



## The Lumbee Indian Nurses

By: **Phoebe Pollitt, RN**

### Abstract

The origins of the 55,000 member Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina are unclear. Many think the Lumbee are descendants of Sir Walter Raleigh's Roanoke Island "Lost Colonists" of 1587, the first permanent English settlers in North America. A new group of settlers arrived on Roanoke Island in 1590 to replenish supplies and grow the colony. However, when they arrived, the fort was deserted and all they found was the word "Croatoan" carved into a tree. According to this theory, sometime between 1587 and 1590, the settlers moved to another island or mainland location called "Croatoan." The idea continues that the English colonists settled among and intermarried with the friendly Croatan Indians, and by 1650 the tribe migrated to the area in and near present-day Robeson County, North Carolina. The ancestors of the Lumbee were mainly Cheraw and related Siouan-speaking Indians who have lived in the vicinity of Robeson County since the 1700s. The Lumbee have been recognized as a Native American tribe since 1885 by the state of North Carolina, although they have yet to receive federal recognition. They take their name from the Lumbee River, which winds its way through their ancestral lands.

For the first half of the twentieth century, North Carolina laws called for triple segregation—separate schools for African American, Lumbee, and white students, with African American and Lumbee schools far inferior in funding, equipment, and general support to white schools. Lumbee were also frequently discriminated against in employment, housing, recreation, and health until the 1960s. Despite these hardships, a few young Lumbee women were determined to become nurses. All of the early Lumbee nurses went out of state to receive their nursing education; a few returned to help their neighbors and families. Here are their stories.

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## THE EARLIEST KNOWN LUMBEE REGISTERED NURSES

**Viola E. Lowry Armstrong** is the first known Lumbee registered nurse. She was born on June 25, 1897 in the crossroads community of Elrod in Robeson County, North Carolina, to Henry H. and Julia Revels Lowry. Shortly after graduating from Wesleyan College in Athens, Tennessee in 1918, Armstrong enrolled in the Knoxville General Hospital School of Nursing (KGHSON). According to KGHSON historian Billie McNamara, Armstrong was the first Native American nurse to enroll at the school. She graduated in 1923 and soon married William Franklin Armstrong, a local businessman. The couple had a son in 1926 followed by a daughter two years later. The Armstrongs spent their lives in Knoxville where Nurse Armstrong managed family responsibilities along with a part-time, private duty nursing career until her retirement at age 75.

Two of Armstrong's first cousins, sisters **Lorraine C. Lowry Evans** and Lessie Lowry Blakeslee, followed Mrs. Armstrong into nursing. Evans was the sixth of eight children born to the Reverend Doctor Fuller and Jessie Mae Hatcher Lowry on January 22, 1916 in Robeson County, North Carolina. Shortly after graduating from the nursing program at St. Thomas Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee, she married a local man, John Robert Evans, in June, 1938. Her life was cut short when she died of breast cancer in 1957. Her Nashville death certificate lists her occupation as a registered nurse and her place of employment as Gordon Hospital.

**Lessie Lowry Blakeslee** was the third of eight children born to Reverend Doctor Fuller and Jessie Mae Hatcher Lowry in 1912. She graduated from Philadelphia General Hospital School of Nursing and later became a U.S. Army nurse. She lived in several parts of the country before dying in Nebraska in 1954.

Another early Lumbee registered nurse was **Bertha Locklear Berkheimer**. She was born on September 4, 1908 in Robeson County, North Carolina to Reverend Peppers Mahoney Locklear and Mary Catherine Hunt Locklear. After graduating from Pembroke High School she went to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to pursue her nursing education. By 1940 she was living in Philadelphia, married to Jessie Berkheimer, was mother to a son and daughter, and was a nursing supervisor at the Philadelphia State [Psychiatric] Hospital. She lived in Philadelphia until her death in 1981.

### **Velma Mae Lowry Maynor: Community Health Nurse**

The first Lumbee registered nurse to return to Robeson County after graduating from nursing school was Velma Mae Lowry Maynor. She was born on September 9, 1907 to Edmond and Sally Hatcher Lowry. After graduating from what is now the University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNC-P) with a teaching certificate, Maynor taught school for a few years in Robeson County. By the late 1920s, Maynor pursued her calling to become a nurse and entered the Philadelphia General Hospital School of Nursing. After graduating in 1933, Maynor worked for four and a half years at the Philadelphia General Hospital as a medical floor supervisor.

The Great Depression of the 1930s led President Franklin D. Roosevelt to establish many new government programs, policies, and agencies to help the poor and unemployed across the country. These new initiatives were known collectively as the New Deal.

As part of President Roosevelt's New Deal, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration—and beginning in 1935, the Resettlement Administration—helped to establish homestead communities that encouraged landownership and, in many cases, fostered agricultural skills. In North Carolina, the resettlement projects were rural farming homesteads. The idea behind the homesteads was that the settlers would rehabilitate the land and learn valuable agricultural and subsistence skills (Tillery Farms historic marker).

Robeson County was selected as a site for a farming homestead project, called Pembroke Farms, specifically created for Lumbee people. Each family who lived at Pembroke Farms had a modest house and 11 acres of land. Once the farm was in working order, the homesteader could purchase

the land through the federal government. Pembroke Farms had its own school, community center, and several staff on hand to assist with agricultural practices, homemaking skills, and health. The only full-time, permanent, Lumbee employed at Pembroke Farms was Mrs. Maynor, the nurse. According to Malinda Maynor Lowery, historian of the Lumbee people and author of *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity, and the Making of a Nation*, “her duties centered on curbing the area’s malaria, tuberculosis, syphilis, and other diseases through treatment and education.”

Several articles in the local newspaper, *The Robesonian*, note Nurse Maynor’s activities during the four years she worked at Pembroke Farms (1939-1943). The first, on September 8, 1941, mentions that she is teaching a home nursing course at Pembroke State College (now UNC-P), a course she would repeatedly offer to the community during the WWII years. A month later, she judged several exhibits at the Pembroke Fair. The newspaper reports her extensive involvement with the 4-H club and her service on the Board of Directors of Odum Home, an orphanage for Indian children.

World War II brought an end to most New Deal programs, including Pembroke Farms. Many men were serving in the military and jobs were more plentiful. Nurse Maynor’s job at Pembroke Farms ended. She worked as a night nurse at the N.C. Cancer Center in nearby Lumberton from 1952 until 1966 when she became a school nurse for Robeson County. Again, *The Robesonian* often described her activities during the seven years she cared for the school children. Maynor and the other schools’ nurses screened children for vision, spinal, dental, and other common childhood health problems and made sure all the children received proper care. Maynor’s obituary states that she was also the first nurse to serve the Robeson County Department of Corrections. After a lifetime of caring for her community, Maynor died on November 18, 1997, at the age of 90.

### **Eva B. Sampson: Student Health/Infirmary Nurse**

Another nurse who dedicated her life to her Robeson County community was Mrs. Eva Brewington Sampson, RN. She was born on July 31, 1932 to Clyde and Lillie Mae Brewington. She was one of the earliest nursing graduates from Southeastern Community College, earning her Associate Degree in Nursing in 1968. After working two years at Southeastern General Hospital, Sampson became the Director of Student Health Services at UNC-P. While working in the student health center she earned her bachelor’s degree majoring in psychology and sociology. During Sampson’s 25-year tenure at UNC-P, she was involved with the students and campus life. She served as an adviser to the Tri-Sigma Sorority and established the John W. (Ned) Sampson endowed scholarship, to assist deserving young athletes in paying for their schooling. Mrs. Sampson was also active in her profession and her community. She was an active member of the NC State Nurses Association, a Cub Scouts Den Mother, and a volunteer for the Pembroke Rescue Squad and the Caregiver Support group. She served on the Board of Directors for the Southeastern Regional Medical Center, Hospice of Robeson County, the Lady’s Lion Club, the Professional and Business Women’s Club of Pembroke and was active in her church’s Women’s Mission Union. In addition to her employment and volunteer activities, Sampson had a devoted husband and raised three daughters and a son. She passed away on January 11, 2014.

## **PRESENT DAY**

With the passage of state and federal laws outlawing racial segregation and ensuring equal rights for Native Americans, Lumbee people have earned degrees from a variety of nursing schools and become nursing leaders. Today, two of the most prominent Lumbee nurse leaders are Bobby Lowery, PhD, RN, MN, FNP-BC, FAANP, and Cherry Maynor Beasley, PhD, MS, FNP, RN, CNE. Their admirable accomplishments inspire today's young nurses, both Lumbee and non-Lumbee, to excel in their profession.

**Bobby Lowery** is a native of Robeson County and a member of the Lumbee Tribe. With over 30 years combined nursing experience as a family nurse practitioner, health policy advocate and educator, he holds a BSN and PhD in Nursing from East Carolina University and a Master of Nursing from Emory University. Lowery retired at the rank of Captain after twenty years of service as a Commissioned Officer of the U.S. Public Health Service. He developed, implemented, and directed the inaugural DNP Program at East Carolina University College of Nursing where his work with the virtual community clinic learning environment is the foundation for \$2,197,446 in funding for Interprofessional Education. A respected leader, he has served on the North Carolina Nurses Association Board of Directors, chaired the NP Executive Committee, and was appointed as the inaugural chair of the Commission for Advanced Practice Nursing. Lowery also served on the Board of Directors for the NC Board of Nursing where he has chaired the NP Joint Subcommittee, Education and Practice Committee and the Midwifery joint committee. Nationally, he chaired the NCSBN Distance Education Committee and is a past AANP State Representative. Lowery's research on NP regulation expands nursing knowledge and informs stakeholders regarding the need for evidence-based NP regulation and interprofessionalism in health care. He is a Fellow of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners. Currently, he serves a Nursing Practice Consultant-NP for the NC Board of Nursing where he participates in proposed recommendations on actions relating to regulation of nursing practice for consideration by the Board and serves on the Senior Staffing Practice Committee and Research Committee. Lowery is currently participating in a one-year fellowship program with the American Nursing Advocacy Institute where he is focusing on full-practice authority for Advanced Practice Nurses in North Carolina.

**Cherry Beasley** is the Anne R. Belk Endowed Professor for Rural and Minority Health at UNC-P. She earned her BSN in 1973 from the University of Michigan, a MS in Nursing and Public Health Nursing at UNC-Chapel Hill, a post-master's FNP from the University of South Carolina, and her PhD in 2009 from East Carolina University. Beasley is the first Lumbee to have earned a baccalaureate, masters, and doctor of philosophy all in nursing. Her areas of expertise are cultural role in health care decision making, rural health, diabetes, nursing workforce issues, and women's health. Beasley is a member and leader in numerous nursing organizations, including the American Nurses Association, the North Carolina Nurses Association, Sigma Theta Tau, and the National League for Nursing, and Delta Omega. She is the past chair of the NC Center for Nursing. Beasley has successfully written and administered many grants and is the author of numerous articles. A generation of nursing students have benefited from her dedication to and excellence in nursing education. She continues to live and work in her native homeland where she serves on several local boards and has recently been selected as the first Secretary of Health for the Lumbee Tribe.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Lumbee nurses' contributions to nursing have been overlooked in the literature. Despite being a relatively small, federally unrecognized tribe, and having suffered racial discrimination and segregation for most of their history, the Lumbee Tribe has produced several outstanding nurses. These nurses have both provided care to vulnerable people under difficult circumstances and enhanced the nursing profession. Their lives and work should not be forgotten.

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