

# New Visions, Old Stories: The Emergence of a New Indian History

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In February 1969, the "Professional Register" section of the *American Historical Association Newsletter* contained the first job listing for an "American Indian" history position at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point. Prior to 1969 no college or university in the United States had ever advertised for a historian specializing in Native-American history; indeed until the late 1960s the history of Native-American people, if taught at all, was a component of frontier history courses in which Indians, like geological barriers, severe climatic conditions, and wild animals were obstacles to the Euro-American settlement. Within this interpretation, lip service was given to Native-American participation in the fur trade, but most teachers and historians focused upon the "Indian wars." Ray Allen Billington's *Westward Expansion*, the most widely used textbook in this period, entitled a chapter describing the western tribes' defense of their homelands as "The Indian Barrier" (1).

By the early 1970s the focus of Native-American history began to change. As the consensus interpretation of American history crumbled and historians reappraised the roles of ethnic minority groups, scholars re-examined the relationship of Native Americans to the non-Indian majority and attempted to create a "new Indian history" which incorporated both history and anthropology. Unlike previ-

ous interpretations which had depicted Indian people only as foils for European activity, the new Indian history was more "Indian centered" and endeavored to present a Native-American perspective of events. Much of this activity emerged from scholars associated with the D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian, at the Newberry Library, in Chicago.

During the past two decades these historians have expanded our understanding of the Native-American experience. Although more traditional historians previously ignored the pre-Columbian period, scholars recently have re-evaluated Native-American societies prior to 1492 and have illustrated that they formed a rich mosaic of cultures with many similarities to contemporary societies in the Old World. Like the cultures which emerged beside the Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile, or the Ganges, the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian people of the American interior also were riverine societies which rose, flourished, and eventually declined. Governed by a theocracy, Cahokia, a nascent Mississippian city-state opposite modern St. Louis, boasted a population of over 10,000 in 1100 A.D. Its markets offered products from a region encompassed by the Appalachians, the Great Lakes, the Rocky Mountains, and the Gulf of Mexico. Alvin M. Josephy Jr.'s *America in 1492* features a series of essays surveying pre-

Columbian societies, while Francis Jenning's interesting but controversial *The Founders of America* attempts to investigate the relationships between the pre-Columbian societies and historic tribes in the United States. Lynda N. Shaffer's *Native Americans Before 1492* surveys the moundbuilding cultures of the eastern United States, and offers a concise, readable synopsis designed for a broad, general audience (2).

During the past two decades historians have reassessed their estimates of the pre-Columbian populations which comprised these societies. Prior to 1970 most textbooks stated that before European contact, the Indian population of the United States numbered somewhere between one and one-half million people. More recently, scholars such as Russell Thornton (*American Indian Holocaust and Survival*) and Henry Dobyns (*Their Numbers Become Thinned*) have illustrated that the population was considerably larger, and now most historians believe that Native Americans numbered at least seven million. The new assessments are particularly significant, since Charles Hudson has shown that Spanish explorers such as Hernando de Soto encountered populous,

complex Mississippian societies in the Southeast as late as 1540-1541, but when Europeans settled permanently along the Atlantic coast in the early-seventeenth century, they encountered far fewer Indians and found the ceremonial centers of the moundbuilders abandoned (3).

Like Cahokia, some of these population centers had declined prior to 1500, but the subsequent destruction of the Mississippians and other Native-American populations was intensified by the introduction of Old World pathogens. Isolated in the Americas, Indian people had developed no natural immunities to the epidemics that plagued Africa and Eurasia, and when these diseases were introduced into the western hemisphere, Native Americans died by the millions. Both Thornton and Dobyns discuss this population decline, but David Stannard's *American Holocaust* examines the combined impact of disease, European colonial policy, and the dissolution of the contemporary native societies. Alfred Crosby also discusses these events in *The Columbian Exchange* and provides a fascinating analysis of how the transmission of plants (especially food crops) and animals between the eastern and western hemispheres altered the sub-

sequent history of both regions (4).

The initial meetings between Indians and Englishmen on the Atlantic coast produced tensions which changed both societies. Historians have illustrated that both sides interpreted the other through a preconceived set of images, and that English colonists attempted to fit Native Americans into a cultural framework imported from Europe. During the 1960s Roy Harvey Pearce analyzed British endeavors to integrate Indians intellectually into European concepts of an "ordered" universe, while more recently James Axtell has illustrated that both sides soon replaced favorable assessments with more negative appraisals. Axtell asserts that Indian reassessments of Europeans resulted from Indian exposure to new diseases and European expansion, while the British adopted negative stereotypes of Native Americans to facilitate their imperialism (5). In a similar vein, Bernard Sheehan argues in *Savagism and Civility* that despite Native-American hospitality, colonists in Virginia were unable to transcend their subscription to stereotypes of "ignoble savages." Focusing upon a later period, James Rawls illustrates that during the nineteenth century Anglo-American settlers in Califor-

Painting by Michael Hampshire. Courtesy of Cahokia Mounds State Historical Site



A Cahokia market. Markets at Cahokia contained products from throughout the eastern two-thirds of the modern United States.

nia continued to manipulate the public image of Native Americans to serve their own political and economic purposes, while Robert Berkhofer's *The White Man's Indian* provides an excellent survey of how changing images of Native Americans have always influenced American science, literature, art, and Indian policy (6).

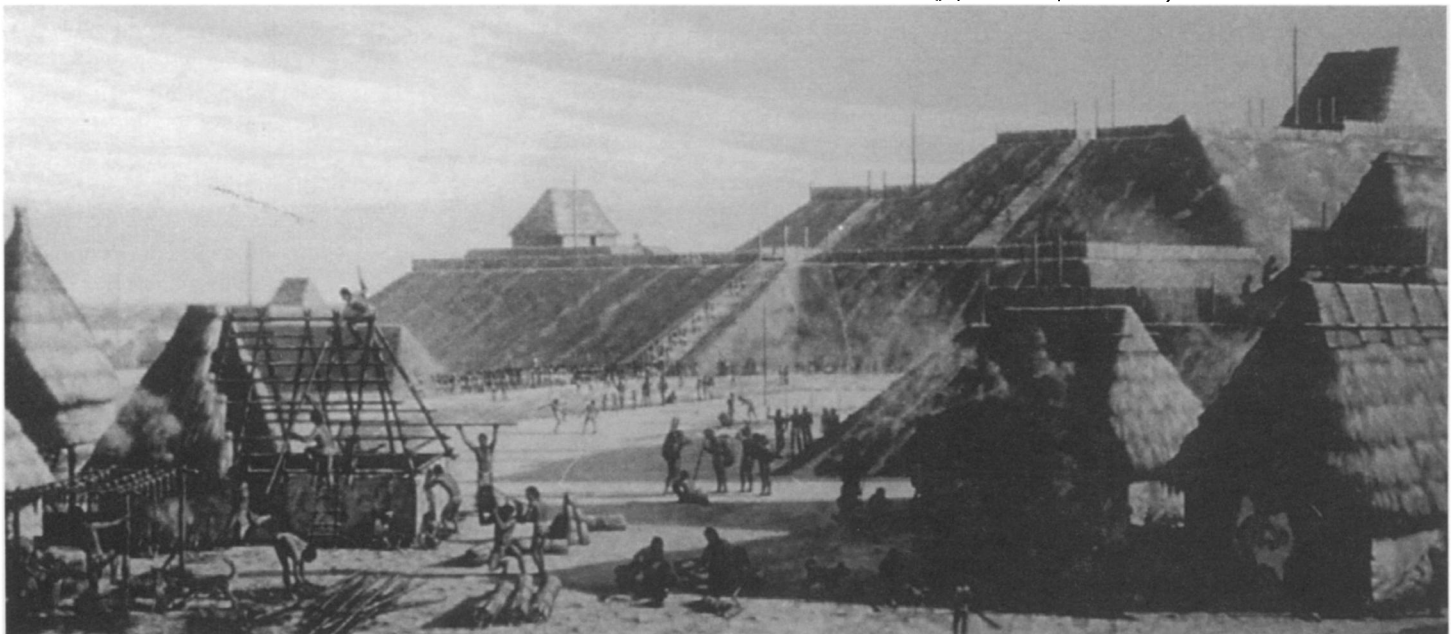
Modern studies of the American frontier indicate that Native Americans rarely fit such stereotyped images. Although Frederick Jackson Turner once described the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization," Francis Jenning's *The Invasion of America* points out that such concepts as "savagery" and "civilization" are ethnocentric terms rarely applied equally to both sides (7). More recently, historians such as Richard White, John Mack Farragher, and Daniel Usner have illustrated that until the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the American frontier was a region of "inclusion" rather than "exclusion," and that Native-American, European, and African-American populations and cultures blended together to form multi-cultural societies in which the parameters of ethnic and cultural identity overlapped and were indistinct. In *The Middle Ground*, White

argues that French and Indian peoples in the Great Lakes region created a way of life where European and Indian worlds "melted at the edges and merged" and where it became unclear "whether a particular practice or way of doing things was French or Indian." These mixed-blood, bicultural societies dominated commerce in the Great Lakes and upper Mississippi Valley during the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and mixed-blood leaders served as important intermediaries between less acculturated tribal communities and European and American governments. Usner's *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy* illustrates that multi-ethnic societies in the South combined subsistence and barter economies to create a flexible socio-economic environment whose definitions of race and ethnicity were as fluid as its trading patterns. The emergence of plantation agriculture markedly altered this flexibility however, eventually fostering more social stratification and more rigid definitions of race. Richard White's *The Roots of Dependency* traces these changes among the Choctaws and other tribes and analyzes the mechanisms utilized by mixed-blood Choctaw planters to

legitimize their usurpation of leadership. Farragher's *Daniel Boone* provides an interesting biographical study of the frontiersman, but also illustrates the striking similarities in economic activity, material culture, and gender roles between the Shawnees and white settlers in Kentucky (8).

During the nineteenth century, as other Native Americans found themselves overwhelmed by the changes swirling around them, many sought a religious deliverance from the political, social, and economic problems that plagued their communities. In *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, a model of ethnohistorical inquiry, Anthony F. C. Wallace has traced the decline of the Seneca from a position of political and military dominance over the western Algonquian tribes during the middle-eighteenth century, to the socio-economic dependency of the reservation system in 1800. Describing the Seneca enclaves as "slums in the wilderness," he illustrates how a social pathology of alcoholism, fear of witchcraft, and violence gave rise, in 1799, to a revitalization movement led by the Seneca Prophet, Handsome Lake. Wallace argues that Handsome Lake's new religion provided an effective moral sanction for the Senecas' adaptation to a

Painting by Michael Hampshire. Courtesy of Cahokia Mounds State Historical Site



Community activities. Containing eighty earthen mounds and a population over 10,000, Cahokia was a nascent Mississippian city-state that flourished opposite modern St. Louis in 1100A.D.



new world. By selectively adopting some European cultural patterns, the Senecas retained many facets of their own culture and strengthened their identity and self-respect as Indians (9).

Other revitalization movements were less successful. In *The Shawnee Prophet* and *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, R. David Edmunds indicates that political fragmentation and socio-economic decline among the Shawnees produced a more militant response. Denouncing Americans as the “spawn of the serpent” (the children of the evil spirit), Tenskwatawa, or the Shawnee Prophet, expounded a doctrine urging his followers to disassociate themselves from their white neighbors and to relinquish many aspects of European culture. Edmunds argues that the Prophet’s religious doctrines provided the basis for Tecumseh’s efforts to unify politically the tribes in the period before the War of 1812. More recently, Gregory Dowd’s *A Spirited Resistance* describes Tecumseh’s proposed confederacy as the culmination of pan-tribal alliances which had existed for several decades (10). Joel Martin’s *Sacred Revolt* examines similar revitalization movements among the Creeks, while Joseph Herring’s *Kennekuk: The Kickapoo Prophet* analyzes a less militant revitalization movement among the Kickapoos in Illinois and Kansas during the 1830s (11). Obviously, the revitalization movements reached their tragic finale in the Ghost Dance, which spread out of the Great Basin and onto the plains in 1890. James Mooney’s *The Ghost Dance*, compiled and written shortly after the massacre at Wounded Knee, remains the standard and most authoritative account of Wovoka and his religion, while

Robert Utley’s *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* provides an excellent account of the Lakotas’ involvement in the faith. More recently, Jensen, Paul, and Carter’s *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee* provides a dramatic, pictorial account of these tragic circumstances (12).

While many Lakota sought a religious deliverance through the mysticism of the Ghost Dance, their children were being

lization.” As James Axtell and other historians have illustrated this practice emerged during the colonial period, but it reached its height between 1885 and 1930 (13).

Autobiographical accounts such as Francis La Flesche’s *The Middle Five*, or Luther Standing Bear’s *My People the Sioux* provide insights into the lives of individual Indian students, but recently scholars have assembled and analyzed

accounts from large numbers of students, searching for patterns of experience which students shared. Michael Coleman’s *American Indian Children at School, 1850-1930* examines autobiographies and reminiscences of over one hundred Indians and illustrates that students seemed rather ambivalent about their boardingschool experiences. Most were not surprised that school administrators relied upon student labor for the everyday maintenance of the institutions, and although most students underwent an initial period of homesickness and adjustment, many “willingly accepted useful values, knowledge, and skills of an alien culture.” Coleman’s volume contains many interesting vignettes illustrating the students’ experiences, and his bibliography offers a rich opportunity for additional investigation of this subject (14).

In contrast to Coleman’s examination of student experiences at a broad spectrum of institutions, Tsianina Lomawaima’s *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* provides an in-depth analysis of the experiences of students at Chilocco, a school in northern Oklahoma which emphasized agricultural and vocational education. Based upon careful research and extensive interviews of Chilocco alumni,



Courtesy of the Tippecanoe County Historical Society

The frock coat and turban of Iowa, a Potawatomi from Wabash, reflects the acculturation typical of many Potawatomi métis.

enrolled, both voluntarily and otherwise, in white men’s schools. Intent upon assimilating Native Americans into the Anglo-American mainstream, reformers urged that Indian children be separated from the “savagery” of their families and sent to boarding schools where they could be imbued with “education” and those cultural values deemed necessary for “civi-

Lomawaima indicates that students often formed tribal cliques, and that divisions emerged between students from eastern and western Oklahoma. Like many of the students in Coleman's study, the Chilocco alumni often disliked the regimentation of school life, but they also retained some favorable memories of their Chilocco enrollment. Few, however, enrolled their own children at the institution. Devon Mihesuah's *Cultivating the Rosebuds* provides a good account of the Cherokee Female Seminary, a tribally administered institution modeled after Mount Holyoke College which enrolled primarily mixed-blood students, while Robert Trennert's *The Phoenix Indian School* indicates that this Arizona institution, although dedicated to assimilation, generally failed in its mission and was vulnerable to criticism by reformers during the New Deal era (15). In addition, two films also provide valuable insights into the boarding school experience. "In the White Man's Image," a television documentary produced as part of "The American Experience" critically examines the career of Richard Pratt and the establishment of Carlisle Indian School, while "Where The Spirit Lives" provides a dramatic, if heart-rending dramatization of student experiences in a Canadian boarding school during the 1920s (16).

Since the 1960s, Native Americans in growing numbers have added a new "Indian voice" to the analysis of Native-American history, and the recent Indian commentary has engendered considerable discussion. During the early 1970s Vine Deloria Jr. took non-Indian scholars, politicians, and theologians to task, and although Deloria's comments were not directed specifically at historians, his witty, if sometimes acerbic,

commentary caused many historians and anthropologists to re-examine their motives and methodology (17). More recently, other Indian historians have argued that both the American Revolution and the Constitution were markedly influenced by Native-American concepts of politics and representative government; and although many academic scholars have disagreed, the Native-Ameri-

history faculty at California Polytechnic State University, at San Luis Obispo. In "Teaching American Indian History: A Native American Voice," Grinde argues that the very structure of American history incorporates a series of Euro-American assumptions about change and "progress" in the western hemisphere that imprisons the history of Native-American people

within parameters often alien to Native-American cultures. Reflecting perspectives similar to those included in the discussion of African-American or women's history in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*, Grinde argues that "the image of the American Indian in history, literature, and art has been largely an 'invented' tradition external to the American Indian experience." Grinde points out that Native-American historians have never championed "essentialism" (that only scholars of Native-American descent can write Native-American history), but that many Indian historians believe that current scholarship often excludes an authentic Native-American voice, and that many non-Indian scholars continue to produce an "American-Indian history" that is "just the history of Indian-white relations (and the colonial conquest perspective at that), or is the history of governmental bureaucracies that have dealt with American Indians." Grinde suggests that historians immerse themselves in Native-American

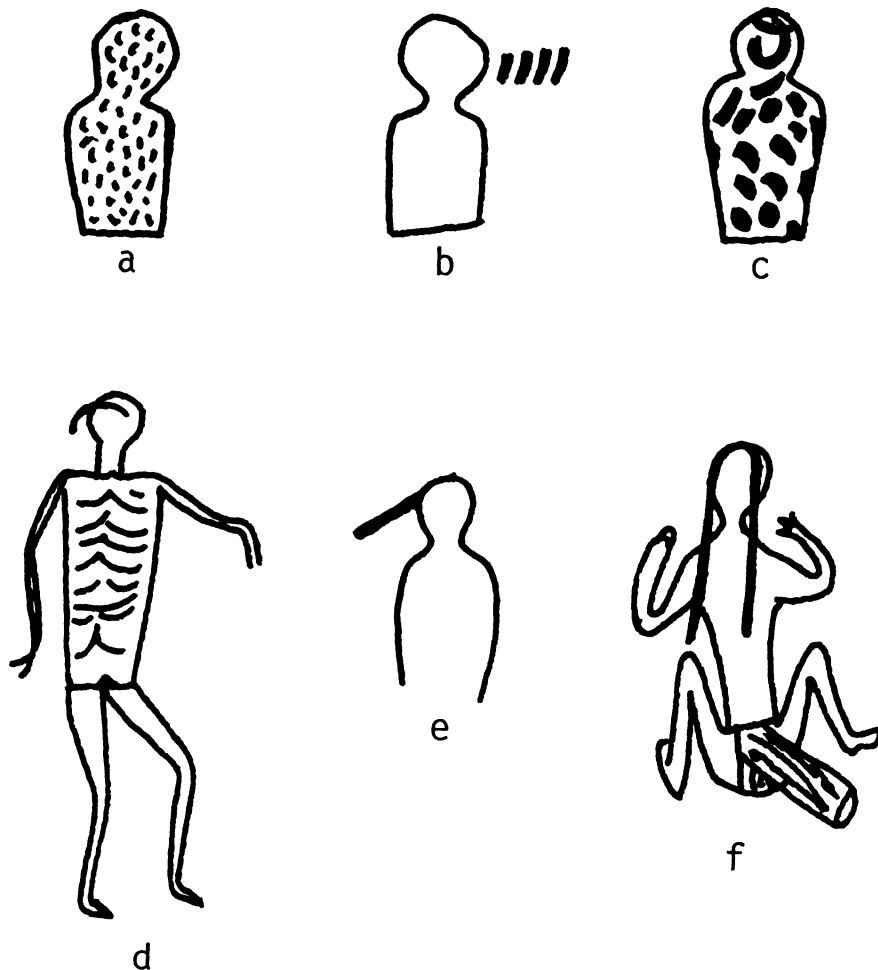


Jean Baptist Brouillette, a prominent Miami métis, was a prosperous entrepreneur in Indiana during the 1830s.

can assertions have attracted the attention of the general public, including influential members of Congress (18).

Perhaps the most cogent plea for the inclusion of a new Native-American perspective in the writing of Native-American history comes from Donald A. Grinde, a Yamasee historian and a member of the

can language and culture ("how far, for example, [would] a graduate student in French history . . . get without a knowledge of French and the [opportunity] to go to France to pursue scholarly research as well as to gain an understanding of French life") and includes a good discussion of essays and books which are sensitive to a



Sioux pictographs from *Winter Counts*: a) measles; b) whooping cough; c) smallpox; d) starvation; e) dropsy; and f) cholera.

Native-American perspective. Although some historians might challenge some of Grinde's recommendations, almost all would agree with his conclusion that "a critical and potent Native voice . . . will enrich the multivocality of American history and widen our perspectives" (19). □

#### Endnotes

1. *American Historical Association Newsletter* 7 (February, 1969), 17; Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 653-72, and *passim*. In this essay the author has used the terms "Native American" and "Indian" interchangeably. Although "Native

American" currently is utilized by academics, "Indian" is used more often within the reservation communities.

2. Alvin M. Josephy Jr., ed., *America in 1492: The World of the Indian Peoples Before the Arrival of Columbus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); Francis Jennings, *The Founders of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); and Lynda Norene Shaffer, *Native Americans Before 1492: The Moundbuilding Centers of the Eastern Woodlands* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1992).

3. Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); Henry Dobyns, *Their Numbers Be-*

*come Thinned* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973); and Charles Hudson and Carmen Chaves Tesser, eds., *The Forgotten Centuries: Indians and Europeans in the American South, 1521-1704* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

4. Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival*; Dobyns, *Their Numbers Become Thinned*; and Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971).
5. Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967); James Axtell, "Imagining the Other: First Encounters in North America," in Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Also see essays by Axtell in his *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and in his *After Columbus: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
6. Bernard Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility: Indians and Englishmen in Colonial Virginia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); James Rawls, *The Indians of California: The Changing Image* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984); and Robert Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).
7. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in George Rogers Taylor, ed., *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* rev. ed. (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1956), 2; and Frances Jennings, *The Invasion of America* (New York: Norton, 1975).
8. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in*



- the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); and John Mack Farragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Times of an American Pioneer* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992).
9. Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).
  10. R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); R. David Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984); and Gregory Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992).
  11. Joel Martin, *Sacred Revolt: The Muskogee Struggle for a New World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); and Joseph B. Herring, *Kennekuk, the Kickapoo Prophet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988).
  12. James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890, Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1896); Robert M. Utey, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); and Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul, and John E. Carter, *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).
  13. James Axtell, "Dr. Wheelock's Little Red School House," in Axtell, ed., *The European and the Indian*, 87-109.
  14. Francis La Flesche, *The Middle Five: Indian Schoolboys of the Omaha Tribe*

(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963); Luther Standing Bear, *My People the Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975); and Michael C. Coleman, *American Indian Children at School, 1850-1930* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 194-5.

15. K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); and Devon A. Mihesuah, *Cultivating the Rosebuds: The Education of Women at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1851-1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and Robert A. Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).
16. "In the White Man's Image," produced for *The American Experience* (PBS) by Matthew Jones, 1992; "Where the Spirit Lives," produced for *American Playhouse* by Heather Golden, Eric Jordan, and Mary Young Leckie, (Amazing Spirit Productions Ltd.), 1989.
17. Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); and Deloria, *God is Red* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1973).
18. Donald A. Grinde, Jr. and Bruce E. Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy* (Los Angeles: University of California Regents and the UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1991); and Oren Lyons and John Mohawk, eds., *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations, and the U.S. Constitution* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1992).
19. Donald A. Grinde Jr., "Teaching American Indian History: A Native American Voice," *Perspectives* 32 (September 1994): 1, 11-6; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).


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