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**Working for the Community in Tribal Partnerships**



**Interpreting the Histories of American Women**

**LARGE-SCALE DEACCESSIONING**

# Working for the Community in Tribal Partnerships

By Katie Stringer Clary, Carolyn Dillian, and Jesse Morgan



JUDY JOHNS, COASTAL CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

Chief Hatcher with CCU President Michael T. Benson and Dean Claudia Bornholdt at the exhibit opening.



KATIE CLARY

Vice Chief Cheryl Cail, who helped install the exhibit.

**E**xperiential learning, reflective practice, and community-centered programs are all popular buzzwords in higher education and public history fields. In the 2020-2021 academic year, living by those principles became even more challenging as we entered a second year of pandemic conditions and a reckoning with social injustice around the globe. The world watched and participated in numerous Black Lives Matter protests, and the news was filled with repatriation requests from museums and the horrific discovery of thousands of Native American children buried at boarding schools across North America, all while we lost hundreds of thousands of lives to COVID-19.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the adversity of our new, virtual, tenuous reality, those buzzwords were embodied by students, instructors, and community members who rose to the challenge in a partnership between local college students and South Carolina's Waccamaw Indian People. The work culminated in the exhibit *Waccamaw Indian People: Past, Present, Future*, which exemplifies the many facets of public history and education.

Dr. Carolyn Dillian worked to build a relationship with the Waccamaw Indian People of Aynor, South Carolina, for more than a decade. Throughout this process we, along with other instructors and students, have had to work against the historic legacies of the often one-sided and harmful relationships between Native American people and various institutions, including museums and universities. Building trust between researchers and communities is always hard under the best circumstances, but the weight of colonial history and racial oppression can make those associations more difficult.

The Waccamaw Indian People of Horry County, South Carolina, descend from Siouan-speaking peoples who lived in South Carolina, North Carolina, and possibly as far north as Virginia at the time of European contact. Today, members of the Waccamaw Indian People maintain a close-knit community that shares knowledge of the relationships, cultural traditions, and histories of their Waccamaw ancestors.

The Waccamaw Indian People are recognized by the state of South Carolina as an Indian tribe, but they are not federally recognized, and as a result, school curricula often ignore or lump together the Waccamaw with other Southeastern tribes. This is pervasive and not unique to the Waccamaw, but it means that many people, even residents of the local community, know very little about the Native American descendant community who are their neighbors, colleagues, and friends.

Conversations and collaborations on other educational and community projects between Dr. Dillian and Dr. Clary, both faculty at Coastal Carolina University, and with Chief Harold Hatcher and Vice Chief Cheryl Cail made clear the lack of public knowledge, nationally, regionally, and locally, of the Waccamaw Indian People. As a result, we approached the tribal leaders with the idea of creating an exhibit at the Horry County Museum to tell their history, and to share their current stories and their hopes for the future. Chief Hatcher and Vice Chief Cail were open to this conversation, but they did have questions about the motivation for such an exhibit. Many people in the community do not recognize them as a contemporary society, but rather as a story from history. We made it clear that the motivation was to tell the story of the Waccamaw people in their own words *with* them, rather than *for* them. Since our goal was to create a truly community-centered and collaborative experience, this project was administered by university professors, but the content was led by the Waccamaw Indian People and their wishes. We were working *for* the community rather than merely *with* them.

### In the spring 2021 semester,

students enrolled in HIST392: Museums and Communities and ANTH432: Cultural Resource Management began the task of creating an exhibit from planning and design to opening day. The project was fortunate to receive funding from several sources: a grant from South Carolina Humanities, a Public Education and Outreach grant from the Register of Professional Archaeologists through the Council of South Carolina Professional Archaeologists, and the Department of Anthropology and Geography and the Prince Fellows program within the Department of History, both supported by the Horry County Commission on Higher Education and Coastal Carolina University.

Thirty-seven students worked in collaboration with the Waccamaw Indian People to tell their story through their words, voices, images, and belongings, and educate the community about Waccamaw history, heritage, and culture. Collaborators were careful to make clear that this exhibit was not about a historic tribe that was “extinct” or had “been eradicated,” as many sources claim, but rather about a living culture with a rich history and goals for future endeavors.

Because of COVID-19 precautions, students started the semester online using video-conferencing and classroom management software. Mid-semester, students in both classes met in a hybrid format with some students meeting only online and others socially distanced in the classroom. This presented

some unique challenges when working on such a hands-on project, but it also provided the opportunity to allow guest speakers from the Waccamaw Indian People to safely meet with students.

In August 2020, four undergraduate students, who would serve as student leaders, first met to discuss the project as part of the Department of History Prince Fellows program. The development, construction, and installation of the exhibit was to take place between January and April 2021, and the compressed timeline meant that laying groundwork in the previous semester was imperative. One of the main projects for the student fellows was the creation of a best practices document for the rest of the students to use in the spring semester. Using a variety of sources, students wrote a concise guiding document for doing public history, interpretation, oral histories, and working with communities for their peers. The best practices document was frequently cited by students in their final reflections as the most important reading for the semester.

To prepare for the project, students read a variety of sources as part of their classwork: Raney Bench’s *Interpreting Native American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites* (2014), UNESCO’s *Running a Museum: A Practical Handbook* (2010), and the Prince Fellows’ best practices document served



Interviews at the Waccamaw Indian People Tribal Grounds office in March 2021.

as guiding texts. Because the Waccamaw Indian People are not federally recognized, but strive to meet that goal, students also reviewed the laws surrounding federal recognition, including Bureau of Indian Affairs resources, and learned about the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Many cited *Journeys to Complete the Work*, a 2017 graphic novel by Sonya Atalay, Jen Shannon, and John G. Swagger, as a favorite and informative text.

The student-compiled best practices document urged students to remember: “Historically, many museums have focused on their history in relation to Native American tribes, not the tribe’s history itself. We need to make sure that the history we present is Waccamaw history from the tribe’s perspective.” The document goes on to remind students that “there are many things we can do to respectfully represent Waccamaw



Council Member Marie Hatcher Hines and Fire Keeper Marion Craddock being interviewed by students.

belongings and culture in our exhibit. The most important thing is to interact with the tribe throughout the development of our exhibit. This is crucial because it ensures what we present is accurate and appropriate to the Waccamaw culture.”

The Waccamaw Indian People invited students to conduct interviews with tribal members at their Spring Equinox Fire Ceremony at the tribal grounds in Aynor, South Carolina. The instructors obtained Institutional Review Board approval prior to the initiation of this phase of the project, and a COVID Research Resumption Plan was submitted and approved by the university. Students worked to develop questions to ask tribal members and practiced oral history best practices in the classroom before visiting the tribal grounds.

Students interviewed ten tribal members, including members of the tribal council. Students asked questions about their past and their cultural practices, but also their own stories and hopes for the future. Excerpts of the interviews were used as printed text and as push-button audio in the exhibit, and the full interviews are available through the exhibit website (a QR code in the exhibit allows museum-goers direct access to this resource). Copies of the interviews were also provided to the tribe for their own records. Student Jesse Morgan also led documentary procedures including filming, recording, and photographing members for the exhibition and online materials. All photographs, text, audio, and exhibit displays were approved by tribal members at every stage of the design, and their comments and edits were incorporated prior to printing and construction, so that their message came through in the final exhibit.<sup>1</sup>



Chief Hatcher showing his ceremonial pipe at the museum.

By working in true collaboration with the Waccamaw Indian People, we created an exhibit that uses their voices to convey the information they wanted shared in a culturally sensitive and factually accurate way. Through the use of interviews, photographs, archaeological artifacts, and personal belongings, the exhibit traces the history of the Waccamaw Indian People from prehistoric times through today, and highlights tribal members’ aspirations for the future of their tribe. Additionally, the use of digital spaces, websites, audio, and videos allows people who are unable to visit the museum physically to interact with artifacts and interpretation.

In consultation with the tribe, and with the help of Chief Hatcher, students and the tribe selected historic artifacts, current belongings, clothing, and other items to display within the exhibit. The artifacts selected for the exhibit came from the museum’s collections, but other belongings were loaned by members of the Waccamaw Indian People. An important part of the exhibit was the personal narratives and oral histories provided by members of the tribe during interviews with students. Artifacts included prehistoric projectile points and pottery spanning Paleoindian through historic times; a pipe, gourd art, ribbon dress, and ribbon shirt on loan from tribal members; and photographs, text, and audio highlighting tribal members and their stories.

The exhibit was ultimately divided into three distinct yet interconnected sections: past, present, and future. When visitors enter the exhibit, they first see a land acknowledgment developed with the tribe, to remind all that the land on which the museum



Portraits of tribal members complement their words and objects on display.

and university stand are traditional Waccamaw grounds. The **past** section includes a timeline of prehistoric and historic documentation of the Waccamaw Indian People, establishing their residence in the region prior to European contact. There are also sections on food, hunting, and daily life for Waccamaw ancestors.

When visitors round the corner to the **present** section of the exhibit, they meet five larger-than-life portraits of tribal members, and the words of those individuals from interviews. Many visitors who participated in an exit evaluation stated that the words of individuals were the most impactful part of the exhibit for them. Chief Hatcher's interview states, "I knew as I grew up in South Carolina that I was an Indian. My Dad was an Indian; my Mom was an Indian. We knew, but nobody else did." Vice Chief Cail explained, "Knowing that you're Indian, knowing that you have been told this all your life, but not having any information... when I learned more, it was like finding a home." Former Chief of Council Ricky Hudnall explained that, to him, "there's still a big stereotype, a lot of people think we're still the savages we were made out to be years ago, and that's definitely not the case." While historical information provides context, hearing from individuals themselves allows the visitor to build a connection to the information and the current issues of the Waccamaw Indian People.

The present section also includes information about Native American arts and crafts, regalia, and the annual pauwau at the tribal grounds. This information firmly places the Waccamaw Indian People in the present narrative and in their local community as contemporaries, rather than antique curiosities.

Moving through the exhibit, visitors end in a section that addresses the **future** of the Waccamaw Indian People. Five interviews are linked to the exhibit website, and five tribal members are represented with their hopes for the future of the tribe. Randy Wood explained in his interview, "We're like everybody else; we just want to exist; we want to be recognized... we want to be known as our own people living in harmony with everybody else. We need to be our own tribe or people, but we need to get along. We need to believe in each other; we need to respect each other; we need to love each other."

In order to make the exhibit accessible to all publics, all components of the exhibit, as well as supplementary materials and full recordings of interviews with tribal members,

are available online as well as in the Horry County Museum. Examples of some artifacts from the display were replicated as a "please touch" section that allowed low-vision audiences to explore some of the belongings held in glass cases. Some portions of the exhibit also included touch buttons for audio interaction, as well as QR codes for accessible experiences. A 3-D tour of the exhibit, with direct links to images of text panels and artifacts on display, can be accessed on the exhibit website at [waccamawpastpresentfuture.com](http://waccamawpastpresentfuture.com).

A distant goal of this project was to help the Waccamaw Indian People eventually attain federal recognition of their tribe from the U.S. government. Currently, the Waccamaw do not qualify because of gaps in the colonial and early settlement records, and the systematic destruction of their early ancestors in coastal South Carolina. One of the federal recognition criteria states that local awareness of the tribe and their history and culture is imperative. Currently, many residents of the county do not recognize or realize Native Americans are still here. This project seeks to change that.

Coincidentally, collaborators learned that just a few weeks before the opening of the exhibit, Representative Tom Rice



submitted a bill (H.R. 1942) entitled “Waccamaw Indian Acknowledgement Act” in support of federal recognition for the Waccamaw Indian People. In order to take advantage of this momentum, students addressed and mailed invitations to the exhibit to every member of the House of Representatives. Though there was no expectation that these politicians would attend, students wanted to raise awareness of the Waccamaw Indian People in light of the bill introduced by Representative Rice. The bill is currently before the House Committee on Natural Resources as of November 2021.

**Results and Reflections:** A total of 152 people attended the exhibit on its opening day, and museum-goers have continued to visit since that date. Attendees were asked to complete an online survey upon exiting, accessible via a QR code posted at the exit of the exhibit. Measured outcomes revealed that the exhibit educated the community about the Waccamaw Indian People, created collaborations and lasting partnerships with CCU’s Native American neighbors, and raised student awareness about this local descendant community while giving them the knowledge and skill to work respectfully with diverse groups.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the exhibit on students who participated in the design was conducted through online course evaluations that assessed experiential learning objectives. Twenty students completed online evaluations. Students stated that they enjoyed the project and working with the Waccamaw Indian People. The ability to see the project to completion and interact with tribal members was one of the biggest benefits. One student commented “I learned a lot about what goes on behind the scenes when it comes to putting on an exhibit.”

Students also learned about true collaboration and shared authority: “While this seemed like a huge responsibility, considering a large portion of the exhibit is interviews and photographs, I felt more like a vessel of connection to the community. My job with the Waccamaw was actually very simple: Let them tell their stories and show who they are. All I had to do was record that information and document it for the exhibit. I think that is what makes the exhibit so amazing.

As a class, we gave the Waccamaw Tribe total control of what went into the exhibit. We let them tell their story and show the artifacts they wanted within the exhibit.”

Others focused more specifically on what they learned about the Waccamaw Indian People:

“My favorite part of this exhibit was our collaboration with the Waccamaw and our ability to learn more about them first-hand. That first Zoom meeting with the Chief and Vice-Chief changed our perspective on the class. This was no longer a class where we were forced to learn a curriculum and create a project based on this. The end result of this project was something bigger than academia, which, as students, we are not used to nor have had much experience with. This project gave us the chance to make a real change for the better in our community.” Another commented that because the exhibit sometimes addressed painful personal stories by members of the Waccamaw Indian People, the classes worked respectfully with “...difficult information in a manner that was inclusive [and] brought up discussions of difficult topics” which allowed everyone to learn about that history.

*Waccamaw Indian People: Past, Present, Future* will remain on display at the Horry County Museum for at least one year. Portable, collapsible panels were also printed with exhibit materials which are loaned for temporary exhibits to local libraries, schools, and other organizations. If the Waccamaw Indian People would like them, the printed exhibit panels, photographs, and other exhibit items not owned by the Horry County Museum will be given to the tribe to place on display at their Tribal Grounds office or facility of their choice after the exhibit ends at the museum. Additional materials based on the exhibit content will be placed into education kits that are used in the museum’s school outreach programs and teaching materials. The website for the exhibit will remain online with photographs, text, and audio links, offering a permanent educational resource for everyone to use.

The partnership between multiple university departments, the museum, and the Waccamaw Indian People has attracted interest from other museums in the region and beyond, and we hope this project can educate and motivate other organizations. The transparency in the development of this project and the exhibition of the process both within the exhibit and online can serve as a model to inspire other museums to create similar exhibits and partnerships.



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Jesse Morgan is a student at Coastal Carolina University studying communication and photography. He has enjoyed being involved with documentary work with the Waccamaw Indian People. Contact Jesse at [jrmorga2@coastal.edu](mailto:jrmorga2@coastal.edu).

<sup>1</sup> Ten interviews conducted by students with tribal members of the Waccamaw Indian People are available on Soundcloud at [soundcloud.com/user-475547154/sets/waccamaw-indian-people-past](https://soundcloud.com/user-475547154/sets/waccamaw-indian-people-past).



The exhibit emphasizes the survival and cultural vitality of the Waccamaw Indian People.