

Quapaw Tribe Seeks Connection to Arkansas Roots

By Joseph Price

One group that once called Arkansas home, the Quapaw tribe, is one of the few that claim its origins began in the land that became the state and is now aiming to preserve its history in the Little Rock area.

“We’re very much from Arkansas,” Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma Chairman John Berrey says. “We’re emotionally attached to it.”

After the Quapaw submitted an application this year requesting that 160 acres in Pulaski County south of the Little Rock Port Authority be entered into federal trust, which would remove the acres the tribe purchased in 2013 from local and state taxation, concerns were raised that the group would build a casino.

But Berrey says that’s not the case.

“Right now, we don’t have any plans aside from taking care of the burial site and slave cemetery,” he says. “We’ve been trying to work with the Little Rock Port Authority. We have a good relationship with them.”

Berrey also says the land will be used to grow crops for food banks.

“Little Rock was developed on a Quapaw reservation,” Berrey says. “We’re negotiating a more in-depth study.”

Entering the land into federal trust has found an opponent in Pulaski County Judge Barry Hyde, who sent a letter dated May 11 to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Nashville, Tennessee, asking for the land not to be entered into federal trust.

Little Rock Mayor Mark Stodola also wasn’t completely on board with the request, saying in his State of the City speech on March 19, “As fun as that might be to do in another state, out of town, I have questions about whether or not that’s the most appropriate place or use of our property here in Little Rock.”

Until a decision is made, the Quapaw tribe has been working at public relations with both the Port Authority and the people of Little Rock. An electronic billboard in the metro currently displays a message on the tribe's Arkansas heritage.

The Quapaw tribe is currently based in Quapaw, Oklahoma. Quapaw is located in Ottawa County, along with Miami, a town that is the headquarters of five other American Indian groups. Ottawa County is also home of the Tar Creek Superfund site, which is known for its chat piles that caused lead dust to blow into the nearby town of Picher, leading to its eventual abandonment.

PEOPLE OF ARKANSAS

The Quapaw, or okaxpa, have a history tied to the Mississippi River. Okaxpa means “people who went downstream,” which suggests the origins of the tribe. The state's name is derived from a Quapaw word meaning “land of the downriver people.”

According to George Sabo III, director of Arkansas Archeological Survey at the University of Arkansas, there is debate on whether the Quapaw developed out of prehistoric Mississippian communities, migrated to Arkansas sometime after Hernando de Soto's exploration in the 1500s, or if they both displaced and merged with other tribes that were already here. Sabo says the last scenario currently has greater favor than the other.

Sabo says there are several competing hypotheses about where the people who became the Quapaw originally migrated from and why. While the Ohio Valley is often cited as the most likely area, Sabo says, there are hypothesis questioning that, as well.

"There's no real consensus," Sabo says in an email. "What is well established is that when French explorers descended the Mississippi River at the end of the 17th century, the Quapaw occupied four villages around the confluence of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers."

The beginnings of the Quapaw are still roused in uncertainty. Members speak a Siouan-related language. The Siouan-language family encompasses a wide number of tribal languages used by tribes that have roots in the Midwest, Midsouth and as far east as the Atlantic Ocean.

According to the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture, the Quapaw established the village of Kappa on the east bank of the Mississippi. The villages of Tongigua and Tourima were on the west bank and Osotouy at the mouth of the Arkansas River.

Quapaw history becomes a little more clear after considering its encounters with the French, beginning in 1673, who became trading partners, as well as family members for many in the tribe.

"The French and the Quapaws enjoyed an amicable social, trade and military relationship for upwards of five generations," says former U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Morris Arnold in an email. "There was a certain amount of intermarriage, but the extent of it is obscure. Relationships like this were very rare in the Anglo colonies."

In 1686, the French arranged with the Quapaw to establish a trading post where members would trade French goods for beaver pelts. They founded the first Arkansas Post near the Quapaw town of Osotouy in present-day Arkansas County, according to the encyclopedia.

"We were the first tribe to work with the French," Berrey says. "The Quapaw protected the Arkansas Post, [the first European settlement in Arkansas]."

Berrey also says the word "Arkansas" may come from the French having trouble pronouncing "okaxpa."

The Chickasaw, one of the largest tribes dwelling on the eastern side of the Mississippi River, were allies of the British. The Quapaw acted as protectors of French outposts during raids from the Chickasaw and others.

During the initial meetings with the French, it is believed the Quapaw were at their population high point. After this initial contact with settlers, the Quapaw population began to decline rapidly, Sabo says.

The decline is partially blamed on smallpox, a disease brought by Europeans that is often fatal and can result in sterility for those that survive. It was one of the many introduced diseases that killed millions of American Indians in both North and South America during colonization.

“Jesuit missionaries recorded the effects of smallpox as early as 1699, but devastating outbreaks continued throughout most of the 18th century, as well,” Sabo says.

With the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, the Quapaw’s territory became part of the United States. But the Quapaw were not considered Americans. From that time onward, the group saw its Arkansas land shrink.

The Quapaw first ceded land to the U.S. government in 1818, giving up all claims of land from the Red River beyond Arkansas and east of the Mississippi. In 1824, they ceded more land, and finally in 1834, they were expelled by the U.S. government and forced to settle in the northeast corner of Indian Territory, which includes Oklahoma.

WHO ARE THE QUAPAW?

The Quapaw tribe decides membership by lineal descent, instead of blood quantum. The lineal descent is determined by one of the federal allotment rolls, the most recent being from 1959, which listed tribal members at the time for the federal payroll, as well as allotment of land.

“For the Quapaw tribe, the simplest answer is that you must be able to prove that you are [a descendant] from someone on the roll,” says Everett Bandy of the Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma’s Tribal Historic Preservation Office.

There are 3,240 members of the Quapaw tribe. “We’re considered a ‘large’ small tribe,” Berrey says.

Preserving the heritage is a very high priority for the tribe.

“The Quapaw Tribe has various tribal members, families and departments within the tribal government that engage in numerous tribal activities,” Bandy says in an email. “These include traditional crafts such as beading, moccasin making, singing, traditional games such as dice game[s] and hand game[s].”

The annual Quapaw Powwow is the biggest cultural event for the tribe. This year marks the 143rd powwow, which is held around Independence Day. At the event, traditional dances and crafts are showcased. There is also a variety of traditional clothing contests.

It is also where the Powwow Princess is selected. The Quapaw Powwow Princess is crowned every year at the event and is selected by the Powwow Princess Committee and represents the annual event in a number of fashions including local parades, dances and contests hosted by other tribes and organizations.

This year, the powwow will be held July 2-5 in Oklahoma.

One aspect of tribal culture that is not currently practiced is the naming of the chief. The Quapaw’s leadership is now in the position of a chairman. Bandy says the position of chief was determined by one’s paternal ancestry.

“As far as chiefs, in years past we had traditional hereditary chiefs and elected chiefs,” Bandy says. “Tall Chief was the last hereditary chief of the Quapaw tribe, and Victor Griffin was the last elected chief of the tribe.”

After Griffin, the leadership position became that of an elected chairman, which Berrey now holds.

“It’s our history and culture that makes us who we are,” Berrey says.

Aside from the preservation of sites on the 160 acres sought for federal trust, there have not been any other plans mentioned. But that doesn’t mean that Arkansas won’t see more of the Quapaw in years to come. It’s unknown if that means historic sites, cultural centers or casinos, but the entry of the land into federal trust would open a door for the tribe that’s been separated from its ancestral lands for almost two centuries.

“We don’t have a masterplan,” Berrey says. “We want to re-establish our name there.”