

THE NANTICOKE INDIANS OF INDIAN RIVER,
DELAWARE

By WILLIAM H. BABCOCK

There are two remnants of Indian population in eastern Delaware, not far from the coast,—the so-called Moors of Kent county and the more southerly Nanticokes on Indian river in Sussex county.

Of the former I can speak by report only, not having visited them. According to an old legend they are the offspring of Moors shipwrecked near Lewes; a more romantic version gives them only one Moorish progenitor—a captive prince who escaped from his floating prison and found wife and home among the half-Indian population alongshore. There are said to be two or three hundred of these people, clustering mainly around Chesholm, a hamlet and railroad station a few miles south of Dover. The *Philadelphia Press* for December 1st, 1895, presents a series of portraits which, if accurate, go far to sustain the contention of the Nanticokes that there is not much in common between the two peoples; but their intercourse is too slight and infrequent for their judgment to be conclusive. They consider the Chesholm people to be a mixture of Delaware Indians with some Moorish or other foreign strain. According to their tradition the Nanticoke and Delaware tribes were often at war in the old time, and even yet there would seem to be a barrier of rather more than indifference between them.

The Nanticokes themselves are not more than fifty or sixty in number at home; that is to say, in the sandy pine-land country which lies between the northeastern shore of Indian river and the coastline, comprising approximately the two county subdivisions

or "hundreds" of Clear spring and Indian river. They have sent out numerous colonies and keep in touch with most of these, so that one may see in their albums prosperous faces from Maine and California. One member of the tribe, lately deceased, attained a considerable measure of wealth in Philadelphia. A whole carload migrated to Michigan a short time before the Rebellion, when circumstances and white neighbors bore over-heavily upon them. Another party, including Levin Sockume, their strongest man, moved to Gloucester, New Jersey. Nearer home, though hardly more accessible, are isolated families on the Pocomoke, near Snow Hill, and across Delaware on the river which bears their own name. These offshoots have for the greater part kept up their rules of life in the matter of racial segregation, except that wherever a single household settled where there were no Indian neighbors, the sons and daughters have generally married with the whites; but where wives and husbands of Nanticoke blood were obtainable, the latter seem to have had the preference.

In the Indian River country, the rule is imperative. There must have been intermarriage with the whites at one time, for they admit that none of them is wholly Indian, while nothing so stirs their indignation as to be suspected of having negro blood; but at present they marry exclusively among themselves. A Nanticoke of either sex who marries among the negroes is referred to as having "gone astray," and although not ill-treated is no longer welcome in church or home or any social gathering. They have their own (Methodist Protestant) church, usually ministered to by a white man, and a school supported wholly by them for their own children only, though they pay taxes abundantly for the public schools besides.

In person they seem to be mainly of medium height and of strong though not very bulky frame. The form of head differs not less than with ourselves, I think, judging solely by the eye. Neither from the individuals before me, nor from the much more

numerous photographs which they exhibited, could I deduce anything like a general rule or type. The craniologist of the future would probably form his idea of the Nanticoke from the particular specimens which might happen to come in his way, and his conclusions would err accordingly.

In complexion there is as marked a variance. There are individuals whiter than many white folk; there are others of all intermediate shades, to the coppery tint which we most often associate with the Indian race. This does not depend on the proportion of Indian blood; the son of a very light-tinted father and mother may be a more pronounced Indian in complexion than half the members of tribal delegations that visit Washington.

My chief informant and kind assistant in my investigations, Mr William Russell Clark, is of notable Nanticoke type—long, glossy, black hair waving about his shoulders; vivid, eager, black eyes; aquiline nose, dark complexion, oval countenance; enterprising, sensitive, spirited, and kindly. But there is another and broader type of countenance among his people which recalls the more Tartar-like and square-faced Indians whom we so often see. In cheek-bones, in lips and nostrils, they have the features of their race, or of the white race, and not those of the African; yet no one of them would be taken for a person of unmixed white blood unless by a careless observer.

I neither saw nor heard of cripples nor seriously diseased persons; yet instances of longevity seemed equally wanting, for their oldest living member is under fourscore years. To divers inquiries concerning young persons or couples, the answer "dead," "he is dead," or "they are both dead," came with depressing regularity. I found that my entertainers agreed with me in not considering themselves a long-lived people.

Children are fairly numerous. I saw no very large families, but the roads were well dotted with them in twos and threes on their way to school. They seemed a hearty, cheery lot of youngsters, not unlike well-treated, well-taught white children of equal

age and rural surroundings. They seemed also in a fair way to keep more than even with the death-rate, while the continual loss by emigration is well offset by the love of this secluded sept of people for the tribal home. The city draws them, or the ends of the country draw them in early life; but with middle age the Indian hundred prevails and they are back in the trials and limitations of their environment. Of course the little community brightens by this outflow and inflow. In that sense there is a growth, but the best available estimate held their numbers to be nearly stationary. In area of occupancy they have perhaps contracted a little since the middle of the century, but I think not at all during the last twenty years.

They have quite lost their language. It is believed by them that Lydia Clark, great-great-grandmother of the gentleman above named, was the last of them who could speak it. To the day of her death she wore an Indian cap and short skirts, altogether refusing the ordinary garb of white women. Every relic of distinctly Nanticoke customs has disappeared as completely.

They have, of course, no tribal organization, but live on such land as they have been able to earn and buy, quite out of sight and reach of the Indian Bureau, with no sort of Governmental aid, and with more hindrance than help from anybody. They pay their taxes and vote like other citizens. For a long time there was a determined effort to crowd them into the ranks of the negroes, when the latter were denied many of the rights of citizenship; but their steady resistance and persistence have triumphed over it, although a certain measure of obstruction, disparagement, and jealousy may still be discovered about them. Their first church was burned down to compel them (as they believe) to worship with the negroes. They built a second, and the latter, they say, got possession of it. Then they built a third, and they assemble in it weekly to this day.

They are a neat people in their persons and homes. Myself

and a companion, with a rain-storm, took one of the latter by surprise, and we could not have been given anywhere a more dainty and tasteful room in which to sleep; it had nothing costly in it, but everything was bright and pretty and perfect. In the four-poster bedstead, the brass stair-rods of the carpeted stairway, no less than in certain slight, winning quaintnesses of speech, there lingered a reminiscence of older fashions and times. There were prayers before breakfast and grace at every meal, for these people are conscientious in religious observance, though in an unostentatious way. No one could have been more cordial in their welcome than this good old couple, and it was to strangers whom they had never seen before.

We visited one Indian mound, which they identified as having that character by continuous tradition, though they could not say who made it nor when. I paced over the crown of it from one point of its circumference to the opposite, and determined that interval to be approximately forty-eight yards. It seems to be settling in height and probably spreading. The elder Mr Clark said it had lost two feet in elevation within his memory; perhaps the sandiness of the soil may account for such subsidence. It is nearly as white as snow in parts of the field near by. Such a mound could have little more consistency than a sand-dune by the seashore, except where the roots of saplings and herbage have bound the shell of it together. There is a light growth of new timber over it, besides one large oak near the periphery, which, however, may be beyond the limit of the original mound. The present height seems not over fifteen feet, so that it is a very low and squat conoid. They told me of another tumulus, at a tributary of Indian river, known as Swan creek, where are also said to be the remains of a dam or some similar work.

The only distinctive thing that I observed in their architecture was a house with bright blue posts and corners, all the rest being white or nearly colorless. The effect was gay and primitive, not to say a little amusing.

I visited one Indian home where could be counted nineteen outbuildings of various size, including long rows of overflowing cornhouses, ample, well-stored barns, and all else that went to make up abundant evidence of thrift. The farmer who owned this place began with nothing ; now he is able to give one of his sons a two-hundred-acre farm, keeps two sawmills in operation, maintains his fields and cattle in excellent order, and is popularly credited by the whites with being the richest man in that region. I heard his possessions estimated at \$60,000, which stands for more in southeastern Delaware between Cypress swamp and the ocean than a much larger amount in one of our great cities. The money had been made fairly by diligent labor, enterprise, and a vigilant eye to the main chance. "A man of good judgment and mother wit" are the terms in which he was defined to me by an Indian neighbor, relative, and friend.

These interesting people should not be neglected any longer. They ask no help, being very well able to take care of themselves, except that in the matter of school facilities the state of Delaware might go a little out of its way in their behalf. There would be no loss, but some fairness, in letting their taxes support their own schools. But the anthropologic world may brighten matters a little for them by showing that in their long struggle for individual existence they have at last become visible to the scientific eye. Certainly they have a nearly unique interest, sharing the position of the Pitcairn islanders as instances of successful modern hybridization of two widely different human-race stocks, the resultant type, when established, preserving itself wilfully from further intermixture or change.

I have called these people Indians, and certainly their dominant tone of feeling and the more obvious characteristics of some of their race warrant the name ; but it is evident, also, that they have nearly as many white attributes of mind and body, habit and temper. The result is a singularly alert, versatile, capable kind of men, with no present sign of vanishing from among us.