

Indians clash over heritage Nanticoke chief at odds with Lenape, state over research

By J.L. MILLER Dover Bureau reporter 06/26/2001

The state Department of Transportation, bowing to protests from Nanticoke Indian Chief Kenneth S. Clark, has blocked publication of an archaeological report that challenges the Nanticokes' claim as the sole surviving remnant of Delaware's original inhabitants.

The archaeological study concludes that some of the original Indian inhabitants of the Cheswold area in northeastern Kent County adapted to the encroaching European culture, and that their descendants populate the area to this day.

The report also states the Nanticoke Indians and the Cheswold inhabitants are "genealogically indistinguishable" -- a conclusion that prompted threats of a lawsuit from Clark.

The report, which was available in draft form upon request and on the department's Web site, has been removed from distribution on orders of Transportation Secretary Nathan Hayward III.

That decision has stirred protests from descendants of the Cheswold inhabitants, who see the report as a long overdue recognition of their Lenape Indian heritage.

The report details the results of an archaeological dig at Bloomsbury, the site of a tenant house occupied between 1761 and 1814.

DelDOT ordered the excavation when the site was selected to become an artificial wetland that was needed to replace a wetland destroyed by construction of Del. 1.

According to the report prepared by Edward F. "Ned" Heite and his Camden-based Heite Consulting, at least two of the tenants were of Indian descent.

A team of archaeologists unearthed shards of glass that, according to the report, had been converted into cutting tools by the same technique that Indians used in fashioning tools of stone.

Those shards, along with four blue glass beads that resemble those found at Indian sites throughout the Chesapeake Bay region, led the archaeologists to conclude that the occupants clung to some of their Indian ways even after adopting the trappings of the dominant white culture.

Many Indians had left Delaware by the mid-1700s, and in the 1770s the Delaware General Assembly declared there were no Indians left in the state.

But the Nanticoke Indians in Sussex County clung to their identity, even though their language and most of their traditional ways were fading.

The Cheswold people also maintained their separate identity and eventually became known as Moors, for a legendary ancestral connection to the Moors of Spain.

Now, the Bloomsbury excavation and subsequent report have placed DeIDOT in the middle of a dispute between two groups who share a fierce pride in their ancestry but disagree over the right to claim it.

"This report is vital to the recognition of our community, or the authentication of our community," said Dennis Coker, chief of the Cheswold-based Lenape Indian Tribe of Delaware.

The tribe organized in 1990 and has about 85 members, but Coker said about 750 people qualify for membership.

The Nanticokes and the Moors alike endured the painful days of segregation, resisting white lawmakers' attempts to classify them as black. Some of those wounds linger to this day.

"Our people have been Native American all this time but have never been very vocal about it," Coker said. "A lot of our people are still living in a state of denial about this. There is so much negative feelings about Native Americans that a lot of our people would rather not talk about it."

But younger descendants of the Cheswold inhabitants are embracing their Indian identity, and Coker said that identity is important to their survival as a community.

"This has turned into a political issue, and politics has no place in determining the ethnicity of a people," Coker said. "The citizenry of the state of Delaware has a right to review that report. For it not to be public for political reasons is ridiculous."

Tension between tribes

Genealogical links between the Cheswold and Sussex groups were documented by the late C.A. Weslager in his 1943 book, "Delaware's Forgotten Folk, the Story of the Moors & Nanticokes."

Weslager also documented baskets, drinking gourds and other crafts among the Moors that bore strong resemblance to Indian implements.

But a rift between the Cheswold community and the Nanticokes was reported as early as 1898 by an amateur anthropologist named William Babcock.

Babcock, according to Weslager, was told by some Nanticokes that the two communities originally were members of two different tribes that were not always on friendly terms.

Tensions flared nearly a century later when the Cheswold group sought recognition as an Indian community through a resolution in the state Senate in 1994.

That resolution was tabled after the Nanticoke Indian Association lobbied against it.

DelDOT was poised to release the Bloomsbury report last year and the issue came to a head.

Nanticoke Chief Clark, in a letter last August to then-Transportation Secretary Anne Canby, accused Heite of making a racist comment at an archaeological conference: "The only good Indian is a dead Indian."

"Suffice it to say, the Nanticoke Indian Tribe adamantly protests the publication of this report in light of the statements Mr. Heite has made," Clark wrote.

Heite wrote in rebuttal that his statement was "pure hyperbole" and was taken out of context: Archaeologists prefer to deal with dead Indians, Heite pointed out, because that is their profession.

Heite also cited his honorary membership in the Cheswold Lenape tribe and enclosed a photocopy of his membership card with the comment, "That's not a bad track record for an alleged anti-Indian racist."

Canby gave Clark the opportunity to submit an addendum that would be included with the report.

But in a strongly worded Dec. 4 letter, Clark and Assistant Chief Charles C. Clark IV not only declined to offer an addendum but threatened to sue if the report were released.

"The report is so vile toward the Nanticoke Indian Tribe and denigrating of our true history that it calls into question the motives of the consultants paid to write it," the Clarks wrote.

"In short, we are unwilling to be a party in such a blatant travesty that too often is aimed directly at our Tribe and the history of our people, and we will take whatever means necessary to block the publication of this report and any furthering of its libelous meanderings," they wrote.

Identity fight

Most troubling to the Clarks were the archaeologists' assertions that the Sussex Nanticoke are an amalgamation of several native peoples that eventually called themselves Nanticoke -- and that the Nanticoke, the Cheswold people and a related community in Bridgeton, N.J., are "genealogically indistinguishable."

"The truth is that history is filled with instances in which the Nanticoke, like other established tribes, fought hard to retain our culture and identity," the Clarks wrote.

According to the Clarks, the Nanticoke Indian Association maintains a database of genealogical information that has never been made available to anyone outside the association.

"The fact is that many individuals from the two communities that Heite mentions have submitted applications in the past for membership in our tribe, but were rejected due to their inability to connect themselves to our tribal rolls," the Clarks wrote.

Kenneth and Charles Clark IV did not respond to repeated requests for interviews.

Backing the Clarks is Jay F. Custer, a professor of anthropology at the University of Delaware and director of the Center for Archaeological Research.

In a Nov. 17, 2000, letter to Canby, Custer said the Bloomsbury report contains "many significant errors of fact and logic" and "statements that are detrimental to the interests of the current Nanticoke Indian Tribe and the Clark family."

Custer, apparently seeking a middle ground in the developing controversy, suggested that Canby quietly bury the report.

"Compliance with federal and state cultural resource protection statutes DOES NOT require the widespread dissemination of reports resulting from required cultural resource studies," Custer wrote. "The statutes only require that the reports be publicly available in some way."

Custer did not return phone calls.

Heite continues to defend his report.

"The Bloomsbury report is a straightforward exposition of historical and archaeological fact," Heite wrote in a September letter to DelDOT.

"Like all this firm's reports for DelDOT, it was intended as a professional contribution to the history of our state, and I stand by every word," Heite wrote.

The draft report has been widely disseminated and has received favorable reviews from other archaeologists.

Archaeologist John Bedell of the Louis Berger Cultural Resource Group reviewed the draft report and wrote that it is "full of terrific material. ... I agree with most of the report's conclusions. The discussions of class and ethnic identity are very sophisticated."

It also struck a chord with descendants of Cheswold-area Indians from as far away as Toronto. Many of them have been peppering DelDOT and Gov. Ruth Ann Minner with e-mails protesting the suppression of the report.

The controversy also caught the attention of Cassandra H. Marshall, who serves on the nine-member Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs.

"I have a big problem with the staff and politicians in Delaware allowing the Clarks to intimidate them," said Marshall, who sent e-mails to Minner and Hayward protesting the decision.

"Delaware government paid for the excavations and is paying for the printing of the Bloomsbury report," Marshall said. "That's why Delaware needs a commission [on Indian affairs], so its governor can have the necessary tool to take care of this type of business. It protects her appointees plus gets the business of the day done and over with."

Lenape Chief Coker speculated that part of the Clarks' opposition to the Bloomsbury report is based on money.

The Nanticoke Indian Elder CHEER Center, for instance, received a \$66,713 state grant-in-aid for the current budget year, and the Nanticoke Indian Association received a \$14,000 grant.

Coker said he thinks the Clarks fear they would have to compete with the Lenape for state money if the Lenape win state recognition.

Independent review

DelDOT appeared on track to publish the report late last year. But Canby was replaced by Hayward, and he ordered the publication blocked.

DelDOT now has decided to seek an independent review of the Bloomsbury report to assess its accuracy, spokeswoman Michelle Ackles said.

"We will have an independent third party review the report because our goal is to make 100 percent certain that the report is objective, factual," Ackles said.

DelDOT will work with the state Historic Preservation Office to select the third party, she said.

According to a DelDOT statement from spokesman Mike Williams, the third party's credentials will be presented to members of the Delaware Indian community for their review before the final selection is made.

That selection is expected to take place by July 31, with the review to be completed by September.

"As soon as this review has been accomplished, the results will be shared with the public," Williams wrote.

Heite called that decision another attempt to delay the report's release, a decision that strikes at the heart of the people's right to know.

"Does this mean that the state will withhold any information that offends one or two people?" Heite asked. "The issue is the right of the people of this state to benefit from the research they have paid for. Any more reviews are merely delays."

Coker, too, said the time for reviews has passed.

"We need to take our place in Delaware history. As the bald eagle or the piping plover or the box turtle, we have our place as indigenous people of Delaware," Coker said. "I am confident that when the final chapter is written, this report will be published."

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