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Impacts on Native American Literacy Throughout the 1800s

The literacy of Indigenous peoples of America underwent extreme transformations as the tedious attempts by descendants of colonizers to integrate aspects of white American life into Indigenous customs continued. Native American literacy exclusively consisted of oral traditions prior to the arrival of British colonizers in 1607 in Jamestown, Virginia. These oral traditions were, and still are, key elements of Indigenous culture as they serve to distribute cultural lessons, record histories, and share religious legends through the generations and amongst others. As the basis of Indigenous culture these traditions were one of the primary features of Native American life that scholars and missionaries devoted themselves to exploring and further altering in order to forcibly conform Indigenous peoples to white lifestyles. European ideals strongly differ from those of the Indigenous Native peoples of America but notably regarding written language. European ideals emphasized the importance of written language and disregarded the spoken aspects of literacy that Indigenous people utilized for generations. The lack of a written language was further reasoning for Europeans to conclude that Native Americans had no tangible history and were lesser people. These reasonings, amongst others, resulted in the initiative for the development of written Indigenous languages and forced education across America. Native American literacy expanded throughout the 1800s in the form of the development of written languages and spread of English as a result of mission work, the need for government

involvement, and the threat of a disappearing culture, as a result of European views on Indigenous lifestyles.

European distaste for Indigenous lifestyles continued throughout the 1800s as many scholars began to research Indigenous lives and publish their findings in an overall negative light. The interest in studying Native American tribes backed the white American inclination to reconstruct Indigenous life to fit a more “acceptable” mold in their eyes. In Stephen Riggs’s “The Gospel Among the Dakotas” white American disgust for Native American culture was still prevalent as the missionaries described the Choctaw Nation as “a savage people” with a “sad heritage.”¹ This dissatisfactory opinion on the Choctaw Nation was largely due to their lack of a written language and acceptable form of government in the author’s opinion. However, the author noted a shift in opinion regarding the Choctaw lifestyle as they sought education and knowledge in 1859. “They had given up the chase; and agriculture was duly honored. They had a written constitution, with a ‘declaration of rights’.”² As Indigenous nations began to form written languages and utilize them in various ways white American views on their lifestyles began to turn more positive. A newspaper titled the “Choctaw Intelligencer” was developed in the late 1800s as a way to disperse knowledge across the nation. On each of the newspapers the sentence “The ‘CHOCTAW INTELLEGENCER’ is published every Wednesday, in English and Choctaw,”³ was displayed to showcase the newspaper’s extensive audience and the expansion of literacy in the tribe. Literacy advanced in parallel to white American views towards Indigenous civilization and development. This relation is evident in Rev. Cyrus Byington’s “Grammar of the

¹ Stephen Return Riggs and Selah B. Treat, *Tah-Koo Wah-Kan; Or, the Gospel among the Dakotas* (Boston: Cong. Sabbath-school and Publishing Society, 1869), 29.

² Riggs and Treat, 29.

³ The Choctaw Intelligencer, *The “Choctaw Intelligencer” Is Published Every Wednesday, in English and Choctaw* (Doaksville: The Choctaw Intelligencer, 1851), 1.

Choctaw Language” in which the author states “Their evil habits were reformed, they were instructed in agriculture, and their language was reduced to writing.”⁴ There is a striking shift in tone regarding the evolution of the tribe as the Choctaw people are referred to as “educated natives,”⁵ rather than the previously described “savage people.”⁶ Many white Americans would go as far as defend tribes in the public eye that they deemed “civilized”. Their definition of a civilized community often included learning English, developing a writing language, converting to Christianity, and departing from many of their cultural ideals. “The Dawes Commission and the Five Civilized Tribes of Indian Territory” depicts author Charles Francis Meserve defending tribes that he deemed civilized after meeting with tribal leaders. “I have met Indians of these five tribes that were well dressed, that have business qualifications of a high order, that speak the English well, that are Christians, and in every way capable and honored citizens.”⁷ As Native Americans learned English and began to utilize the written versions of their language white Americans began to see Indigenous peoples as more human and advancing societies.

Although the growth of Indigenous literacy in the forms of recently created written languages and learning English pleased those that previously strongly detested the Indigenous peoples, these changes were not entirely completed by Native Americans themselves. Missionaries were the preeminent authors of written dictionaries for Indigenous languages as they pursued tribes to convert to Christianity. Dictionaries and grammar books became published in increasing numbers as missionaries spent time with various tribes, studying their languages and then creating religious texts in said languages. Following the publication of John Pickering’s

⁴ Cyrus Byington and Daniel Garrison Brinton, *Grammar of the Choctaw Language: by the Rev. Cyrus Byington; Edited from the Original MSS. in the Library of the American Philosophical Society, by D. G. Brinton* (Philadelphia: McCalla & Stavely, Printers, 1870), 3.

⁵ Byington and Brinton, 3.

⁶ Riggs and Treat, 29.

⁷ Charles Francis Meserve, *The Dawes Commission and the Five Civilized Tribes of Indian Territory* (Philadelphia: Office of the Indian Rights Association, 1896), 26.

“On a uniform orthography of the languages of the Indians of North America”, a spelling book was printed in 1825, (in the language of the Choctaw people) and soon after several religious texts such as the New Testament and hymn books were translated.⁸ Additionally, missionaries desired Indigenous languages to be available for students across America. One of Byington’s primary motives for creating his grammar was “to render it available for the missionary and philological student.”⁹ Missionaries understood the importance of language as a tradition but failed to comprehend that the Indigenous peoples of America were not an ancient civilization during their surveillance, further displaying a lack of respect for their cultural differences. The introduction of Christianity played a pivotal role in white American’s attempts to assimilate Indigenous peoples to their respective cultural ideals. In part one of Stephen Riggs’ “Gospel Among the Dakotas” Riggs expresses the desire to utilize religion when uniting Indigenous and white American societies. “*Missionary organizations in the United States are under peculiar obligations to the Indians.* (1) They were dwelling in the midst of us; and they may become, in due time, — and with their own consent should become, — a part of ourselves, like our colored population.”¹⁰ Due to the foundational moral teachings the majority of white Americans followed being found in the Bible, the text was a vessel to spread their instructions on how be morally correct and civilized. Author of “Our Next Duty to the Indians” James E. Rhoads stated, “Give him, then, the religion of the Bible, which imparts the best moral and religious instruction to be found, and the highest motives conceivable.”¹¹ The development of nonconsensual written languages and further publications of said languages were another factor in the overarching goal of absorbing Indigenous peoples into white American society.

⁸ Byington and Brinton, 3.

⁹ Byington and Brinton, 5.

¹⁰ Riggs and Treat, xxvi.

¹¹ James E. Rhoads, *Our Next Duty to the Indians* (Philadelphia: Indian Rights Association, 1887), 5).

Throughout the 1800s the Indigenous peoples of America endured several attempts to exterminate their culture and responded in various ways, one of those being the expansion of literacy. Indigenous peoples' populations were facing steady declines in several tribes across the country due to the displacement forced upon them by the American government, amongst other reasons. In Frederick Starr's "American Indians" multiple tribes had been recorded as "dead" or a dwindling population. "When I knew the Tonkaways in the Indian Territory, they numbered but thirty-five persons, and had been disappearing at the rate of one-third of the population in eight years."¹² As populations decreased, Indigenous populations began to seek out the root of this decline. Similar to the ideas held by white Americans, Indigenous Nations of America began to attribute educational differences to the vanishing of their culture. This is apparent in "Proceedings of an Indian Council, Held at the Buffalo Creek Reservation, State of New York, Fourth Month, 1842" documented by William Woody in which a figure in the Indigenous Nation called Israel Jemison whose role is not declared stated, "It would also be a means of preserving our people, if they would send their children to school and have them instructed in useful learning and the arts of civilized life. And we are fully convinced, that if our nation would adopt your habits and mode of life, they would be more prosperous and happy."¹³ This mentality is strikingly similar to the ideals expressed earlier in the text by the Joint Committees of the Four Yearly Meetings of Friends, "You know that the white men have a written language... We have seen that from the day when the *white men* first set their feet on your land, *they* have been *increasing*, and the *red men* have been *decreasing*."¹⁴ The similarities display how the pressures

¹² Frederick Starr, *American Indians* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1899), 240.

¹³ *Proceedings of an Indian Council, Held at the Buffalo Creek Reservation, State of New York, Fourth Month, 1842* (Baltimore: William Woody, 1842), 15.

¹⁴ *Proceedings of an Indian Council, Held at the Buffalo Creek Reservation, State of New York, Fourth Month, 1842*, 11.

from the white Americans impacted the attitudes of a number of Indigenous leaders and further showcased their desperation to manage a prosperous society. Learning English and developing a written language was a direct reaction to the descending numbers of Native American populations in the 1800s as tribes exhausted several forms of resistance. In addition to the work of the missionaries, Indigenous figures also played pivotal roles in the creation of written languages. Sequoyah, a Cherokee man, created the Cherokee Alphabet in 1821 as a result of the creator's interest in written language. Sequoyah's motive behind the creation of the alphabet was for the preservation of Cherokee traditions and language. The Cherokee alphabet was created with the aid of the Christian Bible for letter shaping which is evident in each individual letter. As seen in one of the earliest letters of the alphabet "Ꮝ" which resembles an English I but it is actually read as "qua."¹⁵ Following the exposure of the alphabet Cherokee nations became united despite separation and literacy was expanded throughout the tribe. The expansion of literacy was a result of Indigenous nations viewing the rising white populations. Expanding literacy allowed these nations to assimilate but not entirely, ensuring that aspects of their culture will survive.

Similarly, increasing literacy granted Indigenous figures more opportunities for involvement in negotiations, further preserving their culture and lifestyle. In "Notes on the Iroquois: Or, Contributions to American History, Antiquities, and General Ethnology" by Henry Schoolcraft, a figure known as Kaweaka, the Tuscarora chief of intelligence, spoke in English to express his displeasure with the taxation the tribe was facing. "We know our own rights. Should the legislature attempt to tax us, our protection is in the Constitution of the United States, which

¹⁵ "Cherokee language," Britannica, last modified January 10, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cherokee-language>

forbids it.”¹⁶ As leaders in the tribes began to learn English, they garnered the power to retaliate against white American oppression in a more direct way as a result of a deeper understanding of foundational documents such as the Constitution of the United States. This deeper understanding gave them tangible proof for their arguments against these abuses which furthered their disputes and allowed them to have a heightened voice in American democracy. In the United States Board of Indian Commissioners’ “Fifteenth Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners for the Year 1883” various Native American leaders came together to discuss important topics revolving around their individual tribes. A representative referred to as Muscogee (it is unclear if this is their name or their tribe’s name) of the Creek Nation showcased the importance of English during their speech to the board regarding the ratification of peace in the Creek Nation, stating “He said in the matter of this peace conference we have been talking about so long we had appointed five men to meet them, some colored men, some half-breeds—that is, people who know some English and can read.”¹⁷ This demonstrates the importance of literacy in the tribe as it was a key component in the selection of figures to represent the Creek people when discussing peace on an enlarged scale. Similarly, knowledge regarding events between tribes and the United States government was dispersed amongst tribes as newspapers such as “The Indian’s Friend” were developed. Information regarding bills, treaties, and more could be found in each publication of this newspaper which was printed in English. Volume 11 issue 7 reads “The Indian Bill, carrying over seven and a half million dollars, was passed by the Senate on the 8th of February.”¹⁸ Additionally, the Cherokee had developed a weekly newspaper with sections in

¹⁶ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Notes on the Iroquois: Or, Contributions to American History, Antiquities, and General Ethnology* (Project Gutenberg), 9.

¹⁷ United States Board of Indian Commissioners, *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners for the Year 1883* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 22.

¹⁸ The Indian’s Friend, *The Indian Bill, Carrying over Seven and a Half Million Dollars, Was Passed by the Senate on the 8th of February* (Philadelphia: The Indian’s Friend, 1899), 3.

both English and Cherokee. The discussion of slavery in the Cherokee tribe began to become agitated several years after the introduction of the newspaper. An antislavery party was organized in 1860 as Cherokees attempted to keep white settlers that owned slaves off of their reservations¹⁹. Newspapers allowed members of Indigenous communities to gain knowledge about what is happening to their communities in a more efficient way and in turn supported their involvement in government.

The expansion of Indigenous literacy through the introduction of English and the creation of written languages to support preexisting oral languages through the 1800s had various impacts on Native American nations. Societal pressures by white Americans, fear of a disappearing culture, continuation of mission work, and the desire to be involved in American democracy were all key aspects in the increase of literacy. Attitudes towards Indigenous lifestyles and the aspiration to assimilate Native Americans into white American life and the spread of Christianity pushed missionaries to expand into tribes and develop written languages on their behalf. As a result of white American oppression, loss of land, and various other factors Native American populations were decreasing at a rapid rate and learning English along with creating written languages were some of the many ways that they attempted to preserve their culture. Although English was one of the many things white Americans used to oppress Indigenous communities, expanding literacy allowed these individuals to eternalize their culture. Additionally learning English allowed them to communicate with various figures in government and expanded their scope in democracy. Literacy has a complex relationship with the Indigenous peoples of America as it has not only damaged them but aided them, this contrast further complicates Native American resistance against assimilation.

¹⁹ Helen Hunt Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1881), 287.

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