

Tracing Native Ancestry

A Guide to Responding to Inquiries

A publication of the National Indian Child Welfare Association

Hearing the ancestry cliché, “*my great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess,*” is a common experience for Native people. It has become an inside joke spanning generations in an America infatuated by playing Indian. Most times, it’s said with ignorance and no intent to pursue the relation the non-Native person claims to have descended from. However, those who work in Native human service organizations—especially those related to child welfare—know to expect consistent inquiries from people who have been told they have Indian ancestry. Some inquire out of curiosity. For many, their desire to establish this connection is rooted in a family disruption that they wish to remedy.

NICWA receives hundreds of inquiries each year from people seeking instruction on how to confirm their Native American heritage. This article is intended for those tracing their Native ancestry and for the service providers who may encounter ancestry questions from the communities they serve.

HISTORY

Tracing Indian ancestry is both intriguing and perplexing. Part of the challenge of determining ancestry has to do with history itself. Traditionally, familial relationships were passed down through oral history. While this still occurs in many Native families today (it’s typical to have unknown, distant cousins or grandmas pointed out at powwows or gatherings), intentional federal policies disrupted other methods of recording these relationships.

In 1893, the U.S. government established the Dawes Commission. This commission was a way for the government to control what was clearly out of control: tribal people had been moved so many times from their ancestral homelands that each tribe’s unique and culturally sophisticated record-keeping systems had been lost, misplaced, or deliberately tossed aside. Trying to reorganize what had once been organically organized and transmitted by oral tradition was the task of the new commission. With this wide dispersal of American Indians, it is not a surprise that identities were confused.

CONDUCTING A SEARCH

What if someone believes they have American Indian or Alaska Native blood? Wouldn’t DNA testing erase any questions? Yes and no. Mitochondrial testing can certainly tell whether there is Native blood on a mother’s side or a father’s side, but it cannot identify the specific tribe they are from.

The question then becomes more intricate. How does one go about connecting one’s lineage to, and even enrolling in, an American Indian or Alaska Native tribe? Many genealogical experts and online resources recommend the same general steps:

1. Research and identify as many members of a family tree as possible.
2. Search Indian-specific records to confirm relationship to tribe.
3. Seek assistance from the tribe to establish a relationship or enroll.

RESEARCH AND IDENTIFY AS MANY MEMBERS OF A FAMILY TREE AS POSSIBLE

NICWA refers inquiries to the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ (BIA) [Guide to Tracing Your American Indian Heritage](#). Begin a genealogical search with familial records. Interestingly, many people mistakenly think that they should go through the BIA, but the BIA does not keep genealogical records and does not conduct genealogical research for individuals.

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At the Native American Rights Fund in Boulder, Colorado, a spokesperson explained, “You must go through your own family to find out what tribe you are from.”

It’s true. In communities that have experienced so much upheaval and disruption, the most thorough family records may reside in the memories of relatives. One should talk to relatives and learn as much as possible about a family history and take specific note of vital statics, including:

- Names (full names, Indian names, and women’s maiden names)
- Dates of birth, marriages, and deaths
- Places of birth, residence, death

This stage of research should include a thorough search of as many family personal records as are available. These include oral histories (which, if recorded, can be uploaded digitally to an online family tree such as those found on [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)), Bibles, family papers, scrapbooks, photograph albums, and diaries.

SEARCH INDIAN-SPECIFIC RECORDS TO CONFIRM RELATIONSHIP TO TRIBE

Armed with as many names and dates as possible, researchers can access online genealogical resources. The goal of such research is to confirm and document two indicators: (1) a direct relationship between the individual and a specific ancestor of Native heritage and (2) that ancestor’s relationship to, or membership within, a specific tribe.

An ideal place to start is in the Indian Census Rolls that were taken in the late 19th century until the mid-20th century. These are a treasure trove of information. They include tribal affiliation and link individuals with extended family members who shared a residence. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has the world’s largest genealogical collections, [FamilySearch](https://www.familysearch.org). [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) provides easy connection to the Indian Census Rolls and links data entered on one family tree to other family trees in its collection of records.

Working backward in time, starting with the individual and moving from his or her parents to their parents and so on, researchers should cross-check the Indian Census Rolls for relatives and identify their tribal affiliations. Other sites with Indian-specific information are included in the Resources section of this article.



SEEK ASSISTANCE FROM THE TRIBE TO ESTABLISH A RELATIONSHIP OR ENROLL

Once a specific tribe is determined, researchers can visit the National Congress of American Indians’ [tribal directory](https://www.ncaianet.org/tribal-directory), which lists contact information for all federally recognized tribes. Many tribal governments have their own website, which may contain community and cultural information as well as contact information. For those seeking advice on how to establish a relationship with their tribal community, tribal enrollment, cultural preservation, or family services departments may have suggestions. Attending and participating in cultural or community events and respectfully inquiring about known familial ties may be appropriate.

If an individual seeks to become enrolled in a tribe, the BIA explains, “Each tribe determines whether an individual is eligible for membership. Each tribe maintains its own enrollment records and records about past members. To obtain information about your eligibility for membership, you must contact the tribe.”

Further, they write, “When establishing descent from an Indian tribe for membership and enrollment purposes, the individual must provide genealogical documentation. The documentation must prove that the individual lineally descends from an ancestor who was a member of the federally recognized tribe from which the individual claims descent.”

What’s more, each tribe is its own sovereign nation, and each has its own membership criteria. Some tribes have strict blood quantum requirements as high as 50%, while others ask for other specific descendency documentation. As such, just because one can demonstrate Indian heritage in no way guarantees membership into the tribal rolls.

ADULT ADOPTEES AND LOST RECORDS

Tragically, many Native children were taken from their communities and placed in non-Native homes where their lack of identity haunted them. When the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978, research indicated that one in every three Native children was being removed from their homes. Often these removals led to adoption by non-Native families who lacked the



relationships or commitment to keep their adopted children connected to their extended families, tribes, and cultures. Given these numbers, it is no surprise that thousands of Native adults search for their roots today.

Until recently, what information existed of tribal relations was seldom shared with adoptees. During the military era and assimilationist period of federal Indian policy, claiming to be an Indian could literally be a matter of life and death. The distancing from Native roots that occurred as a result—although intended to ensure survival—also created a strong current of shame in successive generations. Severing ties was common, and, for many, records were not written down.

For these reasons, there are many people today who have only an ambiguous notion of where their Indian heritage originates. NICWA receives inquiries every week from adult adoptees who were removed from their tribal communities and others who are simply trying to determine their relationship to a tribe. Unfortunately, scarce information and few resources make the research more challenging, but not impossible.

First, one should determine to the best of his or her ability from which area of the country he or she was adopted. A rudimentary example would be if an adoptee was living on the East Coast with a wealthy family, but knew he or she was adopted in South Dakota, research could focus on the tribes in that area, the Lakota, the Dakota, or the Nakota people.

Then, tribal enrollment offices can be contacted to enlist their help. This type of inquiry may be enough to alert the community of someone’s desire to reconnect with home. Many adult adoptees share similar stories of reaching out to a tribal community where they had only the vaguest knowledge of a familial connection. Unbeknownst to them, close-knit families like those on reservations are aware that a relative was lost during the adoption era and may welcome the relative back.

This optimism just doesn’t seem to fit in with the terrible feelings of displacement that many American Indian and Alaska Native people feel who have been taken from their Native communities. The most committed researcher may become daunted when the BIA suggests consulting an adoption attorney for assistance in opening sealed adoption papers to

identify Indian relatives, instead of suggesting other methods of data collection.

However, organizations like the [First Nations Repatriation Institute](#) can not only provide support to adoptees but may also connect adoptees with others who have gone through the same process. Furthermore, looking at the abundance of genealogical resources available at anyone's fingertips, it is striking how self-sufficient one can be despite the obstacles.

TRIBAL LINEAGE VS. TRIBAL IDENTITY

Genealogical research is time-consuming and tedious, but ultimately rewarding. What motivates a person's desire to connect with a Native community is as diverse and complex as the tribes themselves. Researching and confirming genealogical ties to a tribal community is but one step in establishing a tribal identity rooted in culture, history, tradition, reciprocity, and community. As any Native person could assert, being Indian entails much more than just getting one's paperwork in order.

RESOURCES

Ancestry.com

www.ancestry.com

Includes easy access to Indian Census Rolls and links to possible matches in its large collection of records.

Bureau of Indian Affairs

www.bia.gov/bia/ois/tgs/genealogy

Publishes a downloadable Guide to Tracing Your Indian Ancestry.

FamilySearch

www.familysearch.org

Has the world's largest collection of genealogical records, including a comprehensive list of Indian specific resources: www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/American_Indian_Online_Genealogy_Records



Native American Rights Fund

www.narf.org/nill/resources/roots.htm

Has a vast online library, Tracing Native American Family Roots.

National Congress of American Indians

www.ncai.org/tribal-directory

Provides the online tribal directory where contact information for specific tribes can be found.

TO ENLIST THE HELP OF A PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHER

The BIA suggests writing to the Board of Certification of Genealogists or the Association of Professional Genealogists and requesting their listings of genealogical researchers for hire.

Board of Certification of Genealogists

P.O. Box 14291 Washington, DC 20044

Association of Professional Genealogists

P.O. Box 40393 Denver, CO 80204



NICWA
National Indian Child Welfare Association

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) works to support the safety, health, and spiritual strength of Native children along the broad continuum of their lives. We promote building tribal capacity to prevent child abuse and neglect through positive systems change at the state, federal, and tribal levels.

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