



Figure 1. As a graduate student in maritime studies at Eastern Carolina University, I researched and wrote an artifact biography of the Coharie canoe and the history of the Coharie Tribal Nation for my MA thesis. My project was at the invitation of Tribal Administrator Greg Jacobs and elder Danny Bell, and I interviewed tribal members and attended powwows and talking circles at the Tribal Center. I also photographed the canoe extensively, as seen here, in order to create a 3D photogrammetric model of it. Photograph courtesy Danny Bell

How the Rediscovery of an Ancient Canoe Connected Its People to Their Ancestors and Their Environment

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The rediscovery of the Coharie canoe did not follow the usual script for archaeological research. There were no permits, preplanning, or permissions obtained prior to the canoe being pulled out of the South River. In a normal instance, there would be a plan for surveying the site, excavation, processing, storage, and curation before any fieldwork took place. But for the Coharie canoe, events unfolded in a way that did not allow for any plans to be made until after the fact. This was a case of dramatic accidental discovery that turned into a story of connection and healing.

The Coharie Tribal Nation is one of seven state-recognized tribal nations in North Carolina.¹ The Coharie reside within Sampson and Harnett counties, with 80 percent of the Tribe's three thousand members living within their tribal community. The Tribe shares its name with the Little Coharie River, which runs through their lands.² The Tribe's connection to the river has always been strong and it represents more than their namesake. As many tribal members have shared, the river is a place of spiritual medicine, and that is one reason why the rediscovery of the Coharie canoe was so significant.³

In May of 2018, a fisherman on the banks of the South River saw a log protruding out of the water; upon closer inspection, he recognized it as a dugout canoe. He tried to pull the canoe out of the river, but the other end was embedded in the mud. He posted pictures of the canoe on social media, asking for help hauling it out of the water. Thanks to the use of social media, news of the canoe spread rapidly and swiftly reached the North Carolina State Archaeology Office, then headed by John Mintz. The state archaeologists realized the significance of the vessel and the importance of getting to it that day.⁴ If the man was able to get the canoe out of the water and to his personal property, then they would not be able to give it the treatment it required and it, along with its story, would be lost to history.

The state archaeologists sent representatives to the location posted on the social media platform to try and intercept the man before he could pull the canoe out of the river. By the time they got to the site, which was only a matter of hours after the initial posting, the fisherman and a friend were in the act of trying to pull the canoe onto the riverbank. When the representatives of the State Archaeologist's Office insisted that the vessel needed to be handed over to the state, one of the men pointed a gun at them and said they could not take it. The police were called to the scene, and a roadside custody battle

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Figure 2. Tribal Administrator Greg Jacobs works with the Coharie Tribe's Great Coharie River Initiative. Photograph courtesy Charles Harris

took place. It was determined that since the canoe was found in state-navigable waters, it was property of the state.⁵

The canoe was eventually transported to the North Carolina Office of State Archaeology Underwater Branch in Kure Beach, North Carolina. There, the state archaeologists treated it with a bulking solution called SP-11 for several months.⁶ SP-11 is a solution for waterlogged wood that replaces the water molecules inside the cells of the wood and makes the cell structure more stable in an open-air environment.⁷ Without treatment, the canoe would have been susceptible to cellular collapse as it dried and would have rapidly deteriorated. SP-11 is especially good for ensuring that the wood doesn't shrink as it dries, and it allows for more transportation, display, and storage possibilities.⁸

While the canoe was being treated, the state archaeologists sent samples to a lab to have the

wood identified and radiocarbon dated. It came back as yellow pine that was between 590 and 670 years old.⁹ The canoe is twelve feet and nine inches long and about a foot and a half wide. There is still charring visible along the inside, evidence of its construction using traditional burning and scraping methods. It is one of over fifty Indigenous canoes to be found in North Carolina and the first to be attributed to the Coharie Tribal Nation.

Once the conservation of the canoe was well established and it was becoming more stable in open-air environments, questions about ownership and access could be considered. It is the goal of the North Carolina Office of State Archaeology that all Indigenous cultural objects should remain within the area where they are found.¹⁰ The Coharie Tribal Nation was the closest tribe geographically, so it was determined that the canoe should be offered to them first.¹¹ A cooperative effort began between



Figure 3. The canoe display in the Coharie Tribal Center during the 51st annual powwow on September 11, 2021, surrounded by other culturally significant objects including tobacco, an eagle staff, and regalia. Photograph by the author

the State Archaeology Office, the North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs, and the Coharie Tribal Nation to make sure the canoe could safely be repatriated and housed with them. According to state archaeologist John Mintz, although the canoe legally “belongs to the State of North Carolina, because it was found in state waters, actually, philosophically, ethically, and morally, it belongs to the Coharie people and the American Indian Community of North Carolina.”¹¹

Tribal Administrator Greg Jacobs, and Tribal Elders Danny Bell and Phillip Bell, were instrumental in coordinating the return of the canoe to the Coharie people. When the state archaeologist publicly stated that the canoe belonged with the Coharie people, it initiated a visceral shift in the relationship between the tribal members and the archaeologists. There had been a long tradition of the state putting Native people’s belongings into

state museums, and repatriation had only recently begun happening. As Jacobs reflected:

that was the answer I was looking for even more so than it being housed here, was just to overcome my historical trauma. To hear outside dominant society say that it’s the right thing to do. That you do exist. That you have equal rights. That you do need to be treated fairly. That your heart and your desires are important.¹²

In 2019, the Coharie canoe finally made its way back home to its people and now resides at the Coharie Tribal Center near Clinton, North Carolina. The canoe was welcomed home as a tribal member returning from a long absence. Upon its return, a ceremony took place where the room and the people present were smudged, blessing and prayers were said, and thanks were given. Danny Bell explained that those who were present felt



Figure 4. Two screenshots of the 3D model of the canoe that I created using photogrammetry. Photograph by the author

their connection with the spirit world strengthen, and it reminded them of their responsibilities to the river they are named for.¹³ According to Phillip Bell, during the ceremony “there were a lot of tearful eyes and not just from tribal members but also from those gentlemen from the state that brought it here. There was just an air of presence of something here that touched everyone.”¹⁴ He spoke about an indescribable feeling that came over the group, that the canoe was saying, “this is where I belong.”¹⁵ Jacobs also spoke about feeling the spirit of the canoe speak to him. He believes that the canoe understood that, for a long time, it was very dangerous to be an Indigenous person living on this land, and so it went into hiding. Now that we have entered a time when it is once again legal to be Indigenous and to practice the traditional ways, the canoe reemerged from its hiding place and made its way back home to its people.¹⁶ The canoe now stands as the focal point display within the Tribal Center. An exhibit about Coharie tribal history is currently in the works in the room housing the Coharie canoe.

The return of the canoe to the Coharie people has had a profound impact on tribal members and how they view their place in the world and their identity as stewards of the river. In an interview

with Greg Jacobs, he spoke about growing up with a sense of invisibility in a Black and white, segregated America. When the state decided that the right thing to do was to give the canoe back to the Coharie people, he heard his ancestors say, “We are visible. *You* are visible. And more so, the government recognizes it.”¹⁷ Jacobs spoke of how his ancestors who built the canoe must have known of the medicine that the Coharie River held, and that must have been why they chose to live in that spot. The Coharie people landed where they did when they were running from conflict and disease, but they felt the spiritual medicine that the Coharie River possessed and made it their home.¹⁸

The Coharie Tribal Nation has identified as River People for hundreds of years. The word *Coharie* actually means “driftwood” in the Tuscarora dialect.¹⁹ To continue their work as stewards of the river, Greg Jacobs and Phillip Bell started the Great Coharie River Initiative, which is a community-led effort to clean and maintain the Coharie River. The river is considered one of the cornerstones of the Coharie Community, along with the church and the school.²⁰ The goal of the Great Coharie River Initiative is to make as much of the Coharie River navigable by canoe and kayak as possible and make it accessible to the Coharie people so they



can have access to its spiritual medicine. Over the years, hurricanes have dropped trees in the water and dammed it up, turning it more into swamp-land than river. Since 2015, over one hundred miles have been cleared, and now all new generations of tribal members have access to its waters. Because of these efforts, the Coharie Tribal Nation was named the Water Conservationist of the Year in 2019 by Governor Roy Cooper.²¹

The Coharie canoe's rediscovery was not an ideal example of how archaeology is supposed to work, and it was all too typical of how Native American sites and belongings have been treated in the past. However, the outcome has been a perfect illustration of the importance of repatriating Indigenous belongings to their communities of origin. The canoe has given the Coharie Tribal Nation a new sense of visibility. It has created a new avenue for tribal members to communicate with their ancestors and renewed their sense of identity as River People. This situation sets an example for all archaeologists for collaboration with the communities whose belongings we are stewarding and paves a path for the future.

Endnotes

- 1 "The Shape of Water: A Tribe's Connection and Conservation Efforts to North Carolina's Waterways," USDA, November 30, 2023, <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/news/the-shape-of-water-a-tribes-connection-and-conservation-efforts-to-north-carolinas-waterways>.
- 2 "About the People," Coharie Indian Tribe, accessed September 9, 2024, <https://cohariepeople.org/history/>.
- 3 Greg Jacobs, Coharie Tribal Administrator and Elder, interview by author, December 1, 2021.
- 4 Nathan Henry, "Autryville Canoe Recovery and Conservation" (North Carolina Office of State Archaeology Underwater Branch, 2018).
- 5 Henry, "Autryville Canoe Recovery."
- 6 Henry, "Autryville Canoe Recovery."
- 7 Lydia Downs, "A Study of the Cultural Significance of a Dugout Canoe to People of the Past and Present" (master's thesis, Eastern Carolina University, 2022), 38, 45.
- 8 Henry, "Autryville Canoe Recovery."
- 9 Darden Hood, "Report of Radiocarbon Dating Analysis," Beta Analytic Inc., Miami, FL, June 18, 2018.
- 10 John Mintz, retired state archaeologist for the State of North Carolina Archaeology Office, interview by author, November 5, 2021.
- 11 Mintz, interview.
- 12 Jacobs, interview.
- 13 Danny Bell, Tribal Elder, interview by author, December 2, 2021.
- 14 Phillip Bell, Great Coharie River Initiative coordinator, interview by author, December 1, 2021.
- 15 Bell, interview.
- 16 Jacobs, interview.
- 17 Jacobs, interview.
- 18 Jacobs, interview.
- 19 "About the People."
- 20 Bell, interview.
- 21 "The Shape of Water."