

3 Va. tribes gain state recognition

By Vincent Schilling, Today correspondent March 5, 2010

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Photo by Vincent Schilling

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RICHMOND, Va. – The Virginia Indian Patowomeck Tribe has ended a 16-year battle for state recognition in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Approximately one week after an appearance by Patowomeck tribal member and entertainer Wayne Newton, the Virginia House and Senate approved [HJ 150](#) granting the tribe state recognition and a seat on the [Virginia Council on Indians](#).

The [Nottoway Indian Tribe of Virginia](#) and the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Indian Tribe received state recognition and VCI seats approximately one week after the Patowomecks.

The passing of the Senate and House resolutions end a 21-year drought since any Indian tribe has been recognized in the Commonwealth.

When witnesses were invited to testify prior to official voting on the Senate and House floors, Newton, who canceled a performance in Las Vegas to testify, transformed the first committee meeting at the Virginia House of Delegates in Richmond, Va. into a media circus.

Newton, 67, brought more than his charisma in making a bid for state recognition for the Patowomecks. After telling House Committee members he was born in Norfolk and raised in Fredericksburg, he pulled out a framed portrait of his grandfather wearing a full Indian headdress and a peace medal given to his distant grandfather by George Washington.

“When my dad was working my grandfather had to take care of me because I had bronchial asthma. When the other kids went out and played they didn’t want me along because I was a little too slow for them, so I had a chance to spend that time with my grandfather,” Newton said.

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“He was proud of his Indian heritage, and he talked about it to me and taught me things that I never would have learned, had I not been sick and had been able to go out and play with the other kids.”

*– Wayne Newton,
Patawomeck tribal member*

Newton also explained the day he told his daughter about her Native heritage. “I sat her down on the steps because it was a very important day for me – and a very emotional day. I explained to her that she was part Indian, and part American – she looked at me as only a 7-year-old could and said, ‘does this mean I am half Indian and half human?’

“I realized our heritage, had to be documented more than ever before,” Newton said.

Patawomeck Chief Robert “Two Eagles” Green, Newton’s cousin, was pleasantly surprised to see Newton show up at his own expense in defense of the tribe. “I originally asked him to write a letter. He said, ‘Heck, no, I’m coming to testify live.’ He had a show in Vegas and canceled the performance so he could testify. I am sure it cost him a pretty penny.”

Green also spoke to the House Committee members and said state recognition would enable the tribe to ensure the protection of sacred sites and burial mounds. “If I appear nervous it’s because the heritage of my father and grandfather and their father and grandfather rest on your decision. Some people say that Indians can survive without recognition, but in this day and age, they can’t.”

After the testimony presented by Newton and Green, a committee member asked Newton if he was from Virginia, Newton answered “yes” and House Speaker Bill Howell, R-Stafford County – who sponsored the bill added, “He won his first music contest at the Kiwanis Club.”

After Newton’s testimony, the room cleared considerably. Without receiving the same level of media hype, the Nottoway Indian Tribe of Virginia and the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Indian Tribe introduced similar bids for state recognition.

The tribes claimed two separate tribal structures and different chiefs. They have both undergone separate processes to achieve recognition. The Nottoway Indian Tribe has gone through VCI in an attempt to gain a recommendation while the Cheroenhaka as of yet has not.

Committee members asked the tribes if they could combine efforts to become one tribe.

However, the tribes denied the request and Nottaway Chief Lynette Allston told the committee there were two Chickahominy recognized tribes in Virginia. The committee approved both resolutions.

The initial measure passed unanimously and eventually passed on the House and Senate floors, so on Feb. 26, both Nottoway tribes were officially recognized in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

“It’s been a long journey,” Allston said. “Now is an appropriate moment in history to advance an accurate and truly balanced cultural exploration of all the relationships of all people in Virginia. We have much to gain from reaching out to share our cultures.”

“Newton is ecstatic,” Green said. “I am overwhelmed. I never thought it would go that fast.”

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