

A Point of View

John Jeffries belongs to the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation and lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Mr. Jeffries’s Native American name is John Blackfeather. He, like the other 400 members of his tribe, descends from Siouan-speaking people who lived in the area long before Europeans arrived. Their territory covered parts of northern Orange County up through Person County and into southern Virginia.

As is true for many of North Carolina’s Indian people, part of Mr. Jeffries’s history is lost. European diseases, to which Native Americans had no immunity, mercilessly killed his ancestors, wiping out many who would hand down oral traditions and customs. Of those who remained in early Colonial times, conflict claimed some. Survivors faced removal to reservations away from their homelands.

Put in Colonial schools and churches, Mr. Jeffries’s people found that what they had managed to keep of their heritage began slipping away as their children learned other lessons.

Mr. Jeffries knows that some of his history speaks from the ground—the kinds of tools and jewelry his people used; the size and shape of their houses; the layout of their villages; the foods they ate; the rituals and offerings they used for burials. So each time archaeologists excavate parts of a 17th-century village near Hillsborough Mr. Jeffries believes was home to his ancestors, he regularly comes to watch and learn what archaeologists find.

Asked how he would feel and what he would say to vandals if they dug up the site to take artifacts or human remains, Mr. Jeffries replied:

“There’s a man I know about. He has a barber shop near a town where some of my ancestors lived. He has relics all over his shop, and he has a skull. That really bothers me. The bones really bother me. The skull gives me the chills; it upsets me. I did a ceremony where I touched the skull. There’s no way to describe my feelings.

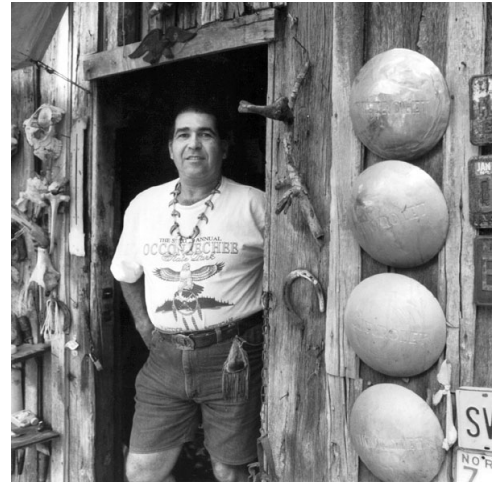
“Graves, in particular, should not be disturbed. But I’m of two minds about that. The archaeologists I know treat remains in a respectful way. So do their students. I wouldn’t want them exhuming people. Nobody needs to disturb another person that way. When I see remains of people in museums, I think their spirits are not resting. Would you want somebody lifting out your grandmother?

“But I know, too, that if the archaeologists didn’t open the graves, I wouldn’t know my ancestors. This is my history, and I wouldn’t have it if they didn’t do that. But I expect the archaeologists to have respect. When they open graves, I do a special prayer. If I touch the bones, I feel those people.

“I’m against removing artifacts from graves—by archaeologists or anybody else. Once in a grave, I saw an Occaneechi pot. I wanted this pot bad. But, it belonged to the person it was buried with. The Creator gave me the chance to see something my ancestors made. But I couldn’t take it; it belongs with the person.

“How can I explain this so non-Natives can understand?

“People who’d rob graves are thieves. They’re thieves of a culture, the past and the present.



John Jeffries.

They steal our identity. They also intrude on someone's privacy—the people who are buried there. Those sites are special places; they are the resting places of ancient people.

“Fortunately, I've never witnessed vandalism. I would hate to go into a site and see it all dug up, destroyed. I'd hate to think how I would act if I caught somebody.

“There's nothing special about Native American stuff. Why does anybody else want it? I'll tell you why: they want money. They want to sell our things, like this man I knew about who took gorgets [a kind of ornament carved from marine shell] and sold them. But these things have no monetary value to anyone who respects Native culture.

“Really! What I want to know is why do people want to possess these things? If they are not Native, they can't possess the spirits of my people. Only Natives can possess the spirits of their ancestors. By spirits, I mean it would be like if you wear your grandmother's brooch. It may not mean anything to somebody else. But when you wear it, you are holding her, touching her.

“To hold something like an arrowhead in my hand and know it belonged to my ancestors, it connects me to them. It also gives me a greater sense of respect for them. Understanding how they could survive using those implements. They had to be a strong people.”