

We Rise, We Fall, We Rise

A descendant of the capital city's original inhabitants comes home

BY GABRIELLE TAYAC

I WAS BORN AND RAISED in New York City, but I come from a people with a traditional territory encompassing Washington, D.C.—the swath of land in Maryland between the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay. We are called the Piscataway. Our name translates as “where the waters blend” and refers to the location of our main village at the confluence of Piscataway Creek and the Potomac River. More specifically, Washington was the home of the Anacostan, who lived under the influence of the Piscataway central chief, the *tayac*, although it is probable that they maintained a high level of autonomy. Their name has been translated as “trading town.” (The Anacostia River is named for them.) Rivers were not borders to them, but highways and connectors between disjointed lands and peoples.

As a distinct people, the Anacostan could not withstand the disease epidemics, land loss or trading wars that Europeans visited upon them. To the Iroquois Confederacy who protected them after the establishment of English hegemony, the Piscataway are known as the Conoy. The word is believed to be an English linguistic corruption of the Iroquoian word *Kanawa*, meaning “the rapids,” and alludes to our lands at Great Falls in the Potomac where water rushes over boulders, forming a divide between mountains and coastal plains. Our point of view seems to be defined over time by waterways.

What I see here in Washington are lands that reach into deep time—and have been cultured for millennia. Like groundwaters that continually seek new flows, the indigenous peoples of this place—as well as those across the Western Hemisphere—have sought different means to endure. Some did so by resisting, adapting or retreating. But many others did not survive the onslaught of colonial and national expansions. In 1492, between 5 million and 13 million individuals existed within contemporary U.S. boundaries, according to Cherokee demographer Russell Thornton; by

1900, the number of indigenous peoples had declined to 250,000.

Although many peoples were lost, and across the continent many still face ethnic persecution, the people are on their way back. The year 2000 Census reported that 2.5 million American Indians lived in the United States—an extraordinary population recovery. An additional 1.6 million reported being American Indian and at least one other race, for a total of 4.1 million. In fact, the Census Bureau predicts that the American Indian population will double by the year 2050. South of the (artificially constructed) border with Mexico, there are as many as 44 million indigenous people today. As Native poet and activist John Trudell teaches, “We rise, we fall, we rise.”

The story of the Chesapeake Bay area is germane to many places that are seemingly devoid of a Native presence. Yet nowhere in this hemisphere can be truly described as vacant of an indigenous aspect. When Capt. John Smith led expeditions in 1608 throughout the Chesapeake—the name has been translated as “great shellfish bay” or “mother of waters”—seeking and seizing resources for his settlement at Jamestown, he recorded dozens of distinct peoples. Recently, I viewed computerized archaeological maps of the Potomac River and its drainages. I searched for Native American sites back to the earliest human occupation. Red dots indicating sites were so densely clustered on the waterways that they fused. Our peoples were truly numerous in and around Washington, D.C. at one time.

My grandfather, Chief Turkey Tayac, who was born in 1895, spent his life making a stand on the preservation and rebirth of Algonquian peoples, including his own Piscataway com-

GABRIELLE TAYAC, a sociologist, is a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

munity. I was raised in an intensely liberating environment, where the unusual mix of my Jewish mother and my Piscataway father was not seen as odd: Greenwich Village in the 1970s. My father, Joseph, had left Washington, D.C. in 1944 at the age of 16 and joined the merchant marines. He ended up in Normandy on D-Day, and went on to navigate 100 sea voyages over the span of his 40-year career. His appearance confounds some people. When he visits his southern Maryland homeland, “locals” often assume he is from somewhere else. Arizona? South Dakota? Hawaii? China? “Can we show you how to eat that crab?” they ask. The look on their faces when they find out he is native to the region is priceless.

As an adolescent I became conscious that no one else could keep our heritage alive but ourselves. So I eventually returned to this Piscataway homeland and to Indian Country, which is also a state of mind and envelops every inch of this beloved land.

IN 1999, Native peoples and allies came together, in the shadow of the Capitol, to launch a process of truth and reconciliation. On a September morning, with prayers and solemnity, we lovingly opened the skin of the earth and broke ground for the National Museum of the American Indian.

We convened not far from the old lands of the Anacostans, to recognize the aboriginality of the land and also to bring the different Native peoples’ experiences to light. Beginning with the drum group, we affirmed a promise to tell the truth: the truth about what happened to us, about who we are now and about who we want to be. The Vietnam Era Veterans Intertribal Association and North American Iroquois Veterans Association color guards danced in flags—those of the United States and of Native nations. Smithsonian and government officials were there to enact the promise. Hundreds of Native and non-Native people bore witness.

Then the spiritual leaders came, from four directions. They came from the south, Quechuas of Peru. They came from the west, Native Hawaiians. They came from the north, Inuit. To bless the east, my uncle Chief Billy Tayac and his son, Mark, answered the museum’s invitation. Uncle Billy had handed me a plastic bottle of water labeled *sipi*, which I knew meant “river” in Algonquian languages. “Hold this for me,” he requested. I thought that he had brought the bottle in case he got thirsty. But it turned out to be for a much more serious purpose.

“The earth is still here,” my uncle proclaimed as the blessing began, “the water is still here. And *we* are still here.” With soil from our burial grounds at Moyaone, in southern Maryland, he sprinkled the ground. Then he opened the bottle and poured its contents out. “This is water from the sacred Potomac,” he explained. The ceremony ended with the old anthem of the American Indian Movement.

It felt, in that moment, that centuries of history had completed the turn of a great wheel: a wheel that in its 500-year revolution had wrought shattering cultural cataclysms; but

one that had left enough of us standing to begin a healing process for both Native people and those who had come to our shores. We still have a long journey, but this is one that many recognize we must take together. We are all part of the story of this land now, and the choice to follow in our own ways the original instructions—the great laws given to our people by the Creator—is open wide before us. ●

From *Native Universe: Voices of Indian America*
by Gerald McMaster and Clifford E. Trafzer.
©2004 NMAI Smithsonian Institution.
Reprinted with permission of the National
Geographic Society.