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That student knows the secret of custom essays... > read more Every day, I receive e-mails very similar to this one. "My family has always said that we were part Native American. I want to prove this so that I can receive help with money for college." The reasons vary, and not everyone wants to prove their heritage in order to qualify for some type of assistance. Some want to find their tribe and join to reclaim their lost heritage. Some want to honor their persecuted and hidden ancestors, undoing some of the wickedness of the past, and some simply seek the truth. Regardless of why, they are all searching for information lost to them. I'd like to talk about three topics in proving Native Ancestry. First, I'd like to do some myth-busting. Second, I'd like to talk a little about conventional research and third, I'd like to discuss what DNA can, and can't, do for you. As you read this blog, please click on the links. I'm not going to repeat something I've already covered elsewhere. Myth-Busting Myth 1 – Free College There is no free college for Native Americans. There are sometimes scholarships and grants available, mostly by the individual tribes themselves, for their official members. Myth 2 – Joining a Tribe Many people think that if they can only figure out which tribe their ancestor descends from, they can join. This is untrue. Each tribe is a sovereign nation, and they get to determine their criteria for membership. Most tribes require a specific percentage of Native "blood," called blood quantum, in addition to being able to document which tribal member you descend from. Some tribes require as much as 25% Native heritage, and most require at least 1/16th Native heritage, which is one great-great grandparent. If you don't know who in your family was a tribal member it's unlikely that you would be able to meet the blood quantum requirement. Myth 3 – DNA Testing Will Reveal my Tribe Generally, DNA testing does not provide us with the information needed to determine a tribe, although it can clearly tell, using Y-line or mitochondrial DNA testing, whether your direct paternal or maternal line was or was not Native. Sometimes you will be able to infer a tribe based on your matches and their documented history, but the definition of tribes, their names and locations have changed over time. We are working on improving this ability, but the science simply isn't there yet and the number of Native people who have tested remains small. Simply put, most federally recognized tribes aren't interested in more tribal members. More members mean a smaller piece of the pie for existing members. The pot of resources, whatever resources you're discussing, is only so large and it must be shared by all tribal members. What is a Tribe? Tribes in the US fall into two categories. When most people think about tribes they are talking about federally recognized tribes. Those are tribes that have some continuity with the past, such as they have always been a tribe, or they still retain tribal lands, etc., and the federal government recognizes them as such. These are the tribes that qualify for government programs and many own casinos. As you might imagine, with the influx of casino money, the desire to join a tribe has increased significantly. The second category is non-federally recognized tribes. Some are state recognized and others, not at all. State recognition does not in any way guarantee federal or state funding and there are no universal standards for state recognition. In other words, your mileage may vary, widely. Non-federally recognized tribes are often run as non-profit entities. In many cases, these tribes will help people research and document their genealogy and may be more open to tribal membership for those connecting with their Native heritage. Be aware that some "tribes" that fall into the non-federally recognized category may be less than ethical. Some tend to come and go. In one case, to apply to join, one had to provide information such as social security numbers and a complete family pedigree including your children. In some cases, membership is very expensive, hundreds of dollars, but is available to almost anyone for the right price. When evaluating tribes that are not federally recognized, if something sounds fishy, it probably is. Caution is the watchword. In general, the federally recognized tribes do, and view them as "fake," interlopers trying to get part of that pie. Of course, the non-federally recognized tribes feel differently; that they are reclaiming their heritage denied them. Native American politics is nothing new and is fraught with landmines. No federally recognized tribes, to the best of my knowledge, have considered DNA testing as a criteria for membership. No federally recognized tribe has endorsed or participated in DNA testing that I'm aware of. This does not mean that individuals have not privately tested. Traditional Genealogy Research Given the criteria for membership in federally recognized tribes, traditional genealogy is the only way to obtain the type of information required. If your family history includes a tribal name, and east of the Mississippi, that most often is Cherokee, contact the various Cherokee tribes to inquire about membership criteria. If the membership criteria is 25% blood quantum, and you must live on the reservation, you're toast.....no need to continue that line of research if your goal is to join the tribe. If your goal is simply to find your Native ancestor, that's another matter entirely. Begin by using the traditional research tools. First, look at where your ancestor or that family line was located. Did they migrate from elsewhere? How were they listed in the census? Was someone listed as other than white, indicating mixed race? Check the records where they lived, tax records and others to see if there is any indication of non-European heritage. Remember that your non-white ancestor would have retained their "darker" countenance for at least 2 generations after being admixed. Many Native people were admixed very early. So first, check the normal genealogy records and look for hints and traces of non-European ancestry. Second, turn to Native resources that might reflect the Native people in the areas where your family is or was found. The Access Genealogy site is absolutely wonderful and has an amazingly complete set of records including searchable tribal rolls. In addition, I add information almost daily to the Native Heritage Project at [www.nativeheritageproject.com](http://www.nativeheritageproject.com), which is searchable. There are many more resources including several collections at Ancestry.com. Hopefully, these records will help narrow your focus in your family tree to a particular person or two, not just a general branch. Family rumors like "Grandma was a Cherokee Princess" are particularly unuseful. What they more likely mean is that there was indeed some Native ancestry someplace in her line. Cherokee has become a generic word like Kleenex. It may also have meant that Indian heritage was claimed to cover much less desirable African heritage. Institutionalized discrimination existed against any people of color in pre-1967 America, but Indians generally retained some rights that people of African ancestry did not. Laws varied by state and time. Take a look at my blog about Anti-Miscegenation Laws and when they were overturned. Now, let's look at DNA testing to see what it can do for you. DNA Testing to Prove Native Ancestry There are three types of DNA testing that you can do to prove Native Ancestry. Two are very focused on specific family lines, and one is much more general. Mitochondrial for your direct maternal line. Y-line for your direct paternal line – if you are a male. Sorry ladies. Autosomal to test your ethnic mix and one direct marker test for Native ancestors. On a pedigree chart, these genealogical lines look like this: You can see the path that the blue Y chromosome takes down the paternal line to the brother and the path the red mitochondrial DNA takes down the maternal line to both the brother and the sister. Autosomal tests the DNA of all of the 16 ancestral lines shown here, but in a different sort of way. Let's look at each type of testing separately. Y-Line DNA – For Paternal Line Testing For Males The Y-Line testing tests the Y chromosome which is passed intact from father to son with no DNA from the mother. This is the blue square on the pedigree chart. In this way, it remains the same in each generation, allowing us to compare it to others with a similar surname to see if we are from the same "Smith" family, for example, or to others with different surnames, in the case of adoption or Native heritage. Native American genetics isn't terribly different than adoptees in this situation, because different English surnames were adopted by various family members, into the late 1800s and sometimes into the early 1900s, depending on the location. Y-line DNA can tell you whether or not you descend from a common male genealogically when compared to another adoptee from the father. Women obtain their mitochondrial DNA from their mother, who got them from their mother, up the line into infinity. This is the red circle on the right hand side of the pedigree chart. Like Y-line DNA, mitochondrial DNA is passed intact from one generation to the next, except for an occasional mutation that allows us to identify family members and family lines. 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