusty Negro fellow named Sampson,: who had an Indian mother, looked like an Indian, talked and dressed like an Indian, as did his son, and was presumably fleeing to Indian relatives in Carolina.

J. Leitch Wright

Henry Francis...a former slave when admitted into the First African Baptist Church of Savannah: “He is a strong man about forty-nine years of age. Whose mother was white and whose father was an Indian.”

Minges, Patrick, “Beneath the Underdog: Race, Religion, and the Trail of Tears,” American Indian Quarterly, Vol.25, No.3, p.467

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First I would like to say I enjoyed reading your post of my people, I am [Byron Jacobs Brooks](#), a Lumbee Indian of Robeson County. But I was wondering why you were so involved in our unique and fascinating history. I saw that your name was S. Pony Hill. . Are you a the writer of the post on the lums, or are you clark, and if so is since clark if common among us lums, are u a lum? Anyway, I know and accept through my genealogical research and tedeous studying and investigating, I 've learned and come to accept that we are of descendants of the Siouan nations at Fort Christianna, who later moved in with some remaining tuscarora on the bertie reservation. I've seen the tax records and court papers with my direct brooks ancestors along with my oxendine, jacobs, lowry, locklear, and all the others as well. However, I don't underestand or accept your "Portuguese" claims. I concede that my ancestors at times can be seen in Northampton County, but they could have just been moving there at various points , not deriving from there at all. Plus even if they were particially from that area, just that doesn't tie them into the "Portuguese" identity. You have to keep in mind that they were often mislabled as mulato, others , colored, black, white, so why not consdider that this lable placed on them by whites was wrong also. And when they talk about the lowry history and say that mary polly cumbo was portugese, thats bull, the cumbos were non as an indian family, and in the edcombe county in 1800's many can be found on indian rolls, listing them as tuscarora and meherrin indians , and also with nancy deese, the same can be said. I desced from a Deese man and there are still deese's her otday all indian. Do you agree or whats your opinion? Can you share any more information about the Harris family and their siouan connections? I've always thought that our harris' and blues' are connected to the catawbass' people. I mean the cheraw and keyauwee and some saponi did live with them a short while in early 1700 tim period. Can you share any more information about the Jacobs family and their Gingaskin connections? Can you share any more information about the Oxendine and Chavis family, what tribe or what place do you see they came from? Also could you elaborate or point me to your reason or sources for believing that the tribe encountered on or around Roanoke Island (Croatan) was merely a tuscarora village, and not an Algonquin tribe along the coast.

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