



WOMPATUCK NEWS

First Encounter, First Impressions

By Jim Rose, Wompatuck News Editor and Historian

With Thanksgiving around the corner, Rick Brown of the Holliston Historical Society lent me an excellent book about Native Americans in New England: "Indian New England Before the Mayflower" by Howard S. Russell. It offers an abundant source of information on Native American culture before and during the colonial period. I printed edited excerpts about white man's first impressions at that time.

The native inhabitant - cultivator, hunter, fisherman "was amiable to behold," according to colonial author William Wood. "Black haired, out nosed, broad shouldered, brawny armed, long and slender handed, out breasted, small waisted, lank bellied, well thighed, flat knee, with handsome grown legs and small feet," he wrote.

English Captain John Smith said, "Well-proportioned and goodly people." Samuel de Champlain called them handsome. "They exceed us in size," 16th century explorer Giovanni Verrazano observed.

As to complexion, one of Captain Bartholomew Gosnold's English crew thought the natives appeared dark olive. Others saw them as bronze or tawny, one tribe even black (perhaps painted). None described those they met as aged. To Gosnold they appeared gentle of disposition and

exceedingly courteous, but other early visitors suspected deceit or encountered fear and antagonism.



Native American sachem.

The males were easy to judge physically. "Naked they go, except a skin about their waist, and sometimes a mantle about their shoulders," said William Wood. "Their teeth, gleaming white, were sound and regular, and apparently intact. Few or none were cross-eyed, blind, lame or hunchbacked; most were well formed and without blemish. No males were bearded beyond a few hairs, but the skins of some bore seared-embellishments."

Wood tells how upon the cheeks of the superior males there were "certain

portraits of Beares, Deeres, Mooses, Wolves... Eagles, Hawkes" incised permanently in unchangeable ink, together with round impressions on their arms and breasts, for what purpose he is not altogether certain.

As for the feminine aspect, Verrazano, called the Indian female: "comely to behold, very graceful and well formed, of a sweet and pleasing countenance and well mannered."

Champlain thought the Cape Cod girls neat in manners and dress. Isaack de Rasieres, a very early visitor to New England from New Amsterdam, considered them attractive, of middle height, and well proportioned, with their features finely cut, hair long, eyes black. Several other Europeans including the Hollander Adriaen Van der Donck, termed them physically well favored, seldom handsome, and rarely very ugly.

Testimony from early English writers is usually complimentary. John Josselyn judged the youngest ones "very comely, with good features and many pretty brownetoes and spider-fingered lasses...among them." He termed them "slender, limbs cleanly straight, generally plump as a partridge, and, saving now and then one, of modest deportment." Like others, he noted their black eyes and even, very white teeth, which he adds, "all the natives account the most necessary and best parts of man."

English explorer Gabriel Archer on the shore of Vineyard Sound describes a native's wife and daughter as clean and straight-bodied, with sweet, pleasant faces. "All observers agree as to their erect carriage and ability to bear great burdens without stooping," he said.

The youngsters' physiques drew special plaudits. "Their children are never rickety nor shall you ever see bandy-leg'd or crooked Indian," wrote colonial author Samuel Orcutt (children were bare in summer). "No fools among Indians, but some born deaf and dumb."

In New Netherlands Nicolaes Van Wassenaar called native children well shaped, few deformed or with natural physical faults and Adriaen Van der Donck had never heard of a native child born blind. The general good health, vigour, and spirit of the young Indian was in marked contrast to the misery of many children in Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.



Native American family living on a reservation.

Few local explorers say much about the elderly, but Pennsylvania missionary John Heckewelder writes that their old were as well treated as their favorite children.

The Italian explorer Giovanni Verrazano, who had sailed the whole Atlantic coast, appears to present a balanced appraisal as he observes New England's natives: "This is the

goodliest people and of the fairest condition that we have found on this voyage; they exceed us in bigness, they are the color of brass, some of them incline more toward whiteness, others are of a yellow color, with long black hair which they are careful to turn and deck up: they are of a sweet and pleasant countenance."



Italian explorer Giovanni Verrazano

As to mental capacity, Roger Williams who founded Rhode Island testified: "For the temper of the brain in quick apprehension and accurate judgements to say no more, the most high and Sovereign Creator hat not made them inferior to Europeans."

William Wood also found their understanding quick, judgement good, and memory strong.

"I have not seen anyone who does not frankly admit that the savages are more intelligent than our ordinary peasants," wrote Father Paul LeJeune of Canada in the 1600s. He even suggested the laborers be sent from France to work for the Indians.

In respect to moral attributes, testimony is sharply divided. Here we moderns tread on insecure ground if we rely on the writings of Puritan and colonial chroniclers, steeped in the Old Testament and confident of their destiny as God's chosen people. The New England portion of the New World was to them an area He had

prepared for His elect. Many chroniclers, plainly prejudiced, had nothing good to say of the natives. Thievish, deceitful, lazy, improvident, licentious, bloody, murderous, devilish – these are but a few of the derogatory adjectives used by soldiers, frontiersmen, Puritan divines. Reverend Cotton Mather, of Boston, called them "wretches and blood thirsty savages, the most devoted vassals of the deval."

The Native American ability to remember for years benefits conferred and injuries suffered at others' hands is well attested. Yet there is no lack of reliable testimony in regard to acts of loyalty, generosity to friends and their punctuality and their scrupulous regard for agreements is proverbial.

Like the colonists who judged them, each native was an individual, with a deep sense of personal and tribal worth. To Europeans who treated them with consideration and respect most natives responded in kind.



Tribes of southern New England

The Indian sense of personal dignity and their concept of fair dealing were frequently outraged by unscrupulous European newcomers. The whites, assuming themselves superior and with a radically different concept of land tenure, often dislodged the natives from ancestral fields and hunting grounds, bound them by laws in the making of which they had no part, and demanded allegiance to a faraway king of whom they had never before heard.