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Voices from the Shore

"We Human Beings are the first, and we are the eldest and the greatest. These parts and countries were inhabited and trod upon by the Human Beings before there were any Axe-Makers [Europeans]."

—Onondaga orator Sadekanaktie,
message to Governor Frontenac, 1694[1]

The things that seldom happen bring astonishment. Think, then, what must be the effect on me and mine, the sight of you and your people, whom we have at no time seen, astride the fierce brutes, your horses, entering with such speed and fury into my country, that we had no tidings of your coming.

—Southeastern Indian chief to Hernando de Soto, 1540[2]

Our history texts tell us much about Europeans' first impressions of America and American Indians. From Christopher Columbus's first meeting with native people in the Caribbean, European travelers penned descriptions of the land and peoples they encountered. But Europeans knew little of what had happened in North America before they arrived, and they often cared even less, dismissing thousands of years of history as a static prelude to European colonization.

Even today, some writers refer to American history before contact with Europeans as "*pre*history." Nevertheless, Europeans did come across pieces of evidence of the world that had existed before their coming. In areas of the Southeast and the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, temple mounds remained as mute testimony to the ancient civilizations that had built them. And, though Indian peoples generally preferred to keep their traditions to themselves, they did occasionally share accounts of tribal history, legends of old times, and memories of how things had been in the days before Europeans changed their world.

[1]Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 184.

[2]Edward G. Bourne, ed., *Narrative of de Soto* (New York: Allerton Book Co., 1904), 1:55.

Many Indian peoples had, and continue to have, stories of creation and migration that explain how they came to be living in their homelands. Often shrouded in the mists of time, myth, and memory, these legends may strike us as too vague and fanciful to be useful as historical documents, but they convey the peoples' sense of their past and give us a glimpse into the many experiences that shaped American history before Europeans entered the picture.

When Europeans arrived, they tended to judge others according to their own ideas of what constituted "civilization." Consequently, much of what they had to say about Native Americans was couched in negative terms: Their language was unintelligible (they did not speak English or Spanish or French or Dutch); they went naked (they did not dress like Europeans); they had no government (Europeans could not understand political systems that often functioned by consensus and kinship); they had no religion (Europeans saw no churches, Bibles, or priests and dismissed Native American beliefs as superstitions); they had no morals (they had *different* standards); they were treacherous (they could not be relied upon to do what Europeans wanted them to do); and their customs were barbarous (they were different from the customs of Europe and therefore not "civilized").

Judging Native Americans according to their own preconceptions, assuming that their own way of life was superior, and certain that European "civilization" and Christianity must triumph over what they regarded as savagery and paganism, Europeans were ill equipped to value, or to record accurately, the peoples and cultures they encountered in North America. Cultural myopia plagued early relationships and, combined with the Europeans' quest for wealth, land, and converts, ensured that early hospitable relations soon broke down. Many Indian people shared food and knowledge with the first European settlers. Indians and Europeans borrowed and learned from one another and cautiously cooperated, but it was not long before coexistence degenerated into violence.

In some areas of the country, hostilities began almost at first contact. As early as 1524, when Florentine Giovanni da Verrazzano and his crew sailed along the coast of Maine, the Abenaki inhabitants gave evidence of previous unpleasant experiences with Europeans. They wanted to trade for metal goods but refused to let Verrazzano's crew ashore. Finally, in a gesture of contempt that needed no translation, they turned and exposed their buttocks to the Europeans. Ten years later, when Mi'kmaqs met Jacques Cartier in the Bay of Chaleur, they held up furs on sticks as an invitation to trade but hid their women in the woods. Hernando de Soto's Spanish invasion of Indian country in the Southeast in the 1540s was

particularly brutal and shattered countless Indian lives. Some Indians tried to get rid of the Spaniards by telling them that gold could be found elsewhere; others resorted to ambushes and scorched-earth tactics.

Anglo-Indian relations in Virginia broke down in conflict in 1609; Virginia Indians launched bloody assaults on English colonists in 1622 and again in 1644. Puritan English soldiers slaughtered hundreds of men, women, and children in the Pequot War in 1637; the Dutch fought a vicious war against the Indian tribes of the Hudson River and Long Island in the 1640s. By the late seventeenth century, war between Indians and Europeans was common throughout the country. After King Philip's War (1675–1676), the Indian war of resistance against English expansion in New England, Indians and Europeans often expected their relationships to be violent, and so, often, they were.

The selections in Chapter 1 give a sampling of Native American memories of their early history and viewpoints on their early encounters with Europeans. They show how Indian people first met Europeans in dreams and in person. A common thread running through many of their comments is the rapid decline of their world. Native American traditions, whether with foresight or hindsight, often contain predictions of disaster that was sure to follow after Europeans set foot in America.

The Creation of the World

Many Indian peoples in northeastern North America share a tradition that the world was created on the back of a giant sea turtle. Some people still refer to North America as "turtle island" and revere the turtle. There are many variations of the legend, and the story printed here is just one of several versions among the Iroquois Indians of New York State. Anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recorded various accounts of the Iroquois creation story, and those are the ones most commonly related. This account, however, is one of the earliest to be written down, recorded by John Norton around 1816.

John Norton was the son of Scottish and Cherokee parents and an adopted Mohawk. He played a prominent role in his people's affairs in the early nineteenth century, traveled widely among the Indian nations of the eastern woodlands, and also visited England. He had a special interest in the mythology of the Iroquois, and he gave a condensed version of the story told here to an audience at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1805.

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JOHN NORTON

Iroquois Creation Story

ca. 1816

The tradition of the Nottowegui or Five Nations says, "that in the beginning before the formation of the earth; the country above the sky was inhabited by Superior Beings, over whom the Great Spirit presided. His daughter having become pregnant by an illicit connection, he pulled up a great tree by the roots, and threw her through the cavity thereby formed; but, to prevent her utter destruction, he previously ordered the Great Turtle, to get from the bottom of the waters, some slime on its back, and to wait on the surface of the water to receive her on it. When she had fallen on the back of the Turtle, with the mud she found there, she began to form the earth, and by the time of her delivery had encreased it to the extent of a little island. Her child was a daughter, and as she grew up the earth extended under their hands. When the young woman had arrived at the age of discretion, the Spirits who roved about, in human forms, made proposals of marriage for the young woman: the mother always rejected their offers, until a middle aged man, of a dignified appearance, his bow in his hand, and his quiver on his back, paid his addresses. On being accepted, he entered the house, and seated himself on the birth of his intended spouse; the mother was in a birth on the other side of the fire. She observed that her son-in-law did not lie down all night; but taking two arrows out of his quiver, he put them by the side of his bride: at the dawn of day he took them up, and having replaced them in his quiver, he went out.

"After some time, the old woman perceived her daughter to be pregnant, but could not discover where the father had gone, or who he was. At the time of delivery, the twins disputed which way they should go out of the womb; the wicked one said, let us go out of the side; but the other said, not so, lest we kill our mother; then the wicked one pretending to acquiesce, desired his brother to go out first: but as soon as he was

Carl F. Klinck and James J. Talman, eds., *The Journal of Major John Norton, 1816* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1970), 88–91.

delivered, the wicked one, in attempting to go out at her side, caused the death of his mother.

"The twin brothers were nurtured and raised by their Grandmother; the eldest was named Teharonghyawago, or the Holder of Heaven; the youngest was called Tawiskaron, or Flinty rock, from his body being entirely covered with such a substance. They grew up, and with their bows and arrows, amused themselves throughout the island, which encreased in extent, and they were favoured with various animals of Chace. Tawiskaron was the most fortunate hunter, and enjoyed the favour of his Grandmother. Teharonghyawago was not so successful in the Chace, and suffered from their unkindness. When he was a youth, and roaming alone, in melancholy mood, through the island, a human figure, of noble aspect, appearing to him, addressed him thus. 'My son, I have seen your distress, and heard your solitary lamentations; you are unhappy in the loss of a mother, in the unkindness of your Grandmother and brother. I now come to comfort you, I am your father, and will be your Protector; therefore take courage, and suffer not your spirit to sink. Take this (giving him an ear of *maize*) plant it, and attend it in the manner, I shall direct; it will yield you a certain support, independent of the Chace, at the same time that it will render more palatable the viands, which you may thereby obtain. I am the Great Turtle which supports the earth, on which you move. Your brother's ill treatment will increase with his years; bear it with patience till the time appointed, before which you shall hear further.'

"After saying this, and directing him how to plant the corn, he disappeared. Teharonghyawago planted the corn, and returned home. When its verdant sprouts began to flourish above the ground, he spent his time in clearing from it all growth of grass and weeds, which might smother it or retard its advancement while yet in its tender state, before it had acquired sufficient grandeur to shade the ground. He now discovered that his wicked brother caught the timid deer, the stately elk with branching horns, and all the harmless inhabitants of the Forest; and imprisoned them in an extensive cave, for his own particular use, depriving mortals from having the benefit of them that was originally intended by the Great Spirit. Teharonghyawago discovered the direction his brother took in conducting these animals captive to the Cave; but never could trace him quite to the spot, as he eluded his sight with more than common dexterity!

"Teharonghyawago endeavoured to conceal himself on the path that led to the Cave, so that he might follow him imperceptibly; but he found it impossible to hide himself from the penetrating Tawiskaron. At length

he observed, that altho' his brother saw, with extraordinary acuteness, every surrounding object, yet he never raised his eyes to look above: Teharonghyawago then climbed a lofty tree, which grew near to where he thought the place of confinement was situated: in the meantime, his brother passed, searching with his eyes the thickest recesses of the Forest, but never casting a glance above. He then saw his brother take a straight course, and when he was out of sight, Teharonghyawago descended, and came to the Cave, a short time after he had deposited his charge; and finding there an innumerable number of animals confined, he set them free, and returned home.

"It was not long before Tawiskaron, visiting the Cave, discovered that all his captives, which he had taken so much pains to deprive of their liberty, had been liberated: he knew this to be an act of his brother, but dissembling his anger, he mediated revenge, at some future period.

"Teharonghyawago laboured to people the earth with inhabitants, and to found Villages in happy situations, extending the comforts of men. Tawiskaron was equally active in destroying the works his brother had done; and in accumulating every evil in his power on the heads of ill fated mortals. Teharonghyawago saw, with regret, his brother persevere in every wickedness; but waited with patience the result of what his father had told him.

"At one time, being in conversation with his brother, Tawiskaron said 'Brother, what do you think there is on earth, with which you might be killed?' Teharonghyawago replied, 'I know of nothing that could affect my life, unless it be the foam of the billows of the Lake or the downy topped[1] reed.' 'What do you think would take your life?' Tawiskaron answered, 'Nothing except horn or flint.' Here their discourse ended.

"Teharonghyawago returning from hunting, heard a voice singing a plaintive air: he listened and heard it name his Mother, who was killed by Tawiskaron; he immediately hastened towards the spot from whence the voice proceeded, crying, 'Who is that, who dares to name my deceased mother in my hearing?' When he came there, he saw the track of a fawn, which he pursued, without overtaking it, till the autumn, when it dropped its first horns; these he took up, and fixed upon the forked branches of a tree.

"He continued the pursuit seven years; and every autumn, when its horns fell, he picked them up, and placed them as he had done the first.

[1] It is called Fox-tail, in America; from the resemblance it bears to it. It is a reed or strong grass that grows in wild, low meadows,—the top containing a down, almost like cotton. [Norton]

At last, he overtook the deer, now grown to be a stately buck: it begged its life, and said, 'Spare me, and I will give you information that may be great service to you.' When he had promised it its life, it spoke as follows, 'It was to give you the necessary information that I have been subjected to your pursuit, and that which I shall now tell you was the intended reward of your perseverance and clemency. Your brother, in coming into the world, caused the death of your Mother; if he was then wicked in his infancy, his malice has grown with his stature; he now premeditates evil against you; be therefore on your guard: as soon as he assaults you, exert yourself, and you will overcome him.'

"He returned home; and not long after this adventure, was attacked by his brother. They fought; the one made use of the horn and flint stone which he had provided: the other sought for froth and the reed, which made little impression on the body of Teharonghyawago. They fought a long time, over the whole of the island, until at last Tawiskaron fell under the conquering hand of his brother. According to the varied tones of their voices in the different places through which they passed during the contest, the people, who afterwards sprung up there, spoke different languages."

The League of Peace in Wampum

When George Washington, a young officer in the Virginia militia, undertook his first mission into Indian country, he took along wampum belts. Like other colonists conducting diplomacy with Indians, he had to familiarize himself with the rituals and language of wampum, just as Indians had to learn how to deal with written documents. From the Algonquian word wampumpeag, *wampum was originally made from purple and white marine shells, later often replaced by glass beads, which Indian women drilled and strung on fiber or thread or wove into rectangular belts. Color, design, and length symbolized a belt's content and message. Belts might be of one color or of a combination of purple and white beads strung to form graphic patterns. Straight lines connecting squares or diamonds represented paths or alliances between nations and council fires. White beads represented life, peace, and well-being; purple, or "black," beads represented death, war, and mourning. Indians used wampum as gifts, jewelry, and trade items, and when coins were scarce colonists sometimes used it as currency, but wampum was most important in diplomacy.*

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