

**DRUMS ALONG THE DELAWARE
AN URBAN INDIAN MANIFESTO
FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM**

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In a city known for its Revolutionary history, another revolution is quietly taking place, not far from Independence Hall. A flurry of activity is underway at the center city headquarters of the United American Indians of the Delaware Valley, Inc., 225 Chestnut Street. In the heart of historic Old City, a group of dedicated individuals is trying to preserve the legacy of a culture that began 10,000 years ago along the banks of the Delaware - flowing not much farther away, than the distance an arrow can fly.

The sounds of ceremonial drums echoing across the wooded hills and valleys of Fairmount Park recently, heralded the start of UAIDV's annual pow wow. The drums also signaled a new chapter and a new, progressive administration in the life of one key urban American Indian organization. These brave souls are attempting to breathe life into an organization that was on the verge of extinction due to years of mismanagement and alienation. Now, power is back in the hands of "the people."

The heritage and history of Native Americans in this region is a golden thread, inextricably intertwined with the birth of the Nation. But much like African American culture, it is often an overlooked part of American history, which should be remembered, cherished, celebrated. In these waning days of "Indian summer," the waxing of the Harvest Moon and the appearance of pumpkins and Indian corn mark the approach of Thanksgiving. It is a time when our thoughts naturally turn to Native Americans.

A Forgotten History

When William Penn first arrived, the area encompassing Philadelphia and extending as far north as New York; south to Delaware; and west to the Susquehanna River, was called Lenapehocking - land of the Lenape. Lenapes (len-nah-pays) were also known as the Delaware, along whose banks and tributaries they lived. As a tribute to that era, the stately statue of the great Lenape Chief, Tamanend - who made treaties with Penn - stands today at Front and Market Streets.

Unlike most colonial leaders, Penn remains respected by local Indians because he took the time to learn Lenape language and customs. He treated them fairly and humanely, and Indians often visited his home - Pennsbury Manor. Penn's spirit of friendship, cooperation and charity continues today in the form of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's (Quaker) Indian Committee (<http://www.pym-indiancommittee.com/>) which now helps Indian groups from around the country.

Native Americans are typically relegated to a few, usually inaccurate, lines in history books - as if over 2.5 million of them do not exist today. The Federal government now formally recognizes 562 tribal nations and many more tribes have applications on file seeking Federal recognition. Curiously, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania refuses to legally recognize any of the reported 15,000 people of Indian ancestry living in this region.

There is a popular fallacy that "all Indians live on reservations, west of the Mississippi." Actually, approximately 60% of America's Indians live in urban areas. But, who precisely is an Indian?

According to *The Rights of Indians and Tribes* (1992) by the ACLU: "There is no universally accepted definition of the term 'Indian.' Therefore, determining who is an Indian is difficult... Although there is one ethnological definition of Indian, there are many legal definitions. Different laws use different definitions... Many federal laws use the word 'Indian' without defining it." It's also ironic that American Indians were not formally granted U.S. citizenship until 1924.

Locally, few are aware that Chief Shenandoah and a band of Onondaga warriors from upstate New York - in a phenomenal feat of courage and endurance - brought hundreds of bushels of corn to help General George Washington feed his starving troops during that fateful winter at Valley Forge. Few may know that Benjamin Franklin often talked with Iroquois ambassadors, who explained their bicameral form of government, which may have been a model for our own - or that their remarkable Iroquois Confederacy existed for hundreds of years before our Continental Congress.

The term massacre is never used to describe an atrocity committed against Indians. Yet fewer still, know of the horrific massacre of innocent, peaceful, unarmed, Christian, Conestoga Indians in 1763, in Lancaster, PA - by the Paxton Boys, who scalped and butchered the bodies of the defenseless men, women and children they murdered. Because many tribes in the East were pushed and persecuted out of the region, some believe there are no Indians here anymore. "They died out long ago" - according to local legend. With such a pervasive misconception, it's understandable why some are quick to brand anyone in this area who claims to be Indian, part Indian or have Indian ancestry, as a wannabe ("want to be").

With little scientific or ethnographic evidence except, "they don't look like Indians to me" - thousands of people with Native blood are summarily written off as pretenders. As much as America denigrates and disenfranchises Indians, why would anyone claim to have Native ancestry if one did not?

American Apartheid

Much like apartheid-era South Africa, Native Americans - the first Americans - are the only ethnic groups in America required to prove their ethnicity. No other groups are expected to carry identification cards proclaiming they're "genuine USDA" Caucasian, Latino, African American or Asian. To rely on the Federal government to give people permission to be Indian, doesn't make much sense - especially since the government tried its best to exterminate all Indians and force the survivors onto "reservations." Nits breed lice, they reasoned.

In *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995) James Loewen wrote: "Hitler admired our concentration camps for Indians in the west, 'and often praised to his inner circle the efficiency of America's extermination - by starvation and uneven combat' as the model for his extermination of the Jews and Gypsies."

Any descendant of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes in the South knows that many of her ancestors were force-marched west across the Mississippi at bayonet-point by Federal troops -

resulting in a staggering loss of life and especially, property. A primary goal of the nascent nation was the theft of Indian lands.

It would be unconscionable to ask a Jewish person who lost an ancestor in the Holocaust to "get over it" - because "it's time to move on." Yet, that is precisely what is expected of American Indians - who suffered a holocaust of their own. For Indians, this isn't ancient history - it's family history.

It might even be argued that perpetually ignoring America's disgraceful past and present treatment of Native Americans may have laid the theoretical groundwork for our often failing foreign policies around the world, today.

African Americans might pay particular attention to the ethnic, historical, and cultural relationships between African and Native Americans. Though it's rarely acknowledged, Native Americans were the first slaves in this country. Kidnapping and enslaving Indians was a common practice that began with the early European explorers.

Squanto (Tisquantum) - of First Thanksgiving fame - was a Patuxent Indian who helped the hapless Pilgrims survive their first hard New England winters. But years earlier, he had been kidnapped by English traders, to be sold into slavery in Spain. From Spain he made his way to England and then back to America. It had actually been his second round-trip Transatlantic experience - his first, being due to another deceit on the part of other English explorers. A plague wiped out his entire village while he was gone.

For all of the myth-guided honor given to Columbus - who factually never set foot in what would become the U.S. - he is still considered by many American Indians to be among the most brutal, larcenous, and murderous invaders to ever lay siege to the peoples of the New World. Yet, the Indians' justifiable anger toward Columbus typically serves as fodder for late night comedians, and recently even engendered the umbrage of television's make-believe Mafiosi on an episode of *The Sopranos*.

In the South, American colonists turned the trade in Indian slaves and deerskins into an incredibly lucrative business. However, Indian slavery began to wane during the late 17th and early 18th centuries - largely due to drastically declining eastern Native populations - as the African slave trade was on the rise.

A particularly interesting connection between the two groups began there, because whether they know it or not, many African Americans may have Indian ancestry. According to J. Leitch Wright, Jr., in *The Only Land They Knew: The Tragic Story of the American Indians in the Old South* (1981): "A considerable number of female Indian slaves were already in the quarters when male Africans arrived. This was one, but not the only reason why the Southern 'Negro' population on its own increased so much in contrast to almost everywhere else in the New World."

Sometimes, the legal and racial distinctions between Blacks and Indians were determined solely on the basis of whether that individual lived on a state-recognized Indian reservation - which was once the law in Virginia. Some New England states had similar practices. If an Indian moved

off a reservation, he was no longer legally considered Indian. He was now Black, or a free person of color, instead. The political goal was a clearly delineated society with only two types of people - black and white - that made discrimination easier to enforce.

I wannabe a real live Indian

Like many people of mixed heritage, I learned of my Native American ancestry later in life. Some families hid this aspect of their ethnicity to avoid unpleasant conflicts with their neighbors out of fear of being accused of trying to be something one is not.

In *God Is Red* (1992) Vine Deloria, Jr., wrote: "Most Eastern Indians...simply did not admit to an Indian identity to avoid being singled out for discriminatory treatment. They kept most of their traditions to themselves and were highly suspicious of outsiders."

In responding to situations involving rejection, ridicule, danger or discrimination, some families of mixed heritage made a conscious decision to subordinate their Indian ancestry - particularly - in the presence of the Black communities in which they often lived. Teasing, taunts and bullying were ever present for mixed race children. Why pressure people to reject their Indian ancestors, when it would be disgraceful for them to reject their African ancestors?

One would hope that since a primary goal of white slaveholders was to deny African Americans their rich culture, history, language and identity, members of the Black community would be reluctant to do so to others. The same might be said for some in Native groups who enjoy Federal recognition.

In this post-Alex Haley age, discovering and reclaiming one's roots has nearly become a new national pastime. It would seem that people of Indian ancestry would be helping each other to rediscover their ethnic and cultural heritages. Unfortunately, the epithet of wannabe is too often flung at those who are not card-carrying, Federally recognized Indians. However, it might be argued that the ancestors of those Indians who carry the government's "seal of approval," didn't fight hard enough or run fast enough.

Regardless of race or color, in historic times, to be accepted in many tribes one generally needed to live according to tribal laws and customs; honor their leaders; protect their women, children and lands; and worship as an Indian. Some of the greatest Native chiefs and leaders of the 18th and 19th centuries - like John Ross, John Bowles (Cherokees) and Quannah Parker (Comanche) - were of mixed ethnicity.

Historically, Indians never had the white man's penchant for making lists. For all the good it did to write lists or (usually broken) treaties down on paper, oral traditions and tribal memories were more accurate and existed for millennia before the written word.

The names of Indians who refused to participate in the Dawes Act (another land theft scheme) or line up for government censuses may not have been recorded anywhere - but that doesn't mean they never existed! Some went into hiding and others may have blended in with

remnants of other tribes or ethnic groups. Considering the fate that awaited many, why trust the government?

An underlying reason for the curse of the wannabes seems to be that tribes who have Federal recognition fear that if others are recognized, it will mean a smaller piece of the pie for all. This is shortsighted and self-defeating. Limited health care services on Indian reservations and a few educational scholarships do not make a very big pie. The widespread misconception that there are innumerable financial benefits to being an Indian is a myth probably fueled by fears and jealousy of a few, successful Indian-owned casinos. (Why no one ever complains about casinos owned by non-Indians, is another mystery.)

The reality is that the Federal government owes American Indian tribes between \$100 and \$400 billion held in trust by the U.S. Interior Department, dating back for a over century. In a blistering, 267-page opinion, U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth said he was "both saddened and disgusted" by the "disgraceful" conduct of Secretary Gale Norton and other Interior Department officials entrusted with royalties earned from Indian lands.

Native Americans should band together in a nationwide pan-Indian movement. Imagine the political clout that two or three million Indians could wield if they spoke with one voice in a national election. Wrongs could be righted. Debts could be paid. Our future might be brighter. Children could be taught the truth about the injustices committed against American Indians and how much they have contributed to this country since before the colonists and conquistadors first arrived on our shores.

No, Indians have not vanished. They're right there on Chestnut Street and around the Delaware Valley. Perhaps, even in our own families. Learn about them. Honor them and the promises our country made to them. Attend their powwows, support their endeavors, help them grow. By doing so, we'll honor ourselves and help our country become culturally richer and spiritually stronger. And in the process, we'll rediscover who we really are.

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*- Cover photo taken at Fairmount Park Powwow, Summer 2005

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