



WILLIAM & MARY
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

August 14, 2024

The Honorable Abigail Davis Spanberger
562 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515-4607

Representative Spanberger,

We are writing to you in our formal capacities as cultural anthropologists and professors in the Department of Anthropology at the College of William & Mary. Our letter is in response to a recently circulated “position statement” from the Stafford County Historical Society (SCHS) and an associated opposition letter written by Connie Hilker, the president of that organization. The statement expresses incorrect and inappropriate arguments against the legitimacy of the Patowomeck Indian Tribe and H.R. 5553.

This recent attack follows several years of disparaging emails and vindictive letter-writing campaigns by a handful of disaffected Stafford County citizens championed by the SCHS. These citizens’ ongoing attacks on the credibility of the Patowomeck community and the tribe’s 2010 state recognition are unfounded. In the past, we chose to ignore these attacks to avoid giving any credence to their statements. However, due to the actions of these individuals, we can no longer remain silent. Our work with the tribe spans nearly two decades, including archival, ethnographic, and oral history in support of the state recognition efforts of this community. Our anthropological work is not “new,” we follow in the footsteps of other anthropologists and social scientists, most famously that of Dr. Frank G. Speck from the University of Pennsylvania during the first part of the twentieth century; William Harlen Gilbert, Jr. from Smithsonian Institution in the 1940s; Calvin L. Beale from U.S. Department of Agriculture in the 1950s; William F. Stiles, curator for the Heye Foundation’s Museum of the American Indian in the 1970s; and Russell Skrowneck from Florida State University in the 1980s, among others.

The contemporary Potomac, or Patowomeck, of White Oak and Belle Plains share the same state recognition enjoyed by ten other descendant communities in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Nearly all these groups, some of which are now federally acknowledged tribes, underwent a similar recognition review process. The Stafford County Historical Society apparently does not know, chooses to ignore, or simply does not have a grasp on this recent history. As former members of the Virginia Council on Indians (VCI), we can firmly state that the Patowomeck were not denied state recognition twice. Moreover, the VCI was a state-level advisory board, not a regulatory body, and had no authority to grant recognition at the state or federal level. The Patowomeck application was tabled without prejudice, and the General Assembly later extended formal acknowledgment to the community in 2010. Our previous gubernatorial appointments to the Council on Indians served Virginia governors Mark Warner and Timothy Kaine (2003—2006). Based on our scholarship, professional experience, and over 25 years of anthropological fieldwork in the White Oak community and with all the Virginia tribes, we fully support the state recognition of the Patowomeck.

Importantly, Dr. Moretti-Langholtz was also the scholar of record for the Virginia tribes’ federal recognition petition, testifying in Washington, D.C. before the Senate Subcommittee on Indian Affairs (2002) and the

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Congressional Committee on Indian Affairs (2003). More recently, Dr. Woodard chaired the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Virginia Indian Advisory Board State-Recognition Workgroup (2021—2023) under governors Ralph Northam and Glenn Younklin.

Like most of the Virginia tribes (Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Pamunkey, Rappahannock, Upper Mattaponi), the Potomac community is named for the river on which it has resided. These Native descendant communities are coalescent peoples with multiple ancestries and complex histories. None of these groups, save the Pamunkey and Mattaponi who maintained reservation lands, have an uninterrupted historical record into the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries. Gaps in the documentary record for Virginia tribes should not be held as conclusive evidence that they are not Native, nor that they are not communities with ancestral ties to the region's Indigenous peoples. In fact, the Congressional passage of the *Thomasina E. Jordan Indian Tribes of Virginia Federal Recognition Act of 2017* was enacted precisely to address the silences and gaps in the historical record. These statements by the members of the SCHS are a veiled attack on the Commonwealth's six congressionally acknowledged federal tribes and all four of the state-recognized tribes.

The peoples of White Oak and Belle Plains have been studied by anthropologists, ethnohistorians, and sociologists for over 100 years. Our discipline's ethnographic research demonstrates that archival records are but one form of documentation. Recent challenges presented by Native communities regarding their documentary histories prompted the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Federal Acknowledgement in 2015 to revise its recognition criteria. The new federal regulations now require a petitioner to "comprise a distinct community and demonstrate that it existed as a community from 1900 until the present." This new standard alleviates the pressure on tribal groups to document a paper trail back hundreds of years – a nearly impossible task for any Native community.

In federal acknowledgment and state-recognition contexts, we professionally hold that avocational historians and local civic organizations, such as the Stafford County Historical Society, lack the authority, education, or expertise to declare and evaluate complex sociohistorical issues. Their efforts to defraud the Patowomeck attests to their lack of skill in interrogating and interpreting archival and historical documents and ethnographic material.

The remarks by these avocational and self-appointed historian vigilantes of Stafford County are defamatory, misinformed, and salacious. It is extremely troubling to see county civic groups defame other citizens in such a mean-spirited and agenda-driven way. Sowing the seeds of mistrust against a community that the Commonwealth has deemed and declared to be legitimate is a serious legal matter. It is unethical and, frankly, has its roots in forms of bigotry that Virginia is trying to move beyond.

Historical societies are important to local communities on many levels. Key supporters of the Stafford County Historical Society include life members and former president (the late) Steve Gambaro and his wife Retha, the latter a member of the D.C. American Indian Society and honorary member of the Patowomeck tribe. In the 1990s and 2000s, we worked with the Gambaros on a variety of projects, including an art exhibition in 2007 (the Gambaros were instrumental in the establishment of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian). At a dinner in the Gambaro's Stafford home in the late 1990s, Dr. Moretti-Langholtz was introduced



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to several tribal leaders of the local Native community, including Chief Emeritus Robert Green of the Patowomeck Indian Tribe and Chief Emeritus Kevin Brown of the Pamunkey Indian Reservation. How shocking would it be to these people who dedicated their lives to Native culture and history to find that their former organization was actively opposing the work they promoted?

A perusal of the SCHS website offers the stated goals of the Society. These include being “trustworthy,” “building community strength and cohesiveness,” and “understanding of our own past and its connection to the present.” Perhaps the president and board of the Stafford County Historical Society should reflect upon the goals of their organization. The citizens of Stafford County and those of the Commonwealth deserve better than they are getting from the people at the SCHS. They need to cease, desist, and retract their toxic statements against the Patowomeck community immediately.

We appreciate your attention to this matter,

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