

**Chief Stephen R. Adkins  
Chickahominy Indian Tribe  
Testimony before the House Natural Resources Committee  
Thomasina E. Jordan Indian Tribes of Virginia Federal Recognition Act – HR 1294  
April 18, 2007**

Thank you Chairman Rahall and other distinguished members of this committee for inviting me here today to speak on House Bill 1294 which is pending before your Committee. The bill, introduced by Congressman Jim Moran is titled the Thomasina E. Jordan Indian Tribes of Virginia Federal Recognition Act of 2007- HR 1294. A hearing on our Federal Recognition bill was held by this committee in 2002. I am proud to appear before this Congressional Committee today on behalf of the six Tribes named in HR 1294 the Eastern Chickahominy, the Monacan, the Nansemond, the Upper Mattaponi, the Rappahannock, and my Tribe the Chickahominy. As part of the record today I am submitting the statement from our current Governor, Timothy Kaine, who in his inaugural address pledged his strong support for Federal Recognition of the Virginia Tribes. Beside me today is Dr. Helen Rountree, a renowned anthropologist specializing in the heritage of the Virginia Tribes, who worked on the petitions we filed with the BIA, and is prepared to assist with any questions you may have about our history. Also, with me today is Rev. Jon Barton from the Virginia Council of Churches who has worked tirelessly on our effort to gain Federal Recognition and Chief Ken Branham of the Monacan Indian Nation.

Chairman Rahall, I am sure you are well aware of the events occurring this year in Virginia and the United Kingdom commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first

permanent English Settlement in America in May 1607 The settlement became known as Jamestown and is located on the James River in Tidewater Virginia. On Anniversary Weekend at Jamestown, May 11-13, 2007, visitors from all over the world including leaders representing the United States Government, England, Native Americans and African Americans et al will gather acknowledging the birth of this Great Republic, the United States of America, which blossomed at Jamestown. In July 2006 a delegation of 54 tribal members representing the gender and age demographics of the Tribes recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia had the opportunity to visit the United Kingdom as part of its 2007 Commemoration Activities. For many of us it was a first time visit to St Georges Church at Gravesend, the final resting place of Pocahontas, the daughter of Paramount Chief Powhatan and the wife of John Rolfe. History tells us that Pocahontas died when she returned with John Rolfe to England in 1616.

The impact of our experience in Gravesend is something I want to share with you because it was beyond what any of us could have possibly imagined. The congregation of St. Georges Church brought home to us, the very real connection the English people feel with our heritage. And for us, who have experienced and know so well what has happened to our people since the days of Pocahontas, the connection we felt to both the congregation and Pocahontas was palpable and real. The English have paid honor and tribute to her in a manner that no member of her family or her descendants has ever received in this country. This feeling of respect and honor in the church through its living congregation suffused the entire Virginia Indian Delegation. But to my utter amazement, this attitude of honor and respect transcended the spiritual and emotional

service within the church and was extended to us in every venue we attended from Kent University, to Kent County Council to the House of Commons and the House of Lords. If you would indulge me, I would like to share with you the words from a plaque which hangs on a wall of St. Georges Church I believe from these words you can sense the very sincere regard English people feel for Pocahontas. *“This stone commemorates Princess Pocahontas or Metoak daughter of the mighty American Indian Chief Powhatan. Gentle and humane, she was the friend of the earliest struggling English colonists whom she nobly rescued, protected, and helped. On her Conversion to Christianity in 1613, she received in Baptism the name Rebecca, and shortly afterwards became the wife of John Rolfe, a settler in Virginia. She visited England with her husband in 1616, was graciously received by Queen Anne wife of James I. In the twenty second year of her age she died at Gravesend preparing to revisit her native country and was buried near this spot on March 21st 1617. .*

I believe for our people to go back to England and be embraced by this church congregation was a significant reconciliation and healing. As descendants, we have not felt the honor here at home that those in England both feel for Pocahontas and bestowed upon us. Through this visit to Gravesend, we saw Pocahontas as more than the legend we live behind, we saw her as the first to brave the new world that opened up with first contact by the English. We saw Pocahontas as one with whom we can identify, as a soul who today can still touch us, and remind us of whom we are and remind us that we have a proud heritage. She is not a myth for she is still inside all of us, and her death and burial in England, remind us of how far and challenging our path has been since she braved that voyage to England. She was brave and she was alone. It was a tremendous experience to step into that church and feel the love of that English congregation. Appropriately, the St.

George's Church Guide, contains this prayer:

*May your Church, Lord, be a light to the nations, the sign and source of your power to unite all men. May she lead mankind to the mystery of your love? Amen*

I could tell you the much publicized story of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Virginia Indians, but you, like most Americans, know our first contact history. I wish there was time today to tell the full story of what has happened to the Virginia Tribes since Pocahontas went to England to the Court of Queen Ann. The story of Chief Powhatan and his daughter Pocahontas is well known across this land, her picture being in this very capitol building with her English husband John Rolfe. But what about our story, for years the Commonwealth of Virginia did not care about our story? Our public school textbooks had scant mention of who we are. So, what do you know or what does mainstream America know about what happened in those years between the 17<sup>th</sup> century and today. The fact that we were so prominent in early history and then so callously denied our Indian heritage is the story that most don't want to remember or recognize. This year we, the Virginia Indian Tribes, are a part of the commemoration of Jamestown. This year, 2007, when Jamestown is expected to be visited by the Queen of England and the President of the United States, the Virginia Tribes will have a much deeper understanding of who we are, fueled in part by our learning gained from our trip to England and in our involvement in researching the truth about the underpinnings of the first permanent English Settlement at Jamestown and, finally, what our contributions meant to its success. Our connection to Pocahontas and, by extension, to England must come full circle and extend to the Congress of the United States of America. We must feel the

same honor and love from leaders of the United States of America as we do from the people from England with whom our last treaty was signed in 1677.

I and those Chiefs here with me, stand on the shoulders of many others besides Pocahontas and Powhatan. One story that has always made me sad, and which brings in a different picture than the love we experienced in England, is that of the Paspahugh led by Chief Wowinchopunk whose wife was captured and taken to Jamestown Fort and “run through” with a sword, whose children were tossed overboard and then their brains were “shot out” as they floundered in the water, and whose few remaining tribal members sought refuge with a nearby tribe, possibly the Chickahominy. With this horrific action in August 1610, a whole Nation was annihilated. A Nation who befriended strangers and ultimately died at the hands of those same strangers. As we commemorate Jamestown 2007 and the birth of our Nation today, those of Indian heritage in Virginia are also reminded of this history.

We are seeking recognition through an act of congress rather than the BIA because actions taken by the Commonwealth of Virginia during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century erased our history by altering key documents as part of a systematic plan to deny our existence. This state action separates us from the other tribes in this country that were protected from this blatant denial of Indian heritage and identity. The documentary genocide the Virginia Indians suffered at the hands of Walter Ashby Plecker, a rabid white separatist, who ruled over the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Virginia for 34 years, from 1912 to 1946 was well documented in an Article written by Peter Hardin of the Richmond Times

Dispatch in 2000. Although socially unacceptable to kill Indians outright, Virginia Indians became fair game to Plecker as he led efforts to eradicate all references to Indians on Vital Records. A practice that was supported by the state's establishment when the eugenics movement was endorsed by leading State Universities and was further supported when the State's legislature enacted the Racial Integrity Act in 1924. A law that stayed in effect until 1967 and caused my parents to have to travel to Washington D.C. on February 20, 1935 in order to be married as Indians. This vile law forced all segments of the population to be registered at birth in one of two categories, white or colored. Our anthropologist says there is no other state that attacked Indian identity as directly as the laws passed during that period of time in Virginia. No other ethnic community's heritage was denied in this way. Our state, by law, declared there were no Indians in the State in 1924, and if you dared to say differently, you went to jail or worse. That law stayed in effect half of my life.

I have been asked why I do not have a traditional Indian name. Quite simply my parents, as did many other native parents, weighed the risks and decided it was not worth the risk of going to jail.

Former Senator George Allen as Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia sponsored legislation in 1997 acknowledging the injustice of the Racial Integrity Act.

Unfortunately, while this legislation allows those of the living generations to correct birth records, the legislation or law has not and cannot undo the damage done by Plecker and

his associates to my ancestors who endured pain and humiliation in venues disparate as trying to obtain marriage licenses to being inducted into the Armed Forces as Indian, all because of these distorted, altered, incorrect records.

We are seeking recognition through Congress because this history of racism, in very recent times, intimidated the tribal people in Virginia and prevented us from believing that we could fit into a petitioning process that would understand or reconcile this state action with our heritage. We feared the process would not be able to see beyond the corrupted documentation that was designed to deny our Indian heritage. Many of the elders in our community also feared, and for good reason, racial backlash if they tried.

My father and his peers lived in the heart of the Plecker years and carried those scars to their graves. When I approached my father and his peers regarding our need for state or federal recognition they pushed back very strongly. In unison they said, "Let sleeping dogs lie and do not rock the boat". Their fears of reprisal against those folks who had risked marrying in Virginia and whose birth records accurately reflected their identity outweighed their desire to openly pursue any form of recognition. Those fears were not unfounded because the threat of fines or jail time was very real to modern Virginia Indians.

Chairman Rahall, the story I just recounted to you is very painful and I do not like to tell that story. Many of my people will not discuss what I have shared with you but I felt you needed to understand recent history opposite the romanticized, inaccurate accounts of

17th century history.

Let me tell you how we got here today. The six tribes on this bill gained State Recognition in the Commonwealth of Virginia between 1983 and 1989. The legislation of 1997 placed the burden of cost to correct the inaccurate vital records on the Commonwealth of Virginia Governor, but it couldn't fix the problem - the damage to our documented history had been done. Although there were meager attempts to gain federal acknowledgement by some of the tribes in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, our current sovereignty movement began directly after the enactment of the aforementioned legislation acknowledging the attack on our heritage. In 1999 we came to Congress when we were advised by the BAR (Bureau of Acknowledgement and Research) now OFA (Office of Federal Acknowledgement) that many of us would not live long enough to see our petition go through the administrative process. A prophecy that has come true. We have buried three of our chiefs since then.

Given the realities of the OFA and the historical slights suffered by the Virginia Indian Tribes for the last 400 years, the six tribes referenced in HR 1294 feel that our situation clearly distinguishes us as candidates for Congressional Federal recognition.

As Chiefs of our tribes we have persevered in this process for one reason. We do not want our families or our tribes to let the legacy of Walter Plecker stand. We want the assistance of Congress to give the Indian Communities in Virginia, their freedom from a history that denied their Indian identity. Without acknowledgment of our identity, the

harm of racism is the dominant history. We want our children and the next generation, to have their Indian Heritage honored and to move past what we experienced and our parents experienced. We, the leaders of the six Virginia Tribes, are asking Congress to help us make history for the Indian people of Virginia, a history that honors our ancestors who were there at the beginning of this great country. We want to experience the honor and love that we felt was still alive in the congregation at St. Georges. After our visit to England I truly believe the Federal Recognition of the Virginia Indian Tribes during the year of the 400<sup>th</sup> commemoration will make a significant difference. It will reconcile history in this country between two cultures in a way that honors our history of learning to live together in peace and in love. That is what we want for our people and for our nation. The acceptance of the invitation to visit England to share our culture and history to describe our contemporary lifestyles as both contributors to the American way of life and aspirants to the American Dream and our decision to honor Pocahontas at her grave has strengthened our resolve to obtain federal acknowledgement. It has made us understand that we deserve to be on a level playing field with the other 562 odd tribes who are federally acknowledged. It has made us unwilling to accept being discriminated against because of both a historical oversight and the concerted efforts of our Commonwealth to deny to us our rightful heritage. The aforementioned invitation to visit England was not easy for us to accept. We did not know what to expect, and we were apprehensive. From an overall perspective this visit was destined to be for it brought us into the history we commemorate at Jamestown in a very positive palpable way.

The Commonwealth of Virginia has taken definitive actions to right the wrongs inflicted

upon its indigenous peoples and stands with us today as we commemorate the founding of the first permanent English Settlement 400 years ago on the banks of the James River at Jamestown, Virginia. We believe it is time for the United States Congress to stand alongside us and grant us the Recognition we deserve as we commemorate the birth of the greatest Nation in the world. Yes, it essential for Virginia's Indigenous Peoples to receive that honor in this significant year in the history of the Commonwealth of Virginia, the history of the United States of America, the history of the world and in the history of Indigenous Peoples around the Globe.

Thank you for allowing me to address you on behalf of the six tribes in HR 1294.

Stephen R. Adkins

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