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## THE INDIANS OF RHODE ISLAND.

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(Member Rhode Island Historical Society)

Unlike the colonists at Massachusetts Bay, the early settlers of Rhode Island planted themselves in a region which was not depopulated of its former inhabitants by pestilence and war, but which contained a tribe that were accounted "the most potent princes and people of all the country." The Narragansett Indians belonged to the family of Algonquins, a great race whose territory extended all the way from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Savannah. A difference in dialect forms the basis of dividing the New England tribes into those of Maine and those of southern New England. Around the Narragansetts dwelt the Massachusetts on the northeast, the Wampanoags in the Plymouth and Mount Hope region, and the Pequots and Mohegans in Connecticut. The language of all these neighboring tribes differed but little, and there was considerable affinity in speech throughout the whole Algonquin group. It is useless to attempt here any mention of the various guesses as to the origin of these tribes—whether they descended from the Jews or the Greeks or the Norse. Little more is known to-day than when Roger Williams wrote, "From Adam and Noah that they spring is granted on all hands." A subject more profitable to us and decidedly more vital to our ancestors was the question as to their numbers. The fortunes

of war and other circumstances had rendered the Narragansetts the most numerous and powerful of the New England tribes. General Gookin, writing in 1674, said that "the Narragansetts were reckoned, in former times, able to arm for war more than five thousand men," and a safe estimate would place the number at fully two thousand at the beginning of the English settlement here. All the lesser tribes in Rhode Island were subsidiary to or formed a portion of the Narragansetts—the Aquednecks on the island of that name, the Nyanatics in the eastern half of the present Washington county, the Cowesetts of Greenwich and Shawmuts of Warwick, and the wandering Nipmucs in the northwestern part of the State. The Massachusetts and Wampanoags paid them tribute, as did also the Montauk Indians of Long Island. Such was this great tribe at the time of the arrival of the English. By the aid of the newcomers, the tributary tribes, with the Wampanoags in the van, started to throw off the yoke, and the gradual decay of this once proud nation began.

The Narragansett tribe, like all other New England aborigines, stood low in the scale of civilization. Their mode of living was of the rudest kind. Their houses, or wigwams, were round cone-shaped structures, formed of poles set in a circle and drawn nearly together at the top, leaving a hole to serve for both window and chimney. They were covered without and lined within with mats and skins, and were furnished with little besides the rudest utensils of earthenware. Everything was put together with the idea of being easily taken down, as they removed their habitation at nearly every change of season, the whole process of removal and rebuilding frequently taking but a few hours. Their dress was as simple as that of an African savage, merely a girdle around the loins, and occasionally a mantle of skin for winter use.

For food the Indians had fish and game, nuts, roots and wild berries. They raised a few uncultivated vegetables, such as squashes, beans and corn, the last of which, when pulverized and boiled, formed their staple article of food. Nearly all the natives took tobacco, sometimes as a medicine and again as a luxury. The chief occupation of the men was hunting and fishing, in which they were very proficient. Fish were taken on lines with hooks of sharpened bone, or else in nets. Although the natives were very accurate in their use of the bow and arrow, they took many of the wild animals in cleverly laid traps, and even captured fowl by stealing them from their nests on the rocks during the night. Having no salt, they preserved their meat by a process of tanning, which doubtless did much to bring forth from Roger Williams the appellation of "filthy, smoakie holes" to their wigwams.

Their inventive skill and knowledge of the arts was of the lowest grade, all of their tools being of stone until after the arrival of the English. Axes, chisels, gouges, arrow and spear heads, were brought to a sharp edge by constant friction upon hard stone. They also fashioned pestles, mortars, and ornamental pipes. They showed the most constructive skill, outside of the weaving of cordage, baskets and mats, in the hollowing of logs into canoes. This was done by an alternate system of charring and gouging, and it is said that a single Indian could finish a long boat of this kind in three weeks time from the felling of the tree. To the English the most useful Indian art was the manufacture of wampum-peage, or Indian money, of which the Narragansetts were the principal coiners. It consisted of cylindrical pieces of black and white shell, drilled through the center to be strung upon threads like beads. For a long period after the first settlement this was the currency of the colonists themselves, the white being

accepted at six pieces to the penny, and the black at three pieces. By the Indians wampum was also used as an ornament, serving as necklaces, bracelets and girdles.

The natives were described by Roger Williams as of two sorts—the most of them sober and grave, yet cheerful, a few rude and clownish. He accords to them the greatest affection in their households, even to unwise indulgence. Although no fixed custom forbade polygamy, the Indian generally had but one wife. While she remained in his cabin, she was his drudge and his slave, doing all the household work and planting, tending and harvesting the corn. Every English traveller noted especially the rude hospitality of the savages. They invited strangers freely, gave up their own comforts for the sake of their guests, and never forgot a service rendered. The proportion of deaths at infancy was larger than among the English, owing to their ignorance of medicine. Their chief treatment for disease was a sweat bath, followed by a plunge into cold water. If death ensued from sickness, the neighbors indulged in loud lamentations, and often smeared their faces thick with soot. The burial service was equally accompanied by free indulgence in grief. The corpse, wrapped in mats and accompanied by personal effects, was placed in the grave, and often some article of clothing was hung upon a nearby tree, there to decay from the influence of time and weather. If any man bore the name of the dead, he immediately changed his name; and so far was this idea carried, that if one tribe named a warrior after the departed sachem of another tribe, it was held as a just cause of war.

The religion of the Narragansetts was one of the earlier forms of nature worship. They imagined that every natural object, phenomenon of nature, and locality, contained a god. Roger Williams counted thirty-seven of these deities, all of

whom in their acts of worship they invoked. All unnatural circumstances in their life—sickness, drought, war, famine—they ascribed to the anger of certain gods. Gathered together in great assemblies they strove, with loud bewailing and outcry to make atonement, and implored health, peace and prosperity. Their doctrine of immortality was similar to that of other barbarian nations. They believed that the souls of the good went to the southwest, the abode of their great god, *Coutantouwit*, whereas the souls of murderers, thieves and liars wandered restlessly abroad.

Not belonging to an advanced scale of civilization, the Narragansetts did not require intricate political institutions. There is no evidence to show that they ever possessed any code of laws or any set of customs having the force of legal obligation. Their government was monarchical, the supreme leadership being vested in the sachem. Under him were several lower sachems, who paid him tribute and voiced the action of their particular followings. We do not know how the chief sachem was chosen; heredity was certainly a qualification for office, although unpopularity or incompetence would have outweighed this. Not being vested with the accompaniments of power, the sachem was dependent for the carrying out of his will upon the acquiescence of the people, and accordingly seldom took action upon important matters until he had heard the opinion of the people expressed through the great council. There was that same confusion of judicial and executive powers common to barbarian nations, which enacted that the sachem should punish most crimes with his own hand. Assassination, however, was sometimes tried, where a public execution might provoke a mutiny.

The social side of life appealed very little to the savage's unemotional and irresponsive mind. Gambling with dice and

occasional games of football were about the only sports to which he was addicted. He had none of the comforts or luxuries of life, and even after he had acquired knowledge of them, he rejected everything that involved a change in his manner of living. Continually dwelling in the midst of evils which he had no desire to alleviate, the Indian cultivated a sullen fortitude under suffering which is often called stoicism. This brave endurance of torture, however stolid and scenic it may be, is one of the brighter parts of his character. His vices far outnumbered his virtues. Whether through association with the English, who schemed to displace them and get possession of their land, or through natural degradation, the Narragansetts inspired in the breast of their friend Roger Williams great distrust as he began to know them better. Begging, gluttony and drunkenness were undoubtedly acquired through contact with the settlers, but craftiness and falsehood seem always to have been present in their character. In the latter part of his life, after he had received personal experience of their duplicity, he says, "All Indians are extremely treacherous." While recognizing the better qualities of the more worthy, he describes the lower Indians as wallowing in idleness, stealing, lying, treachery and blasphemy. The methods employed so often by the English to incite them to tribal warfare and to get possession of their lands cannot be too severely condemned; yet that so degraded a nation should live side by side with a people favored with all the comforts and advantages of a modern civilization was as undesirable as it was impossible.

During the first few decades of English settlement, the colonists lived in continual fear of the Indians, who stole from them, harassed their cattle and invaded their property. As the English increased in numbers and hewed their way fur-

ther and further into the forests, establishing boundaries for large tracts of land and introducing a new civilization, the Indians saw their tribal lands rapidly disappearing, their favorite fishing-places invaded by the saw-mills and grist-mills of the settlers, and their barbarian means of subsistence supplanted by a mode of living that they would neither understand nor adopt. Under such social conditions a collision was inevitable. Many disputes and altercations arose, which were generally settled by imposing some new restraint upon the Indians. But this state of affairs could not continue long. The savage, haughty, incapable of reasoning, repelling this assumed authority over him, bided his time and waited for revenge. At last when the Narragansetts decided to take up arms with Philip, king of the Wampanoags, against the English, the latter realized that the final struggle had begun. During the years 1675 and 1676 the colonists were almost continually engaged in combat. Upon Rhode Island soil, in the heart of the Narragansett country, was fought the famous "Swamp Fight" of December 19, 1675. From that time the strength of the Indians dwindled, until the death of Philip in 1676 utterly broke their power and doomed them to extinction.

After King Philip's war, the Indians gradually drifted into dependence upon the whites and into slavery. Through inter-marriage with negroes and through their addiction to rum and general intemperance, their numbers were fast depleted. The census of 1730 showed that the colony contained 1,648 negroes and but 985 Indians. Many of them lived upon the tribal reservation which had been provided for in 1709 and where they were practically under the guardianship of the general assembly of the colony. Bishop Berkeley, who came over to Rhode Island in 1730, became discouraged in his efforts to convert them to Christianity and said: "The native Indians

who are said to have been thousands within the compass of this colony, do not at present amount to a thousand, including every age and sex, and these are nearly all servants or labourers for the English, who have contributed more to destroy their bodies by means of strong liquors than by any means to improve their minds or save their souls."

From a report regarding the Narragansett Indians, presented to the assembly at the January session in 1833, it appears that the community in the town of Charlestown, living on the tribal lands, then numbered 198 souls, of whom 6 were full-blooded Indians, 14 half-breeds, 158 of mixed parentage, but less than half Indian, and 20 non-Indian residents. The moral and physical condition of the tribal remnant was far from satisfactory. Rum and other forms of vice were gradually enervating and exterminating them, they were constantly being imposed upon and robbed by designing individuals, and many of the tribe were living in a half-starved condition.

In March, 1880, the remnants of the tribe had so far degenerated that the assembly passed an act abolishing their tribal authority and relations, and a few months later purchased their tribal lands which were sold at auction.



## A NIGHT HERON.

By S. F. DENTON

I propose writing a few words about this real curiosity—one of nature's oddities.

He belongs to the family of wading birds, and seems to enjoy nothing better than to fill his crop with frogs, beside a reedy pond on a moonlight night, and his powers of digestion are something astonishing.

While out collecting eggs, my brother, guided by the noise which could be heard at some distance, came upon a heronry. After floundering through mud, and vaulting slippery logs, and crawling on hands and knees for half a mile he came where hundreds of these birds had built their nests in the trees—a cedar swamp—and the nests, built of sticks and placed in the forks, could be seen in every tree. Many contained young, and they were such long-legged and ill-shaped creatures that he concluded to take a couple home. They bit and scratched, and made more noise than an army of ordinary fowls. One was partly fledged, the other poorly covered with thin down. On arriving home he found his treasures troublesome; they required constant feeding. So he gave the larger one to me and the other to my brother Willie.

I called my bird Tommy. He was not in the least bashful about letting you know he was hungry, and sent forth his persuasive calls in a peculiar cackle, which he kept up incessantly, and it was indeed a strong-minded person who could long listen to it without wishing he would stop.

I started off, and in about an hour came back with a dozen frogs and three good-sized fish—enough rations, I thought, for a week. I was surprised to find Tommy sitting up on his straw with a very contented look on his countenance, and quiet as a mouse. Some one must have fed him. But where was Willie's bird? He was nowhere about the room. But what