

The Land of
NORUMBEGA

*Maine in the Age
of Exploration
and Settlement*



**Reading and Discussion Programs
in Maine Libraries**

Map: *La Nuova Francia*. Giacomo Gastaldi. From:
Giovanni Battista Ramusio. *Terzo Volume delle
Navigazioni et Viaggi*. Venice, 1556.

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Maine in the Age of Exploration and Settlement

When the Menomini lived on the shore of the sea, they one day were looking out across the water and observed some large vessels which were near to them and wonderful to behold. Suddenly, there was a terrific explosion, as of thunder, which startled the people greatly.

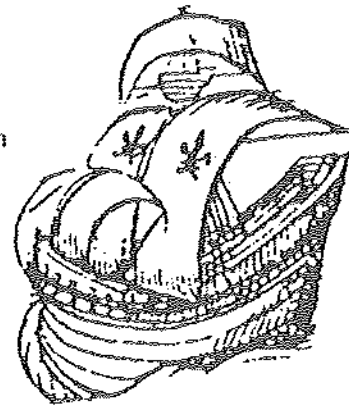
When the vessels approached the shore, men with light-colored skin landed. Most of them had hair on their faces, and they carried on their shoulders heavy sticks ornamented with shining metal. As the strangers came toward the Indians, the latter believed the leader to be a great manido [spirit] with his companions.

—Account of an initial encounter. Recorded in 1660; the source is a Wataoskasit, Menomini (cited in Peter Nabokov, *Native American Testimony*)

American history does not usually begin with a view from this side of the ocean, of what was new and startling to American Indian eyes. Instead, it begins with what the explorers saw through European eyes. In recent decades, however, much has been written to correct this and other distortions and misconceptions a one-eyed view of the world can create. Students of all ages are re-learning, re-thinking, and re-writing a history that once seemed so simple.

The interest of scholars and lay humanists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is an example of this process at work. Those years were often missing from accounts of the American experience. At best, they were presented as a linear progression of European civilization across the Atlantic, punctuated by dates of significant voyages of exploration. Little was seen of the world of the American Indians and the complex interchange brought about by the transatlantic encounter.

Research emerging out of this crossroads of interest in interdisciplinary history and the transatlantic encounter has inspired the study of "The Land of Norumbega." "Norumbega" was



the name given to an area around Maine's Penobscot River by early explorers and cartographers. The precise spellings, boundaries, and origins of the term are disputed, but Norumbega was a place, like El Dorado, which drew adventurers and explorers to the area. The area figured in the voyages of Cabot (circa 1498), Verrazzano (1524), Champlain (1604), and Hudson (1609). Later, it was one of two poles of English colonial interest, and a center of French trading activity; colonies were attempted there as early as 1604.

A study of The Land of Norumbega draws on many disciplines. History, anthropology, geography, cartography, and literature all provide texts for analysis. Many kinds of tools—maps, legends, travellers' tales, and missionaries' reports—help explain what happened and what did not. All work together to give us a broader perspective and a deeper knowledge of a land and its peoples. The final achievement is an increased awareness of Norumbega in its time and place and of the new methods and materials of the humanities today.

The Travellers' Tales

Reading: *Maine in the Age of Discovery: Christopher Levett's Voyage, 1623-1624 and A Guide To Sources.*

In 1604, the French explorer Champlain, aided by the "savages" he encountered, explored the Penobscot River, thought by many to be the center of The Land of Norumbega. He ascended the stream to the vicinity of present-day Bangor and reportedly met "The Lord of Norumbega," although he did not find the city of silver-pillared mansions and towers he had expected. Explorers' accounts of their travels form a vital part of the historical and geographical knowledge of the area in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some accounts, like those written by Champlain, attained a comfortable level of accuracy. Other more colorful tales blurred fact and fiction. Altogether, they are a prologue to ever-popular travel literature with which we are all familiar today. Readers read accounts of new world travels hungrily, whether fact or fiction. Like the authors of the travellers' tales themselves, they saw what they wanted to see. So great was the desire of many Europeans to find a site for a new golden age to rejuvenate a decaying Europe that early reports were often filled with images of what to the European eye was innocent, uncorrupt, and inviting.

Travellers' accounts of varying degrees of truthfulness form the basis of a kind of historical geography that disappeared from the humanities early in the twentieth century as the discipline of geography became enmeshed in a network of newer scientific methods. With that transition, documents detailing the movements of explorers, excursion by excursion, written in a flowing narrative style, were consigned to the dusty shelves of libraries. Renewed interest in the processes of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century exploration has encouraged re-publication and re-interpretation of accounts like Christopher Levett's *A Voyage into New England*.

According to scholars of early American writing, the structure of the earliest accounts



was roughly chronological: the events were noted as the traveller journeyed from place to place, and the text was written from those notes. Examples of this kind of tale range from John Brereton's *Brief and True Relations of the Discoverie of the North Part of Virginia* (1602), one of the earliest accounts in English of the New England coast, to the great collections of voyage accounts subsequently edited by Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas.

Other accounts became more thematic. The narrator described the particulars of the climate, the landscape, the animals, and the human inhabitants. Often these efforts were more polished, written to inspire the reader to migrate to the new lands. Economic motives were often the impetus for eloquence. Inviting passages described "New England" as a world where "Nature and liberty affords us that freely, which in England we want or it costeth us deereley." (John Smith, *A Description of New England*, 1616)

Levett's *A Voyage Into New England* is a mixture of good writing and promotional prose. The text reflects the diverse and (to the sensitive reader) often conflicting motives for both the travels and the publication of travellers' tales. Levett, who journeyed along the coast of Maine in 1623-24, recorded "what places are fit to settle plantations in, in which not; what courses are fit...for bringing glory to God, honor to our king and nation, good unto the commonwealth and profit to all adventurers and planters..." His account is best read as an example of the kind of impression Europeans received of a new world during the era of exploration.

Optional background reading: in David B. Quinn, *North America from Earliest Discovery to First Settlements: The Norse Voyages to 1612*, Chapters 3 (The Atlantic Setting) and 4 (European Technology, Ideology and Institutions: Their Impact on North America).

The Meeting of Cultures

Reading: Selections from James Axtell, *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America*; selected Micmac legends; and selections from Joseph Nicolai, *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*.

O Wonder

How many goodly creatures are there here.
How beauteous mankind is. O brave new world,
that has such people in't.

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act V, Scene 1

And what has become of the Indians, said I?
The Indians, our host replied...It is a race that is
dying out. They are not made for civilization; it
kills them."

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America* (1831)

The history of the encounter between the European and the various tribal groups on American soil often chronicles the difficult journey from Shakespeare's initial enthusiasm to the resigned cynicism de Tocqueville found two hundred years later. The complexity of the cultural exchange and interaction is buried beneath an historical record of the "inevitable" progress of American nationalism and white civilization. The history of the American Indian groups as human societies has too often been lost in the process. Scholars in the past two decades have restored some of the balance between history as conquest and history as encounter and exchange. The period of the initial contact between Europeans and American Indians has emerged as a vital one: during the initial contact we can get a glimpse of what native Indian life was like prior to changes prompted by European invasion.

One important source of information is *The Jesuit Relations*, the combined work of many Jesuit fathers over decades of interaction with northeast tribal groups. It is a compendium of reports the Jesuits wrote home to France describing their world and their success in converting the tribes-men and -women to Christian Catholicism. Like the Levett account, it is a view from outside the American



Indian culture, but the Jesuits were often better observers than were travellers like Levett. They lived alongside the native peoples, and their accounts of Indian life are filled with precise descriptions that can be used in the absence of documents by the Indians themselves to reveal some of the reality of Indian life. The educated fathers described the interactions of the men and women and of parents and children, and of the cultural norms they observed; then they commented on what they saw

Historian James Axtell has "rummaged purposefully" among the nearly 100 volumes of *The Jesuit Relations* to select those letters that best describe the existing cultures of the northeastern tribes in the earliest stages of contact with the Europeans. Axtell organized the selections from *The Jesuit Relations* in *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America* by lifecycle to encourage the reader to see these cultures from a more anthropological perspective. Skillfully annotated selections are organized around such topics as "Love and Marriage," "Birth," and "Working," to encourage the participants to consider the native peoples of Maine and New England as part of the complex human societies they were rather than as the primitive bands early explorers often mistook them for.

Educated observation of a culture is at best a supplement to and not a replacement for documents from within a culture itself. As one astute sixteenth-century European philosopher wrote, "clever people observe more things and more curiously, but they interpret them; and to lend weight and conviction to their interpretation, they cannot help altering history a little." To understand this process of interpretation, scholars have turned to orally-transmitted accounts of tribal histories that have been passed down from one generation to another. One kind of document that historians and anthropologists rely on is legend. In legends of the arrival of the "Knife-men" or "Boat-men," as Europeans were first called by the Micmac people for instance, scholars find some indication of how native peoples originally perceived the newcomers from across

the waters in the east. Other documents are transcriptions by the native peoples themselves of traditional accounts of the tribal past that would be lost if not written down. For instance, in 1894 the Penobscot Indian Chief Joseph Nicolar completed *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*. The book records the ancient stories of the tribal history and the profound changes the Penobscot had undergone since first contact with the Europeans. Like the legends, the selections from Nicolar's history deserve careful examination as expressions of a reality only the native peoples could reveal.

Optional background reading: in James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America*, Chapters 9 (The English Colonial Impact on Indian Culture) and 10 (The Indian Impact on English Colonial Culture).

The New World as Image and Metaphor

Reading: William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

The critic C. S. Lewis once wrote that the existence of America was a disappointment to many Europeans. Its existence blocked the fabled direct route to the Orient, and the fact of America destroyed the dreams and the legends about it. It was the concept of a "new world" that fueled the imagination of poets as well as explorers. Exact information from the explorations took decades to find its place in the popular European worldview. In the interim, poets and playwrights continued to use new world settings and images to explore old world concerns. *The Tempest* is one such work.

In Shakespeare's "new world" in *The Tempest*, there is nothing, as Ariel sings in the play, "but doth suffer a sea change/Into something rich and strange." Scholars have suggested that the new world narratives—from the discovery of the Bermudas to Martin Pring's early seventeenth-century account of the Maine coast—were sources for *The Tempest*. No

doubt the bard absorbed information from travellers as background; he borrowed direct passages from the French philosopher Michel Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals," published in 1580. Like Montaigne, Shakespeare played with the concepts of barbarism and civilization. Montaigne had suggested that a people who had no knowledge of letters, no magistrates, no contracts, no occupations, might well still be civilized. According to him, "each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in." Shakespeare incorporated some of the phrases and much of the spirit of the essay when he painted the new world (without the hallmarks of civilized society) as fresh and free.

Civilization and nature, or art and nature, are juxtaposed so that they can be explored in the moral laboratory that Prospero's island represents. European culture—greedy, politically motivated, exploitative yet subject to refinement and higher ideals—becomes disconcerted and broken on the shores of a wilderness. But that wilderness—natural, fruitful, unpredictable—is also distorted by the encounter with civilization. This is the new world encounter in a literary microcosm. Shakespeare realistically explores the interaction of two cultures (both complex, both a mixture of strength and weakness) as equals. Like Montaigne, but unlike many of his contemporaries, he acknowledged the integrity of a world that espoused values very different from those of the world in which he lived.

Optional background reading: in Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, Chapter II (Shakespeare's American Fable).



Maps: Landscapes and Mindscapes

Reading: *The Land of Norumbega* Exhibition Catalog.

R. A. Skelton wrote that maps have many faces and functions. Each map is a synthesis of experience, viewed differently by different people. Maps can be subjected to the same processes of interpretation as the works of poets and explorers. They can be tools to help make sense of the world, of the relationship between geography and reality. A legacy of maps survives from five centuries of exploration and settlement of the Atlantic seaboard. It is a rich cartographical archive, for these mapmakers were witnesses to the unfolding of a human drama. They both recorded and helped to inspire the exploration of a world new to them. The study of those maps and of mapmaking in the era of exploration reveals the maps as mindscapes as well as landscapes. The work of the mapmakers was a humanistic activity.

The first European explorers ranged the North American coast, drawn by geographical fact and fantasy. The Americas, first perceived as Columbus' dream of Asia realized, gradually came to be viewed by some as a massive barrier to the riches of the East. The quest for a northern passage through to the Pacific became an urgent priority, so urgent that mapmakers erroneously documented such a passage in anticipation of its "discovery." Thus did mapmakers and explorers interpret geographic reality in the light of their own desires.

European mapmakers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries employed an impressive array of artistic and scientific skills. Champlain's maps of Maine and Cape Cod, drawn on site, incorporated in vivid artistic detail those first encounters with the native American culture. Other mapmakers and explorers "drew" stories; others painted portraits of the people who lived on the land their maps described. In these documents, land and people constituted a conceptual whole.

Scholars today argue among themselves about whether our modern "scientific" maps

(increasingly computer-generated) represent an impoverishment or a refinement of the traditional mapmakers' art. There is little consensus on what has been lost or gained in the transition from the old ways of recording the world to the new. Has our human relationship to the land been so changed that it is lost forever, or might it be renewed and strengthened by re-mapping our landscapes in new humanistic ways?

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