

Baptist executives urge federal recognition of Virginia tribes

PRINT EMAIL

By Robert Dilday

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RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The top executives of two Virginia Baptist groups have joined other religious leaders in calling for federal recognition of six Native American tribes in the state.



John Upton

In an [open letter](#) released Aug. 17, about 30 Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders asked Virginia's Republican governor and two Democratic senators to support congressional legislation giving to Virginia's tribes the same status held by more than 560 other Native American tribes across the United States.

Among the signers were John Upton, executive director of the predominantly white [Baptist General Association of Virginia](#), who also was recently elected president of the [Baptist World Alliance](#), and Cessar Scott, executive minister of the historically black [Baptist General Convention of Virginia](#).



Cessar Scott

The letter project was coordinated by the [Virginia Council of Churches](#).

"We see this dream [of federal recognition] fading as this congressional session is rapidly moving to a close," the letter said. "We are deeply concerned that if this bill does not pass in this session, the recognition of Virginia's tribes will be lost, and the door will close for a generation before such a time as this may return."

Federal recognition acknowledges a tribe's sovereignty in dealing with the U.S. government and qualifies tribal members for federal education and health-care programs -- a significant benefit for one of the most marginalized groups in American society.

But while the U.S. Department of Interior has granted recognition to hundreds of tribes, mainly in the West, some Eastern tribes have failed to achieve that status. Most are descendants of Native American tribes who first encountered English colonists at the beginning of the 17th century.

That failure can be traced in part to Native Americans' first treaties with whites, which were signed with British authorities. By the time the United States won its independence, conflict with tribes living along the Atlantic coast had largely ended, and the new nation saw little need to negotiate agreements with them. In contrast, battles with Western tribes throughout the 19th century typically ended with treaties which -- while often unfair and frequently disregarded by Washington -- provided a basis for later recognition.

“This is a really about an affirmation of who we are,” said Stephen Adkins, chief of the Chickahominy, one of the six Virginia tribes seeking recognition. “Federal recognition would acknowledge that we are a sovereign nation and were here to greet the first English settlers, who everyone agrees could not have survived without us.”

Adkins is a deacon and Sunday school teacher at [Samaria Baptist Church](#) in Providence Forge, Va., one of at least six historically Native American churches affiliated with the Baptist General Association.

The Commonwealth of Virginia officially recognizes 11 tribes in the state, with a total membership of some 4,000. About 10 years ago, six of those tribes -- the [Chickahominy](#), [Eastern Chickahominy](#), [Upper Mattaponi](#), [Rappahannock](#), [Monacan Indian Nation](#) and [Nansemond](#) -- initiated a process to achieve federal recognition as well. Tribal leaders hoped to obtain recognition by 2007 -- the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown -- but the process has been slow.



Stephen Adkins

Last year the House of Representatives approved legislation recognizing the Virginia tribes. The same month Virginia Sens. Jim Webb and Mark Warner introduced a similar bill ([S 1178](#)) in the Senate.

The senators' bill has been approved by committee and calendared for a vote by the full Senate, but Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) has placed a hold on it, citing jurisdictional concerns. A spokesperson in Coburn's office said the senator believes requests for tribal recognition should be processed administratively by the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs, not legislatively by Congress.

But an exclusively administrative route to recognition is problematic for the Virginia tribes. The BIA requires documentation that tribal members have direct continuous descent from a "historical Indian tribe" -- something almost impossible for Virginia's Native Americans to prove because the state essentially expunged such records at the beginning of the 20th century.

History erased by racist official

Walter Plecker, registrar of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics from 1912-1946, replaced "Indian" with "black" on every birth and death certificate in his office. Plecker, a white supremacist, said Native Americans had become a "mongrel" mixture.

Plecker's actions, which have been called bureaucratic genocide, altered generations of officially recorded Native American identity and led Virginia tribal leaders to seek a congressional as well as administrative resolution.

Virginia's political establishment, including Gov. Robert McDonnell (R) and both houses of the General Assembly, support federal recognition. Earlier objections that tribes might open gambling casinos -- illegal under Virginia law -- have been met by prohibitions in the Senate bill. In any event, tribal leaders say, they have no interest in operating casinos.

"Virginia Baptists have been honored to have so many of the Native American tribal churches as part of the BGAV family," said Upton in an e-mail statement." The relationship has been long and fruitful. Many of the tribal leaders have served at various times on the Virginia Baptist Mission Board. It is now our privilege and moment to stand by them as they seek federal recognition. It has been an oversight of history that the six tribes of Virginia have not been recognized with the other recognized tribes. I have personally signed this letter of support to stand by our friends to correct this oversight."

The Aug. 17 open letter says the almost unanimous support for the tribes' recognition represents a "unique time provided by the Divine."

"For the first time the entire Virginia congressional delegation supports this bill, as do all the living governors of Virginia; not a single tribe throughout the country has opposed this bill; and the votes needed for passage are there if the way be clear to bring it to the floor," wrote the religious leaders.

"We encourage you to move this bill forward and finally redress this oversight of history by allowing these six tribes to take their proper place among the other ... recognized tribes. Now is the time to make this happen, and we as the faith community want to say this is important, not just to the members of Virginia's tribes, but for all Virginians."

Separate legislation to grant full federal recognition to the [Lumbee Indians](#) of southeastern North Carolina also is wending its way through Congress. Johnny Hunt, most recent past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, is of Native American descent with ties to the Lumbee tribe.

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