

Documentary Genocide: Families Surnames on Racial Hit List

By Peter Hardin, Times-Dispatch Washington Correspondent

Sunday, March 5, 2000 A1

Long before the Indian woman gave birth to a baby boy, Virginia branded him with a race other than his own.

The young Monacan Indian mother delivered her son at Lynchburg General Hospital in 1971. Proud of her Indian heritage, the woman was dismayed when hospital officials designated him as black on his birth certificate. They threatened to bar his discharge unless she acquiesced. The original orders came from Richmond generations ago.

Virginia's former longtime registrar of the Bureau of Vital Statistics, Dr. Walter Ashby Plecker, believed there were no real native-born Indians in Virginia and anybody claiming to be Indian had a mix of black blood.

In aggressively policing the color line, he classified "pseudo-Indians" as black and even issued in 1943 a hit list of surnames belonging to "mongrel" or mixed-blood families suspected of having Negro ancestry who must not be allowed to pass as Indian or white.

With hateful language, he denounced their tactics.

"... Like rats when you are not watching, [they] have been 'sneaking' in their birth certificates through their own midwives, giving either Indian or white racial classification," Plecker wrote.

Twenty-eight years later, the Monacan mother's surname still was on Plecker's list. She argued forcefully with hospital officials. She lost.

Today, the woman's eyes reveal her lingering pain. She consulted with civil rights lawyers and eventually won a correction on her son's birth certificate.

"I don't think the prejudice will ever stop," said the woman, who agreed to talk to a reporter only on condition of anonymity.

She waged a personal battle in modern times against the bitter legacy of Plecker, who ran the bureau from 1912 to 1946. A racial supremacist, Plecker and his influential allies helped shape one of the darkest chapters of Virginia's history. It was an epoch of Virginia-sponsored racism.

A physician born just before the Civil War, Plecker embraced the now-discredited eugenics movement as a scientific rationale for preserving Caucasian racial purity. He saw only two races, Caucasian and non-Caucasian, and staunchly opposed their "amalgamation."

After helping win passage in 1924 of a strict race classification and anti-miscegenation law called the Racial Integrity Act, Plecker engaged in a zealous campaign to prevent what he considered “destruction of the white or higher civilization.”

When he perceived Indians as threats to enforcing the color line, he used the tools of his office to endeavor to crush them and deny their existence.

Many Western tribes experienced government neglect during the 20th century, but the Virginia story was different: The Indians were consciously targeted for mistreatment.

Plecker changed racial labels on vital records to classify Indians as “colored,” investigated the pedigrees of racially “suspect” citizens, and provided information to block or annul interracial marriages with whites. He testified against Indians who challenged the law.

Virginia’s Indians refused to die out, although untold numbers moved away or assumed a low profile.

Now, eight surviving tribes recognized by Virginia in the 1980s are preparing to seek sovereign status from the U.S. government through an act of Congress. About 3,000 of the 15,000 Indians counted in Virginia in the 1990 census were indigenous to the state, experts say.

As they bid for federal recognition, more Indian leaders are talking openly about the injustice of Plecker’s era. They gave a copy of his 1943 “hit list” to Virginia members of Congress along with other data in support of their bid.

Modern scholars have studied Plecker and the racial integrity era. Their findings contributed to this article. Yet he’s not widely known today.

“It’s an untold story,” said Oliver Perry, chief emeritus of the Nansemond Tribe.

“It’s not that we’re trying to dig him up and re-inter him again,” said Gene Adkins, assistant chief of the Eastern Chickahominy Tribe.

“We want people to know that he did damage the Indian population here in the state. And it’s taken us years, even up to now, to try to get out from under what he did. It’s a sad situation, really sad.”

Said Chief William P. Miles of the Pamunkey Tribe: “He came very close to committing statistical genocide on Native Americans in Virginia.”

Chief G. Anne Richardson of the Rappahannock Tribe spoke bluntly: “Devastation. Holocaust. Genocide.

“Those are the words I would use to describe what he did to us,” she said. “It was obvious his goal was the demise of all Native Americans in Virginia. . . . We were not allowed to be who we are in our own country, by officials in the government.”

For people of Indian heritage, Plecker's name "brings to mind a feeling that a Jew would have for the name of Hitler," said Russell E. Booker Jr., Virginia registrar from 1982 to 1995. That view "certainly is justified."

Indeed, one of Plecker's most chilling letters mentioned Adolf Hitler - and not unfavorably.

"Our own indexed birth and marriage records showing race reach back to 1853," Plecker wrote U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier in 1943. "Such a study has probably never been made before.

"Your staff member is probably correct in his surmise that Hitler's genealogical study of the Jews is not more complete."

Plecker also used haunting rhetoric in publishing a brochure on "Virginia's Vanished Race" a month before his death in 1947. He asked, "Is the integrity of the master race, with our Indians as a demonstration, also to pass by the mongrelizations route?"

Confronting an Era

On wooded Bear Mountain, miles up a country road outside Amherst, a visitor finds more evidence of the new willingness to confront Plecker's era head-on.

It's the historical center of the Monacan Indian Nation. A one-room log schoolhouse dating to the 1870s is standing. Also there are a simple white church and a small ancestral museum with a new sign proclaiming "History Preserved is Knowledge Gained."

Tribal activist and researcher Diane Shields digs into her files and pulls out for a visitor a dozen manila folders with photocopies of Plecker's letters covering two decades.

The Monacans acknowledge the stigma and pain, the second-class status, the lack of economic opportunity and the inferior education inflicted upon them and other Virginia tribes.

Indian children were relegated to substandard "colored" schools. Their parents, wanting to keep an Indian identity, often declined to send them there. Some tribal children studied in lower grades at reservation schools or church-sponsored schools like the one at Bear Mountain.

Even in this history of oppression, some Monacans have found a value: a common identity.

"It's a horrible thing, what he did to the Indian people," Shields said of Plecker. "But you know what? It gives me a sense of belonging - because I'm grouped with my own people.

"It kind of backfired with Plecker. He pushed the Indian people closer and gave us an identity."

Her brother, Johnny Johns, is a tribal leader and electrical technician. He's 51. Enrolled at Lynchburg College at midlife, he's been learning about the eugenics movement. Johns, whose surname was on Plecker's "hit list," regards him in two ways.

First, there's "the horror, the terror." Yet he believes Plecker "did us a favor, because the list of [Indian] names is there. We know who we are. It's a two-edged sword, a duality."

Monacan Chief Kenneth Branham, 47, remembers shunning by whites when Indian children were first allowed into public elementary school in the 1960s. School bus drivers sometimes refused to transport them.

Plecker was cruel, Branham believes. But "he kind of drew us together. We were a tightknit group, because there was nobody else we could associate with."

His tribe, which has grown dramatically in recent years to about 1,100 enrolled members, is using federal grant money to document its history. The Monacans are making their comeback with people like Shields and Johns, who were drawn back from beyond Virginia to their family and tribal roots, the place they now call home.

Among them is Indian activist Mary B. Wade, who learned only in the late 1980s about her Monacan heritage from an uncle in Maryland. Now she's secretary of the Virginia Council on Indians, a state government advisory panel.

The Monacan tribe owns more than 100 acres on and near Bear Mountain and dreams of buying hundreds more, developing a retirement home and a day-care center.

These Amherst Indians won recognition from the General Assembly in 1989, five years after Lynchburg pediatrician Peter Houck laid out a Monacan genealogy for what was once called a lost tribe. Houck detailed his findings in a book, and the recognition has contributed to a spirit of resurgence among the Monacans.

Indian people of Amherst and adjoining Rockbridge counties were a special target of Plecker.

He wrote in a 1925 letter, "The Amherst-Rockbridge group of about 800 similar people are giving us the most trouble, through actual numbers and persistent claims of being Indians. Some well-meaning church workers have established an 'Indian Mission' around which they rally."

Across the state in eastern Virginia, home for tribes that once made up the Powhatan Confederation, Plecker evokes diverse reactions from Indian leaders.

"He was just determined to get rid of us," said Chief A. Leonard Adkins, 73, of the Chickahominy Tribe. "It was hard to believe that a man could do what he did and get away with it."

A Chickahominy midwife was threatened by with imprisonment by Plecker if she didn't stop putting 'Indian' on birth records, Adkins said. She decided to stop her midwifery rather than buckle under to him or risk a prison term.

During Plecker's era, a number of Indians didn't admit to their cultural heritage or pass down traditions to their children. It was easier for many to adapt to white society, said Chief Barry Bass of the Nansemond Tribe.

"There's probably a lot who have gone to their grave who still didn't admit they were Indian. That's where it hurt," said Bass, the acting chairman of the Virginia Council on Indians.

Plecker wrote in a 1924 state-published pamphlet, "Eugenics in Relation to the New Family," that there were no true Indians in Virginia who didn't have some black blood. He later refined this to apply to "native-born people in Virginia calling themselves Indians."

His 1943 letter alluding to "rats . . . `sneaking' in their birth certificates" claimed that mixed-blood groups were intent above all on "escaping negro status and securing recognition as white, with the resulting privilege of attending white schools and ultimately attaining the climax of their ambitions, marrying into the white race."

Plecker misunderstood the Indians' culture, said Dr. Helen C. Rountree, an anthropologist and Virginia Indian expert recently retired from Old Dominion University. Those whom she studied in eastern Virginia believed that if they married a white, the children would be Indians, Rountree wrote in her book, "Pocahontas's People."

These Indians did not want to be "white," she wrote, although they wanted access to the better facilities available to whites and the freedom to marry whites to avoid inbreeding.

In drawing his conclusions, Plecker relied heavily on old birth and death records that indicated only whether an individual was white or nonwhite, said former registrar Booker.

"There was no place to register `Indian.' Nonwhite was later taken to mean black, by Plecker and by the Racial Integrity Act," Booker said.

To Booker, the racial integrity era amounted to what today would be called "ethnic cleansing." Or "documentary genocide."

"He was convinced he was one of the chosen," Booker said of Plecker. "He was the original martinet."

The Plecker Letters

Plecker left a major paper trail.

He gave carbon copies of hundreds of his official letters, neatly typed on "Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Health" stationery, to John Powell, a Richmond-born concert pianist and an outspoken advocate for race-purity measures in Virginia.

Today, the letters offer a rare record of a bureaucrat intruding in individual lives, harassing and intimidating citizens, bullying local officials and stamping out civil rights.

The correspondence is housed in a collection of Powell documents at the University of Virginia's Alderman Library. Powell graduated Phi Beta Kappa from U.Va. at age 18. He became an internationally known pianist and lectured in U.Va.'s music department.

In one letter, Plecker wrote a Lynchburg woman in 1924 to correct a supposedly false birth report for her child, which had been signed by a midwife.

"This is to give you warning that this is a mulatto child and you cannot pass it off as white," he wrote. Plecker apprised her of the new "one-drop" rule, which defined a white person as having "no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian."

"You will have to do something about this matter and see that this child is not allowed to mix with white children," Plecker admonished. "It cannot go to white schools and can never marry a white person in Virginia. It is an awful thing."

To a woman he knew to be from a "respectable" white family in Hampton, Plecker voiced surprise that she would ask about a license to marry a man of mixed African descent.

"I trust . . . that you will immediately break off entirely with this young mulatto man," he wrote.

Plecker threatened a Fishersville woman with prosecution in 1944 for a birth record he contended hid her Negro lineage.

"After the war it is possible that some of these cases will come into court. We might try this one. It would make a good one if you continue to try to be what you are not," Plecker warned.

His writing supports the view of leading scholars that Indians were a secondary, not primary, target of the eugenics movement in Virginia.

"The attack on persons of African descent laid the foundation for the attack against the American Indian community in Virginia as a mixed-race population," wrote an anthropologist, Dr. Danielle Moretti-Langholtz of the College of William and Mary, in a dissertation on the political resurgence of Virginia's Indians.

Plecker was vehement about preserving the color line.

"Two races as materially divergent as the white and the negro, in morals, mental powers, and cultural fitness, cannot live in close contact without injury to the higher," he told an American Public Health Association session in 1924. "The lower never has been and never can be raised to the level of the higher."

Plecker went on, "We are now engaged in a struggle more titanic, and of far greater importance than that with the Central Powers from which we have recently emerged," he added. "Many scarcely know that the struggle which means the life or death of our civilization is now in progress, and are giving it He concluded, "Let us turn a deaf ear to those who would interpret Christian brotherhood to mean racial equality."

Rise to Power

He had risen to become Virginia's first registrar at a time when segregationist Jim Crow laws and attitudes already were securely in place in the South.

In the eugenics movement, Plecker and allies found a basis in "science" for their extremist thinking, according to scholars who have studied him.

Plecker was born April 2, 1861, in Augusta County. He died at age 86 in August 1947 when he failed to look before crossing the street on Chamberlayne Avenue in Richmond and was hit by a car.

Schooled at Hoover Military Academy in Staunton, he attended the University of Virginia and graduated with a degree in medicine from the University of Maryland in 1885. For about 25 years, he practiced as a country doctor. After joining the health department of Elizabeth City County, now the city of Hampton, he set up a system for keeping health records and vital statistics, earning that county a national reputation.

In 1912, he came to Richmond to help state officials organize the Bureau of Vital Statistics, and he was tapped as its first registrar. Births, deaths and marriages would have to be reported to the bureau.

"He was a pioneer in the health of the newborn," said former registrar Booker, who as a youngster delivered the newspaper to Plecker's Richmond home. "He wrote what I thought was an outstanding book for midwives."

Plecker was drawn to the eugenics movement, which held that society and mankind's future could be improved by promoting better breeding.

He was among eugenics adherents who believed in the supremacy of white genetic stock, the inferiority of other races and the threat that mixing with the white race would lead to decline or destruction.

To push for law to preserve "racial integrity," Plecker teamed with Powell and Tennessee-born Earnest S. Cox, author of a book titled "White America."

Powell was a leading founder of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America, an all-male, native-born group started in Richmond in September 1922 and a year later claiming to have 25 posts statewide. Plecker was a member.

Its goals were preservation of Anglo-Saxon ideals and "the supremacy of the white race in the United States of America without racial prejudice or hatred," according to its constitution.

"This was the Klan of the aristocracy - the real gentleman's Klan," said J. David Smith of Longwood College, a eugenics expert.

Newspaper accounts at the time detailed a link with former Richmond KKK members. The Richmond Lodge of the KKK seceded in 1922 from the national organization, according to news accounts. A lawyer for some of the former Klansmen said the national group was judged to be a “rampant anti-Catholic organization instead of an organization to maintain white supremacy.”

“The Ku-Klux Klan in Richmond organized the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America, and the local organization is known as Richmond Post, No. 1,” the lawyer went on to say in The Times-Dispatch.

Powell wrote in correspondence later that the Anglo-Saxon Clubs had “no connection whatever” with the KKK and were “in no sense unfriendly to the Negro.”

In 1924 the General Assembly adopted race-purity legislation championed by the Anglo-Saxon Clubs and promoted by Plecker, Cox and Powell. It would stand until a landmark 1967 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Racial Integrity Act was one of the nation’s strictest. It defined white person for the first time, using the “one-drop rule,” and went beyond earlier state law against inter-marriage by making it illegal for whites to marry any nonwhites, including Asians.

However, the law permitted persons with one-sixteenth American Indian blood and “no other non-Caucasic blood” to be classified as white. That was a nod to descendants of Pocahontas, some of whom counted themselves among “first families” of Virginia.

Some leading state newspapers, including The Times-Dispatch and The Richmond News Leader, endorsed the race-purity goals.

The Times-Dispatch editorialized in 1924 that race intermingling would “sound the death knell of the white man. Once a drop of inferior blood gets in his veins, he descends lower and lower in the mongrel scale.”

This newspaper also gave Powell a platform, publishing two years later a 13-part series of his articles titled “The Last Stand” and describing what he called Virginia’s declining racial purity.

Plecker, meanwhile, lent support for black separatist Marcus Garvey’s back-to-Africa movement.

Plecker kept trying to narrow loopholes in the Virginia law. The legislature agreed in 1930 to define “colored” people as those “in whom there is ascertainable any Negro blood.”

Framers of the Racial Integrity Act found “a convenient facade” for their race prejudices in the “pseudo-science of eugenics,” said Paul A. Lombardo, a eugenics expert who teaches at the University of Virginia law school.

Lombardo wrote, “The true motive behind the [act] was the maintenance of white supremacy and black economic and social inferiority - racism, pure and simple.”

Enforcing the Act

In his more than 30 years as registrar, Plecker stood up to those who disagreed with him, urged him to back off, or got in his way.

They included courageous Indians, a Virginia governor and federal officials.

Some people were imprisoned for violating the Racial Integrity Act, but a number of juries wouldn't convict. There were legal challenges to the act and Plecker's enforcement, but it took the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967 to void Virginia's anti-miscegenation law.

Two of the earliest challenges came in Rockbridge County in 1924.

A circuit judge upheld in the first case the denial of a marriage license for an Indian woman to marry a white man. But in the second case, he set the eugenics backers reeling.

Judge Henry W. Holt heard expert testimony from Plecker before ruling in favor of an Indian woman who had challenged the denial of a license for her to wed a white man.

Holt found no evidence that the woman, Atha Sorrells, was of mixed lineage under a reasonable interpretation of the new law. He questioned its constitutionality and the legal meaning of the term Caucasian.

“Half the men who fought at Hastings were my grandfathers. Some of them were probably hanged and some knighted, who can tell?”

Certainly in some instances there was an alien strain. Beyond peradventure, I cannot prove that there was not,” he wrote in his opinion.

Drawing on “Alice in Wonderland,” he added, “Alice herself never got into a deeper tangle.”

John Powell shot back with a pamphlet, published by the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, titled “The Breach in the Dike: an Analysis of the Sorrels Case Showing the Danger to Racial Integrity from Inter-marriage of Whites with So-Called Indians.”

Holt's ruling was not appealed, however. An assistant state attorney general warned that the act might be declared unconstitutional.

Absalom Willis Robertson, the Rockbridge commonwealth's attorney, represented the state. A former state senator, Robertson would rise to fame as a congressman and U.S. senator for 34 years. A conservative Democrat, he was known as an expert on federal finances.

On civil rights, Sen. Robertson opposed the progressive stands of the national Democratic Party and was involved in the filibuster over civil rights legislation in 1963. His son, Republican Pat Robertson, is the conservative television evangelist who founded the Christian Coalition and, in 1988, ran for president.

In an October 1924 letter, Plecker personally had asked A.W. Robertson to represent Virginia “if your charge is not too great, and the Governor will pay the bill.”

Gov. E. Lee Trinkle, too, had written Robertson.

“Willis, this law is a new one and I regard it of vital importance. There are a great many of our real substantial white people who fought hard for the Bill and are doing all they can to help out in this situation over the State.”

Asking what Robertson would charge if he were to represent the state, Trinkle added, “I know that you will be more than reasonable because you, like the rest of us, are interested in this movement.”

When Plecker sought to have the race-purity law toughened the following year, the governor advised moderation.

Trinkle wrote Plecker, urging him to “be conservative and reasonable and not create any ill feeling if it can be avoided between the Indians and the State government.

“From reports that come to me,” Trinkle added, “I am afraid sentiment is moulding itself along the line that you are too hard on these people and pushing matters too fast.”

Plecker didn’t yield.

The registrar tried to tell U.S. Census officials how to list Indians and urged Selective Service officials not to induct them as whites.

A number of Virginia Indians, struggling to retain their identity, battled to be inducted with whites in World War II, a position Plecker opposed. Through various petitions and channels, the Indians met inconsistent results.

Three Rappahannock men who refused induction with blacks were prosecuted and sentenced to prison, but they later were allowed to pass the war years by laboring in hospitals as conscientious objectors. Yet in a federal court in western Virginia, a judge sided with seven Amherst County Indians who resisted induction as Negroes.

Finally the government, after years of wrangling, generally deferred to registrants to choose their race, an Indian victory that some scholars believe helped pave the way for the civil rights movement.

In the same period, Plecker wrote a letter to Powell that reflected a defeat - and Plecker’s own authoritative gamesmanship.

Plecker had begun putting “corrections” on the backs of birth certificates issued by his bureau before 1924 to remove the designation “Indian.”

A prominent Richmond attorney, John Randolph Tucker, representing two Amherst County Indians challenged Plecker's standing to "constitute himself judge and jury" by making such a change and threatened court action.

Plecker yielded temporarily.

"This is the worst backset which we have received since Judge Holt's decision," he confided to Powell on Oct. 13, 1942. "In reality I have been doing a good deal of bluffing, knowing all the while that it could not be legally sustained. This is the first time my hand has absolutely been called."

The "backset" didn't last long.

The General Assembly voted in 1944 to allow the registrar to put on the backs of birth, death or marriage certificates data that would correct erroneous racial labels on the front.

Plecker died in 1947. But his legacy survived. Not until 13 years after the Warren Court's landmark 1954 desegregation decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* was the intermarriage ban in Virginia's Racial Integrity Act overturned.

Saying Virginia's anti-miscegenation law was based on racial distinctions, the Supreme Court concluded, "There is patently no legitimate overriding purpose independent of invidious racial discrimination which justifies this classification.

"The fact that Virginia prohibits only interracial marriages involving white persons demonstrates that the racial classifications must stand on their own justification as measures designed to maintain white supremacy."

In 1975, Virginia repealed its racial definition and segregation laws.

Lasting Damage

Virginia tribes preparing to seek federal recognition as sovereign nations have told officials in Washington about the lasting damage sustained in the Plecker era, three centuries after Virginia's "first people" encountered the European settlers.

A bill being drafted by Rep. James P. Moran, D-8th, would ask Congress to grant federal recognition.

Gene Adkins of the Eastern Chickahominy said it may take beyond the current generation of Virginia Indians to correct the wrongs of Plecker's era.

"We're getting [more] advantages, but we still don't have the same advantages today of the white population," Adkins said.

Telling the story of Plecker's mistreatment of the Indians could open more doors, Adkins said.

“It boils down to this: More people will be sympathetic to what we’re trying to do.”

Posted in [My Work](#), Thu, 28/05/09

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