



A History Long Forgotten

Intersections of Race in Early America
By Arwin D. Smallwood

For centuries America has attempted to simplify discussions of race into three broad categories: Native American, African American, and white. But a significant number of Americans have never seen themselves as belonging to only one race. They embrace and celebrate an identity that blends these cultures. In the 2010 U.S. Census, over nine million people identified themselves as multiracial—the majority sharing some combination of Native-American, African-American, or Caucasian heritage.

It is a historical fact that millions of Americans that identify themselves as “black” or “white” have some Native American ancestry. Native Americans, too, have intermixed—between tribal nations and with other races—resulting in a diverse lineage. We are a nation of *mixed* peoples and have been for hundreds of years. This truth is little known and little accepted, both socially and politically. For example, many Native American tribes are litigating who, and who is not, a member—who may receive tribal services or vote in tribal elections. This is just one of many issues of race relations our country has dealt with, despite our pride in “equality for all.” The stakes can be high and dialogue is necessary. Understanding our history is a good first step to understanding each other.

FIRST CONTACT: WHEN RACE MEETS RACE

The origins, history, and impact of Africans and Europeans on Native Americans, particularly those of the Northeastern and Southeastern

Arwin D. Smallwood is Associate Professor of History at the University of Memphis. His research focuses on African-American, Native-American, and Early American history and the meshing of cultures during that era. His published works include *The Atlas of African-American History and Politics* and *Bertie County: An Eastern Carolina History*. Dr. Smallwood’s many fellowships and awards include, among others: a National Endowment for the Humanities Challenge Grant; The John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library Fellowship; the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Fellowship; and the Gilder Lehrman Fellowship.

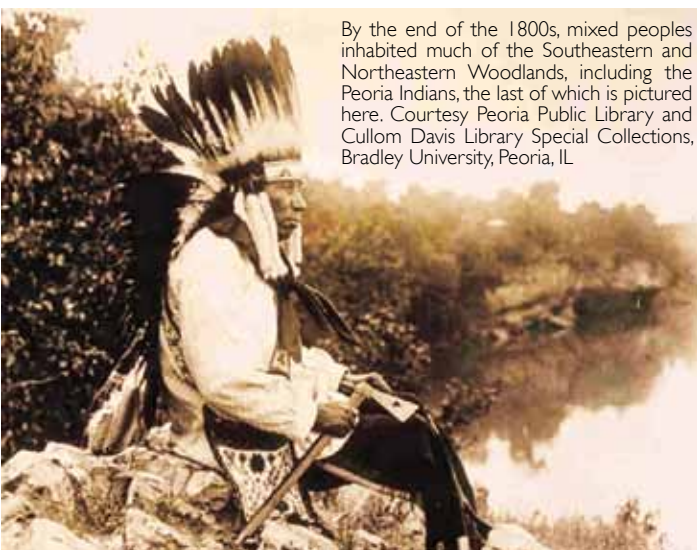
Map of early Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. Courtesy Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. Inset: Spanish map depicting present-day Florida and lands to the east. Courtesy Rick Hill (Tuscarora, Beaver Clan)

Woodlands, began with first contact and early exploration by Europeans. The Spanish were the first to have a major impact on Native peoples of the western hemisphere. As Jack D. Forbes described in his landmark work *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*, Africans and Natives of the Americas were first brought together in large numbers when Columbus and the Spanish took thousands of Caribbean Natives back to Spain as slaves. These Native peoples were mixed with Spaniards and Africans (both slaves and free citizens). In Spain, Portugal, and parts of Western Europe, mixing between Europeans, Sephardic Jews, Moors, Muslims, West Africans, and Christians had been taking place since at least 650 A.D. In the Old World, contact between these groups brought wealth, knowledge—and mixed races.

From 1521 to 1607, tens of thousands of these Native peoples were enslaved with Africans in Europe or on sugar, tobacco, and coffee plantations in the Americas. These peoples sometimes willingly, sometimes through force, intermarried or intermixed with each other and their white owners (the Spanish and Portuguese) throughout the Caribbean and North and South America, creating a mind-boggling array of mixtures and terms to define them. Thus, many Africans and Natives of the Americas became mixed-blood, bi-racial (Native and black) and tri-racial (Native, black, and white) peoples.

In the late 1600s, mixed-race people in most of the thirteen colonies were classified as Mulatto, which could be a person of Indian and white lineage, Indian and African lineage, African and white lineage, or any combination of the three. Once classified as Mulatto or black, poor whites and white indentured servants who intermarried with Indians, Africans, and mixed-bloods eventually were classified as “Negro” and were mandated with their descendants by law to be slaves for the rest of their natural lives. To avoid this fate, many mixed people moved to the frontier and mixed further with what were then powerful Indian nations in the Northeastern and Southeastern Woodlands.

The Tuscarora were one of the first Northeastern Native American tribes to adopt whites and Africans. They began to mix with them as early as 1586, when they absorbed over 300 West Africans, Carib Indians, Muslims, Sephardic Jews, Moors, and Turks left in North Carolina by the English privateer Sir Francis Drake. A year later, they absorbed white colonists



By the end of the 1800s, mixed peoples inhabited much of the Southeastern and Northeastern Woodlands, including the Peoria Indians, the last of which is pictured here. Courtesy Peoria Public Library and Cullom Davis Library Special Collections, Bradley University, Peoria, IL

brought to Roanoke Island by explorer John White. In Northeastern Native communities, mixed-bloods were adopted to replace tribal members lost in wars and to disease. Once adopted, they became one with the tribes and children they had with Native women were seen as full members. As early as the 1600s, there were mixed-race Indians throughout present-day Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina. Tribes such as the Powhatans, Delawares, Nanticokes, and Tuscaroras mixed with former indentured servants (black and white) and runaway slaves. Many of their offspring called themselves “Black Dutch” or “Protégée” to denote in later years that, although they were of mixed race, they were descendants of free blacks, people brought to Virginia by the Dutch in 1619 to work as cheap labor on tobacco plantations. Virginia encouraged free blacks who were former indentured servants to live on its eastern shore and the Roanoke River to serve as buffers between Indians and white settlements.

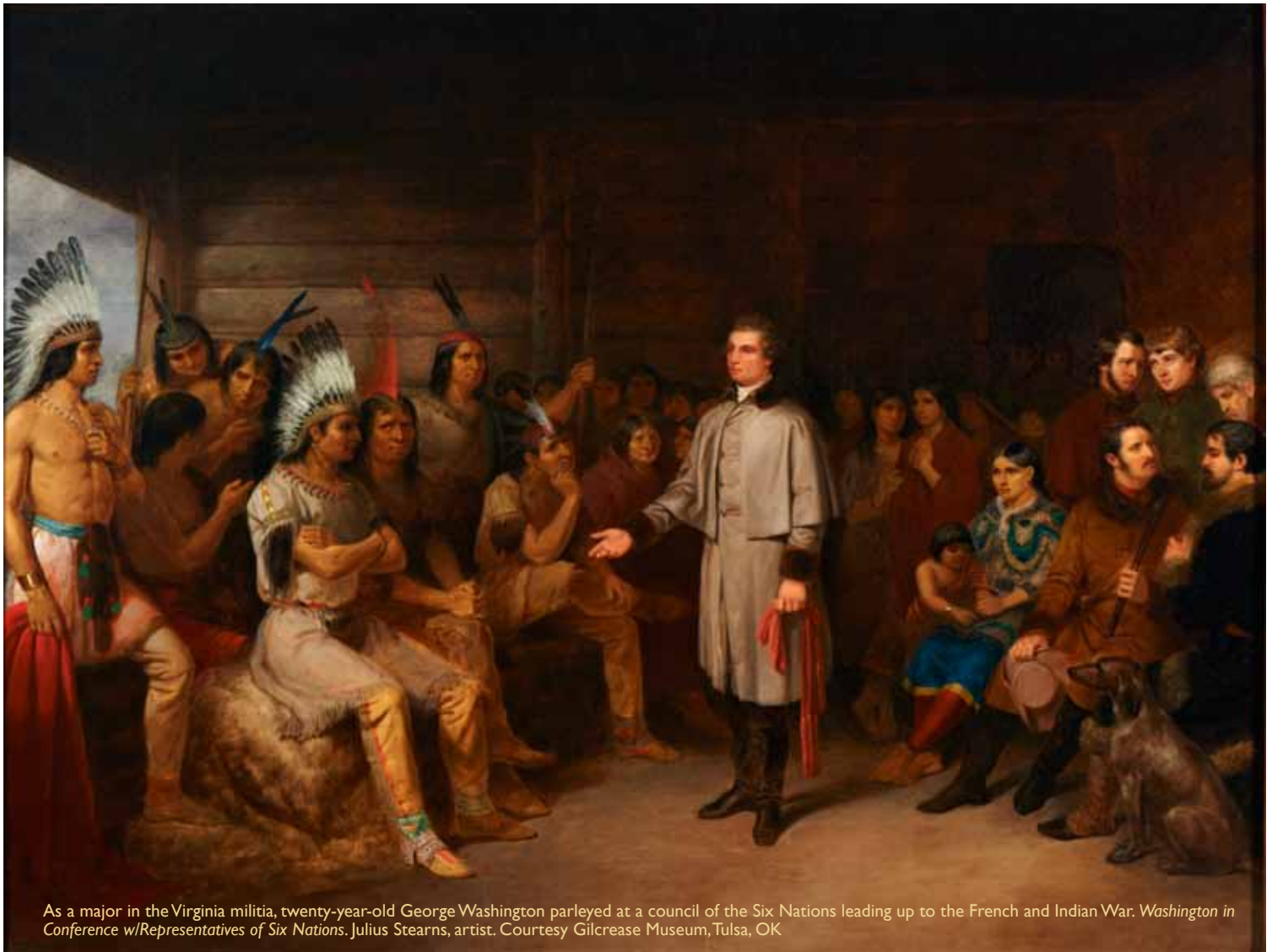
By the 1600s, the Dutch, French, English, and Swedes began to compete with the Spanish for control of sugar islands in the Caribbean, and for trade footholds on the North American Atlantic coast. As Allan Gally notes in his book *The Native American Slave Trade*, when the English arrived in South Carolina in 1670 and began trading in Native American slaves, they found willing partners among Southeastern tribes. Subsequently, tens of thousands of North American Indians were sold into slavery. Some Southeastern Indians (particularly the Cherokee, Creeks, Catawba, Yamasee, and Westos) became slaver traders in exchange for European-manufactured guns, knives, and axes.

DIVIDING NATIONS, COMMINGLING PEOPLES

A huge divide opened between Northeastern and Southeastern tribes over slavery following the Tuscarora War from 1711 to 1713. Although the Tuscarora fought against the Colonies of North and South Carolina and their expansion into Indian lands, the war also involved Southeastern Indian allies who had become heavily involved in and dependent on slaving. The war represented far more than what we traditionally think of as simply an Indian/white conflict over land. It altered the racial and political landscape of what would become the eastern United States. Even before the establishment of U.S. boundaries between the free North and slaveholding South, Northeastern and Southeastern Indians divided the continent into pro-slavery and anti-slavery regions.

In 1715, whites dealing in the Native American slave trade were killed by Southeastern tribes, ending the practice of enslaving Natives. However, Southeastern Indians expanded their involvement in the African Slave Trade, serving as slave catchers and slave holders. From the end of the Tuscarora War, sharp differences remained between Northeastern and Southeastern tribes over African slavery and mixed Indian-African, Indian-African-white peoples. So intense was the warfare between the two groups that the King of England authorized William Byrd of Virginia in 1728 to draw a dividing line on what became the North Carolina/Virginia, Tennessee/Kentucky border. This line separated Northeastern tribes from Southeastern tribes, and non-slaving Indians from slaving Indians.

Southeastern tribes captured and returned runaway African, Indian, and mixed slaves. They also began to practice slavery, amassing thousands of African and mixed-race slaves by the time of Indian Removal in the 1830s. By 1835, at least ten percent of the Cherokee Nation was black slaves.



As a major in the Virginia militia, twenty-year-old George Washington parleyed at a council of the Six Nations leading up to the French and Indian War. *Washington in Conference w/Representatives of Six Nations*. Julius Stearns, artist. Courtesy Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK

The practice was not without conflict among Southeastern tribes. Many full-blood Indians believed that slavery was inconsistent with their traditional ways. Part-white Indians disagreed and were unwilling to give up African slavery. The conflicts led to civil wars in some nations. Many mixed-blood tribal members separated from their nations before and during Indian removal in the 1830s, choosing to live in the swamps and mountains of their ancestral homes instead of moving to Indian Territory.

Even before their removal to Oklahoma, many Southeastern Woodland Indians, including the Cherokee, Creeks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Seminoles (subsequently known as the Five Civilized Tribes), mixed with the African slaves they held, with whites, and with other Native nations. In North Carolina and Virginia, anthropologists note that regional tribes (including Algonquians, Iroquois, and Siouan peoples) were genetically similar before first contact with Europeans, most likely due to the taking and adoption of each other's women and children. Culturally, however, each group was distinct, having its own language, foods, political system, and cultural traditions. These societal systems and folkways—not genetics—are what held these tribes together.

The Iroquois Confederacy (including Mohawks, Oneidas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Senecas, and Tuscaroras, also known as the Six Nations)

avoided enslaving other Natives, mostly due to their involvement with the fur trade which kept them supplied with guns, powder, lead, knives, and axes. From the 1670s, these Northeastern Indians often refused to return runaway slaves from the Colonies, instead choosing to intermix with them and with a host of maroon communities (independent settlements made up of runaway slaves). By the start of the Civil War, mixed-blooded (Indian,



The term *mulatto* was often used to describe mixed-race Indian-black and Indian-black-white, slaves. *Greenleaf's New York Journal and Patriotic Register*, Weds. 12/17/1794. No. 101, Vo. XLVII. Courtesy Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK

black, and white) communities could be documented in nearly every state on the Eastern Seaboard from Georgia to Massachusetts. Northeastern Indians also developed friendly relations with Quakers, Moravians, The Society for the Proclamation of the Gospel, and other antislavery groups. At Quaker and Moravian missions among these tribes, Indians, Africans, and whites lived, worked, and worshiped together, died and were buried together in church cemeteries. Even today, in places like Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, these Moravian cemeteries still remain as a testament to their positive attitudes concerning race.

From the time of first contact with Europeans to the American Revolution, over ninety-five percent of all blacks in this country lived on the South Atlantic coast. Most were moved to the Deep South to clear land and work cotton plantations between 1783 and 1861; therefore, nearly the entire black population (except for then-recent arrivals from West Africa) would have had some Native mixture. From the South, these blacks spread to the Northeast, Midwest, and Far West throughout the early twentieth century. As a result of Indian and African slaving, anthropologists were aware as early as 1890 that the majority of blacks on the East Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico were mixed with Native Americans. These are the reasons that Native-African ancestry is common across America today.

By the time of the Civil War in 1861, 200 years of slavery and racial mixing had had a profound impact on everyone in the Eastern United States. Members of the Six Nations and their mixed-blood kin in New York, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Virginia, and North Carolina sided with the Union. The Six Nations and their allies had become so mixed that, even though they could document their Native ancestry, many were forced to fight with U. S. Colored troops. Most of the Southeastern Nations sided with the Confederacy—a controversial choice, for many had kin who were part black.

By the time Englishman John White and his landing party arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, tens of thousands of Native peoples had been enslaved and mixed with whites, Africans, and other Native Americans. *Captain John and Party Landing at Jamestown, May 14, 1607.* John Mix Stanley, artist. Courtesy Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK

Centuries of history show how American Indians and enslaved Africans became mixed, how their peoples and cultures became blended. In the modern community of Indian Woods in Bertie County, North Carolina (established in 1717 as a Tuscarora reservation), many African Americans today possess this mixed heritage. Communities like Indian Woods are scattered all over the Northeastern and Southeastern United States. These people may have lost the name of their nation, their Native language, and tribal traditions and customs, but the blood mixtures and ancestry remain. They are a microcosm and the United States is a macrocosm of this phenomenon.

EMBRACING A COMPLEX HERITAGE

The merging of culture and blood among Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans is clear when we take the time to examine the early history of our country. Our history is not unlike that of the rest of the Western Hemisphere, where peoples like those of Brazil readily embrace their mixed heritage. But because of race-based slavery, Jim Crow laws, segregation, Indian Removal, acculturation, and other exclusionary measures, many of our ancestors were forced to deny a mixed-race heritage. Those that could, often identified themselves as “white” to survive. Others, who appeared to have some mixture of black races, were forced to identify themselves as “Colored” or “black.” As a result, today, a significant number of mixed-race people identify with tribes and other groups but cannot readily document a connection to them.

If we are to fully understand and appreciate what it means to be Native American, African American, or American we must fully understand and acknowledge the relationship between Indians, Africans, and Europeans over the past 500 years. Explaining how we came to be and acknowledging the role of mixed-race people in America’s evolution will help us deal more sensitively with modern conflicts over ethnicity and identity—and, in time, embrace the *whole* of our rich, diverse heritage. ☺

