

## RESEARCHING YOUR

# NATIVE AMERICAN ROOTS

*A Presentation by Jason R. Terrell*

### Who was your ancestor?

Focus on one specific ancestor. Find out their name and the names of their immediate family including parents, spouse, siblings and children. This information will prove critical when you start diving into records of tribal communities.

### When did he/she live?

Most valuable records/resources on individual Natives were created between 1830 and 1920. Records before or after that time do exist, but many of those tend to focus on the tribe in general and not individual Native people. While there are some good records do be had post-1920, there are fewer of them, on the whole, and they are not always readily available online.

### Where did the family live?

Make sure your ancestor was within the vicinity of the tribe to which they belonged. Having an ancestor claiming Seminole heritage but living his entire life and that of his ancestors in Indiana is a problem. If your ancestor and his/her family remained in a particular area for numerous generations, the best bet is to research the tribes in that area.

### Critically evaluate oral tradition

Many claims to Native heritage come from stories

passed down with little or no details. Use them as a starting point, but don't rely on them exclusively to prove heritage.

### Be wary of "Blood Quantum"

Native people are some of the only people to be judged and evaluated on blood quantum. Unfortunately, this is a notoriously unreliable gauge of Native heritage and in many cases is just plain wrong. Assuming that a recent ancestor is a "full blood" is a common mistake and may lead you down the wrong path.

### DNA alone is not the answer

While many companies tout the benefits of finding your heritage through DNA testing, it's important to remember that current DNA tests that give ethnicity are generally just estimates. Additionally they can't tell you critical details such as tribe, nearest Native ancestor or where they came from. Also, there are instances where someone will have heritage in the family that doesn't come up in DNA and instances of data that comes up as "Native American", but may not actually be from one of the North American tribes.

### Be picky about the help you hire

Make sure anyone you pay to help you has some credentials or expertise in Native research that they can demonstrate. Get references, if necessary.

## Check your GPS: Genealogical Proof Standard

Experienced family researchers and professional genealogists live by something called the Genealogical Proof Standard. The Standard is made up of a simple set of guidelines that direct our research and help us to reach well-reasoned conclusions. Those steps are:

1. A reasonably exhaustive research has been completed.
2. Each statement of fact has a complete and accurate

source citation.

3. The evidence is reliable and has been skillfully correlated and interpreted.
4. Any contradictory evidence has been resolved.
5. The conclusion has been soundly reasoned and coherently written.

When you get deep into your family history search, make sure you look at and evaluate all the clues before you draw your final conclusion.

# Steps & Resources

## I. Start with Censuses & Rolls

Two of the most important tools for exploring Native heritage are the **Census** and the **Roll**. The **Federal Census** is the first tool of the genealogist. Both the 1900 and 1910 Federal Census contained information specific to Native people and covered, in the case of the 1900 census, areas that were considered “Indian Territory” and were not part of the United States.

**Territorial Censuses** such as the Spanish and Mexican Census Records available from the National Archives for New Mexico Territory as early as 1850 also contain valuable information on Pueblo Indians.

Beyond the federal censuses there are the **tribal censuses**. Some tribes would take their own census of their population. The Cherokee have such a census for 1880 and 1890, for example.

After the census we have **Rolls**. To be clear, rolls were generally created by the government as a tool to help determine which people were eligible for benefits that came from treaties or court settlements. Payment or benefit rolls can hold much more information than either the tribal or federal censuses.

A person wishing to be on a roll would most often (but not always) have to apply to be enrolled and the application process often entailed an interview and follow-up research by the government agents into earlier tribal records such as the tribal census. These interviews and applications can contain a wealth of genealogical information that would be found no where else and include things like names of parents, grandparents and extended families.

**BEWARE:** requirements for enrollment varied and there were many Native people who might not have qualified for one roll or another.

## II. Church records

One of the byproducts of the evangelization of Native communities was that the churches and missionaries to those people often kept records. The amount of detail depended largely upon the record keeping traditions of that particular faith. While some churches tended to keep more specific records other faiths, such as the Moravians who worked among the Cherokee, tended to keep diaries which mentioned only those Cherokees with whom they came into contact on a regular basis.

Either way, these are records worth examining.

The church you seek out would depend upon the time and area of your specific ancestor.

## III. Government records

■ **AGENCY RECORDS** Since the U.S. Constitution directs the Federal Government to have primary responsibility over the relations with tribal entities, there are a number of federal records that detail the various legal relationships with tribes and individual Indians.

Records of Indian Agencies are one source that can be found at different times and in different areas. There are also some payment records for Natives who have Individual Money Accounts, as well.

■ **SCHOOL RECORDS** In certain areas there were government schools managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs for Indians and those records are kept by the National Archives and are good resources as they tend to fall before and after 1920.

■ **MILITARY RECORDS** Don't forget military records. Many Native people have served in the U.S. Armed forces throughout history and valuable information about their heritage can be gleaned from those records.

## IV. Land records

For tribes who owned land individually thanks to the Dawes Allotment Act, there are land files available in county courthouses that can give some information about the original Native landholders. Checking early land records for a particular area can be a good starting point, as well.

## V. Tribal histories, genealogies, interviews

For the Cherokee, *History of the Cherokee Indians* by Emmett Starr is a seminal work on Cherokee genealogy as well as *Descendants of Nancy Ward* by David Hampton. These are invaluable resources for the Cherokee researcher. Also the Indian Pioneer Papers are a collection of oral histories that were gathered in during the 1930s by government workers and can provide some good genealogical, historical and cultural information. Also, don't forget to check with the tribe itself. Many tribes have their own archives and some even have genealogists who are there to help answer questions about Native American ancestry.