

The Nanticoke Story

BY CHARLES C. CLARK IV

A former tribal leader sheds light on his people's rich past, difficult struggles, and hopeful — if tenuous — future



Nanticoke Indians gather at a powwow in 1930, a tradition that the local tribe continues to this day during the first weekend after Labor Day at a site near Millsboro. The long history of the Clark family as chiefs is evident here, as Robert Clark at far right and Ferdinand Clark at far left both served as chief before their brother, Charles C. "Little Owl" Clark, took the leadership role.

The Nanticoke Indians of Delaware.

Who are we?

Where did we come from?

Where have we been?

And perhaps most importantly, where are we going today?

The following account (and accompanying commentary) offer an insider's look into these questions. They are from the eyes, heart and mind of a man whose family name is synonymous with the Nanticoke Indian Tribe of Delaware, and who is directly descended from 122 years of consecutive family Nanticoke tribal chiefs.

I myself served as assistant chief for more than a decade, and also served as the annual powwow emcee for at least as long, in addition to being a tribal drummer and singer. I fought for Native American burial rights and grave protection in Delaware, and won. I was vocal about native affairs and kept a conversation about them alive within the State of Delaware. I was, and still am, involved. With that in mind, here are the answers to the above questions, offered with intimate knowledge, complete candor and great care.

The origins of the tribe are wrapped in the mists of time. According to tribal legends, the people known today as the Nanticoke Indians were once a part of a mass migration of indigenous people called the Great Algonquin Migration. They moved eastward from what is now Arizona after the last Ice Age, considered by the Nanticoke to have been a cataclysmic sacred cleansing of the Earth due to mankind's continued wickedness and living out of balance with the will of the Creator, known to them as Gitschi Manitto.

After this latest cleansing — the fourth to occur to the world at the hand of Gitschi Manitto, according to tribal legend — the Earth once again rebalanced itself. However, every place that had been dry was now covered by water. Places that once were cold became hot. Mountain ranges connected to what are now the ocean floors became islands; where islands once were now stand the mountain ranges we are familiar with. The Old Ones



Janie Harmon, a descendant of Isaac Harmon, a prominent Nanticoke landowner, uses a mortar-and-pestle-style device to grind corn into meal in 1922. Behind her is a traditional Nanticoke corn crib.

said the glory and evidence of our once-great native cultures now lie buried beneath water and earth. However, ancient prophecies predict that further Earth changes will one day raise those sunken treasures and that our glorious past will again be revealed.

According to both scientific evidence and tribal lore, the people within the Great Migration broke into separate smaller tribes as they moved across the land, settling into areas that best suited the different family-based bands' wants, needs and preferences. The native people became separated yet remained bound by a shared history, remembering and long-honoring their ancient connections.

These early "Nanticoke" did not use that name for themselves during this time. The word never even became associated with the original tribe — which eventually settled on the Delmarva Peninsula — until 1608, courtesy of English explorer and plunderer Capt. John Smith. "Nanticoke" is a European-based name thrust upon us by Smith, who simply consolidated

several separate bands of related American Indians known by the names Kuskarawaok, Nentego, Nantaquak and others, and forever referred to us all collectively as "Nanticoke," a practice obviously still in play today.

Each of the original tribal names refer either to aquatic-based practices or specific known locations. "Nanticoke" in time came to broadly mean "The People of the Tidalwater" due to our preference for living near and along Delmarva's ocean coastline and many waterways, as well as for our nautical-based lifestyle. During the colder months of the year we retreated to our permanent established homes and villages located inland, away from the fierce coastal winter storms. When the weather became warmer we migrated toward the nearby ocean coastline and countless connected waterways where it was cooler and where we could collect the boundless fish and shellfish the region offered. We especially craved oysters in large quantities, heaping numerous shell pits along the Delaware coast, as documented by early settlers and colonists.

We would plant native crops like corn, beans and squash — a sustainable diet referred to by us as "The Three Sisters" — on our well-established inland farms that the Nanticoke had cleared centuries earlier. In this way, when we would embark on our annual trek for reliable summer seafood, other food would be waiting for us back at home when we returned.

We had long-established, documented villages ranging as far away as modern-day Maryland and Virginia, and we were heavily populated along the Nanticoke River near Seaford, where John Smith first encountered us. My tribe — unlike the powerful Powhatan Confederacy in Virginia or our sister tribe, the Conoy (whom Capt. Smith also encountered) — has the distinction of being the only one that tried to drive away the invading Europeans when they appeared on our shores. Across the Eastern Shore to the Atlantic coastline, from present-day Port Charles, Va., to Saint Georges Creek in northern Delaware, the Nanticoke roamed and called these lands their home. But in time the English and Dutch settlers drove the Nanticoke and other once-powerful tribes in the region to near extinction or annihilation due to warfare and the spreading of European diseases such as smallpox and measles.

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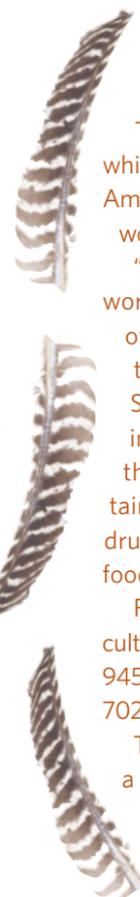
Relations between the newcomers and Nanticoke broke down completely by 1642, when Maryland colonists, who also controlled sections of present-day southern Delaware, declared war against the tribe. They were armed with muskets and other guns, cannons and knives, while we Nanticoke had bows and arrows, spears and war clubs. Eventually, we learned how to use the new weapons they brought into our homeland, and fought this war until 1668 when we surrendered under Emperor Chief Unnacokasimmon.

Nanticoke Indian Powwow

The 40th annual Nanticoke Indian Powwow, which gives attendees a firsthand view of Native American culture, will take place Sept. 9-10, at a wooded site 7 miles east of Millsboro off Route 24. "Powwow" is from the Algonquin Indian dialect word "pauwau," which is a celebratory gathering of Native American tribes and people. The Nanticoke Indian Powwow will begin at noon on Sept. 9 with the formal entry of dancers wearing colorful, traditional native clothing, and throughout the weekend visitors will be entertained by Native American storytelling, drumming, singing and dancing. Arts, crafts and food will also be available.

For more information about this unique two-day cultural event, call the Nanticoke Indian Center at 945-3400 or the Nanticoke Indian Museum at 945-7022, or email info@nanticokeindians.org.

The powwow takes place off Piaffe Lane, about a half mile from the Nanticoke Indian Museum. The parking lot is located at 26800 John J. Williams Highway (Route 24). ■



That marked the beginning of the dismal reservation period for the Nanticoke Indian Tribe, with lands being established in Virginia, Maryland and Delaware for our people. But in time even those lands were taken away. When faced with this upheaval, the tribal brothers and sisters did one of three things: About one-third went westward along with the Delaware (Lenni Lenape) Indians

and the Shawnee tribe; they fought alongside brave Chief Tecumseh in his many campaigns against settlers encroaching on native lands deeded by treaties that were ignored by the government and citizens alike. Those Nanticoke ultimately landed in Oklahoma and Kansas, their identity over time swallowed up by the larger tribes they allied themselves and inter-married with.

Another third migrated far north into the land of the Iroquois Confederacy of Indians, eventually living among them in northern New York and Canada. Shortly after the end of the 19th century, my



This young Indian girl was photographed in 1911 in the Nanticoke community that was established along the Indian River near Millsboro.

great-grandfather Chief William Russell Clark (Chief Wynikako) was reunited in Canada with the old Nanticoke chiefs still living in the Six Nations reservation, specifically Chief Josiah Hill. It was the



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Chief William Russell "Wynikako" Clark served as the first Delaware tribal leader from 1881 to 1928.

first time the chief of the surviving Nanticoke in the Maryland/Delaware region held a *pauwau* (powwow) with a Six Nations' Nanticoke chief in several decades.

Despite this diaspora, the remaining third stayed behind in their Delmarva Peninsula homeland, ultimately settling again in large numbers along the Indian River and the surrounding areas of Sussex County while adapting to life in a world dominated by white Europeans-turned-Americans. In February 1852, a delegation of the Nanticoke Indians living in the Six Nations reservation on the Grand River in Ontario made a trip back to Maryland in an unsuccessful attempt to secure payment from the State of Maryland — for some \$666 to be exact, as recorded in the state archives — for lands sold beneath the tribe's feet without payment ever being received.

This Canadian delegation's leaders made a visit to my great-great-great-great-grandmother Lydia Clark, Nau-Gwa-Ok-Wa, whose name means "She Who Bows Her Head in Prayer." As the last fluent Nanticoke speaker in the Delmarva Peninsula (and recognized as a prominent tribal matriarch), she was still able to speak with them in the ancient tongue of our ancestors. She died four years later, in 1856, and was buried in a documented Nanticoke Indian burial ground situated a few miles north of the Indian River. A monument honoring Lydia Clark, erected in 1927 by the National Society of Colonial Dames of America, still stands on Nanticoke ancestral land in Riverdale.

In 1853 a report issued by the Maryland House of Delegates Select Committee documented the treatment the surviving Nanticoke had reported a year earlier. One unnamed Indian man had stated to the committee, "We are driven back until we can retreat no further. Our hatchets are broken — our bows are snapped — our fires are nearly gone out. A little longer and the white man will cease to pursue us, for we shall cease to exist."

That same year of 1852, my great-grandfather William Russell Clark was born. He served as the first Delaware Nanticoke tribal chief beginning in 1881 when the tribe first received official recognition by the State of Delaware, a title he held until his death in 1928. His son (and my grandfather), Charles C. "Little Owl" Clark, inherited the title after him, in time passing it on to my father, Chief Kenneth S. "Red Deer" Clark, in 1971 upon my grandfather's sudden death. I served as assistant chief at my father's side for more than a decade until we both resigned our positions in 2003 due to ongoing political struggles with certain tribal members and severe differences of opinion regarding important leadership decisions.

Many of the Nanticoke who had occupied the Indian River area during the 1800s became quite wealthy and were prominent landowners in the region. William Russell Clark and Isaac Harmon were two such landholders, owning adjoining property along the northern banks of the river from Rosedale Beach to Riverdale.



Chief Kenneth S. "Red Deer" Clark led the Nanticoke tribe in the modern era, taking the reins from 1971 to 2003.

They were joined by the Wrights, the Courseys, the Johnsons and Jacksons and other prominent tribal members in populating much of the area referred to as the Indian River Hundred, long known to be Nanticoke territory. Here we had our own churches, our own schools and our own marketplaces, all located somewhat off



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A Few Thoughts on the Tribe's Future

Where is the Nanticoke Indian Tribe headed today?

That answer depends upon whom — and when — you ask.

Since my father's and my departure as tribal leaders in 2003 — accompanied by other members who agreed with our positions and also voted with their feet — the tribe has been trying

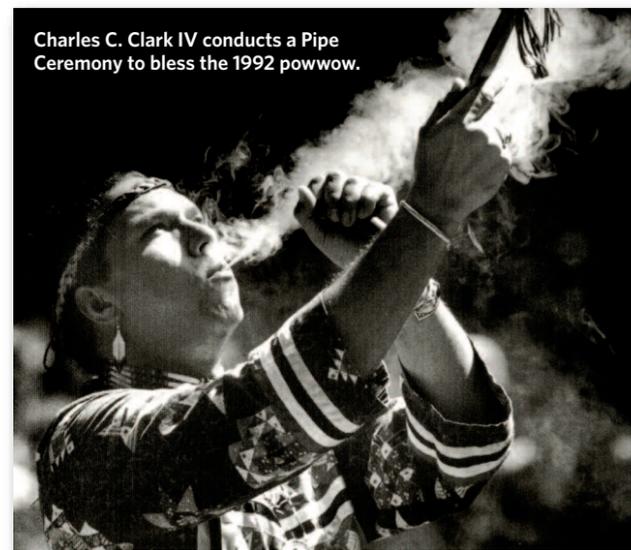
to find itself again. The lack of continuity and longevity of leadership since then has left it somewhat rudderless. And shortly after we resigned our positions, a succession of deaths throughout the tribe simultaneously depleted the community of peripheral and important leaders and well-known elders. Years of momentum was lost with their passing and the void they left behind has not yet been filled.

Most noticeably missing is a strong connection between Nanticoke past and present. This is alarming when generational continuity is not only expected but required in order for a tribe to remain legitimate, autonomous and true. The passing of the eldest Nanticoke generations has stripped the community of much of its institutional memory. The tribe must find some way soon to correct this unfortunate situation.

However, with the tribe's first female chief in place — Natosha Carmine — and an interested, willing and aggressive Tribal Council, the tribe is better poised for success at the present time than it has been in a few years. Hanging in the balance is the Nanticoke people's very identity as Native Americans. It is a precarious — and monumental — tipping point. The tribal members know all too well how much is at stake. Simply put, it is an all-or-nothing proposition.

I obviously wish them only the best. How could I want anything less for my people, whom I love? ■

— Charles C. Clark IV



Charles C. Clark IV conducts a Pipe Ceremony to bless the 1992 powwow.

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Charles C. "Little Owl" Clark became chief of the Nanticokes after his father, William Russell Clark, died in 1928.

the beaten path. But now our ancestral homeland is crisscrossed with so many new roadways, communities, and such incredible rampant growth that our grandparents would not even recognize the area.

Today we, their descendants, continue to cling to our "Indian" community interspersed among the disparate farmlands and beach lands that tribal members still own here and there. Although the Nanticoke land base has shrunk considerably in the last few decades, we still manage to maintain four tribally owned properties: the Indian Mission Church, the Nanticoke Indian Museum site, the Nanticoke Indian Center site and facility, and several acres of woodland along nearby Mount Joy Road.

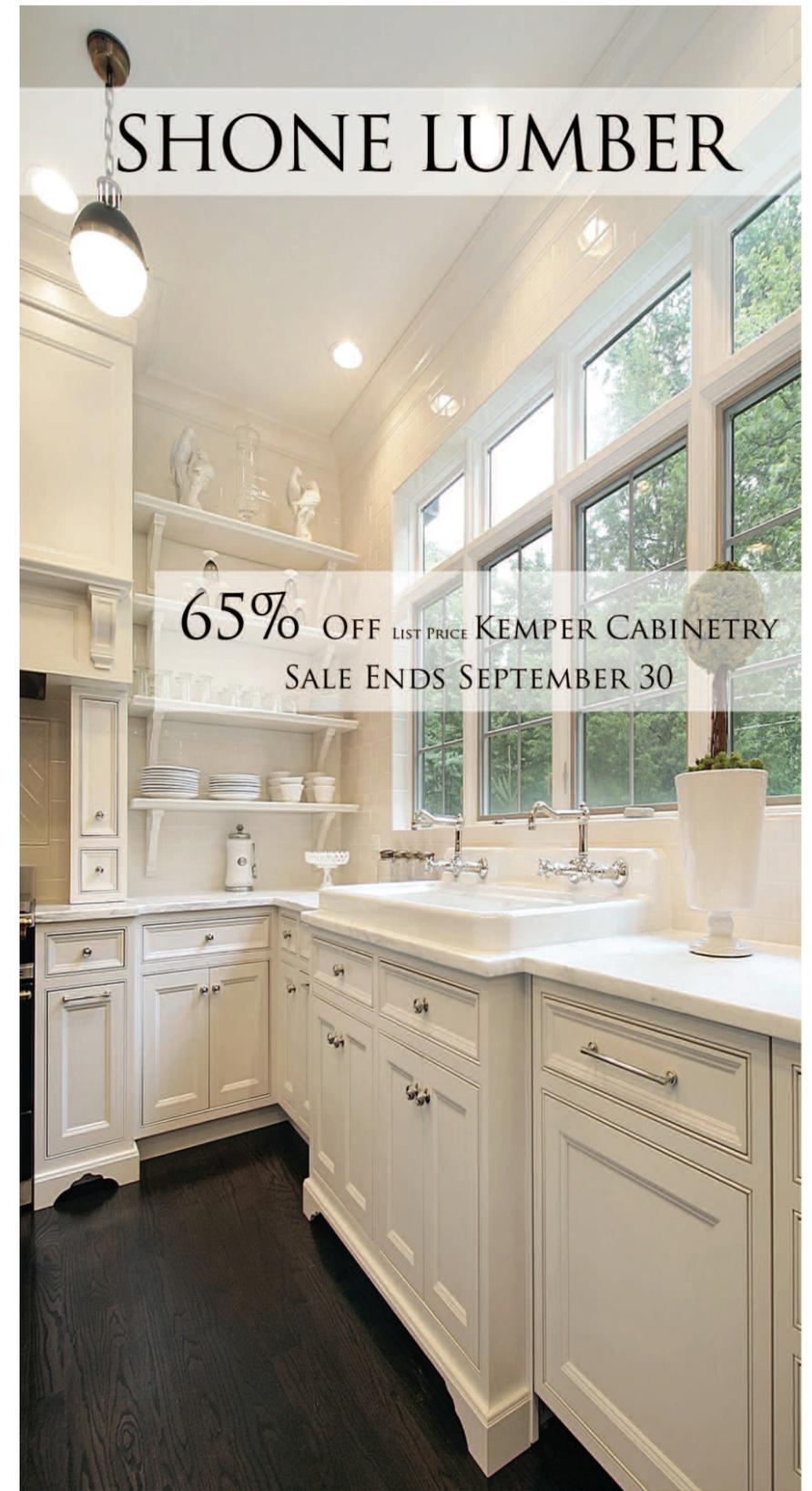
Tribal members still hold an annual powwow for the public to enjoy the weekend after Labor Day, the largest annual display of local Indian culture. Monthly tribal meetings are held in the Nanticoke Indian Center, led by new, well-intentioned tribal leaders, and the tribe's presence and culture are promulgated nearly daily at the museum, open since 1984. We hold other smaller events throughout the year to engender cultural pride and identity retention among the surviving members who still call themselves Nanticoke. ■

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