

First Female Chief of Nause-Waiwash Tribe

By Amelia Blades Steward

This year, the Wilma Mankiller Quarter is being minted as the third coin in the American Women Quarters™ Program through the U.S. Mint. Wilma Mankiller was the first woman elected principal chief of the Cherokee Nation and was an activist for Native Americans and women's rights and will be one of the women featured on the 2022 quarters.

Locally, this author thought it would be interesting to sit down with Donna “Wolf Mother” Abbott, the first female Chief of the Nause-Waiwash Tribe (Choptank and Nanticoke) on Maryland’s Eastern Shore and discuss the significance of women serving as chiefs of Native American tribes today.

According to the tribe’s website (turtletracks.org), the Nause-Waiwash Tribe are descendants of the original Nanticoke and Choptank Indians, who originated on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Their name, Nause-Waiwash (nah-soo WAY-wash), is a reference to two Nanticoke ancestral villages; one having been located along the Choptank River outside of Cambridge and the other having been located outside Vienna along the Nanticoke River. Based in Dorchester County, the Nause-Waiwash are the remnants of what Europeans call Nanticoke, Choptank, and Pocomoke tribes who fled into the marshes in the 1700s to avoid execution. The tribe was first “discovered” by Captain John Smith during his exploration of the Chesapeake Bay in 1609 and is well documented in his writings.

According to Chief Abbott, in the late 1980s, Sewell Fitzhugh decided that the history, culture, and traditions of these Dorchester County Indians needed to be preserved. He approached the elders of his tribe and with their support founded the nonprofit, Nause Waiwash Band of Indians, Inc. An election was then held by the women of the tribe, and he became the Chief. Chief Abbott recalls Chief Sewell



**Chief Donna
“Wolf Mother” Abbott**

“Winter Hawk” Fitzhugh, stating, “We know we’re here. We’ve never left...We want the state of Maryland and all to acknowledge they didn’t kill us all, that some of us managed to survive.”

Chief Abbott’s awareness of her Native American heritage began when she was a child. She reflects, “When I was growing up, I always knew I had Native American ancestry. That was just normal for me and who I was. We ate frog legs, turtle, fish and muskrat. We rarely went to the store and bought beef. That was my

father’s way of life. And he was taught by his father.”

“There was a time many of our elders were disgraced by their heritage, so they didn’t educate their children about their culture. At least two generations didn’t ‘own’ it or know anything about it. My generation is trying to document history and recreate the stories. More and more people are starting to embrace their heritage.”

She shares that Chief Fitzhugh had a passion for his history, and he learned a lot from his own grandmother. She adds, “By the 1980s, he had an abundant amount of information about the people of this area and lower Dorchester County and led the Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians in a positive direction. The tribe prospered and grew by leaps and bounds while under his leadership for 25 years. To date, the tribe has gained over 300 members and counting.”

“I was encouraged by my family and friends to get involved and after I did, I realized that we were losing this heritage and culture and needed to work on that.”

Chief Abbott worked very closely with Chief Fitzhugh in



The Hughes African Methodist Episcopal Chapel in the Bucktown area, built around 1894, will be used by the Nause-Waiwash Tribe as a longhouse.

these efforts and after he died if I didn’t run, I wasn’t sure that suddenly in 2014, she was we were going to be able to unexpectedly asked to run for preserve what we had already Chief. She recalls, “I knew that established. I didn’t want all the

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First Female Chief of Nause-Waiwash Tribe, *continued*

hard work of those founding fathers to go down the drain.”

“It’s been interesting – it’s been rewarding, frustrating, and overwhelming. It’s been a lot of things, but I am honored that our people chose me and I’m trying to do the best I can and move the tribe forward.”

In 1998, the Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians, Inc. was gifted what was the Hughes African Methodist Episcopal Chapel in the Bucktown area. The church was built around 1894 by trustees of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, whose descendants identify themselves as survivors of the Nanticoke and Choptank Indian communities. The chapel will be used by the tribe as a longhouse. Though it is not the traditional longhouse, it will be used as a meeting place and for ceremonies.

“One of our big projects right now is renovating the longhouse. We have put a new roof on it and new windows in. Even though it is a historic structure, we are trying to make it as maintenance-free as possible. The next project is to install new wiring,” she explains.

The Nause-Waiwash also holds in trust the Wesley Chapel, a church built in 1855 and located in Andrews. In 1917, the chapel was struck by lightning and burned. The community pulled together

to rebuild the chapel and it re-opened for services in 1920. The small membership of the church and the members and tribal community maintain the upkeep of the building and the graveyard, where several of the tribe’s ancestors have been laid to rest. When the Nause-Waiwash took over the Wesley Chapel, the tribe allowed the congregation to continue having its services. A lot of the congregation are members of the tribe.

Another major project of the tribe is its annual Native American Festival or “Pow Pow.” In 1992, the tribe held its first festival on Elliott Island. After a couple of years there, the festival moved to Andrews for a year or two and then moved to Sailwinds Park in Cambridge. In 2006, the festival moved to Vienna, close to the tribe’s original location.

The Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians has contributed to the community by cleaning up old cemeteries that have been neglected, supporting the reconstruction of the American Legion Post 91, supporting the Dorchester Goes Purple campaign, donating school supplies to the Dorchester County Public Schools, and also contributing to the Johns Hopkins school supply drive sponsored by the Johns Hopkins Legal Department. Members of the tribe have also participated in the Linchester Mill

Discovery Days and have talked to students in the classroom about the tribe’s history and culture.

For Chief Abbott, it wasn’t until later in her life after she became an adult that she wanted to go back and rekindle her family’s love of nature, foraging, and hunting.

She reflects, “I actually bought a piece of marsh so I could go muskrat trapping. My father taught me how to trap muskrat and gave me a couple of foot traps, which I used in the ditch near our home when I was a child. With the muskrats that we’re trapping now, we’re not catching a lot of them so we’re selling the meat or eating them. My personal goal is to collect enough pelts and tan them and make a blanket.”

Two things Chief Abbott tries to bring awareness to are stereotyping Native Americans and respect for Mother

Earth. She comments, “People don’t understand that after three generations, we may not have the same skin color as our ancestors. People have intermarried and we can have light hair and light eyes because of that. Many people think that we’re supposed to look like how Hollywood portrays us. And as far as Mother Earth, I believe if we respect Mother Earth then she will treat you very well.”

Over the years, the tribe has received local support for its longhouse renovations from the community, Mid-Shore Community Foundation – the George B. Todd Fund, the Pauline and Dave Robbins Charitable Foundation, Delmarva Power, an Exelon Company, Choptank Electric, and the Waddell Foundation.

For more information on the Nause-Waiwash Tribe, visit turtletracks.org, call Chief Abbott at 410-228-0216 or follow the tribe on Facebook.

30th Annual Native American Festival

Held rain or shine, the 30th Annual Native American Festival will be held September 17 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and September 18 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 214 Middle Street in Vienna under the water tower.

Activities include Hoop Dancer Jasmine Bell from the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming; a wampum bead demonstration; a flint knapper; a silversmith and pipe maker; petroglyphs; tomahawk throw; storytelling; performers; and a fire dancer. Cost is \$7 per person, 4 years old and under are free.

For more information, visit turtletracks.org.



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Monica Penwell

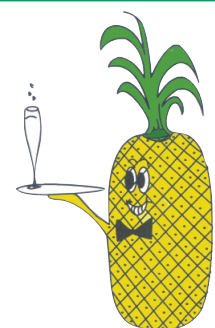
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