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The black-and-white world of Walter Ashby Plecker

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Walter Ashby Plecker, the first registrar of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics, starting in 1912, forced Indians to classify themselves as black. The tribes, he said, had become a "mongrel" mixture. Courtesy Richmond Times-Dispatch

Lacy Branham Hearl closes her eyes and travels eight decades back to what began as a sweet childhood.

There was family everywhere: her parents, five siblings, nine sets of adoring aunts and uncles and more cousins than she could count. They all lived in a Monacan Indian settlement near Amherst, their threadbare homes circling apple orchards at the foot of Tobacco Row Mountain.

As Hearl grew, however, she sensed the adults were engulfed in deepening despair. When she was 12, an uncle gathered his family and left Virginia, never to see her again. Other relatives scattered in rapid succession, some muttering the name "Plecker."

Soon, only Hearl's immediate family remained. Then the orchards began to close because there were not enough workers and the townspeople turned their backs and all that was left was prejudice and plight and Plecker.

Hearl shakes her head sadly.

"I thought Plecker was a devil," she says. "Still do."

Walter Ashby Plecker was the first registrar of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics, which records births, marriages and deaths. He accepted the job in 1912. For the next 34 years, he led the effort to purify the white race in Virginia by forcing Indians and other nonwhites to classify themselves as blacks. It amounted to bureaucratic genocide.

He worked with a vengeance.



State-recognized Indian tribes in Virginia:
Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy,
Mattaponi, Monacan, Nansemond, Pamunkey,
Rappahannock and Upper Mattaponi

Plecker was a white supremacist and a zealous advocate of eugenics – a now discredited movement to preserve the integrity of white blood by preventing interracial breeding. “Unless this can be done,” he once wrote, “we have little to hope for, but may expect in the future decline or complete destruction of our civilization.”

Plecker’s icy efficiency as racial gatekeeper drew international attention, including that of Nazi Germany. In 1943, he boasted: “Hitler’s genealogical study of the Jews is not more complete.”

Plecker retired in 1946 at the age of 85 and died the following year. The damage lives on.

From the grave, Plecker is frustrating the efforts of Virginia tribes to win federal recognition and a trove of accompanying grants for housing, health care and education. One of the requirements is that the tribes prove their continuous existence since 1900. Plecker, by purging Indians as a race, has made that nearly impossible. Six Virginia tribes are seeking the permission of Congress to bypass the requirement.

“It never seems to end with this guy,” said Kenneth Adams, chief of the Upper Mattaponi. “You wonder how anyone could be so consumed with hate.”

It’s likely that Plecker didn’t see himself as the least bit hateful. Had he not been so personally aloof, he might have explained that he believed he was practicing good science and religion. Perhaps he would have acknowledged that he was influenced by his own heritage.

Walter Plecker was one of the last sons of the Old South. He was born in Augusta County on April 2, 1861. Ten days later, the cannons at Fort Sumter sounded the start of the Civil War. His father, a prosperous merchant and slave owner, left home to fight for the Confederate Army with many of his kin.

Some 60 years later, Plecker would recall his early days in a letter to a magazine editor expressing his abhorrence of interracial breeding. He remembered “being largely under the control” of a “faithful” slave named Delia. When the war ended, she stayed on as a servant. The Pleckers were so fond of her that they let her get married in their house. When Plecker’s mother died in 1915, it was Delia “who closed her eyes,” he wrote.

Then Plecker got to his point. “As much as we held in esteem individual negroes this esteem was not of a character that would tolerate marriage with them, though as we know now to our sorrow much illegitimate mixture has occurred.” Plecker added, “If you desire to do the correct thing for the negro race ... inspire (them) with the thought that the birth of mulatto children is a standing disgrace.”

Plecker graduated from Hoover Military Academy in Staunton in 1880. He became a doctor, graduating from the University of Maryland’s medical school in 1885. He moved around western Virginia and the coal fields of Alabama before settling in Hampton in 1892.

Plecker took special interest in delivering babies. He became concerned about the high mortality rate among poor mothers and began keeping records and searching for ways to improve birthing.

Public health was first being recognized as a government concern at the turn of the last century, and Plecker was a pioneer. In 1902, he became health officer for Elizabeth City County (today, Hampton). He recorded details of more than 98 percent of the births and deaths in the county – an amazing feat during a time when most people were born and died at home. When lawmakers established the state Bureau of Vital Statistics in 1912, they asked Plecker to run it.

Plecker’s first 12 years on the job were groundbreaking and marked by goodwill. He educated midwives of all races on modern birthing techniques and cut the 5 percent death rate for black mothers almost in half. He developed an incubator – a combination of a laundry basket, dirt, a thermometer and a kerosene lamp – that anyone could make in an instant. Concerned by a high incidence of syphilitic blindness in black and Indian babies, he distributed silver nitrate to be put in the eyes of newborns.

Plecker was all work. He did not seek friendship. Although married most of his life, he did not have children. He listed his hobbies as “books and birds.”

“He was a man you could sometimes respect and admire, but never love,” said Russell E. Booker Jr., who grew up in Plecker’s neighborhood, delivered his newspaper and worked in the Bureau of Vital Statistics from 1960 to 1994, spending the last 12 years as director. “He was a very rigid man,” Booker added. “I don’t know of anyone who ever saw him smile.”

Plecker was tall, bone-thin, had wavy, white hair that was neatly combed and a trim mustache. He took a bus to work and lunched every day on just an apple.

He was a miserly taskmaster. Plecker scraped glue pots, mixed the gunk with water and sent it back to employees for use. Booker said that, according to office legend, "You didn't get a new pencil until you turned in your old one, and it better not be longer than an inch and a quarter."

Plecker never looked before crossing streets. "He just expected the cars to stop for him," said Booker, who still lives in Richmond. "One time a woman grabbed him just as he was about to be hit, and he laid her out like she'd just touched God."

Plecker was a devout Presbyterian. He helped establish churches around the state and supported fundamentalist missionaries. Plecker belonged to a conservative Southern branch of the church that believed the Bible was infallible and condoned segregation. Members of Plecker's branch maintained that God flooded the earth and destroyed Sodom to express his anger at racial interbreeding.

"Let us turn a deaf ear to those who would interpret Christian brotherhood as racial equality," Plecker wrote in a 1925 essay.

>>**Story continued:** [A man of science ... and eugenics](#)

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