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A River on Fire: A Prediction Realized but not Predetermined

When the Cuyahoga River caught on fire in 1969, it marked not only a crisis moment for water pollution in the United States but also the fulfillment of an old Haudenosaunee vision. The vision from the Haudenosaunee spiritual leader Handsome Lake, whose kinsmen lived just northeast of the Cuyahoga in modern-day upstate New York, foresaw the European destruction of American Indian land, including "water that was not drinkable and a river on fire."[1] Through their first arrival in the 17th century and rapid population growth in the 18th century, people of European descent completely changed the way humans interacted with the environment of the eastern seaboard of North America. Only by comparing the way colonists and American Indians related to this land can historians start to make sense of how and why this land changed from a place of storied natural abundance to a place where rivers caught on fire. American Indians and colonists interacted with the environment of the eastern seaboard through fundamentally different conceptions of land; by contrasting American Indian and colonial calendars, maps, and conceptions of themselves, I will prove that American Indians believed in keeping balance with their environment while colonists viewed land as property to be manipulated for their own use.

American Indians of the eastern seaboard arranged their time through a calendar that emphasized their commitment to achieving a balanced and abundant environment. By any comparison to their European counterparts, American Indians practiced a mobile lifestyle that allowed them to eat the most food with minimal intensive labor.[2] Especially in **north east**

[1] Susan M. Hill and Barbara Lorenzkowski. *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017. Accessed September 25, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central. 51
[2] William Cronon. 1983. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang. 53

climates less suitable for farming, American Indians tended to move frequently, taking advantage of all available food sources without overusing any single one. Their method of tracking time reflected their desire to maintain balance in the ecosystem. In fact, non-agricultural natives living in modern day Maine "named their lunar months in terms of seasonal changes in animal populations, referring to the egg laying of birds, the running of salmon, the molting of geese, the hibernation of bears, and so on."[3] The months of the year signaled to these natives exactly which source of food would be most strategic for them to pursue to keep balance between food sources without starving. Further south where natives depended more on farming, the Agawam calendar named months after the agricultural process. For example, the Agawam Indians began their year with Squannikesos, which signaled the start of the corn planting.[4] While some may dismiss these calendars as simple reminders, they show how natives of the eastern seaboard conceived of time in terms of the environment around them. Each day represented a jump forward in their *ecological clock*. Thus, it is clear that American Indians used calendars to organize their time and, more importantly, reinforce their relationship with the environment around them, keeping them alive and the ecosystem balanced.

When colonists first arrived in the New World, they did not use a calendar with a connection to their natural surroundings; later, when Americans created the Farmers' Almanac to track the relationship between the land and time, they still viewed the land as a commodity rather than a balanced ecosystem. The colonists who came to the New World used the Gregorian Calendar, which named months in praise of polytheistic gods and rulers that had died many centuries before their birth. Thus, the colonists' use of the Gregorian Calendar conveys only their

[3] William Cronon. 1983. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang. 42
[4] Ibid 43

adherence to traditional European customs. The Farmers' Almanac represented the way the people -- who by the late 18th century called themselves "Americans" -- wrote a calendar to systematically connect the land to time. First published in 1792, the Farmers' Almanac detailed the time when farmers should plant and harvest to produce the greatest number of crops.[5] The goal of the Farmers' Almanac mirrored the calendars of American Indians in that both tried to maximize food supplies; however, the connection to the land still fundamentally differs between the two groups. The Farmers' Almanac serves as an instruction manual to reap the greatest productivity from the soil. Native calendars acted more as signals to *move* from one food source to another. Therefore, while calendars ended up serving both the American Indians and the colonists, it is evident that colonists viewed the land as an entity they could dominate to perfection while American Indians used the calendar to track time in their perpetual quest to keep balance with their environment.

Next, American Indians used mental maps, which also reflect how they maintained balance with their environment by moving from food source to food source. While American Indians may not have physically drawn maps in the same way Europeans did, the process of naming places around them created a mental map by which American Indians knew what food they could find at any given place. For example, the word "Abessah, in Bar Harbor, Maine, was the 'clam bake place.'"[6] The naming and mental mapping of food sources allowed American Indians to catalogue their environment to support their lifestyle of moving through food sources to maintain environmental balance. As Cronon writes, "The purpose of such names was to turn the landscape into a map which, if studied carefully, literally gave a village's inhabitants the

[5] William Cronon. "A World of Fields and Fences," (lecture HIS 460, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, September 23, 2020)
[6] William Cronon. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang. 1983. 65

information they needed to sustain themselves."[7] Even if a colonist were to have a translated, physical copy of this map, they could not use it without understanding the American Indian philosophy of land. A colonist could not find the "clam bake place" without knowing when the clam would be most plentiful. Just as crucially, they could not stay in the "clam bake place" indefinitely otherwise the natural, cyclical abundance would be broken.

Conversely, the first maps made by colonists of Cape Cod and later American maps drawn after the Land Ordinance of 1785 make clear that the colonists believed land could be owned and lived on permanently. Early explorer of the Americas Samuel de Champlain mapped Cape Cod, including multiple American Indian villages, from a European perspective in 1605. Just thirty years later, another map was drawn that depicted many new colonial settlements. Crucially, the map reflects how colonists built their settlements right on top of previously existing native villages.[8] While one could call these two maps simply the result of migration or invasion depending on the storyteller's bias, they actually portray how colonists viewed the land. The process of mapping a landscape innately reflects the mapmaker's view of their environment. Since a colonial settlement could be mapped right on top of an old native village, colonists evidently viewed the land as an entity that could change hands and, thus, be owned. Furthermore, these colonists did not name the places on their map to reflect their relationship to their environments. Indeed, the colonists "most frequently created arbitrary place-names which either recalled localities in their homeland or gave a place the name of its owner. . . "[9] The act of naming a place for its *owner* rather than its ecological purpose perhaps best illustrates the

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[7] William Cronon. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang. 1983. 65

[8] William Cronon. "A World of Fields and Fences." (lecture HIS 460, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, September 23, 2020)

[9] William Cronon. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang. 1983. 66

colonial philosophy that land could be owned. Later maps of the United States only continue to reflect how colonists viewed the land as ownable. As colonists became "Americans" and invaded further westward into the continent, they marked maps by a grid system that broke the land into easily partitioned sections. These gridded maps with old, European names look nothing like native maps because the people making these maps subscribed to a totally different philosophy of land use. The mapping of settlements on top of native villages, the naming of settlements after "owners," and the later gridded partition of the American landscape conveys that colonists believed land could and should be owned.

Finally, through their spiritual beliefs, American Indians linked their own identity to the land they lived on, which is evident in their own names and creation stories. In Susan Hill's book *The Clay We Are Made Of,* she writes that "among the Haudenosaunee, the names that the nations call themselves (and each other) denote key geographical features of their home territories."[10] In naming not only aforementioned food sources but also themselves upon geographic landmarks, the Haudenosaunee link their own identity to the land in which they reside. While it is common for people to build community by shared geographical boundaries, American Indians naming themselves based upon specific geographic features makes their identity fundamentally different from colonists. They mirror their ties to land in their spiritual practices as well. In Haudenosaunee tradition, before birth and after death the land and humans are one. In fact, the Great Law of the Haudenosaunee warns people to walk lightly on the land since "the 'coming faces' – the children yet unborn – are just below the surface of the ground."[11] After death too, the Haudenosaunee go back to the land "just as the Creator's mother had been at

[10] Susan M. Hill and Barbara Lorenzkowski. *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017. Accessed September 25, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central. 35

[11] Ibid 37

the beginning of the world."[12] The belief that the humans both come from and go back to the land before and after their time on earth creates a deep spiritual connection between the Haudenosaunee and the land. Following this creation story logic, to degrade the land or upset its natural balance meant endangering the spiritual connection to future and past generations of Haudenosaunee. Unlike the shared ideas of calendars and maps, this spiritual connection to the land has no colonial comparison. The colonists conceived of themselves, their past, and their future in completely different terms than American Indians. Thus, the native spiritual connection to the land -- and the colonists' lack thereof -- marks one of the most important differences between how colonists and American Indians interacted with the land: American Indians needed to respect its balance while colonists could treat the land like any other commodity.

In comparing their calendars, maps, and conceptions of themselves, American Indians clearly emphasized balance with their environment while colonists partitioned and owned land. By studying the vastly different ways that American Indians and colonists viewed the land, we realize that there are *options*. Whether one chooses to adopt the American Indian or colonial philosophy of land or a combination of both will affect the way the world looks. History is neither pre-determined nor necessarily repeating. So, all of our actions and the lenses in which we view the all-encompassing environment matter. The Haudenosaunee may have predicted rivers on fire, but that does not mean that prediction had to come true. Our rivers do not have to burn. Perhaps, if every American were to see that there are options in how to interact with our environment, our rivers will not burn again.

[12] Susan M. Hill and Barbara Lorenzkowski. *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017. Accessed September 25, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central. 52

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