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'We won the battle'

## Monacan tribe reflects on struggle to achieve federal recognition

Justin Faulconer May 19, 2018



For Dean Branham and members of the Monacan Indian Nation, Bear Mountain in Amherst County is sacred ground.

The tribe's spiritual center is about six miles west of the town of Amherst on Kenmore Road. Branham, the Monacans' current chief, said his ancestors have clung to it since it first became an Indian settlement three decades before the

start of the Civil War.

“This was my life,” Branham said of Bear Mountain while sitting in the Monacan Ancestral Museum during a recent interview. “You stayed down here. This is where you did your holidays. This is what kept us together as a tribe down here. The way we were treated back then, we didn’t venture out until later on in life.”

For every injustice he and his people endured, Branham said, they never lost sight of who they were and kept fighting for their rights. In 1989, the Monacans became a Virginia-recognized tribe, and in January, after a two-decade struggle, received long-awaited recognition from the federal government.

The milestone allows the Monacans and five other Virginia tribes to compete for educational programs and other grants only open to federally recognized tribes, repatriate the remains of ancestors — many of which reside with the Smithsonian Institution and were not mandated to be returned without federal status — and provide affordable health care services for elder tribe members who had been unable to access care.

With hundreds expected to converge on the Monacan Indian National Powwow Sunday in Elon, the tribe — which includes about 2,300 members across the country — is celebrating its major achievement in full force.

The event — complete with dancing, drumming and a wide host of vendors — is in its 26th year and, along with showcasing the Monacans’ heritage, helps pay the tribe’s bills throughout the year, such as electricity, phone service and office supplies for the museum.

The festivities, which were cancelled Saturday because of the weather but are scheduled to be held today, will be that much sweeter now that the tribe’s battle for federal recognition is won.

“There are a lot of people before me that fought for it, too,” Branham said. “I’m glad that it happened. I just wish a lot of them would be here to see it.”

**‘We knew who we were’**

Branham, 57, an electrician, recalls how every Monacan he has known lived at the mountain or converged on the site for gatherings and celebrations of the tribe's heritage. For some of his life, that heritage was shunned by the greater Central Virginia area and shut off by state-sanctioned racism.

Walter Plecker, a physician who ran Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics, caused perhaps the most lasting form of discrimination in spearheading the establishment of the state's Racial Integrity Act of 1924. It outlawed interracial marriage and required every birth certificate in the state to be recorded by race with "white" or "colored" as the only options.

In what many refer to as "paper genocide," the legislation was used to disenfranchise Native Americans and deny their existence for decades. Sen. Mark Warner, among legislators who recently championed the tribes' federal recognition in Congress, officially apologized on the state's behalf when he was governor.

Branham's parents and family members worked in the nearby orchards; Monacan children attended a one-room cabin schoolhouse built in the 1870s located directly next to the museum, he said. He began attending Amherst County's school system three years after it integrated to include Monacans in 1963, which he described as a rough experience.

The school bus drove by and refused to pick up his relatives and friends because of their skin color, he recalled. Some students wouldn't sit next to him on the bus, and there were other clashes and brushes with racism.

"My parents quit, like a lot of Monacans did," Branham said of the divide in the school system at the time. "I fought in school for being called names. My brother fought. We all did."

As vice president of the Virginia Tribal Alliance for Life, an organization dedicated to achieving federal recognition for Native American tribes, Branham had traveled to Washington, D.C., many times before only to see legislation seeking recognition fail.

“I’ve learned a lot from it. I’ve met a lot of people,” he said of the lengthy struggle. “I’ve seen how the United States government works ... I’ve seen people vote against it, and you just want to stand up and scream and go, ‘Why?’ But you don’t. You keep going back.”

He said it was frustrating at times driving up and down U.S. 29 only to come back empty-handed.

“We knew who we were as a people, but basically the U.S. government didn’t recognize us for whatever reason,” Branham said. “Every time we went, we went with high hopes.”

When Congress finally did approve the legislation in January, Branham could hardly believe it.

“We were all in shock that it passed,” he said of the crucial moment for his people. “We weren’t expecting it.”

He said the leaders looked at each other and while they could not jump up and down in joy on the Senate floor, that’s what they were feeling on the inside.

“To me, it was like fighting a battle. We never gave up,” Branham said.

One major benefit of federal recognition is the tribe’s main office can improve its computer access with funding for Wi-Fi, he said. The measure also can help tribe members seek better housing through the Department of Housing and Urban Development, he said, though the process is not akin to a blank check.

“It has to be accounted for,” he said of the application process. “It’s not just given to you.”

Along with benefits, lawmakers said during its passage the measure corrects a longstanding wrong by formally recognizing the tribes.

“It’s a fundamental issue of respect, and fairly acknowledging a historical record, and a wonderful story of tribes that are living, thriving and surviving and are a rich part of our heritage,” said U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., on the



Senate floor ahead of the bill's passage in January.

The Monacans now are part one of 573 federally recognized tribes in the U.S.

Branham, a 1978 graduate of Amherst County High School, said he has seen positive changes in the embracing of Monacan culture locally, a welcome departure from the racism he encountered as a youth.

"I tell young people, 'Be proud of who you are,'" he said. "Back then, you could say it — but you were going to get treated like crap."

Kenneth Branham, a former Monacan chief and Dean Branham's cousin, was among the more than 40 schoolchildren raised on Bear Mountain to enter the county's public school system in the 1960s. He recalls making friends pretty quickly, but having one friend tell him he couldn't play with him anymore because his parents forbid it.

That same friend came to him in high school and apologized, saying his parents realized they were wrong.

"If you don't know a group of people, you kind of fear them," he said. "We just want to be friends and accepted for who we were."

## **Building on a tradition**

The Monacan Nation has shared its traditions with the community through its annual Monacan Indian National Powwow, which kicked off in 1992 and was held for several years in Bedford County before moving to Elon, about six miles west of Madison Heights, where it has been held since 1997, said Kenneth Branham.

"It was really twofold: It was to teach our own people, especially the young ones, and the community," he said of showcasing Monacan culture.

Dean Branham said the tribe wants people to come, see who the tribe is and what it's about, especially those who aren't aware of its history.

“I tell people, ‘Walk around, talk to some of our elders and get to know us,’” he said. “Don’t leave with unanswered questions.”

The tribe also holds a homecoming every October open to the public at its headquarters on the 2000 block of Kenmore Road, which includes a cluster of buildings in addition to the museum and the circa-1870 historic schoolhouse.

Dean Branham said the federal recognition’s impact will reach future generations and he hopes to one day see a nursing home specifically for the Monacan tribe.

Many Monacans he knew growing up moved away to get away from discrimination, he said, crediting his ancestors who stayed and endured while maintaining their heritage.

“If it hadn’t been for them staying in the community and fighting to prove who they were and raising us to know who we were, we would have never gotten federal recognition,” he said.

“The way I look at it — my grandparents, my great-grandparents, they never gave up on me. To me ... fighting for this was giving back to them what they had fought for their own life.”

## **The Monacan Indian Nation**

### **At a glance**

The Monacan Indian Nation is headquartered in a cluster of buildings on Bear Mountain at 2009 Kenmore Road in Amherst County. The tribe is governed by a chief, assistant chief and tribal council elected by members.

Along with other Siouan-speaking tribes, the Monacans once occupied most of the western half of Virginia and were traditionally a mound-building culture and skilled basket makers. They also were known to mine copper. Their first known encounter with European settlers came in 1608. Around

1750 when the city of Lynchburg formed, Monacans lived in two communities along the James River. In the early 19th century, an Indian farming settlement was formed on 500 acres on Bear Mountain.

The Episcopal Church established a mission on the mountain in 1907 and Monacan children attended a circa-1870 one-room schoolhouse, a restored cabin now on the National Register of Historic Places.

To preserve its heritage, the tribe formed its own Ancestral Museum with artifacts and exhibits. The tribe operates a food bank, elder program, youth cultural program and other projects to benefit its members. The museum is available for tours by appointment. For more information, call (434) 946-9351 or go online at [www.monacannation.com](http://www.monacannation.com).

Source: The Monacan Indian Museum

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