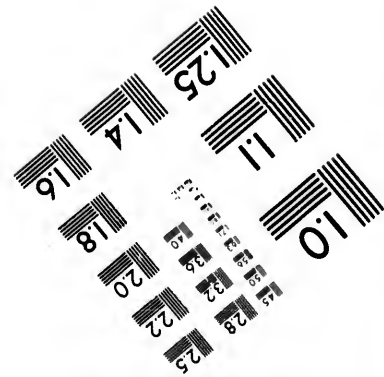
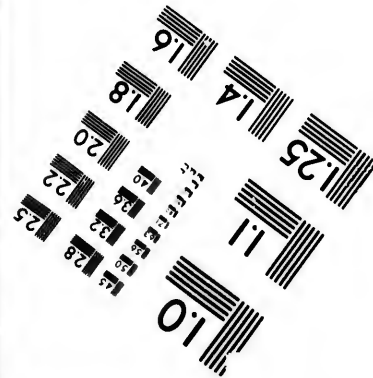
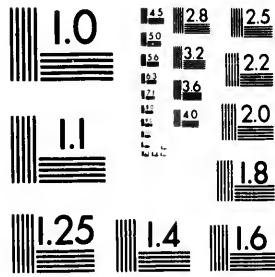


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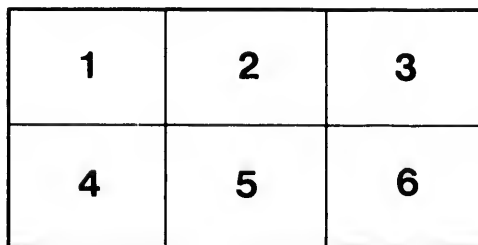
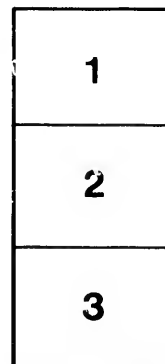
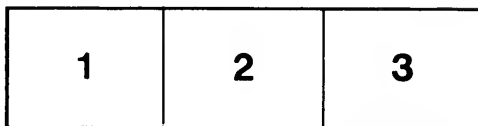
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Indians of North America

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Harry Peere, No. 1

"Stangau," North West Arm,
Halifax Co., N.S.
March 15, 1899.



THE PENOBSCOT INDIANS

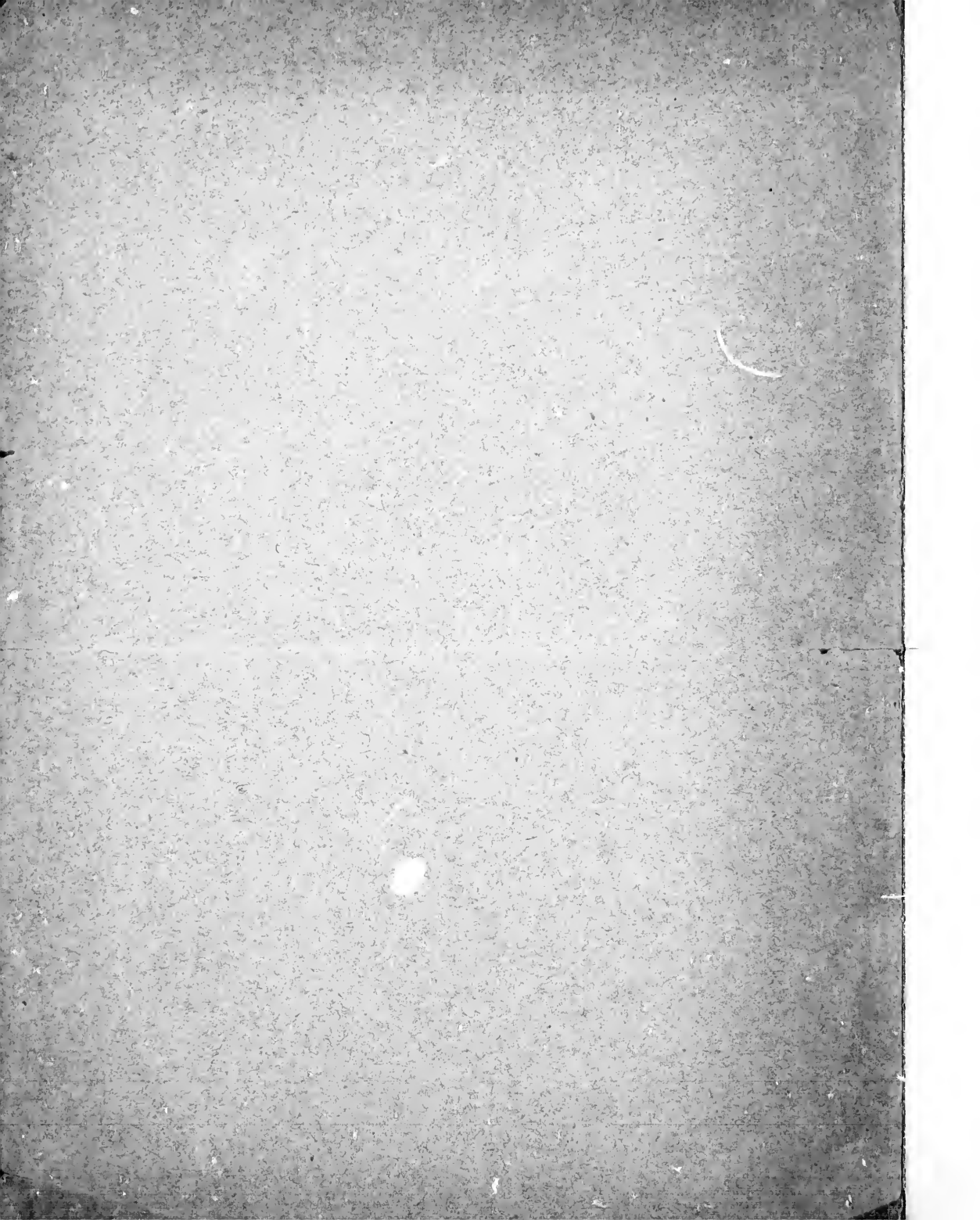
Public. Series of Notes

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF * *
THEIR PRESENT CONDITION

BY MONTAGUE CHAMBERLAIN

Reprinted from the Cambridge Tribune
of February 4, 1899.





THE PENOBSCOT INDIANS

We are gradually coming to the conclusion that the Indian is a better man than we took him to be—that he inherits characteristics which make it possible, with some training, to turn him into a creditable citizen. We have discovered that he can be educated and though he advances slowly through the preliminary steps of school training gets on quite rapidly once under way.

The Penobscots present a fair example of what can be accomplished in this direction. The tribe is one of the Wapanaki or Abenaki group, of which there remain only small bands on the Penobscot, St. Croix, St. John, and St. Francis—remnants of the powerful nation which once held most of the country between the St. John and the Connecticut. What can be said regarding the characteristics of any one of these bands will apply with equal correctness to all, though the Penobscots have probably advanced in civilization a bit further than some of their congeners.

The principal village of this tribe is on an island in the Penobscot river, near Old Town, on the site of Panawauiskek, at which the Jesuit Father, Thury, established a mission in 1688. The tribe still maintains its tribal organization, elects its chief and council, makes its own laws, and votes the distribution of a small income derived from the state.

The village is attractive, for though no longer made picturesque by the conical birch-bark wigwams, the houses are of pleasing forms and vary from the simple one-room shanty to the two-story dwelling of the modern American type, with parlor, dining-room and kitchen on the first floor. The village also boasts of a church of simple though dignified form, a substantial and well-planned schoolhouse and a neat and comfortable home for the Sisters who have charge of the school. There are also two halls in which public meetings and festal gatherings are held.

When the first efforts were made to educate the children the parents were so indifferent, or so utterly opposed to the movement, that the progress was slow. Under the most favorable circumstances the primary teaching of Indian children requires a deal of tact and patience—more patience than the ordinary teacher possesses. The work must be a labor of love to be successful, for these young minds are not only childish, but they are the offspring of parents whose minds are immature and untrained. The requisite patience and loving care is furnished by the Roman Catholic Sisters, who live in the centre of the village, and are the sympathetic friends and guides of both old and young.

I recently visited the school and found it in an exceedingly satisfactory condition, though suffering badly from lack of proper and sufficient books. The conduct of the children was all that the most exacting could demand, and the children answered the few questions I put to them with clearness and intelligence. They have bright minds as a rule, and the more advanced pupils learn rather quickly. The subjects taught are reading, writing, arithmetic and history. After graduating from the Sister's care many go to the High school in Old Town, where they generally rank among the best students. This High school experience is a great advantage to them, for they not only have the benefit of the advanced training, but also come in close contact with the white man's civilization and become instilled with his point of view and his ideas of citizenship and progress.

A few of the larger houses are provided with pianos, for the Sisters have taught the young people to play and sing. I requested a young girl to play, and without hesitation, she replied, "Certainly, if you would like to hear me. What shall I play?" "Play your favorite

piece," I rejoined, and was entertained with "Up the Street," a popular march at Harvard, played with pleasing skill and spirit. Then she sang a pretty love song in a sweet, sympathetic voice and with tasteful expression.

The Penobscots support themselves chiefly by guiding tourists and sportsmen through the Maine forests and by the manufacture of baskets, snow-shoes and other wares. Some of the young men work in the lumber woods and the most energetic find employment in the spring at river driving, a very dangerous and laborious performance, demanding skill and courage, as well as untiring energy. The women are expert basket-makers, at which they have considerable artistic skill.

The authorities at Old Town state that the Indians give them no trouble. They are law abiding, peaceable and honest. A few of the men drink to excess on occasions and a few are indolent, but the major part are temperate and industrious. The women are paragons of industry—they appear to be always at work. If you visit a house and find the woman at some piece of work which makes conversation inconvenient, she will at once take up another task and work while she talks.

But, though busy, they find time to train their children—and few American children are trained more carefully or give better evidence of this care. A visitor to a Penobscot home rarely sees a child acting badly—rebellious against authority or displaying bad temper or making a fuss of any sort. They are usually quiet and respectful, and if a little tot forgets for a moment the presence of strangers, a word from the mother is sufficient to restore order and decorum. From early infancy they are taught to submit and obey. Yet they are not oppressed, nor restrained from merriment. They are a merry lot as a rule—these Indian children—as full of mischief and as fond of frolic as the most pampered young American. They inherit vivacity and love of humor, for the Penobscots are a fun loving people. At their social gatherings they chat fluently and enliven their chat with

amusing tales and good-natured badinage. But they are rarely unkind. Their consideration for the feelings of others, their sympathy for the unfortunate, and solicitude for the aged and infirm are among their strongest and most marked characteristics.

I attended a recent meeting of the tribe when a question of considerable import was being discussed, and though party feeling ran high and the debates were sharp, a stranger would not have known that anything of unusual interest was transpiring. Every speaker was heard to the end—there was not the slightest attempt at interruption—and after he took his seat there was a pause, each man waiting to give someone else an opportunity. When a member did rise he looked around to see if another desired to speak before him.

And they are born orators. In their own language they speak with perfect ease and without hesitation—never at a loss for a word, and as a rule, delivering their ideas with clearness and precision. Many of them are extremely eloquent.

At the inauguration of their sakumun or governor, Joseph Francis, a few weeks ago, he delivered an address that would have been considered creditable in any of our state assemblies. He spoke for over half an hour and did not once hesitate for either a word or a thought. He was followed by two of his council, Joseph Shay and Newell Lyon, who also made excellent speeches.

On this occasion the oath of office was administered by Big Thunder, one of the oldest men on the island, and one whose honesty of purpose, public spirit, good sense and ripe judgment have gained for him the friendship and confidence of the whole tribe. He is a man of large and powerful frame, and as he stood in the assembly dressed in the ancient costume of the tribe, his face striped with black paint and red, his head covered with a mass of iron-gray hair on which rested a head-dress of eagle plumes, his appearance was extremely picturesque. And when in a sonorous voice—deep and strong, yet melodious—he delivered his address of

congratulation and admonition to the young chief, the effect was impressive.

After the inauguration ceremonies came a dance. and the old men of the tribe were just as ready for that function as for the orations and the debates. Big Thunder was again to the front and for over an hour led a company of men in the shot-horn dance and the snake dance to weird chants sung by the dancers.

When the men tired of their fun, a quadrille was formed, followed by a contra dance and waltz. Music was supplied by piano, violin and cornet, played by members of the tribe. Several of the elder women and men joined in the square dances, but the waltz brought out the young people only. They danced well—gracefully and light—and their manners on the floor were such, as we consider, denote well-bred people. There was no affectation—no posing; neither were there indications of self-assertion or of selfish indifference to the pleasure of others. The dresses of the women were neat and tasteful—indeed, during my many visits to the island I have seen nothing in manners or speech, or dress, that could be fairly termed loud. The women enjoy a bit of bright color, but many of the educated of our own women display far more vulgarity in using color.

One of the ancient customs which the Penobscots still practice is that of seeking forgiveness at the beginning of a new year for any offence that may have been committed, consciously or unconsciously, against a neighbor. On New Year's morning, usually after mass has been celebrated,—they are good Catholics and attend the services with marked regularity,—they visit their neighbors and ask to be forgiven, or grant forgiveness, that they may begin the New Year without anger or discord.

These people appear to excellent advantage as hosts. All of us cannot understand their orations, but we do know something of good manners, and can appreciate self-possession and ease, and grace and dignity; we can feel the influence of a cordial greeting and can recognize the spirit of true hospitality

—in which latter, these red-skinned brothers of ours have few equals and no superiors.

This is saying much for them, but it is said advisedly, and is not more than the facts warrant. The Penobscots share these characteristics with all the Wapanaki tribes, as I have had ample opportunities to determine. In my boyhood days Wapanaki children were frequently my playmates; in later years Wapanaki men have been my guides in forest rambles and my teachers of woodcraft. Several of them have been my close friends. Thus, it has been my fortune to meet them under many conditions and in various moods. I have slept in their wigwams and in their houses; have sat with them at their tables and at my own; have joined in their festivals and seen them when their hearts were stirred with anger and with sorrow. They wear well. The more I have seen of them the more highly have they risen in my esteem.

To the average American the Indian, wherever found, is merely a restrained savage—an obstinate, dull-witted, ill-humored, sly, rancorous, cruel brute and nothing more; giving to lying and stealing and scalping; good for nothing better and far beyond the power of civilizing influences. Such opinion is based on ignorance of the Indian's real character, yet should be excused in part, because the facts are difficult to obtain. For the Indian is shy, reticent, proud, sensitive to ridicule which he seeks by every possible means to avoid, and has such self-control that his face tells nothing of his thoughts. A stranger talks to him and he usually answers in monosyllables and appears willing to assent to anything. After trying in vain to get something more the inquisitor is likely to fall back on the old theory, that the Indians are not worth bothering with. But the inquisitor is quite as much at fault as the red man.

Of course these people have faults. Their minds are immature and reflect results of this immaturity—weaknesses that are childish rather than vicious. They lack thrift. The majority of them spend lavishly the few dollars

they earn and take little thought of the morrow. In their old life they shared generously with their neighbors whatever the fortunes of a hunt had brought to them without much thought of future needs, and today the future is a little considered. They need to be taught the art of saving as well as its importance.

The Penobscots are living on good terms with their white neighbors, but they do not receive much sympathy or aid in their efforts toward advanced civilization. The authorities of Old Town kindly open their schools to those who apply for admission, but these people need a little more than this—they need encouragement, advice and sympathy, and above all, their proud and sensitive natures need protection from injustice and abuse—and this latter, they do not always receive from the people and press of Maine. And they are quite aware of this and it frets them. Recently I was striving to impress upon a group of the men the extent and sincerity of the kindly interest which their white neighbors entertained for them, when one of the party produced a newspaper containing a half column of abuse of his people and remarked, "That sort of thing is said about us continually, and there is not much kindness in that." Yet the more sober minded of them try to allay this spirit of antagonism to the whites. In his recent inaugural, Governor Francis dwelt at length upon the privileges which the tribe enjoyed under the mild and friendly rule of the state, and made not one reference to the unjust acts or the unkind words.

Feeling under a slight obligation to the Penobscots for kindness to a near kinsman whom the fortunes of war placed in their power, I asked the older men

what I could do for the tribe to show my gratitude. To my surprise, I learned that a present of books for the young people would be highly prized. The children are taught to read and many of the adults also can read, and all desire information, but their poverty and isolation have deprived them of books. To test the sincerity of this request, I took them some volumes, and soon proved the earnestness of their desire. History is their favorite subject, next to that they prefer travels and accounts of birds and other animals. Some of them like good stories. One man told me that Ben Hur was his favorite novel—it had been loaned to him while at the sea-shore. I read to a group of young people some extracts from Hiawatha, which they had not heard before. They listened intently and afterwards discussed the legend with considerable intelligence.

I have promised to beg a few books for them and hope that some of our generous people, who have abundance of good things, will remember these Indians. The books that I have sent to them are being placed in an unoccupied house in charge of a committee, who will attend to their circulation and care. They need badly a more suitable building, one in which provision could be made for a reading room that the young people especially require for use during the long winter evenings. Such a building could be put up at a trifling cost, as many of the men are good carpenters and would gladly contribute the necessary labor.

We should remember that these people have a claim upon us, as they are our own people—the original New England stock—and also, that they need just now our sympathy and our aid.

MONTAGUE CHAMBERLAIN.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY,
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.,
FEBRUARY 8, 1898.

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