

Introduction



The Kaleidoscope of Early America

*A*T THE OUTBREAK of the American Revolution, the rebelling colonists solicited the support, or at least the neutrality, of the Indian tribes of the eastern woodlands in their war against Great Britain. Often, American agents invoked the shared experiences of white Americans and Indian Americans, pointing out that they were both native-born Americans facing a common threat at the hands of tyrannical Britons. "We are sprung from one common mother, we were all born in this big Island," American commissioners at Pittsburgh told visiting Mohawks, Senecas, Delawares, and Shawnees in 1776. Addressing Indian delegates in the Wabash country in 1778, Virginian George Rogers Clark declared that the "Big Knife [the Indian name for Virginians in particular, and Americans in general] are very much like the Red people." Like the Indians, and unlike the British, he said, the Americans did not know much about manufacturing, "and live chiefly by making corn, Hunting and Trade as you do." Speaking to the Indian tribes around Montreal on behalf of the Continental Congress, Ira Allen of Vermont made similar claims. He said he loved Indians, and hunted and fought as they did. In June 1776, when Congress in Philadelphia was debating independence, John Hancock told visiting Iroquois that the Americans and the Iroquois were "as one people, and have but one heart."

Most of this was just council-fire rhetoric. Clark, Allen, and most of the founding fathers were interested in Indian land, not in a shared Indian identity. But were the Americans on to something? Was there an Indian ingredient in the mixture of influences that made colonists incipient "Americans" by 1775? When George Rogers Clark and his ragtag army arrived at

Vincennes in 1779, the Spanish lieutenant governor in the area was shocked at how much they resembled Indians in their clothing and their appearance. Eight years later, another Spaniard described American backwoodsmen on Florida's northern frontier as differing from their Indian neighbors only in their skin color, language, and cunning. Did surface resemblances indicate a deeper and more pervasive Indian imprint on American culture and character?

In 1066, William the Bastard, duke of Normandy, invaded England to seize the throne from the Anglo-Saxon King Harold. Defeating and killing Harold in battle, William marched to London and took possession of the city, where he had himself crowned king. In the years that followed, the Normans imposed their government, system of justice, language, and culture on the conquered English people. What emerged, however, was an Anglo-Norman mixture, exemplified in the English language. The names for animals derive from the Anglo-Saxon words of the people who tended the livestock: sheep, cow, and pig; the names for the animals' meat derive from the words of the French-speaking Normans who dined on them: mutton, beef, and pork. Eventually, the Norman conquerors and their culture were absorbed by the conquered. Change occurred and England was never the same again, but it remained English. Such cultural confluences have been part of the give and take between conquered peoples and their conquerors for thousands of years throughout the world.

It would be unusual, then, if America, a country that prides itself and even stakes its identity on the multiplicity of peoples in its past and present makeup, did not illustrate the same phenomenon. After 1492, Europeans invaded America in ever-increasing numbers. Over the centuries, they built a new nation and a new society, and changed forever the American world they had invaded. But they became Americans.

The idea is not new. Many writers have pointed the way to an understanding of early America as a world of mixed and mixing peoples, with a substantial Indian presence. Frenchman Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur noted that America in the late eighteenth century demonstrated "that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country." Moreau de Saint-Méry went so far as to assert that "the American is the perfect mean between the European and the Indian." More than a hundred years ago, Frederick Jackson Turner, in a famous study of the American frontier which has since been justly criticized and has fallen into disfavor, offered some of the same sugges-

tions, although attributing change to environmental determinism rather than cultural interaction and employing language that today sounds dated and perhaps offensive:

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe. . . . The fact is, that here is a new product that is American.

In Turner's view of history, the wilderness and "free land" exerted powerful transforming influences on European colonists. But Turner's wilderness America was largely myth: European settlers often lived in reoccupied Indian towns, ate Indian foods, and dealt with Indian people on a regular basis. Human influences were as important as environmental ones in shaping the new America.

Anthropologist Jack Weatherford thinks that the "scramble of peoples and cultures in North America has created a cultural mixture that probably will not be repeated in world history until we encounter life on another planet." Historian Gary Nash points out that the continuous interaction of diverse cultural groups in colonial America produced "a conglomeration of cultural entities." People tend to construct their cultures in interaction with one another, not in isolation. Frank Shuffleton, considering the people of early America "a mixed race," defines ethnicity not as something static and constant but as "a dynamic relation between different cultural groups," who continually modify their understanding of themselves in light of shifting relationships with others. So, for example, English immigrants to New England tried to impose their culture on the Indian peoples living there, but "they were being ethnically transformed themselves in the process of confronting and being confronted by the people they found already on the ground." Europeans became Americans and Americans became different

from Europeans “because they had to confront significantly different ethnic groups that they would eventually include, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes violently, as part of the meaning of America.” In Shuffleton’s view, the multiethnic character of America was well established long before the American Revolution.

The new societies that grew out of the interaction of peoples in early America were amalgams, combining Indian as well as European and African influences. Felix Cohen, author of the *Handbook of Indian Law*, wrote in 1952 that American historians had paid too much attention to military victories and territorial expansion and had failed to appreciate “that in agriculture, in government, in sport, in education and in our views of nature and our fellow men, it is the first Americans who have taken captive their battlefield conquerors.” Cohen thought that the real epic of America was “the yet unfinished story of the Americanization of the white man.”

Ethnohistorian James Axtell has written numerous lucid and suggestive essays and books in which he examines the contest and confluence of cultures in colonial North America. “Without the Indians,” says Axtell, “America would not be America as we know it.” In situations of culture contact, “one culture may predominate and teach more than it learns,” but “the educational process is always mutual.” And the Indian imprint on American society occurred most significantly in the formative, colonial era. Even Bernard Bailyn, a historian of the old school often criticized for ignoring women, ordinary people, and minorities in his view of the nation’s past, recognizes that what he called the “mingling of primitivism and civilization” constituted “an essential ingredient of early American culture.”

Europeans did not come to America to become Indians or even, in the early days, to become “Americans.” They came, for the most part, to recreate in the New World the kind of communities they had left in the Old, with some improvements. By the eighteenth century, however, travelers and commentators regularly complained that the European settlers they encountered living on the frontier were “little better than” their Indian neighbors. They dressed, ate, hunted, grew corn, behaved, and even looked like Indians. According to German traveler Johann David Schoepf in the 1780s, they also acquired “similar ways of thinking.” The complaints were not without foundation. As David Weber observes of Spanish experiences in North America, “However much they wished to conserve the familiar, Spaniards’ scanty numbers and resources left them with no choice but to make concessions to

their strange new environment and, on occasion, to learn from natives who understood local conditions better than they.” Spanish colonists avoided changes that challenged their fundamental values, and they preserved the core of their culture intact, but they also wore Indian clothes, ate Indian foods, married Indian women, produced half-Indian children, and learned to speak Indian languages.

The nature and the degree of exchanges varied from region to region, and from time to time, according to the people who inhabited and invaded the area. Colonists from different regions of Europe developed varying relations with different Indian tribes, and did so in a variety of circumstances. Hispanic people in the Southwest and Frenchmen in Canada, the Great Lakes, and Louisiana generally intermingled more freely with Indian peoples than did English settlers on the Atlantic seaboard. A Franciscan friar in 1631 complained that Spaniards in New Mexico were “reared from childhood subject to the customs of [the] Indians,” and the Indian imprint on society is visible today more clearly in New Mexico than in New England. In the Great Lakes region, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Frenchmen and Algonkian Indians created what ethnohistorian Richard White calls “a middle ground,” where the French and Indian worlds “melted at the edges and merged” and where it became unclear “whether a particular practice or way of doing things was French or Indian.” According to cultural geographers Terry Jordan and Matti Kaups, interactions and cultural exchanges were greatest in “Midland America,” where Swedish and Finnish settlers in the Delaware Valley established good relations with the local Indians and produced a mixed backwoods culture that later pioneers carried to large areas of America. The culture of immigrant Saro-Karelian Finns, joined to the indigenous culture of the Delaware Indians, “yielded all the essential ingredients of a syncretistic Midland American colonizing system.” Subsequent generations of Scotch-Irish immigrants adopted the Finnish-Indian techniques of forest colonization they found in the Delaware Valley and pushed west and southwest. They added their own genetic and cultural input to early American backwoods culture and society, and only rarely replicated the patterns of peaceful coexistence forged by Finns and Delawares. New York’s Mohawk Valley was the scene of bitter fighting during the American Revolution, but the eighteenth-century valley was more often a place where Indians and Europeans talked, traded, and intermarried, where some Indians drank tea and some Europeans tattooed their faces.

Many colonists from many places, at many times, interacted with Indian people, lived in Indian country, and adopted and adapted Indian ways. Writing in the middle of the eighteenth century, Swedish botanist Peter Kalm said that his countrymen who had come to America in the seventeenth century “were accused of being already half Indians when the English arrived,” but noted, “we still see that the French, English, Germans, Dutch, and other Europeans, who have lived for several years in distant provinces, near and among the Indians, grow so like them in their behavior and thought that they can only be distinguished by the difference of their color.”

Early America in the wake of European invasion became a cacophony of languages, peoples, and cultures. In this “kaleidoscope of human encounters,” Indians and Europeans made what historian T. H. Breen calls “creative adaptations” to new places and new peoples. What emerged was something different, for both Indians and Europeans, from what had gone before. In his excellent history of the Catawba Indians, James Merrell has shown how invasions from Europe created a new world for Native peoples in North America. At first, European colonists had to fit into an Indian world and adapt to the Indians’ ways of doing things. As the Europeans adapted to and then transformed America, however, eventually the Indians had to fit into a European world. “Like their new neighbors,” writes Merrell, “Indians had to blend old and new ways that would permit them to survive in the present and prepare for the future without utterly forsaking the past.” Both groups of peoples had to make adjustments, but not at the same time, place, or rate. By the end of the colonial era, Indians and Europeans alike had created new societies in America. The European societies displayed evidence of change; many Indian societies had changed beyond recognition.

However, the adjustments made by Europeans were not insignificant, and they were sometimes fundamental. European immigrants brought with them a cargo of germs, guns, goods, animals, religious zeal, land hunger, and cultural preconceptions that turned America into a new, and often nightmarish, world for Indian peoples. But those immigrants also brought with them personal belongings, inconsequential to anyone but themselves, mental pictures of friends and relatives they would not see again, private memories of sights, sounds, and smells in places where they had spent most if not all of their lives. Writing home from Pennsylvania in 1725, the son of Welsh immigrants recalled his parents talking about the world they had left: “Frequently during long winter evenings, would they in merry mood prolong their con-

versation about their native land till midnight; and even after they had retired to rest, they would sometimes fondly recall to each other’s recollection some man, or hill, house, or rock.” Such people did not leave “Europe”—the term had little meaning and less emotive appeal to most of them. They left a little and local world of regions, distinct dialects, familiar places, and human communities. Life would never be the same for them. Simply by leaving the place of their birth, they cut themselves off from ancient cycles of life and death and embraced a future unknown to their parents and ancestors.

That future involved building a new society and taking on a new identity. As early as the seventeenth century, New England Puritans worried that conquering the American wilderness and coming into contact with American Indians would alter the colonists’ English culture and their sense of themselves as English people. Their American experience threatened to give the colonists a new identity—something deeply troubling to Puritan Englishmen in a new world. Originally, the term “American” referred to Indians, the first Americans. By the time of the Revolution, it designated England’s former colonists who were creating a new nation. The colonists who dressed as Mohawk Indians to dump British tea into Boston Harbor in 1774 were not trying to disguise themselves. They were proclaiming a new, American identity.

Through it all, there were Indian people who, despite massive changes in the world around them, preserved intact their fundamental worldview and tribal values, just as there were Europeans who experienced little or no interaction with Indian people or for whom such interaction had little meaning and left no lasting impression. Nevertheless, many Indian people had to find new ways of surviving, of being Indian, in the new world created by the invasions from Europe, and many Europeans assimilated Indian elements into their new definition of themselves as Americans. By 1800, colonists in America had secured political, if not yet cultural and economic, independence from Great Britain. An “American” was now a citizen of the new country, the United States, not a Native American. The new Americans figuratively turned their faces away from Europe and toward “their” new country. The “backcountry” of the eighteenth century became the “frontier” of the nineteenth century. But it was all Indian country, and it left its imprint, however subtle, on the people who entered it and on the societies they built there.