

Along the Robeson Trail

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In recent segments, we have started along the road toward understanding the Lumbee in context. We have observed that different types of information and various ways of thinking about evidence and interpretation are necessary for the journey. This week we return to discussion of the prehistoric part of Lumbee context, and particularly to the diverse cultures of the Woodland division of prehistory.

One of the ways in which the Woodland ancestors of the Lumbee were diverse was in the languages they spoke. It is now widely accepted that here in eastern North Carolina there were three Indian language families: Algonkian, Iroquoian and Eastern Siouan. But what is a language family?

Just as an ordinary human family is a collection of closely related but distinct individuals, a language family is a group of closely related but distinct languages. To use a familiar modern example, the English language is a part of the West Germanic language family, which also includes Low German, Flemish and Afrikaans (the white South African language). We can get a glimpse of how closely related these languages are by comparing the simple English sentence, "I can," to its German equivalent, "Ich kann." It is pretty easy to see that these two sentences are related linguistically. But if we move beyond this simple level of communication to more complex

words and phrases, it becomes increasingly difficult to see the relatedness of these two distinct languages. Despite the fact that their languages are closely related, most English speakers do not understand German.

So it was with the languages which made up eastern North Carolina's original language families. We don't really know how many separate languages there were in the Algonkian, Iroquoian and Eastern Siouan language families because some of these languages disappeared in early colonial times before they could be adequately documented in writing. But the descriptions by Thomas Harriot in the late 1500s and John Lawson in the early 1700s give the impression that there was considerable linguistic diversity among the Native Americans of the eastern Carolinas.

The homeland of the Algonkian languages of this region was the outer coastal plain, north of the Neuse River drainage (and extending north along the coast all the way into Canada). Most of the Native people encountered by Barlowe, Lane, Grenville, White and Harriot at what would come to be called "the lost colony" of the 1580s spoke Algonkian languages. Powell included Pamlico and Nanticoke in this southern range of the Algonkian language family, to which should possibly be added Roanoke and/or Hatteras and others. If it is true, as many believe, that some

survivors of the "lost colony"

intermarried with Native Americans,

it seems most likely that those Indian

people

would

have

been

speakers

of

an

Algonkian

language.

Oral tradition

suggests

that

some

of

their

descendants

were

among

the

ancestors

of

some

segments

of

the

modern

Lumbee

population.