

## **Chapter Seven: Transformation of Place: Emerging Occaneechi Identity**

### ***Introduction***

In recent years the local Native American community has had a dramatic impact on Hillsborough's historic landscape and its evolving historic identity. The construction of a replica Occaneechi village in downtown Hillsborough, modeled after one of the villages excavated at the nearby archaeological site, marked the first (and still the most significant) transformation of a history based on the deeds of the "great white men" of colonial times to a history that is both ethnically and temporally more inclusive. Annual pow-wows bring Indians<sup>1</sup> in colorful regalia from up and down the eastern seaboard, piedmont, and mountains to Hillsborough, and their visible presence creates a reference to a distant past. In this chapter I discuss the way the emergence of the formerly hidden Occaneechi identity transformed Hillsborough's identity. When the circumstances were fortuitous and the timing was exquisite, a very small group of people who had no previous participation or representation in Hillsborough's history community was able to radically redefine the temporal and ethnic boundaries of the town's public identity. The words of three informants tell most of the story: Forest Hazel,<sup>2</sup> historian of the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation; John Blackfeather Jeffries, elder and former chief of the tribe; and John's wife Lynette Jeffries. As I discuss below, Hazel's research was the catalyst that initiated a series of events that led to the re-emergence of tribal identity. John Jeffries has for many years been an effective spokesman for the tribe, and

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<sup>1</sup> The informants for this chapter used the terms "Indian" and "Native American" interchangeably. I follow their convention.

<sup>2</sup> Forest Hazel is originally from Maryland, and described his Nanticoke (Indian) and European heritage in our interview.

orchestrated the creation of the replica village. These two individuals have had an enormous impact in reshaping the view of Hillsborough's past.

### ***History of the Occaneechi Community***

Archaeological evidence indicates that Native Americans have been in the southeastern United States for approximately 10,000 years. A bend in the Eno River in what is now Hillsborough was the site of a succession of Native American villages, and the earliest site yet discovered dates back to 1000 A.D. The arrival of Europeans led to a major decline of Indian populations as a result of European diseases and cultural disruption. Archaeological work confirms the decline in population size, and suggests that as populations diminished, different tribes had to work together in order to survive (Ward and Davis 1999). Thus the residents of the Occaneechi village at the time of early explorer John Lawson's visit in 1701 may have been an amalgamation of several different groups. Within the Southern Piedmont, the Occaneechi were a powerful group who controlled the north-south flow of trade goods from their base on Occaneechi Island,<sup>3</sup> and whose wealth and power were enhanced through their participation in fur trade with Europeans (Dunmore 2002).

In 1715 the Virginia government attempted to alter the balance of power in the region by relocating approximately 300 Indians to Fort Christianna (Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation 2002), where, according to tribal historian Forest Hazel, it was hoped that

they could be converted to Christianity and educated, taught English... The idea being that if these Indian people became 'civilized' they could then form a buffer between the Virginia settlements and the 'uncivilized' Indians further

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<sup>3</sup> The Occaneechi Island location is now underneath Kerr Lake in southern Virginia.

west. And it was supposed to also be an economic enterprise, it was a trading fort.

Although this experiment lasted less than ten years, the relocated Indians remained in the area and intermarried with local Europeans, eventually creating an acculturated community of mixed ancestry with Indian identity. Around the time of the Revolutionary War some of these people began migrating to Orange County, North Carolina (Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation 2002).<sup>4</sup> Descendants of these migrants still inhabit a primarily rural area in northern Alamance and Orange Counties and southern Caswell County. The central community is Pleasant Grove in Alamance County, once known as “Little Texas” (see Map 5, p. 21). According to Hazel, families in this community can document their ownership of land in Pleasant Grove back to the mid-1700s, and at least one family has been in place on the same land for nine generations.

The amalgamation of peoples characteristic of the Occaneechi (and of other Southeastern tribes) continued as members of the community married other local people, Indian, black and white. The Pleasant Grove community retained distinctive characteristics for generations, but over time their identity became hidden from many outside of the community and contested within the community. According to Hazel and John Jeffries,<sup>5</sup> most of the people of the Pleasant Grove area shared the knowledge of their Indian ancestry and the fact that their ancestors were not slaves. Some of them, if asked, would have identified themselves as Indians. Some would have identified

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<sup>4</sup> The area that was Orange County in that time period was later divided into five counties, including Orange, Alamance, Caswell, Durham and Person Counties.

<sup>5</sup> Because I interviewed both John Blackfeather Jeffries and his wife Lynette Jeffries, I refer to them by both first and last names as necessary to make it clear who is speaking.

themselves as black or white. Those who thought of themselves as Indian had no name for their ethnic group and did not think of themselves as belonging to a particular tribe.

### ***The rediscovery of Occaneechi identity***

The story of the contemporary Occaneechi is the story of how this identity re-emerged. The consequences of this re-emergence for the people themselves, and for the community of Pleasant Grove are the most significant part of their story, but I focus my discussion on the effects of the re-emergence of Indian identity on the historic identity of Hillsborough and its landscape.

Tribal leader John Blackfeather Jeffries has been interviewed dozens of times. He is aware of the limitations of interviewers and their lack of skill in representing him, and at the beginning of our interview he related this to the history of the misrepresentation of his people. Below I include excerpts from my interview with John Jeffries with a minimum of editing, for reasons that he makes clear.

At the beginning of the interview he drew a careful distinction between “history,” which he termed “his-story,” the stories told by those in power, and “our story,” the stories of the Occaneechi that represent the truth of his people.

When I go into the school systems<sup>6</sup> I define history as his-story, there’s an s left out of it. Because this is generally written by Europeans. ...And when we speak of Native Americans being involved in this country and being here, we call it the truth. There are so many people who are misled in historian’s writings.

He then issued a friendly warning to the interviewer.

I’ve experienced this through interviews I’ve had with people and they don’t write what I say, they write what they think they heard me say. They try to

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<sup>6</sup> John Jeffries regularly presents programs about Native Americans in general and the Occaneechi in particular to school classes.

correct my grammar, which is not always good grammar, but it's my grammar, you see. So I tell people to write what you hear because who is to say it's bad grammar.

He cited his ancestors to make his case for the use of his individual grammar.

Because when our people were here thousands of years ago, they were communicating with each other, and then as time went by they started to speak American, not English, but American, then their dialogue changed. And my grandfather up on a farm, when they communicate with one another, they use their American language. When the townspeople heard it, they said it was bad grammar, but the people there were able to communicate with themselves. Like the word *hope* for help, and *mgwine* for going.

He then made the larger point that this lack of communication is at the heart of the misrepresentation of his people's story.

So sometimes strangers that went into the community could not converse with these people. So I like to refer to it as the indigenous people's story, which a lot of people have been misled a lot about native people.

Next he defined his own ethnic identity and described the government *fiat* that resulted in the suppression of Indian identity in the local region.

Am I an Indian? No, I'm not an Indian, I didn't come from the country of Hindu, I came from here. And so I'm aboriginal and I refer to myself as a Yésah, of the people, as all people did, a human being. But I'm not offended by people calling me an Indian, and I'm not offended by people calling me a Native American, because I'm not an American, I'm an aboriginal individual. Even though some of my people came from Scotland, the base is right here. So history plays an important part, but for many years our story was never told. Because it was hidden, up until the (19)80s, because when I was coming up, there were no Indians around here. Because all the Indians had been gone, because of the stroke of a pen from Andy Jackson.<sup>7</sup>

This "stroke of a pen" reclassified the inhabitants of Pleasant Grove from Indian to Negro and began the suppression of their identity.

When our people left on the Trail of Tears, they were not just Cherokee people. That's what history tells. But some of my people were there because

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<sup>7</sup> The Indian Removal Act was signed by President Andrew Jackson in 1830. This eventually led to the forced resettlement of many southeastern tribes, a brutal migration known as the "Trail of Tears."

they were up in the mountains when they left here after the rebellion in 1676.<sup>8</sup> Macon County, North Carolina carried a lot of Occaneechi Saponi people who had gone up to hide in the mountains. So when Andy went through there in the 1800s, mid 1800s, and then when he had marched what he could, all the way down from Florida, he went back to Washington and said all the Indians had been removed from the east coast. So they said ‘very well.’ So they signed a paper that eradicated an entire race of people and their culture, by saying all the Indians were gone. So the Indians that were here had to take on two different identities, either you were white or you were colored. Or you were a slave.

Although after the Trail of Tears the only officially recognized ethnic identities were white and colored, many people of the region centered on Pleasant Grove retained the knowledge of their Indian ancestry. John Jeffries said

And ever since I could remember, my grandmother, she always told me I was an Indian. But of what tribe she wasn’t aware of, she didn’t know what tribe she was, she just knew she was Indian blood. And the people there were Indian people and they lived the way Indian people did as much as they could after contact.

The knowledge of Indian heritage was deliberately hidden from the outside world.

Lynette Jeffries said that as her husband’s grandmother transmitted the knowledge of his ancestry, she did so with a warning: “His grandmamma would whisper to him ‘you are a little Indian boy, but don’t tell anybody.’”

Policies of the white power structure did not distinguish between colored and Indian people. In the 1920s the county government consolidated several small rural non-white schools, some of which were traditionally for colored children, and some for Indian children. According to Hazel, “the white people really didn’t consider it integration to send the Indians and blacks to school together.” Although for whites the classification system was “white” or “non-white,” the people of Pleasant Grove were aware of finer distinctions. John Jeffries spoke of his father, who was born in 1911.

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<sup>8</sup> The Occaneechi were one of the Indian tribes involved in that murky chapter in early Virginia history known as “Bacon’s Rebellion.”

Daddy told me the first black man he saw, he was nine years old. And he was so afraid that he hid behind his daddy, grabbed his pocket, his overall pocket, and his daddy said 'Son, that's OK, this man is from a place called Africa.'

Jeffries' father left Pleasant Grove in 1938 and moved to Hillsborough to work in one of the textile mills.

When my father moved here in 1938, there were no Indians. But my father didn't look black. Let's use the word 'colored,' because black didn't come into existence until the (19)60s. So use the words 'colored' and 'Negro.' So my father never identified as a Negro or colored. But he never challenged it.

He reports that his father said:

I was always a colored man even though, no black in my family, none whatsoever. I was still identified as a colored man, therefore I was limited as to where I could go, what I could do.

Non-Indian people in the area had a limited understanding of the identity of the people in the Pleasant Grove community. Lynette Jeffries described Forest Hazel's introduction to this hidden identity:

A young man came to UNC<sup>9</sup> for his grad work [Hazel] and he would see these people up in Pleasant Grove and he would ask his co-workers: 'who were they?' They would say 'I don't know. They ain't white and they ain't black.'

Hazel described his interest in the Pleasant Grove community.

Some of my father's people are a mix of Nanticoke Indian, which is why it interested me to see these people, because they sort of looked like pop's people. And from having gone to school at Carolina most of my association was with Lumbee<sup>10</sup> students, from the other Indian settlements in Carolina. To me these folks looked just the same as people from any other settlement.

In the early (19)80s...I started meeting some of the folks that looked like they were Indian people. And I would ask the other deputies<sup>11</sup> if they were Indians and they would say 'no, they are black' but then would go into this long explanation of how they weren't really black... Once I got acquainted with some of the folks enough to ask nosy questions, you know all of them have this tradition of Indian ancestry and having never been under bondage. Which is certainly born out by documentation.

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<sup>9</sup> UNC is The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, often referred to simply as "Carolina."

<sup>10</sup> The Lumbee are the second largest Indian tribe in North Carolina (after the Cherokee).

<sup>11</sup> Hazel worked as an Orange County sheriff's deputy while he attended graduate school.

This story reveals that there was awareness among some people in the larger community that the people of Pleasant Grove had a distinctly separate identity, but that there was uncertainty about what that identity was. In a society which assigned race according to a dichotomy (white or black) there was no way to describe their unique identity.

Hazel's initial interest was in the history and relationship of the Pleasant Grove community to other Indian groups.

When I first got involved with the community it was not to form an Indian association. I was just interested historically trying to link these people. My first theory was that they descended from families that had never left the Occaneechi town region,<sup>12</sup> but [that] proved not to be the case. It was clear that they came back from Virginia, that they moved up there and came back. In fact, some of the elders remember that they came from Virginia.

Hazel's historical research led him to conclusions that he shared with members of the community. The initial reaction to the emergence of a specific Indian identity was often one of skepticism. John Jeffries' wife Lynette,<sup>13</sup> speaking of Hazel, said

So he came to see John [Jeffries] and some other people and he said that he had history that shows that you all are possibly Eno-Occaneechi Group, Occaneechi-Saponi that came down from what is now called Virginia at the Kerr Lake area and that you settled here in Hillsborough first and then back into what is now called Pleasant Grove. And John just looked at him and said 'right.' It's like the first thing you think of is 'what does this guy want, what is he going to get out of this?' Being who they are and the ties to so many different people of color and Caucasian, there is always that guard put up as to 'are you coming to attack me and tear me apart or are you coming as a friend?' And you can't always tell at the beginning, but eventually through a lot of talking he realized that this guy had done his work and it gave a name to who they were. Some in the very beginning were hesitant, there was the question of you know: Why are you doing this? Is this to hold me up to ridicule or is it really for my benefit?

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<sup>12</sup> In 1701 English explorer John Lawson visited an Indian community that he called "Occaneechi town." Many people believe that this village was located on the bend of the Eno River in Hillsborough, where there is archaeological evidence of a succession of villages.

<sup>13</sup> Lynette Jeffries defines herself as a woman of color with many ethnicities in her heritage: East Indian, West Indian, Cherokee and two other unnamed Indian tribes, Scots, French Creole, and African American. She is originally from Charleston.



Lynette Jeffries referred to the severe difficulties that people faced in the past as a result of the oppression of people of color and said

They did the best they could to survive. ...They knew that there was a difference of all the people around them, but they were still different, but they didn't have a word to cover why. People were always going to be asking you 'what are you mixed with, who are you?' I have seen some who right now are standing back to see where this is going, and [thinking] 'I might get on the band wagon if I see that you are not carrying me to Hell.' But then there were some who hesitantly stepped forward and remembered stories that they had been told and little snippets and things that they knew. And so now there is a pride in knowing who they are. But they did not wholeheartedly embrace it, because John was the same way. Like 'no, don't want to hear anymore. Because I don't need this right now.'

There was good reason for the fear and skepticism. John Jeffries, who was one of the first to "cross the line" from black to Indian, reported his father's anxiety about the decision.

But you see somebody had to take that step, cross that line. My daddy told me that I would be killed doing this. When we first started. 'You gonna be locked up or killed doing this. This is dangerous.'

Jeffries explained that his father feared that The Ku Klux Klan would have killed him.

The Klan saw Indian identity as a threat

because all of the Indians are gone. To be an Indian, you were shirking off being black. It shows how people thought back then, because you only have two races, you have black and white. If you throw another race in there, that's confusion. You know it's confusion for the white man to have to keep up with a third race. Yeah, had to be black. You had to be Negro or white.

Evidence for the "truth" of the Indian identity came internally as well as from documentary sources. Lynette Jeffries, speaking of her husband's childhood, related his love of nature and the outdoors to his Indian ancestry:

It just fit in with the life that John had lived, he loved being out in the woods even as a little tiny boy and his mom would take him up to see... his daddy's people and his grandmamma would whisper to him 'you are a little Indian boy, but don't tell anybody.' He was instantly gone and nobody bothered him, he's out there with his cousins or just by himself, just wandering through the

woods. And if he brought Mama Kate a bunny rabbit back, that was fine and she cooked it for him. So it started making sense.

Lynette Jeffries sees the self-sufficient rural lifestyle as further evidence of Indian identity.

But then after you start seeing it in writing and seeing that connection, its like a bulb goes off that says 'yes, OK, this is who I am and why I have felt this way, this is why we've done this or that' and it gave credence to the way they lived. Like the people who lived in Pleasant Grove, they were farmers, they lived off the land. Even here [in Hillsborough], Papa Bute grew food, he had chickens, pigs. This was a self-sufficient family... The tie to the land is so important.

Lynette Jeffries described the way the community has slowly moved from an identity defined by others to a self-identified identity.

Then when they found out 'this is who I am and this is why I have been a part of this family' and there is a pride now. And surprisingly it has been picked up by the younger people (more) than the older people. I observe by just talking to them and being around them that there is this hesitancy of being hurt by this new information and maybe down the road somebody says 'well, you are not really that anyway.' You know that is what I perceive and I can understand that. I can understand that. They have been labeled by someone else all of their lives regardless of whether they knew who they were or not and so you accepted it to survive and now here you come with another label. But this label had a name with it that was different from everybody else.

As the Occaneechi began to reclaim their identity, there were white people who came forward with their knowledge of the previously suppressed Indian identity. John Jeffries said

Once we started into the culture back in the (19)80s, I had a lot of my daddy's friends, who are now dead, that dad did business with downtown, he had very good credit, he could get anything he wanted. They said, 'We knew your daddy wasn't black, we knew he wasn't white. We knew he was Indian cause he came from Pleasant Grove, but we didn't make an issue about it'.... So, they didn't say that in a derogatory way, they said 'We just didn't want to make anything of it. Because, why? Your daddy was an honorable man, he was trustworthy.' And so, nobody spoke about it, it was just an unspoken thing.

When Jeffries' father was classified as a black man, he was treated as a black man even though some people knew that his origins in Pleasant Grove meant that he had Indian

heritage. Once the Indian identity emerged, these store owners acknowledged this identity, and implied to John Jeffries that they had always known that his father deserved more respect than that usually accorded to black men.

Although some of the white business owners acknowledged the emergence of Indian identity, others resisted this as a challenge to the colonial identity of the town.

According to John Jeffries:

We had two people that will remain nameless that was not very supportive of this, and they were business men in Hillsborough, very influential business men. They passed on now. But they were not, they were not impressed at all with what I was trying to do because ... they wanted to keep all the signs up down there, as colonial Hillsborough.

Jeffries linked the emergence of Indian identity to the perceived threat to Hillsborough's white colonial identity. Those who felt threatened challenged his change of outward identity.

But Hillsborough has been colonial so many years, so many years they were colonial, that once we stepped forward then I started to identify as a native person. Been here all my life, shining shoes downtown, going to the Central High School<sup>14</sup> here. People say, 'you been black all your life, why you want to start being Indian?' I said 'no, I was born an Indian, I've been labeled colored.'

As the Occaneechi pursued their own history, they also became knowledgeable about the history of the local area. John Jeffries stated that the change to Hillsborough's identity as a white colonial town began with his attempts to get one of the historic markers corrected. The marker referred to a "Catawba trading path" and Jeffries knew that to be incorrect. He presented research to "DOT and the Division of Archives" in Raleigh and they replaced the Catawba sign with one that says "Occaneechi Town."

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<sup>14</sup> Central High School was the high school for people of color in the days before the integration of the schools.

“That was one of the first changes there that came about and after that it’s all our story.”

The historic markers that map Hillsborough’s identity no longer mapped an exclusively white and colonial identity.

Investigation of the Pleasant Grove community’s history led to other initiatives.

Hazel said

In the process of doing the history a number of the people said that we ought to have an organization for our own people. So I assisted them in doing that. ... So you know there was the group incorporated and began working on things that seemed to be important to the people. The biggest thing was probably cultural revival. We started taking groups around to the powwows that other tribes held and in (19)84 the tribe held its first powwow. And we worked on things like getting people’s birth certificates corrected and then started working on state recognition.

In the early 1990s John Jeffries began making public appearances attired in Indian regalia in the schools and at Hog Day (Hillsborough’s annual summer festival). Jeffries’ first representation of Indian regalia was modeled on Plains Indians costume, and included a large feathered headdress. Forest Hazel considers Jeffries’ original regalia as part of the revitalization process that occurred as members of the tribe began to adopt an openly Indian identity. Hazel said

there is nothing wrong with that but you need to move beyond that and the problem with a lot of North Carolina tribes is that they did not move beyond this initial kind of revitalization process... It’s like when you go to powwows in North Carolina, even up in Cherokee. The kind of dancing is not indigenous to North Carolina. Its Plains style dancing, Oklahoma style dancing, the outfits are mostly Oklahoma style, it is a pan-Indian sort of style.

Over time as the tribe learned more about the Southeastern Indians John and Lynette Jeffries created new regalia that Hazel considers more accurately represents clothing worn in the region in the contact era.

Now one thing that I think the Occaneechi have at least made a stab at is trying to give their outfits a more traditional southeastern flavor. The kind of

outfit that John wears is patterned on what the various southeastern tribes would have been wearing.

John Jeffries acknowledges that his original Plains style regalia is anachronistic. It is now in the Occaneechee<sup>15</sup> State Park in Clarksville, Virginia, displayed not as a representation of authentic Occaneechi life in the past, but as a marker along the contemporary Occaneechi journey of discovery.

### ***The Tribe and the UNC Research Laboratories of Archaeology (RLA)***

The tribe's exploration of its history was greatly enhanced by the fact that in the mid 1980s archaeologists from the Research Laboratories of Archaeology (RLA) at the nearby University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill decided to revisit a site in Hillsborough originally excavated in the late 1930s and early 1940s. At the time of the earlier excavation no connection was made between the community of people in Pleasant Grove and the archaeological presence of Native Americans in Hillsborough. Not only was the identity of the Pleasant Grove community probably unknown to the archaeologists, but the relative distance between the two communities was great in the days when most rural families did not have automobiles. In the interim not only did improvements to transportation create time-space convergence (and thus a greater flow of information) between the two locations, but the ethics and practices of archaeology evolved. The new ethics are codified in the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Whenever human skeletal remains are encountered NAGPRA requires consultation with the living native peoples who reside in the region of an archaeological excavation (Office of State Archaeology).

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<sup>15</sup> Several variations of the spelling of "Occaneechi" existed before the tribe gained widespread recognition, and some of these variations linger.

Archaeological discoveries coincided with the emergence of the identity of the tribe. Lynette Jeffries feels that it is important for people to know the “history before Hillsborough” and said:

People need to know that this was not always just Hillsborough but it was where people lived, fished, farmed, and did a little bit of everything.

The work of the archaeologists<sup>16</sup> provided further confirmation of the Indian presence in the region, important both for the tribe and the wider community.

Both Lynette and John Jeffries expressed appreciation for the positive relationship that has developed between the tribe and the staff of the RLA. Lynette Jeffries said

The staff was just so nice to work with and they don’t hesitate to reach out and say ‘John, we need you to help us with this’ or ‘Forest, you need to come see this.’

The recognition accorded to the Occaneechi by the archaeologists of the RLA, who represent a highly respected source of knowledge and authority (the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), creates a further validation of the identity of the tribe. Lynette Jeffries said

To have it [the presence of Indian villages] verified by the findings of the archaeological dig has just been, it’s almost like we expect to wake up at any minute and find that it was all a dream.

In the Foreword to the CD “Excavating Occaneechi Town” (Davis, et. al. 2003) Lawrence A. Dunmore III, Tribal Chairperson and Council Chief of the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation (at the time of publication) described the relationship between the RLA and the tribe.

Since the 1980s, the Research Laboratories of Archaeology (RLA) of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has undertaken the enormous task of

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<sup>16</sup> The archaeological work was done by R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr., Patrick Livingood, H. Trawick Ward, and Vincas Steponaitis and others (Davis, et. al. 2003).

uncovering the archaeological record of the Yésah or eastern Siouan inhabitants of the Piedmont of Virginia and North Carolina. Perhaps its most effective and informative effort has been in the location and excavation of Occaneechi Town on the Eno River near Hillsborough, North Carolina.

Through their painstaking work, RLA archaeologists have been able to paint a picture of a people during a period of transition. They have actively sought the support of the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation and have given us, the descendants of the historic Occaneechi, Saponi, and related tribes, a more precise understanding of our unique culture and history as well as a firmer connection to our ancestors. The Occaneechi-Saponi people have been and continue to be actively involved with the Research Laboratories of Archaeology throughout its excavations.

The RLA has made a conscious effort to treat our ancestors' remains with respect, allowing us, their children, to reinter them once they have been located and documented.

John Jeffries has mixed feelings about the archaeological excavations. On the one hand he said "I have a problem with them opening up Indian grave sites," but on the other hand he recognizes the enormous contribution that the archaeologists have made to the knowledge base of the tribe.

Those people are professional experts and we learn a lot about the life of our people. About how they really died. A lot of them died from disease. They had plenty of food, they were very wealthy, as far as the food is concerned. There's not a site that they haven't opened, a trash pit they haven't opened, that they had an abundance of food there. Animals and plant life and nuts. So they died and they were young. So they died of disease, we know this. Had it not been for that, this is always a question mark.

John Jeffries also appreciates the respect accorded to the tribe by the RLA.

Down here at the village site, anytime they're going through the site, Steve Davis calls me and tells me they're gonna be digging. The respect that they show is awesome. I go down to visit it and usually they digging and I ask them what they have, where they've got, the trash dumping. I get a call, see they say 'John, we've got a feature here we'd like you to see before we go in it.' And I go down and, he knows when it's [human] remains and once it's open I go down and smudge it.<sup>17</sup> I'll smudge it and then they'll close it back.

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<sup>17</sup> Smudging includes the prayerful ceremonial burning of aromatic herbs. As part of the revitalization of Occaneechi tribal culture, the tribe has borrowed this and other practices from the wider pan-Indian culture.



Figure 5: Artist's Representation of the Occaneechi Village. Copyright, Joe Stiles. Used with permission.

Members of the tribe used the knowledge developed by the RLA to create a replica village modeled on the spatial distribution of features discovered at one of the dig sites. Although John Jeffries said “I never thought I’d see it,” the county loaned a parcel of land in downtown Hillsborough to the tribe on which they constructed the replica village. According to Jeffries this is “the only reconstructed Indian village between Williamsburg and Cherokee.” Jeffries jokingly calls this parcel “the Occaneechi Black Hills.” Located on the floodplain of the Eno River, “Nothing else can be done with it but give it to the Indians.” In a newspaper interview, Jeffries described this as “a one-of-a-kind site, a village site constructed through archaeological research by descendants of the people who were there” (The Herald-Sun, 1999).

The tribe is cognizant of the role they play in local heritage tourism, and of the economic impact of this tourism on the town. The replica village is downhill from the new county courthouse, and immediately adjacent to the open land on which community festivals such as Hog Day and the powwows are held. Activities at the village have been



incorporated into these festivals, and the tribe also holds “Living History Days” when they demonstrate cooking and crafts traditions. According to John Jeffries, the replica village, which remains open throughout the year, “brings tourists into this town. Every time I’m down there there’s somebody coming in to see it from another country.” In another newspaper interview Jeffries was cited as “pointing out that the tourists who come into town looking for the village go into the shops and restaurants, spending money and boosting the economic base” (Schwartz 2000).

Tribal powwows also bring tourists to Hillsborough. The first powwows were held on a farm in Alamance County, but by the mid 1990s the tribe was holding one or two powwows a year in downtown Hillsborough. The photogenic nature of Indian regalia, whether it includes Plains style feathered headdresses, shirtless young men in leather loincloths, or the more sedate and place-specific regalia adopted by the Jeffries family, has proved irresistible to the press. Every powwow has been covered both before and after the event by the three local newspapers (in Hillsborough, Durham, and Raleigh) and often has been covered by local television news.

Although the tribe collects small entrance fees to the powwows, they have not charged tourists to enter the replica village. The value of the village lies in its educational mission, not only to the local community and visitors from afar, but to the members of the tribe as well. John Jeffries has been pleased to see the response to the village by other Occaneechi.

A family come from Caswell on a Saturday to come to the Indian village. The school kids will come anyway, but individual families are coming in to see this village, and that’s what’s so impressive to me. That our own people now are getting interested in it.

The hesitance of older local people of Native American descent to embrace the new tribal identity is being mitigated by the increased recognition of the Occaneechi tribe, the validation of their identity implied by their interactions with RLA, and the presence on the landscape of a village site that replicates the experiences of their ancestors.

According to one of my informants, the local history community was slow to embrace the implications of the emerging Occaneechi identity. She said that the

groundswell towards tribal recognition...[provided] the opportunities to lay the groundwork for a big new chunk of local history... And the historical society uptown was still kind of asleep to the magnitude of what was just outside their purview.

Over time she has seen this change as history nationwide has been redefined to be more ethnically inclusive. She said “The historic society uptown I think would like to do more and more of this, it’s gotten to be more fashionable.” In 2001 the Hillsborough Historical Society gave John and Lynette Jeffries the Engstrom Award for Meritorious Service to the Community.<sup>18</sup>

### ***The drive for state recognition***

The tribe filed an application for tribal recognition by the state of North Carolina in 1990 (Velliquette 2002). Active opposition from other tribes resulted in repeated rejection of the application by The North Carolina Commission on Indian Affairs. The commission is made up of members of recognized tribes, and of institutions associated with the tribes such as colleges and multi-tribal associations. According to Hazel, the commission either did not read or did not understand the documentation provided by the

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<sup>18</sup> According to the Society’s website, the Engstrom Award “has been made to more than 25 individuals and organizations since it was first created nearly 30 years ago. Named for Dr. Mary Claire Engstrom, a founder of the Historical Society, the honor is bestowed upon a person or organization that has promoted and disseminated the history and/or culture of the community” (Hillsborough Historical Society 2005).

Occaneechi that supported the tribe's application for official recognition. Established Indian tribes may have been reluctant to share identity, power, or limited states funds with another tribe, but Lynette Jeffries interprets the rejections as based on "jealousy" for the achievements of the Occaneechi: the powwows, the replica village.

Eventually the tribe sued the commission and an administrative law judge was appointed. The judge not only reviewed the records submitted with the application, but she visited the Pleasant Grove community. Lynette Jeffries said

The commission did not fulfill its legal stated duty to respond. But ... Judge Delores Smith, she actually went to the graveyard and (asked) 'who is this?' (and received the answer) 'my great granddaddy, my great granduncle, that's my grandmamma.' She said 'this is 1700s so that is 200 years right there.' She walked the graveyard, no one from the commission has ever set foot up there.

Judge Smith ruled that the tribe had met the criteria for recognition, and after further legal skirmishing the tribe received recognition in 2002.

The number of people claiming Occaneechi heritage accelerated after tribal recognition. Much of these claims come from outside of the region. John Jeffries said

Now that we are state recognized the doors open. People flinging the curtain back saying 'I'm Occaneechi,' you know. I mean we've got red, white, and black [saying] 'I'm Occaneechi, I'm Occaneechi, here's our history.' So we say 'send it in to the office and we'll read your genealogy.' We have them, oh God, it's far spread across the United States. We get them, a multitude, Occaneechi.

He listed the far flung locations where descendants of the Occaneechi live.

Ohio, they went up in, Pennsylvania, Six Nations up in New York claiming Occaneechi heritage. ... Canada claiming Occaneechi heritage. Trust us, we got one young lady is Filipino and her father was a Jeffries he come right back from Pleasant Grove... And Hillsborough is just opening up like, we're flooded with people in Hillsborough saying 'we're Occaneechi.'

## ***Plans at Pleasant Grove***

Although both the tribe and the town of Hillsborough have benefited from their association, both John Jeffries and Forest Hazel repeatedly made the distinction between the importance of two places to members of the tribe: Hillsborough may be important archaeologically, but it is at Pleasant Grove that the heart of the community is found. Jeffries said “We didn’t have an Indian community here in Hillsborough. Our Indian community was in Pleasant Grove. But in Hillsborough we had families here.” The families living in Pleasant Grove are more than just Indian families living in Pleasant Grove, they are the Indian community in Pleasant Grove. The families, churches, stores and schools form a community that is an extension and intensification of the concept of homeplace. White and black informants in this study discussed the concept of homeplace as applied to a particular house and/or farm, with ownership extending back three or four generations. Although there are still a few white families inhabiting houses that have continuously been in the family since colonial times, neither the white nor black community can claim an entire region extending back nine generations, as the people of Pleasant Grove can.

The tribe’s plans to purchase and collectively own land in Pleasant Grove are detailed at their website titled “Occaneechi Homeland Preservation Project: Bringing the Past and the Future Together” (Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation).

In August 2002, the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation embarked on an ambitious project; to begin buying back a portion of its ancestral lands in the "Little Texas" Community of NE Alamance County, North Carolina. For the first time in over 250 years, the Occaneechi would own land again as a Tribe, to be used for Tribal administrative offices, a Museum, permanent Pow-wow grounds,

and reconstructed 1701 Occaneechi Village.<sup>19</sup> On 30 acres of land, the Occaneechi will build a legacy for their children.

This complex will serve as an educational tool, not just for the Tribal members, but for the public as a whole. Anyone interested in the lifestyle of the Siouan Tribes of the North Carolina and Virginia Piedmont will find the planned complex an invaluable resource. As a tourist attraction, it will, in conjunction with the Tribe's Pow-wows, festivals, and historical programs, draw thousands of visitors into the Alamance county area, while helping preserve the quiet rural way of life in the community.

The facility will also increase the Tribe's self-sufficiency by giving it a place of its own to hold tribal meetings, classes, and ceremonies without having to use the facilities of others. The Tribal Council will meet here, as will the Occaneechi Youth Council. Adult Literacy Classes for Tribal members, Neighborhood Watch, and other programs that would benefit both Tribal members as well as the community at large would be held here. The Tribe's Emergency Food Cupboard would benefit from expanded space.

## **Summary**

To many of the white informants of this study, the contributions of black and native peoples are invisible even today. As I asked the question “who built this town?” in the interviews, all of the people of color interviewed replied with references to three ethnic groups: black, white and Indian. Most of these informants also discussed the presence of all three of these lines within their own ancestry. They connect to Hillsborough’s history through the contributions of all three groups. No white people referred to any non-white ancestors.<sup>20</sup> Many white informants, especially but not exclusively the older people, only cited white people when asked the question “who built this town?” This was not limited to the insiders who referred the contributions of their own families. Some white incomers were also blind to the contributions of people of

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<sup>19</sup> This village will be similar to the replica village in Hillsborough, and modeled on the same archaeological site.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Magnuson of the Trading Path Association discussed several white families who cherish the notion that their ancestors include an “Indian princess,” but none of my white informants revealed any knowledge of Indian ancestry.

color to Hillsborough's past and present. Identification with place history is rooted in personal identity. People of color are aware of the intersecting and overlapping nature of ethnicity and thus can identify with history through the multiple strands of heritage in their own communities. White people do not do this. Although the move towards multiculturalism is increasingly valued and accepted by white people in the history community, the contributions of other ethnic groups are regarded as precisely that: the contributions of others.

The recent contributions of the Occaneechi to Hillsborough's historic identity will make it more difficult for white people to overlook the role that people of color played in the town's past. Elementary school children are exposed to a multicultural history. School field trips to the replica village and John Jeffries' outreach programs in the schools bring Native American history to life. The re-emergence of Indian identity for the Occaneechi tribe has had a dramatic impact on Hillsborough's historic landscape. Triggered initially by the curiosity of a "resident alien" with a similar ethnic background, the tribe's research into its own history and the history of the region led not only to a greater awareness of Indian identity and state recognition for the tribe, but also to additional heritage tourism events in downtown Hillsborough (powwows and Living History Days) and the creation of a replica Indian village. The timing for the tribe's discovery of its history could not have been more fortuitous. Although this took place outside of the framework of Hillsborough's history community, the change in national values to embrace multiculturalism meant that the history community was ready to accept a history other than that based on the deeds of those "great white men." The fact that the timing of the archaeological dig coincided with the emergence of Occaneechi identity

resulted in confirmation and validation of the Occaneechi presence in the region from an authoritative and respected source.

Hillsborough's historic landscape, although still focused on the colonial period and the accomplishments of those of European descent, now incorporates a span of time beginning 1,000 years ago (with the archaeological site and the replica village) and extending into the Civil War period. Features of the landscape now acknowledge the existence of slavery and the historic impact of people of African descent (as discussed in Chapter 4) and the presence of Native Americans long before the arrival of Europeans and Africans. The emergence of Occaneechi identity has changed the historic identity of Hillsborough.