



## **Article #2: What Is Blood Quantum and What Does It Mean for the Future of Oneida?**

By: The Oneida Trust and Enrollment Committee

*This series of articles is designed to inform Oneida citizens about enrollment issues. The total number of Oneida enrolled members is expected to decline within the next 10 years. The goal of these articles is to generate community conversations about citizenship and belonging so that we may explore our options.*

This article will explore the history of using blood quantum to categorize American Indian tribal identity. The measuring of blood and the concept of 'Indianness' is a complex and difficult subject. What is blood quantum and where did it come from? In the United States, "blood quantum" is the degree to which an individual can prove a certain amount of Indian blood. This amount is used to determine the individual's tribal belonging and legal rights. Blood quantum is a measure of the amount of Indian blood, expressed as a fraction such as one-half or one-fourth.

What many people don't know is that blood quantum laws have been in effect for about three hundred years. In 1705, when the slave trade was at its height, state governments began "cataloguing" people of color into three categories: "Negros, Mulattos and Indians." Each category of person had different rights. Racial categories were further defined during the Civil War where "...every person having one-fourth or more Indian blood shall be deemed Indian." The U.S government began taking census rolls in the 1800s and 1900s. These census rolls define the genealogical ancestry on which blood quantum is based. When tribes began to create their own enrollment rules, many based them on the Dawes Act of 1887 - also known as the General Allotment Act - and used blood quantum as a requirement. The purpose of this act was to assimilate Indians into white American society by breaking up tribal lands into individually owned plots of land or "allotments."

Over time, competition for governmental resources placed greater importance on Indian blood as a way to qualify for aid. In 1906, in order to control who received aid, the U.S. Interior Department began to issue Certificate of Indian Blood (CDIB) cards. In this way, American Indians are unique - no other group of human beings is required to carry a racial membership card. This mathematical racism continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and has become a deeply ingrained tool used by tribal governments. Over 70 percent of existing tribal constitutions contain citizenship requirements involving blood.

The use of blood quantum as a genetic cut-off point for Indian people is viewed by many as an instrument of assimilation and extermination. The reasons are as follows: first, blood quantum can never be increased; only decreased. Even if a full-blooded Oneida marries a  $\frac{1}{2}$  blood Oneida, their children will only be  $\frac{3}{4}$ . And if their children have children, they will only be a further divided fraction of "Indian enough." As Lakota elder Gilbert Walking Bull has said, when Native nations adopt blood quantum, we can "never restore the rock, we can only pile stones upon one another." Second, blood quantum is also radically different from traditional Native values of family and inclusion. In the past, cultural practices such as adoption and intermarriage allowed greater flexibility in determining the boundaries of the social group. Not so today. By using blood quantum, concerns over eligibility determined benefits and services make this traditional flexibility impossible. In this way, some argue that the use of blood quantum may be more harmful to Native cultural survival than any other federal Indian policy.

Today, tribes across the United States face a difficult problem: the blood dilution over generations has decreased the number of Indians who meet the minimum blood requirement. Why is this happening? One reason, according to the 2010 US Census, is that Indians marry more non-Indians than any other ethnic group. Indians are the group most likely to identify as more than one race. There are many historical reasons for this pattern that are too complex to dig into here. We know that Indians and white Americans have been intermarrying for centuries and there have been many political and economic reasons for doing so. For example, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the federal government, in the hopes of assimilating Indian culture into "mainstream U.S. society," promoted Indian/white intermarriage. This trend continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century; census data shows us that Indians are just as likely to be married to white Americans as they are to other Indians.

So the question today is this: do tribes continue to use blood quantum as an enrollment requirement or do they change their constitutions and create an alternative set of requirements to define tribal citizenship? Belonging and citizenship are much more than a mathematical fraction. And culture is not a biologically defined characteristic. Today, the Oneida have the opportunity to have a conversation about the many possibilities for future Oneida generations if we change our criteria for citizenship. Alternative requirements for Oneida citizenship can be generated by having Oneidas of all ages, from children to elders, participate in creating ideas on the possibilities.

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