

## Our Debt to the Indian

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When the first textbook was published on the subject of American history, about the year 1775, a large proportionate amount of space was devoted to the American Indian. As time went on, less and less space was devoted to Indian history until about two decades ago, when we reached a point where this topic had been almost entirely dropped except for incidental mention.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century the authorities on the teaching of American History in the elementary and secondary schools, laid down the principle that in choosing the curriculum for these schools we should admit only such historical material as belonged to the stream of history to which we owe our civilization; namely, that flowing via Northern Africa, Western Asia, Greece, Rome and Western Europe. For the reason that he had not contributed to our lineage or our culture, the American Indian was to be dropped.

But there is coming into being a changing viewpoint as regards the function of the Indian in American history. From being accustomed to regard him as an extinguished enemy, of interest only as a museum specimen, many have come to consider him as an important factor, in the development of our modern culture.

**The problem.**—Suppose that Columbus had found the American continent a land never yet peopled by any race. What difference would that circumstance have made in the exploration and development of the country? What differences would be in our modern culture? Have the inventions, geographical knowledge, agriculture, and woodcraft of the Indian been a positive factor in attaining to our present stage of culture?

**The North American continent.**—The North American Continent is a region of vast distances. In a north and south direction, it stretches from the tropics to the arctics. Great mountain barriers rise close to the eastern coast. The greatest river system and the largest fresh water lakes to be found anywhere upon the face of the earth care for the drainage of the interior. The colonists had to confront the problem of an indigenous food supply. To face the problem of conquering so remote and so vast a continent entirely without intelligent guidance would have been the severest test of the stamina of any people.

**Friend and guide.**—The colonists who sought our shores were not trained in woodcraft, but came from various motives. Some were religious or political radicals who came to escape persecution; some were indentured servants; some were land speculators; some had been prisoners for debt; some were gold seekers. It was not a particularly well chosen group from which to select men to cope with the problems of the pioneer. How rapidly would such people have conquered these natural obstacles without the ready trained skill of the friendly aborigines? We must not forget, that in the majority of cases the success of the exploring expeditions was largely due to Indian guides. Their knowledge of the geography of the continent was acquired by long journeys or spying expeditions and by oral reports of other

tribes. The red man was not exactly a stay-at-home as the wars between the Iroquois and the Illinois bear witness. In their century-long quest for a passage to the South Sea, the explorers of the eastern coast were told repeatedly of a great water to the west. From letters which reached England from Virginia in 1648 we learn that Indian rumors had already come to governor Berkeley concerning the land beyond the mountains, of the great river systems and of the Gulf of Mexico.

Indian guides made possible the marvelous chain of discovery by which the French linked the Gulf of St. Lawrence with the Gulf of Mexico. They made possible the discovery by the Virginians of the upper waters of the Ohio Valley and the basing of England's claim on the basis of prior discovery.

In 1687 LaSalle having failed in his effort to colonize Louisiana found himself in his last extremity of suffering and want. Failure to locate the mouth of the Mississippi, mutinies, shipwreck, hunger and disease defeated the great leader but could not break his iron will. With a party of seventeen men, using Indian guides, he set out overland for Quebec. Two months later he was murdered by mutineers from his own party on the banks of the Trinity. Indian guides, scouts and soldiers have fought side by side with the soldiers of the United Colonies and States in every War from the War of the Revolution to the World War.

**Indian money a factor in New England civilization.**—Another way in which the Indians of the coast contributed to the welfare of the colonists was by furnishing them with a currency; this stimulus was Indian wampum.

The unit of value first used among the natives was the cubit. It no doubt originated from the handy scheme of seizing the wampum belt in the knuckle of the little finger, running it down the forearm to the point of the elbow, and there seizing it as a mark. This mark was then lifted to the knuckle and the process repeated at will.

**The debt of language and literature.**—Twenty-four of our States bear Indian names. But it is not for geographical names alone that our language is indebted to the Indian. We use a large number of other words in our English-American speech whose Indian origin we never suspect. Tabulations show that we use about five hundred words of this kind, also many popular phrases and expressions are of Indian origin. Literature has been enriched by Indian legends and stories, such as Longfellow's "Hiawatha" and Alonzo de Ercilla's "La Araucana".

In time of war, officers of the opposing armies are constantly trying to devise cipher codes which will deceive each other. Yet during the World War the German intelligence officers captured many American messages which they could not decipher. After the close of the War the secret was let out. The American messages were written in the Choctaw Indian language—and the Germans did not know that such a language existed.

**The debt of the arts and sciences.**—To the Indians we owe our introduction to a knowledge of gums and resins, valuable timbers and many useful inventions.

Indian doctors taught the colonists the use of many valuable medicinal herbs and other members of the forest pharmacopeia.

**The debt for a nation's food.**—Before the coming of the white man the Indian had developed corn or maize into practically its present form. The effect corn had on colonial development, the westward movement, the live stock industry, the building of cities and railroads, in winning the Civil and World wars are topics too large to discuss in a paper of this length.

The conclusion as to the enormity of our debt to the Indian for friendly guidance, for pioneer currency, for useful inventions, our vocabulary, our knowledge of the arts and sciences, and for the nation's food supply is so obvious as to need no further proof.