

Lumbee Indians - Part 2: Origins ^[1]

Lumbee Indians

by Glenn Ellen Starr Stilling

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Part ii: Theories of Lumbee Origins

The earliest and perhaps most famous theory of the Lumbee tribe's origins is the so-called Lost Colony theory, proposed in 1885 by [Robeson County](#) ^[8] legislator and local historian [Hamilton McMillan](#) ^[9] and later expanded upon by North Carolina historian [Stephen B. Weeks](#) ^[10]. The theory holds that the Lumbee are descendants of [Sir Walter Raleigh](#) ^[11]'s Roanoke Island colonists. The colonists left their settlement, according to the theory, sometime after [Governor John White](#) ^[12] had returned to England in 1587, moving south to an island or mainland location called "Croatoan"—the sole word White and his men found carved in a wooden post upon returning to the island in 1590. There the English colonists settled among and intermarried with the friendly Croatan Indians, and by 1650 they migrated to the area of present-day Robeson County. The Lost Colony theory gained considerable credence among Lumbee people as well as non-Indians when Lumbee historian and author Adolph Dial argued in favor of it during the latter half of the twentieth century.

John R. Swanton, an anthropologist with the Smithsonian Institution, wrote a report for the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1933 on the probable origins of the Lumbee. His research concluded that the tribe descended mainly from Siouan tribes, primarily the Saura (Cheraw) and Keyauwee. The Saura theory of origin has also been supported by Jack Campisi, an ethnohistorian who was the primary author of the tribe's massive 1987 petition to the Bureau of Indian Affairs seeking full federal tribal recognition, and by William Sturtevant, editor of the Smithsonian Institution's *[Handbook of North American Indians](#)* ^[13].

Several other theories have been advanced, including the Cherokee theory, which states that during the Tuscarora War of 1711–13, Cherokees joined Col. John Barnwell in fighting the Tuscarora and marched home through Robeson County. Some Cherokees may have remained there and intermarried with local residents. [Angus Wilton McLean](#) ^[14], a Robesonian who served as governor, advocated this theory before Congress in 1913. Mary W. Norment, in an 1875 book, also proposed descent from the [Tuscarora](#) ^[15]. Lumbee oral tradition reveals no fewer than four other migration theories, documented by anthropologist Robert K. Thomas in an unpublished 1976 report.

Archaeological research reported by Stanley Knick in 1988 established that the land that makes up Robeson County has been inhabited by native peoples continuously from 12,000 B.C. (the early Paleo-Indian period), through the Archaic period (8000–1000 B.C.) and Woodland period (1000 B.C.–1600 A.D.), and up to the present day. In addition, Robeson County was a zone of cultural contact from the Middle Archaic period through the Woodland period and into colonial times. Knick argues that Indians from tribes of three eastern Carolina language families (Algonquian, Iroquoian, and Eastern Siouan) interacted with the Indians already living in the area. Early in the colonial period, European diseases and Indian wars began to decimate the southeastern tribes. As these processes unfolded, remnants of tribes from the three Eastern Carolina language families—primarily Saura and Siouan-speaking Indians—coalesced with the Indians already living in geographically isolated Robeson County. The area, dominated by swamps and other marginal lands for settlement and agriculture, did not generally interest whites, so the Indians' chance of survival was increased. Evidence suggests that the amalgamated tribe that became the Lumbee was in place in Robeson County by 1750.

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