

Patterns in White - Native Relations, 1600-1900

Beginning with the earliest European contact, the Native populations of the Americas began a slow and painful retreat in terms of numbers, range, and influence. In the British North American colonies, this story played out in a fashion that would become a pattern in white-Native relations. Throughout the three centuries of the 1600s-1900, the colonies grew, gained independence, formed the United States, and expanded the western frontier across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. The numerous Indian tribes that had occupied these lands for centuries represented an obstacle for the expansion of the nation, as the competition for land and resources often led to conflict and mistrust between the American Indians and the settlers and United States government. Throughout the centuries, familiar strategies of encroachment and domination developed in the manner that whites, both settlers and officials, interacted with Indians and ultimately took ownership of their land. As the Indian tribes of the plains would experience, certain strategies that were first employed on the East Coast would be deployed against them: use of trade to change power structures, unfavorable treaties that increased white settlement, cultural erasure and genocide, and decimation by disease.

Trade was a major driving force in shifting traditional and long-established power structures among the tribes of North America. Survival for early colonists in New England, as well as in the Chesapeake, depended on reciprocal trade relationships with American Indians. Historian Daniel Richter explains in chapter 5 of his *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* that "English men were bereft of food . . ." and trades with native people could result in being "showered . . . with foodstuffs . . ." by Native leaders like Powhatan.¹ Over time, trade would come to completely transform intra- and inter-tribal relationships across the continent. Even early in the colonial era, "Once substantial numbers of European and Native people began living near each other, it became virtually impossible for *any* chief to control the flow of goods to his people".² This development was problematic for chiefs in the East because much of their power was derived from their abilities to procure and distribute valuable metal trade items. Competition for these goods was sometimes a tremendous disadvantage for some chiefs and their control.³ In the West, it was the fur trading era that accelerated the distribution of manufactured items to the indigenous groups. Colin Calloway, in his essay *The Inter-tribal Balance of Power on the Great Plains, 1760-1850*, provides the example of the Northwest Company whose policy it was "to open direct trade with Indian hunters by establishing posts in the fur country".⁴ This policy, also used by the Hudson's Bay Company, allowed traders to "by-pass middleman tribes and to deal with less sophisticated customers who were comparatively ignorant of market values".⁵ Contact and trade with European groups particularly spread two critically important items among the Indians of the plains: horses and guns. With these two trade items, "Horses increased the Indian's mobility; manufactured goods brought him out of the stone age. Both wrought dramatic changes in native culture, social organization, economy, commerce, warfare, and tribal locations".⁶ While some tribes became more adept at controlling the distribution of trade goods throughout the West by occupying a middleman/distributor position, the spread of these items led to

¹ Daniel Richter, *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2011), 125.

² Ibid, 127.

³ Ibid, 128.

⁴ Collin Calloway, "The Inter-tribal Balance of Power on the Great Plains, 1760-1850," *Journal of American Studies*: Vol. 16, No. 1 (1982): 37.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, 26.

much intertribal warfare. The reality of trade in the West was that it led to “those with firearms terrorizing and taking the lands of those without”.⁷ This also had precedent in earlier interactions, guns had been distributed even before 1650 in the East, with no prior precedent before European contact.⁸ Intertribal warfare over control of trade, resources, and hunting grounds was exacerbated by European influence and led to the decimation of many western tribes.

White settlement through treaties that were highly unfavorable to Native peoples, as well as illegal pre-treaty white settlement, were common features of the relationships between Native people and settlers and the official representatives of government. Efforts to gain access to or control of land took different forms depending on the relative power of the colonists involved. In the example of less-powerful Scots-Irish in Pennsylvania, “many moved west into either proprietary or Indian lands with little regard to the niceties of legal paperwork and no intention of paying quitrents.”⁹ Conversely, more powerful colonial leaders in Pennsylvania attempted to secure land with only slightly more regard towards traditional practices in using the “Covenant Chain” with the Iroquois to gain Native land cessions, whether or not other tribes observed Iroquois authority.¹⁰ In the case of the Walking Purchase of 1737 in Pennsylvania, the treaty document that initiated it “may have been an outright forgery” to give favorable conditions to officials, while they also “sent scouting parties into the woods to blaze a trail likely to take in the most territory in a thirty-six hour trek”.¹¹ Historian David Andrew Nichols, in his *A Rejoinder to Jefferson’s Notes of Virginia*, estimates that the population west of the Appalachian mountains grew by 500% in 16 years from 1784 to 1800.¹² These misleading and unscrupulous tactics were visited upon the Indians of the West in order for the United States to take control of their territory as well. As stated by historian Waziyatawin in *What Does Justice Look Like?*, “the United States consistently violated their treaty obligations to Indigenous nations” (pg. 29).¹³ In the example of the 1805 treaty with the Dakota, Zebulon Pike could only secure the signatures of two Dakota leaders, which at best would have only represented 2/7 of the Dakota Nation’s blessing.¹⁴ This treaty, along with others, shows “that the U.S. government was not interested in fair negotiations”.¹⁵ The United States government used threats of withholding rations and the use of military force as tactics to coerce the Dakota into signing the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux in 1851. Furthermore, paper were presented to be signed that “Dakota leaders could not read”.¹⁶ This treaty was signed two years after Minnesota became an organized territory, which required 5,000 white inhabitants, many of whom had moved into Dakota territories. Following the completion of Fort Snelling in 1819, settlers began to flood into the area who “came to displace the Dakota population so that they could obtain some of the richest farmland in the country”.¹⁷ It is clear that the strategies used in treaty negotiations in the East had been brought to the West.

Cultural erasure and genocide of Native peoples was yet another method of domination that developed during the colonial period and was later used in the West. In New England, and particularly Rhode Island, the experience of the Narragansett tribe provides a clear example of the process of cultural erasure used by

⁷ Ibid, 39.

⁸ Richter, *Before*, 140.

⁹ Daniel Richter, *Trade, Land, and Power: The Struggle for Eastern North America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 160.

¹⁰ Ibid, 168.

¹¹ Ibid, 166.

¹² David Andrew Nicholas, “A Rejoinder to Jefferson’s ‘Notes on Virginia’: François Barbé de Marbois in Iroquoia, 1784,” *New York History*: Vol. 84, no. 3 (2003), 406.

¹³ Waziyatawin, *What Does Justice Look like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland*, (St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2008), 29.

¹⁴ Ibid, 30.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 31-33.

¹⁷ Ibid, 97.

officials against American Indians. Through intermarriage and reproduction, children with Narragansett and white parents were classified as “mustee”. However, especially after slavery ended in Rhode Island, Narragansetts and mustees were erased from the public in, what historians Ruth Wallis Herndon and Ella Wilcox Sekatau in *The Right to a Name: The Narragansett People and Rhode Island Officials in the Revolutionary Era*, call a form of “documentary genocide”.¹⁸ Officials reclassified Indians as “Negroes”, so that “between 1750 and 1800, Indians disappeared from [the] records”.¹⁹ Indeed, the “Narragansett were keenly aware of the pressure to lose their Indianness”.²⁰ This process of cultural erasure continued in the West. For the children of many western tribes, forced assimilation and cultural erasure occurred at the notorious Indian Boarding Schools of the late 1800s. Brenda Child, of the University of Minnesota’s Department of American Studies, explains in her article “Indian Boarding Schools” in the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* that “boarding schools . . . served the interest of the White majority”.²¹ The boarding schools were designed to force assimilation of Native children as it was believed “separating children from their families and communities would help guide young people towards civilization and European American values, something that educators believed would come undone if they spent time at home”.²² Waziyatawin posits that indeed the primary function of the schools was to “destroy Indigenous ways of being,” which caused enormous amounts of longitudinal damage to Native communities.²³ Cultural erasure began in cases like the Narragansetts in the East and continued in an even more institutionalized manner later in the West.

Disease was the most decimating and effective aid that colonists and Americans had against the Native peoples of North America. Examples of large numbers of people from various tribes across the continent succumbing to European diseases are numerous. As has been theorized, and an explanation offered by Richter, domestication and close-quarter living with domesticated animals likely assisted humans in the Eastern Hemisphere with developing immunity to certain viruses and disease, while leaving those in the Western Hemisphere vulnerable.²⁴ Epidemic disease among Native populations of North America was rampant, particularly smallpox. Epidemics of smallpox occurred up and down the east coast of North America reducing population numbers of American Indians in many locations by up to 95% in a matter of 100 years.²⁵ Herndon and Wallis note that Narragansetts were decimated by disease on top of being erased from the records.²⁶ On the plains, disease would continue to be one of the most destructive forces brought by direct or indirect White contact. Tribes who had led village-based lifestyles were “vulnerable to epidemics . . . [and] disease exerted a decisive influence on the balance of power on the plains”.²⁷ The Mandan and Blackfoot both almost completely disappeared due to a smallpox epidemic in the 1830s.²⁸ Disease brought by white settlers also greatly affected the Dakota.²⁹ As enormous numbers of American Indians fell victim to the ravages of deadly epidemics, settlers were able to take control of more of the land as less and less of it was occupied by the tribes and those remaining were less able to defend their territory.

¹⁸ Ruth W. Herndon and Ella W. Sekatau, “The Right to a Name: The Narragansett People and Rhode Island Officials in the Revolutionary Era,” in *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500-1850*, by Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell (U.K.: Routledge, 2007), 429, 443.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 437.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 439.

²¹ Brenda Child, “Indian Boarding Schools,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, Vol. 13, no. 1 (2016), 26.

²² *Ibid*, 27.

²³ Waziyatawin, *Justice*, 59.

²⁴ Richter, *Before*, 143-144.

²⁵ Richter, *Before*, 144-147.

²⁶ Herndon and Wallis, “Right to a Name,” 437.

²⁷ Calloway, *Balance*, 41.

²⁸ *Ibid*. 43-44.

²⁹ Waziyatawin, *Justice*, 43-44, 102.

The trends, strategies, and realities of white, European American contact and influence on the indigenous people of North America followed patterns in the West that were first seen and used in the East. As the colonies, and later the United States of America, grew and expanded from the Atlantic seaboard into the frontiers of the Great Plains, the original occupants of the land represented an obstacle to the government officials and settlers who pushed the expansion. The tactics employed against the Native people included use of trade to change power structures, unfavorable treaties that increased white settlement, cultural erasure and genocide, and decimation by disease. In each case, some combination of one or more of these strategies is evident. While the Native people of North America resisted the encroachment of new peoples, the combination of these factors proved to shift the balance of power to the expanding nation.

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Images:

Images from Colorado Encyclopedia:

Chippewa Medicine Man Treating Sick Woman

Image from Encyclopedia Britannica:

Iroquois Territory Map

Image from Glenbow Museum:

Metal Trade Items on Blanket

Images From Herndon, Ruth W., and Ella W. Sekatau. "The Right to a Name: The Narragansett People and Rhode Island Officials in the Revolutionary Era." *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500-1850*, by Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell, Routledge, 2007, pp. 427–451.

Chart of Population/Demographic Records from Rhode Island
Map of Early Rhode Island

Images from the History Channel, History.com:

Woman Infected in Blanket

Tom Torlino, before forced assimilation

Tom Torlino, after forced assimilation

Images from the Library of Congress:

Carlisle Boarding School Children at Chalboard, circa 1901

Carlisle Boarding School Children on Steps, circa 1890

Entry from Zebulon Pike's Minnesota Expedition

Indian Tribes of North America Map

Images from the Minnesota Historical Society:

1805 Land Cession Map

Fort Snelling at Bdote

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Photo of Treaty of Traverse des Sioux

Snake River Fur Post Photograph

Image from the National Park Service:

Settlers and Indians Trading at Jamestown

Image from the New England Historical Society:

Indians Lament Death by Disease

Image from Public Domain

Blackfoot on Horseback

By Karl Bodmer - Painting 1840-1843, Public Domain

The Treaty of Penn with the Indians

By Benjamin West - Painting 1771-1772, Public Domain

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"American Progress" John Gast, 1872

Image from Washington State University

Early Domesticated Animals

Image from the Wisconsin Historical Society

Diorama of Trading from Alaska