

American Indians - Part 5: Today ^[1]

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American Indians

by William G. DiNome, 2006

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Sparked in part by the national civil rights movement and its gains, and also by the continued building of cultural identity and institutions among Indians themselves, a new surge of interest in the status of North Carolina's American Indian people marked the last third of the twentieth century. In 1971 the [North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs](#) ^[7] was established in response to requests from concerned native people in the state. The commission serves as the primary advocate for American Indian rights in North Carolina and assists Indian communities in establishing programs and associations for the improvement of their health, education, housing, and economic situation.

Through legislative and other action, the state of North Carolina officially recognizes eight American Indian [tribes](#) ^[8] and several chartered Indian groups. These include the [Coharie](#) ^[9] tribe, the Cumberland County Association for Indian People, the [Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians](#) ^[10], the Guilford Native American Association, the [Haliwa-Saponi](#) ^[11] tribe, the [Sappony](#) ^[12], the [Meherrin Indian](#) ^[13] tribe, the [Metrolina Native American Association](#) ^[14], the [Occaneechi Band of Saponi Nation](#) ^[15], the [Triangle Native American Society](#) ^[16], the [Lumbee](#) ^[17] tribe, and the [Waccamaw-Siouan](#) ^[18] tribe. North Carolina also is home to people who identify with or are enrolled members of many other American Indian tribal groups, some of which continue to seek fuller recognition from the state. These include the Tuscarora Nation of North Carolina, the [Southern Band Tuscarora Indian tribe](#) ^[19], Cherokee Indians of [Hoke County](#) ^[20], and the Hattadare Indian Nation.

In 2002 [Governor Michael Easley](#) ^[21] proclaimed November as Indian Heritage Month in North Carolina. Special events were planned during that month to draw attention to the contributions native people have made to the state and to their particular cultural heritage. Other annual and seasonal events celebrate American Indian culture and history in the state. Two outdoor dramas portray aspects of the history of Indian people in the state: [Unto These Hills](#) ^[22], performed in Cherokee, tells the story of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians at the time of removal, and [Strike at the Wind!](#) ^[23], performed at the North Carolina Indian Cultural Center near Lumberton, focuses on the history and legend surrounding [Henry Berry Lowry](#) ^[24]. Cultural events such as powwows are held throughout the year; these celebrations have become increasingly popular as an opportunity for native and nonnative people alike to participate in and observe traditional storytelling, dance, singing, crafts, and drumming. A number of fairs and festivals are held in and around the Cherokee community. These include the Spring Ramp Festival, held each April to celebrate the arrival of ramps, a member of the onion and garlic family with deep ties to the foodways and traditional medicinal practices of the Cherokee people, and the Cherokee Fall Fair, held the first week of October and featuring crafts, food, storytelling, and traditional stickball games.

By the early 2000s the Indian population in North Carolina was just under 100,000 people, or approximately 1.24 percent of the total population. This was the largest Indian population of any state east of the Mississippi River and the eighth largest in the United States. American Indians live in all [100 North Carolina counties](#) ^[25]. The only tribe in North Carolina recognized fully by the U.S. government remains the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, whose territory is officially known as [Qualla Boundary](#) ^[26]. In March 1997, to boost their local economy, the tribe followed the lead of other Indian groups across the nation and opened a casino. The successful Harrah's Cherokee Great Smoky Mountains Casino significantly increased the business of motels, cabins, campgrounds, retail shops, and restaurants in and around the region. Tribal attractions such as the [Oconaluftee Indian Village](#) ^[27] and the [Museum of the Cherokee Indian](#) ^[28] offer tourists a more complete picture of Cherokee life and history than was previously available. Of the other state-recognized tribes and organizations, only the Lumbee (with more than 42,000 enrolled members, the largest tribe by far in the state) have achieved a degree of federal recognition, but by 2005 the tribe had not yet achieved full recognition from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Efforts to secure full recognition and tribal benefits from the federal government were ongoing.

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