The Lumbee Indians: searching for justice, searching for identity

by David K. Eliades

On February 1, 1988, two Robeson County Indians took twenty people hostage in a newspaper office. They held their hostages for ten hours before releasing them. The two captors said they were Tuscarora Indians, and they claimed they were protesting corruption by officials in the county. This incident was very revealing. It focused state and national attention on Lumbee Indian concerns for racial justice. It focused attention on their desire to establish a tribal identity.

Robeson County native Americans are the second largest group of Indians in the United States. The great majority of them identify themselves as Lumbee Indians, not Tuscaroras. Yet they are a native people without a traditional Indian culture. When Scottish settlers began moving into the Cape Fear valley in the 1700s, they found the Lumbee's ancestors already there. They were Indian in physical appearance, but they lived like Englishmen. The Lumbee lifestyle raised questions about their origins. Numerous attempts have been made to trace those origins and to explain how they came to have a European-based culture. Final proof has not been offered, but some historians support a "Lost Colony theory." This theory states that the Lumbees are descended from coastal Indians and Sir Walter Raleigh's famous "Lost Colony." The colony disappeared from Roanoke Island between 1587 and 1590. Most scholars now accept the "amalgamation theory" about their Indian origins. This theory says that the Lumbees are what is left of many tribes that were wiped out by disease and war in the 1700s. These tribes include the Cheraw and Tuscarora. The mystery of how they gained an English culture remains unsolved.

In the mid-1700s the Lumbees were described by a colonial official as "a mixt crew, a lawless people, possessing the land without patent...." This quotation indicates that the Lumbees had few rules to live by and did not own their land. Whether they owned the land they occupied or not, they were farming it. They also lived as free men. Their history becomes more certain in the Revolutionary War era. A number of Lumbees fought for independence in the American Revolution (1776-1783), and several were rewarded with land for their service.

The Lumbees in the late 1700s and early 1800s were considered "free persons of color." And they had all the rights of first-class citizens. Yet in the 1820s the growing threat of slave insurrections made many white southerners afraid of all nonwhites. They feared the Lumbees might incite the slaves to violence. At the same time, traditional Indian tribes found themselves under attack. They were considered obstacles to progress. Indian removal was a way to tear down the obstacle by removing Indians from North Carolina to another state. In 1835 delegates to the North Carolina Constitutional Convention deprived all nonwhites of their political privileges. The Lumbees were able to escape earlier Indian removal because they were so much a part of the white culture. But they did not escape the loss of their rights.
Under the 1835 Constitution, Lumbee tribes were not allowed to own weapons, to vote or hold office, to attend public schools, or to serve in the military. The next generation of Lumbee also suffered greatly from additional abuse. It was a time of frustration and discrimination. To this day there is still bitterness among the Lumbee over what are known as tied-mule incidents. These occurred when a white person placed several of his livestock on an Indian’s land. He then claimed that the Indian had stolen the animals. The Indian knew he had little chance of getting justice. He would agree to pay an out-of-court settlement. This settlement usually gave free labor or a piece of land to the white person. This type of treatment fueled Lumbee anger. It also helps explain the racial conflicts of the 1860s and 1870s.

At the start of the Civil War in 1861, the Lumbees were viewed as a potential danger to the Confederacy. They were also seen as a potential source of forced labor for Confederate military projects. The militia tried to control and to exploit the Indians. As a result some Indians were abused and some were killed. In 1864, Henry Berry Lowry, a young Lumbee, fought back. His actions triggered the “Lowry War.” For the next decade, southeastern North Carolina knew terror and bloodshed as Lowry became the most hunted outlaw in the state’s history. Like much of the Lumbee past, Lowry is controversial. He was thought by his defenders to be a hero. His critics thought he was a common criminal. His image as an Indian folk hero was enhanced by his mysterious, still-debated disappearance in 1872.

The Reconstruction period after the Civil War promised a new era in civil rights. The late 1800s brought segregation instead. Segregation is the separation of one group in society from another. Lumbees rejected white North Carolinians’ attempts to force them into black society. They received help from state representative Hamilton McMillan. He helped them get legislation establishing separate schools for themselves, an Indian normal school, and a specific tribal name. For most of the 1800s, they were generally called “mixed bloods.” They were sometimes labeled “Indians.” In 1887 they became known as the Croatian Indians. When that name was turned into a racial slur, they became known as the Indians of Robeson County and then the Cherokee Indians of Robeson County. Finally in 1953 they voted to identify themselves as the Lumbees. It was hoped this would absolutely establish their “Indianness” and their identity. But not all of the Indian people in Robeson County have accepted Lumbee as their tribal designation. The Tuscarora faction, for example, insists that the Lumbee name has no historical foundation. They refuse to accept it.

The beginning of the legal end of segregation in 1954 opened many doors. Yet gains were not made without a struggle. In 1958 the Ku Klux Klan announced a rally to “keep” the Lumbees in their “place” and to end “race mixing.” The Indians turned out for the rally and disrupted the Klansmen with gunfire. Since that time, the Lumbees have helped to bring about a school merger in Robeson County. They have sought and generally gained greater political power at municipal and county levels of government. They have urged their people to become educated. They now have more college graduates than all other Indian tribes combined. They are actively involved in the professions and in business. They have established the first Indian-owned bank in the nation. They are engaged in a massive effort to gain full federal recognition. To the Lumbees the achievement of national recognition would be a climactic event in their history, largely ending the identity issue and laying a foundation for future progress.