

# FILL IN YOUR FAMILY TREE

## “Firsting” and “Lasting” of Native Americans in Local Histories

Jean M. O'Brien's 2010 study of local histories in New England describes how strategies of “firsting” and “lasting” are used to take control of the historical narrative and to proclaim the presence, and then absence, of the “last” Native inhabitant. We can find examples of this in the case of the ancestors of several of the state-recognized tribes in New Jersey today. “Indian Ann” Ashatama Roberts was the daughter of a Native American who had lived at the Brotherton Reservation, moved out of state, and then returned to New Jersey. She died on December 10, 1894 and was memorialized with a stone at the Burlington County Historical Society, which proclaimed her as the “last of the Delawares.” This is untrue. She had seven children and many of her descendants still live in New Jersey (Norwood 2007 p. 22). After a local Nanticoke woman named Lydia Clark died in Delaware in 1856, a monument in her honor was erected by a local white citizen in 1927. The inscription claims that she was “the last of the aborigines of the country.” Yet members of the Nanticoke Indian community today can trace their ancestry back to her (Norwood 2007 p. 21). *The Daily Standard*, a Utah newspaper, published a report from Middleton, New York on April 19, 1910 stating that “Robert S. Peterson, the last descendent of the Ramapo Indians, who once occupied this section, is dead at his home here at the age of 73 years.”

O'Brien's study finds that these practices were employed as local populations attempted to convince themselves that Indians had vanished despite their continued presence. Historians and their readers “embraced notions of racial purity rooted in the century's scientific racism and saw living Indians as ‘mixed’ and therefore no longer truly Indian. Adaptation to modern life on the part of Indian peoples was used as further evidence of their demise” (O'Brien 2010).

## Who has the authority to confirm or reject your identity and heritage?

Take a look at the discussion of “firsting” and “lasting” to understand how and why Native American pasts have been erased. Are there any histories that you can think of that are being obscured today? What are the reasons for this attempted erasure?

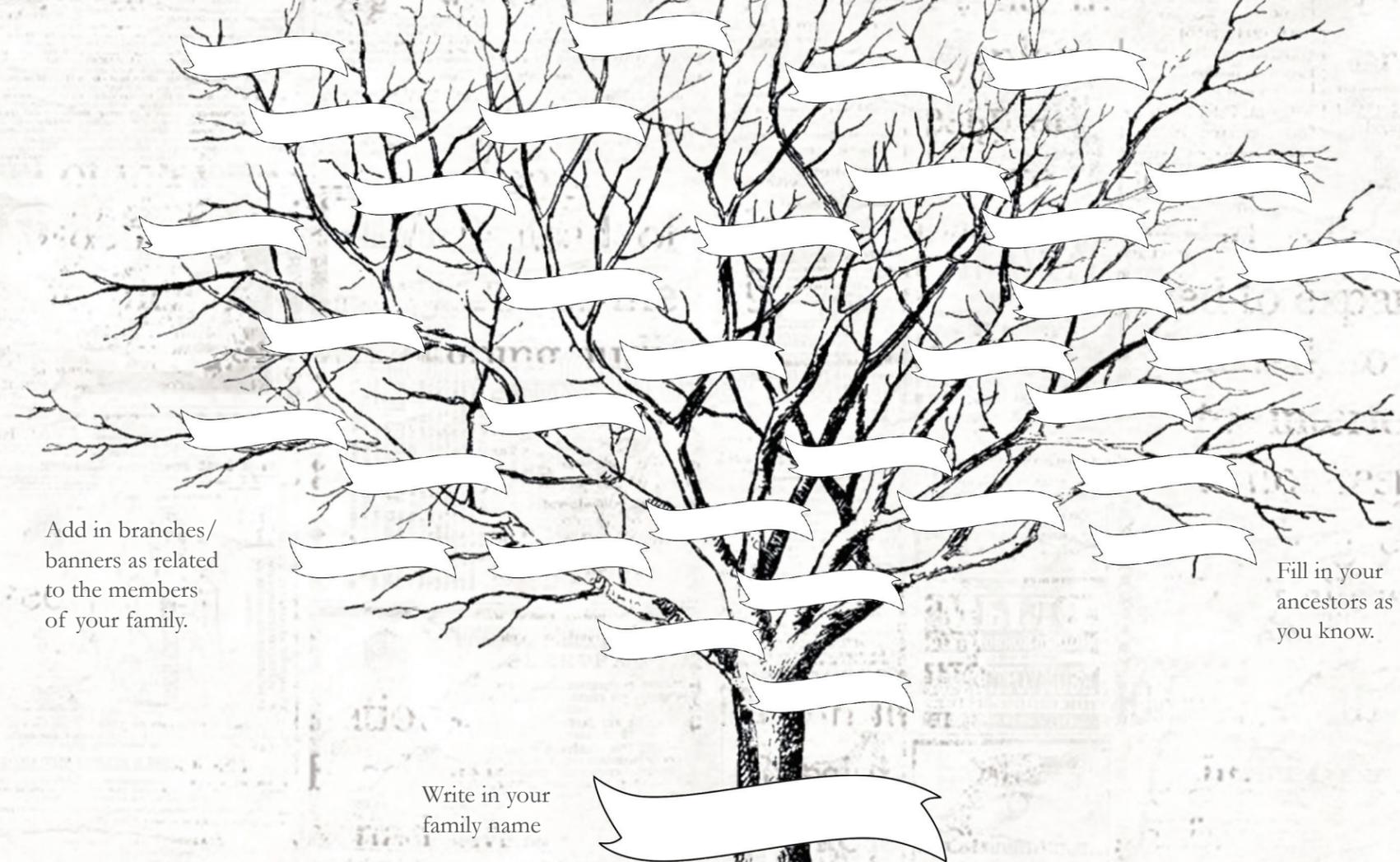
Reflect on the history of your family and your ancestors. Where did they come from, and where do you live now? Have your ancestors ever been depicted in a negative way? Have you experienced any complicated dynamics in terms of how your identity has been accepted or understood?

**“While they were pleased that I had refuted the derogatory name Jackson Whites, they didn’t want to be told their self-image was incorrect.”**

- David Cohen

**“I’ve lived with rejection my whole life, so I’m used to it. But to say we’re not Indians means calling my parents, my grandparents, and my grandparents’ parents liars, and that just isn’t fair.”**

- William (Silent Wolf) Van Dunk, Ramapough



Add in branches/  
banners as related  
to the members  
of your family.

Write in your  
family name

Fill in your  
ancestors as far as  
you know.