

Red Jacket was old enough to have served during the years when Iroquois power and prestige were at their height. Now he headed what detractors called the "pagan faction"—Iroquois who sought to maintain their traditional culture and to keep European influences outside the borders of their reservation. In his speech, Red Jacket responds to Missionary Cram's suggestion that Native Americans convert to Christianity and accept European ways. What is Red Jacket's view of the European assault on Indian life?

Although the readings in this chapter have focused on the Native Americans of the eastern coast of British North America, it is important to remember that Spanish colonizers of territory that would later be part of the United States also encountered and interacted with Indians. In 1598, Juan de Oñate established the colony of New Mexico. The final document is from a letter he wrote to the Spanish viceroy in Mexico in which he described the nature and society of the native inhabitants. In what ways does the document serve to illustrate the wide variety of Native American cultures existing in North America during the colonial period?

ESSAY

Algonquians and Iroquoians: Farmers of the Woodlands

Peter Nabokov with Dean Snow

When the hunting party of three Penobscot River Indian families arrived at the frozen creek in the spring of 1492, the men tested the ice with their five-foot staves. It would support them today, but not much longer. The wintry season which they called "still-hunting and stalking" was ending quickly. A warm spell a few days earlier caused sticky snow to cling to their moose-hide snowshoes, slowing them down.

It was time to head downstream, following creeks to the broad river and continuing to where it widened to the sea. Other hunters and their families, whom they had not seen since autumn, would also be returning to the summer villages. The warmer evenings would offer time for recounting the past winter—all the deaths, births, hunts, and tragic, funny, and supernatural happenings of which human memory and history are made.

The hunting parties were traversing a well-watered and heavily forested landscape which white men would one day call Maine. In their own language they knew themselves as "people of the white rocks country," a phrase which Europeans would later shorten to Penobscot. They

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were one of six loosely organized eastern Algonquian-speaking tribes who would become known colloquially as Wabanakis, or “daybreak land people.” Their territory marked the northern limits of Indian farming, for late thaws and early frosts permitted them to produce only a little corn, squash, and beans.

The annual shifts between seasonal camps up and down the Penobscot River valley were determined by the time-honored habits of fishing and hunting on which their survival depended. Branching out from this great stream were innumerable tributaries that were familiar to the hunters who revisited them, usually more than once, throughout the year. Each of these natural domains was dubbed a “river,” which, to the Penobscot hunting families, evoked a stretch of stream and adjoining lands on which they held relatively exclusive hunting and fishing privileges. Deep in the heart of their homeland loomed their sacred Mount Katahdin, home to the fearsome spirit known as Pamola. Few hunters ventured above the tree line to trespass on his territory.

Waterways, and the well-trodden trails that connected them, served as the hunters’ routes into the dense interior forests, where their arrows, snares, and deadfalls yielded moose, deer, beavers, muskrats, and otters in their “rivers.” The central river was their highway down to the coast, where they collected clams and lobsters, speared seals, and caught porpoises.

Mobility was a necessity for the hunting life of the Penobscot. Hence, their social groups were small, and rules of residence were rather loose. Generally, it was up to the husband whether his family lived with his own or with his wife’s parents. The opportunities and dictates of the hunt dominated all other concerns; social organization had to be flexible enough to let men make the most of the availability of game or shifts in the weather.

The hunters were not unhappy to leave winter behind. The “master of the animals” had blessed this group with a late-season moose cow, her unborn still in its slick, wet pouch. Their hunting had yielded enough beaver and other pelts, thick with luxuriant winter hair, to weigh down the toboggans the men dragged behind them. Their dogs also sniffed spring, and seemed happier. Ahead, everyone anticipated spearing and netting the shad, salmon, alewives, and sturgeon during their spring spawning runs.

This was also a time to harvest bark. It is hard to imagine northeastern Algonquian culture without the paper birch tree. Thin, speckled flats were peeled from the trunks at different times of year. Spring bark was thickest and was preferred for canoes, so the entire trunk would be cut down and the bark separated in the largest pieces possible. Then it would be sewn onto a canoe frame of steam-bent cedar wood and waterproofed at the seams with white-pine pitch colored with charcoal.

Summer bark was thinner, and was earmarked for roofing mats and receptacles. It could be stripped from the trunk in smaller flats without killing the tree. Then it could be folded and sewn into maple-sap buckets, baby

cradleboards, and pitch-caulked cooking vessels in which heated stones were dropped to bring water to a boil. For more decorative items, floral designs were produced by careful scraping away to the darker, inner layer of the bark. Porcupine-quill or moose-hair embroidery might also ornament the bark surfaces.

In late spring, families planted gardens before heading for the coast and the pleasures of seabird eggs, escape from blackflies, summer berry picking, flirting among the young, easier fishing along the saltwater bays, and extended twilights. At summer's end, the "going about to find something" time, the forest lured them once more.

Hunting opened in earnest with moose mating season. To entice the fat summer bulls within arrow range, hunters trumpeted through birch-bark megaphones, imitating the sounds of cow moose. Then came winter, story-telling season, when a few families collected within wigwams and lulled children to sleep with the exploits of Glooskap, the trickster figure of Wabanaki folklore.

For Penobscot Indians in 1492, this cycle of tasks and pleasures seemed as predictable and everlasting as the seasons themselves. Their way of life also made extremely efficient use of the natural resources in their river and forest world. Woodlands, waterways, and—south of Penobscot country—open fields remain the ecological hallmarks of all of the North American East. However, in 1492, there was probably far more local variation in plant and animal life than we have today.

Indeed, if we are to believe the earliest European eyewitnesses, New England, for instance, resembled a checkerboard of natural preserves with dramatically contrasting ecological features. "It did all resemble a stately Parke, wherein appeare some old trees with high withered tops, and other flourishing with living green boughs," wrote James Rosier in 1605, after walking through the forests and fields not far from Indian Island in Maine. Yet in this stroll of less than four miles, the modern-day environmental historian William Cronon pointed out, Rosier's party actually passed beneath the leafy canopies of a number of quite different micro-environments.

The sylvan paradise of northern New England, lying at the northernmost extreme of the corn-growing region, was but one section of nearly one million square miles of the eastern half of North America that is commonly called the Woodland culture area. Farther west might be added 400,000 square miles of intermixed river foliage and tallgrass prairie, where—except on strips of narrow floodplain—Indians usually were not able to sustain substantial gardening.

By 1492, the native people of this huge eastern mass of the continent occupied a world already rich and complex in human history—many different histories, in fact. At least sixty-eight mutually unintelligible tongues, representing five of the twenty known language families of North America, were spoken in the region. The net effect of over 10,000 years of adaptation by

contrasting native peoples who had grown deeply tied to a great diversity of environmental regions of the eastern woodlands had produced a complex cultural mosaic. . . .

It had taken time, new ideas, and experimentation for the woodland Indian peoples of 1492 to develop this annual round of land-use customs and mixed strategies of subsistence. Indian occupancy of the East is now believed to go back as far as 16,000 B.C., when Paleo-Indian foragers and hunters began settling the region in highly mobile bands. As these groups established local residency, they developed almost imperceptibly into the Indian world that archaeologists label the Archaic period, which lasted until about 700 B.C.

The domesticated dogs that accompanied the Penobscot hunters were introduced during Archaic times and were found throughout the East by 1492. Inherited from their Paleo-Indian forerunners, a principal Archaic weapon was the spear thrower. Archaic hunters improved this device to gain increased velocity during a throw by adding flexible shafts and by weighting the throwing stick with a ground stone to add leverage. . . .

By 1492, Indians in the East had been growing vegetables in two different ways for a long time. Both the Iroquoians and Algonquians practiced what is known as swidden, or slash-and-burn, horticulture. A plot of preferably well-drained land was cleared of its canopy of leaves and branches. The area was then burned and nutrient-rich ashes and organic materials were hoed into the forest floor. Seeds were dispersed within hand-formed mounds. The resulting fields did not have a very kempt appearance; generally, the corn stalks and squash vines flourished greenly amid a scatter of scorched or dead brush.

Among the semi-nomadic hunting-and-gathering Algonquian bands, who traveled relatively light and who fished, foraged, hunted, and gathered maple syrup, growing vegetables was but one subsistence activity. If a season's garden was beset by insects, or a hunt came up empty, the people generally could rely on stored foods or other options. The Iroquoians, however, who elevated swidden agriculture to their dominant means of support, might be considered true "farmers," rather than part-time "gardeners." Their sizable hillside lots were the mainstay for their matrilineal social system and for a semi-sedentary, village-based way of life. . . .

Prior to the advent of gardening, food foraging among woodland Indians had probably been the responsibility of women. The heightened importance of plant cultivation, processing, and storage steadily enhanced their role. By the time of Columbus, women were clearly the primary food producers in a number of woodland cultures whose political and religious systems reflected their status.

South of the northeastern territories of the Wabanaki peoples, the weather softened. Among the Indian groups of central and southern New England, the length of the summer allowed greater attention to gardening

and so promoted a more settled village way of life. While for Penobscot hunters corn was a sometime delicacy, for the south it became a basic food staple. In present-day New Hampshire and Vermont, the western Abenakis were marginal farmers and fishermen. Among the Mahicans of eastern New York, like the Pocumtucks of the interior Connecticut River valley, work in the fields was still augmented by hunting in the woods and trapping migratory fish in local rivers.

Not surprisingly, this more temperate world had a larger native population than did the northern forests. It is estimated that the Massachusett, Wampanoag, and other Indian nations of southern New England possessed a population density of five people per square mile—ten times that of the hunters of Maine. Population densities at this high level also obtained for other eastern Algonquian-speakers farther south, the Lenapes (Delawares) and Nanticokes, and their linguistic kinfolk in coastal Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. There, also, among the Powhatans and others, were permanent villages and more stable intertribal alliances.

All central and southern New England Indians spoke languages belonging to the same language family—Algonquian. Commonly, a tribesman was conversant with the words and pronunciation of his immediate neighbors, but communicated with decreasing fluency as trade, hunting, or warfare drew him farther from his home territory.

By 1492, techniques for growing and storing vegetables had been developing in the Northeast for four or five centuries. Wampanoag men cleared fields from the forests of oak, elm, ash, and chestnut. They felled the smaller trees and burned the thicker trunks at the base together with their branches, which left a coating of ash to enrich the soil. In Wampanoag society, rights to these cleared plots were inherited through the female line of descent.

Women broke up the ground with hoes edged with deer scapulae or clamshells. Around April, they began planting the seed corn in little mounds, often counting four kernels per hillock and perhaps adding heads of alewife fish for fertilizer. The corn came in many colors and kinds—flint, flour, dent, and pop.

By midsummer, an early crop yielded squash and beans and green corn, but the major harvest occurred in September. Apparently these crops helped each other out. The beans growing amid the corn added nitrogen, which corn consumes, while the heavy stalks offered support for the climbing bean vines. Finally, the corn provided the shade that the low-lying squash needed to reach maximum maturity.

When eaten together, beans, corn, and squash produced a greater protein intake, and Indians developed the mixed-vegetable dish which is still known by its Algonquian name, “succotash.”

While garden caretakers weeded roots and protected the emerging crops from birds and pests, the majority of villagers headed for the coast to gather clams and oysters and to catch lobsters and fish. Wild greens, nuts,

and fruits, which were also important to their diet, varied with season and habitat. They included blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, and wild grapes, and walnuts, chestnuts, and acorns, which could also be dried and stored for leaner times.

In autumn, the Indians divided their time between preparing their agricultural surplus for winter storage and dispersing in hunting parties before winter set in. Deer were stalked by individuals, or were flushed into special game pens by communal drivers. For warm skins as well as meat, Indians stalked moose, elk, bears, bobcats, and mountain lions in late fall, winter, and early spring. In midwinter, they dangled lines into local ponds through the ice, but dipped nets or repaired fish weirs in milder seasons.

Villages came alive in summertime, their long, mat-covered multifamily structures busy with social activity. Those villages near cultural frontiers were surrounded by a protective stockade of fire-hardened, sharpened posts. A typical settlement included storage pits, menstrual huts, and sometimes special religious structures. Plaza-like areas were used for public feasts, and for dancing performed to the accompaniment of song, drum, and rattle.

Religious specialists among the Wampanoag of present-day Massachusetts were known as “powwows.” Admired and feared for their association with extraordinarily strong “manitou,” or spirits, they exhibited their spirit-bestowed powers at special events to benefit hunters, control weather, prophesy the future, cure the sick, or bewitch their enemies. They also mediated between the community and the spirit world at green-corn harvest feasts and at special midwinter rituals and memorials for the dead, and they concocted war magic against tribal enemies. Among some southern New England tribes, religious specialists who behaved more like formal priests maintained temples in which bones of the chiefly class were treasured.

Exchange was lively among these different peoples and probably bound them together in personal and group alliances. The eastern woods and riversides were laced with well-used trail systems along which goods and messages were conveyed. Individuals fortunate enough to be related to the resident “sachem,” or chief, as well as powwows who were on intimate terms with them, benefited from the exchange of values and goods that moved back and forth.

In 1492, these Algonquian-speaking hunter-farmers were neighbors to more militarily powerful tribes who were representatives of another major eastern Indian language family, Iroquoian. Dwelling along the Carolina and Virginia portions of the Appalachian foothills were such Iroquoian-speaking peoples as the Nottoways, Meherrins, and Tuscaroras. The last of these would later migrate north to become the sixth member of the famous Iroquois confederacy in the eighteenth century.

Among the mountains, valleys, and flatlands that lay across what is now central New York State, the principal beacon of Iroquoian-speaking culture was positioned in the midst of a more extensive territory of

Algonquian-speaking groups. What these upper Iroquoian peoples may have lost in terms of sheer acreage, however, they more than made up for in the fertility of their agricultural lands, which they utilized most efficiently.

Inhabiting the mountains of eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina were southern Iroquoians, the ancestors of the populous Cherokees. Tutelos, who lived in Virginia, were speakers of the Siouan language, while the Catawbias, farther south, possessed a language with a more distant relationship to mainstream Siouan. West of Cherokee country were the Yuchis, whose language was vaguely related to Siouan.

If the birch was the emblematic tree of Algonquian culture, it was the white pine for the Iroquoians. In their cosmology, a cosmic evergreen was believed to stand at the center of the earth. Elm served more pragmatic purposes. Slabs of its heavy bark, sewn onto stout sapling frames, shrouded their barrel-roofed longhouses, which extended up to 300 feet or more in length.

These dormitorylike buildings were also an embodiment of the Iroquois social order, for women and children under one roof were linked by membership in the same clan, which was traced through the female line. Each of the ten or so Iroquois clans took its name from a particular animal or bird that was considered to be the original ancestor of the clan's members—thus there were, for example, the Eagle, Snipe, and Heron clans. Over the door at one end of a longhouse would be a depiction of the reigning clan animal of the house's inhabitants.

The year 1492 probably found this group of woodland Indians undergoing a profound social and political transformation. Sometime between 1450 and 1550, it is believed, the five major Iroquoian-speaking tribes south of the St. Lawrence River were developing an altogether innovative form of political union—a multitribal federation with members allied for mutual defense—and were deliberating with elaborately democratic rules of order. The story of the formation of the Iroquois League provides a strong argument against the notion that pre-contact Indian societies existed in a timeless vacuum and did not experience "history" until Columbus imported it.

At the dawn of this transformation, around A.D. 1450, northern Iroquoian groups were found across southern Ontario, New York, and central Pennsylvania in villages of slightly over 200 people each. As with the New England horticulturists, they practiced swidden agriculture, only to a far more intensive degree. Lacking direct access to coastal resources, they were more dependent upon gardening for survival. These tribes also appear to have been highly competitive and politically assertive.

Early Iroquoian life was divided into two domains, the clearings with their longhouses and gardens and the wider wilderness with its game and dangers. The clearings were the responsibility of women, and over each longhouse presided the oldest "clan mother." By contrast, the forests were a male domain, where the men gave offerings to the masked spirits, who responded by "giving" wild animals to respectful hunters.

Iroquois fields were cleared by hacking and burning around the base of tree trunks so that the heavier foliage died and, if necessary, the entire tree could be felled easily the following year. This also allowed sunlight to shine on the forest floor and provided ashes to energize the soil. Maize, beans, and squash were planted in hills among the fallen trees. Firewood was gathered as dead limbs dropped during the course of the year. Within a few years, however, the garden soil began to decline in productivity, and new acreage had to be opened up. Every twenty years or so, infestation from worms and other pests, plus depletion of easily available wood for fires and stockade or longhouse construction, forced relocation of the village. The entire community would rebuild not far away, often an easy walk from the old site.

For the Iroquoians, growing crops was not simply one of a number of food-gathering options; their fields were their lifeline. They were considerably more sedentary than their Algonquian neighbors. This heightened reliance upon cultigens and reliable food storage decisively elevated the prominence of women in political life. By 1492, not only was each longhouse under the authority of the eldest clan mother resident, but it was Iroquois women who handpicked candidates for the office of sachem.

However, the pattern of communities containing only a dozen or so longhouses changed by 1492, when Iroquois towns each began sheltering from 500 to 2,000 inhabitants. Perhaps a rise in intertribal warfare inspired consolidation for mutual defense, or improved farming strategies allowed for a dramatic aggregation of population. But the new social and political institutions that arose to cope with these mega-villages grew directly out of the old social fabric and residence patterns.

Traditionally, the center aisles of the Iroquoian longhouse split the buildings lengthwise. Paired family quarters faced each other like compartments in a sleeping car, with a shared cooking hearth in the central aisle. Men married “into” these longhouses—which were expanded if all existing quarters were spoken for. Although men appointed from senior households ran the affairs of the village as a council of equals, sometime around 1492 this changed. The matrilineal clans, which seem to have served originally as units that facilitated trade and exchange within the tribe, became the building blocks of a brand-new political institution. Within the century between 1450 and 1550, the Iroquois proper became known as the Five Nations, which held sway across present-day New York State. They consisted of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk peoples.

According to Iroquois tradition, two legendary figures, Deganawidah and Hiawatha, conceived of a “great peace” among the incessantly feuding Iroquois peoples. They persuaded the Iroquois tribes, one by one, to accept their “good news of peace and power.” Among the reforms they instituted was the abolition of cannibalism. The old social importance of the communal longhouse made it a perfect symbol for their political creation. All the

member tribes talked of themselves as “fires” of an imagined “longhouse” that spanned the extent of Iroquois territory.

To its participants, this Iroquoian fraternity meant strength in numbers and security through allies. To outsiders such as the Hurons, neighboring Algonquians, and eventually the European powers, it meant a formidable foe. The full drama of Iroquois political destiny would actually unfold in the three centuries after 1492, but if Columbus had ventured northward, he would have witnessed a truly Native American representative government in the making. . . .

DOCUMENTS

“Of the Naturall Inhabitants of Virginia,” 1624

The land is not populous, for the men be fewe; their far greater number is of women and children. Within 60 miles of *James Towne* there are about some 5000 people, but of able men fit for their warres scarce 1500. To nourish so many together they have yet no means, because they make so small a benefit of their land, be it never so fertill.

6 or 700 have beene the most [that] hath beene seene together, when they gathered themselves to have surprised *Captaine Smyth at Pamaunke*, having but 15 to withstand the worst of their furie. As small as the proportion of ground that hath yet beene discovered, is in comparison of that yet unknowne. The people differ very much in stature, especially in language, as before is expressed.

Since being very great as the *Sesquesahamocks*, others very little as the *Wighcomoco*s: but generally tall and straight, of a comely proportion, and of a colour browne, when they are of any age, but they are borne white. Their haire is generally black; but few have any beards. The men weare halfe their heads shaven, the other halfe long. For Barbers they use their women, who with 2 shels will grate away the haire, of any fashion they please. The women are cut in many fashions agreeable to their yeares, but ever some part remaineth long.

They are very strong, of an able body and full of agilitie, able to endure to lie in the woods under a tree by the fire, in the worst of winter, or in the weedes and grasse, in *Ambuscado* in the Sommer.

They are inconstant in everie thing, but what feare constraineth them to keepe. Craftie, timorous, quicke of apprehension and very ingenious. Some

SOURCE: Edward Arber, ed., *Captain John Smith Works* (Birmingham, Eng.: The English Scholars Library, No. 16, 1884), 65–67.