

MISCELLANY

NATIVE AMERICAN: EVIDENCE OF AN EARLIER USE

THE EARLIEST WRITTEN EVIDENCE of *Native American* in the sense of ‘American Indian’ is recorded by *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition (W10)* as having occurred in 1925. This is based on a single citation from the *Abilene Kansas Weekly Reflector* (22 Sept. 1925), which includes the following passage:

Big Sheep, a Crow Indian, was arrested and convicted in the district court for Big Horn county, charged with possession of narcotics. Federal agents found in his possession a sack containing 56 mescal buttons.

Big Sheep explained that he is a leader of the congregation of the Native American church and that the decoction from the buttons is a necessary part of the ritual of the church. State and federal laws say it is a prohibited narcotic [*sic*].

The basis for claiming that *Native American* in this citation means ‘American Indian’ depends on the fact that *church* is not capitalized.¹ The “Native American Church,” from which *Native American* is said to derive, refers to a religious group identified chiefly with the Navaho Indians. It originated about 1890 but was not known as the “Native American Church” until 1918, when other Indian peoples joined the movement (*Columbia Encyclopedia* 1993). The hallucinogen mescaline, derived from the peyote cactus, was taken as part of the religious ritual. As the citation makes clear, the religious practice of taking mescaline ran afoul of federal law.

The basis for claiming that *Native American* refers to ‘American Indian’ in the 1925 citation of *W10* seems extremely doubtful. To rely so much on the lack of capitalization of *church* in the context of this citation surely strains credibility, especially in light of the typographical error for *narcotic* in the same newspaper article. Can we believe that the editors were so scrupulous in their fidelity to grammar that their use of lower-case *church* meant that they were not referring to the Native American Church as an entity, even in the context of a dispute about this church’s use of a forbidden drug?

The Second Barnhart Dictionary of New English (BDNE2, 316–17) endorses the derivation of *Native American* from *Native American Church* but gives a date nearly half a century later (1973) for the earliest recorded use, citing a passage by William Buckley in the *National Review*. The editors give the following etymology:

This name was popularized in the early 1970’s by civil-rights activists to emphasize that the Indians were the earliest native inhabitants of America and to call attention to the discriminatory practices they were subjected to over the centuries. The new name probably derives from the designation *Native American Church* (known

since the early 1950's), referring to a religious denomination of American Indians which combines traditional Indian beliefs and rituals with aspects of Christianity.

The Native American Church was known long before the 1950s, but perhaps not nationally known, and *BDNE2* may be right in citing the Church as the source of *Native American*. *BDNE2* also mentions the earlier nineteenth-century use of *Native American* in the Native American Party, which, incidentally, the *Century Dictionary* (1896) records as "Native American party," not "Native American Party," and describes as follows:

in *U.S. hist.*, an organization based on hostility to participation of foreign immigrants in American politics, and to the Roman Catholic Church, formed about 1842. In 1844 it carried the city elections of New York and Philadelphia, and elected a number of Congressmen. It gained no further successes, and disappeared within a few years, after occasioning destructive riots against Roman Catholics in Philadelphia and other places.

The *OEDS* records a 1956 citation for *Native American* that uses "Native American churchmen" in a way that could be interpreted as referring to 'American Indians' rather than to 'members of the Native American Church'; but, while better than the *W10* citation of 1925, it is still ambiguous. *OEDS*'s first unambiguous citation for *Native American* is, like *BDNE2*'s, that of 1973.

One of the earliest records of *Native American* 'American Indian' may, in fact, have had nothing to do with the Native American Church, as it surely had nothing to do with the Native American Party.

HENRY CHAPMAN MERCER AND "FONTHILL"

Henry Chapman Mercer (1856–1930) was an American archaeologist who wrote at least 55 scientific papers and several books during his lifetime on a variety of subjects. Prehistory and the original settlement of his native region (Bucks County in Pennsylvania) were of particular interest to him, and he was curator of American and prehistoric archaeology at the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania from 1894–97. But he is probably best known today for his distinctive tile-making, for which he claimed several new patents. His mosaic tiles were widely used in the early part of the twentieth century in churches and private homes, since his designs, and the manufacturing process he employed, enabled him to depict more elaborate scenes on his tiles than were otherwise available in this country. In 1907 he planned a house, called "Fonthill," in which he would display the immense variety of his tiles. As he himself recorded, the house was built in three summers, 1908, 1909, and 1910.² It is an incredible place, lined

from top to bottom with tiles of every description, and it is now open to the public as a museum.

On a recent visit to this museum, I noticed a ceiling tile in the Columbus Room, dedicated to the story of the discovery of the New World, in which American Indians were depicted. The tile bears, in raised letters as an essential part of the tile, the following inscription: "FIRST KNOWN PICTURE OF NATIVE AMERICAN / PUBLISHED AT AVGSBERG CIRCA ANNO MD." Inquiry soon established that the Columbus Room in which this tile appears was built in 1909 and that the tile was original to the room (see figure 1).³ The inscription on the tile refers to an engraving of American Indians printed in *The Narrative and Critical History of America* (1886, 2: 19), edited by Justin Winsor, then Librarian of Harvard University. Mercer was himself a graduate of Harvard in 1879 and may even have known Winsor. In any case, there is no doubt about the source. As one might expect, there is considerably more detail in the engraving than in the tile, but the relationship is clear. The engraving shows a group of half-naked people wearing headdresses of feathers, who are gathered in small groups or standing alone. The entire scene is on a shore, with the sea (and two sailing vessels) in the background. A crude canopy of rough-cut timbers provides minimal shelter to part of the group. A seated woman is seen nursing a child. A standing man holds a bow as large as he is. To the left a

FIGURE 1

Photograph of the Ceiling of the Fonthill's Columbus Room
(Collection of the Fonthill Museum of the Bucks County Historical Society)



man is shown biting into a severed arm, while a decapitated head and severed limbs hang from a nearby tree. Close by, a man and woman stand close together in what is presumably to be taken as a sensual and savage embrace: the man seems to kiss the woman; her hand appears to be on his thigh. The figure in the book contains only the legend "AMERICANS" with the following footnote:

This is the earliest representation which we have of the natives of the New World, showing such as were found by the Portuguese on the north coast of South America. It has been supposed that it was issued in Augsburg somewhere between 1497 and 1504, for it is not dated. The only copy ever known to bibliographers is not now to be traced. Stevens, *Recoll. of James Lenox*, p. 174. It measures 13½ x 8½ inches, with a German title and inscription, to be translated as follows . . . [Here follows a lengthy description of brown-skinned cannibals who are said to live to the age of 150 years!]⁴

Nothing is less surprising than that Mercer, with his keen interest and archaeologist's knowledge of early settlements, would have been familiar with the *Narrative and Critical History of America* and used it as a source for some of his tiles. I suggest that the legend under the engraving—"Americans"—is the most likely source for his own description of the Indians on his tile. The very first sentence in the book's description refers to the Indians as "natives of the New World." It is reasonable to suppose that Mercer simply adopted the legend of the source for his tile along with the illustration itself and coined *Native American* as a nonce word to describe the people depicted. If this supposition is correct, the putative earliest use of *Native American* had nothing to do with the Native American Church. Whether later uses do, we do not know. It is certainly possible that the modern use of *Native American* derives from the eponymous church, but it is also possible that the modern use, like Mercer's earlier one, was a coinage based on the reasonable conjunction of *American* with *native*, to distinguish these Americans from all subsequent immigrants. While Mercer's tile can hardly be represented as the source of the modern use, it may represent the earliest recorded evidence of *Native American* in unambiguous reference to the American Indian. It appears indeed to have been a nonce use, since there is no evidence Mercer ever used it before or later.⁵

NOTES

I am grateful to my brother, Martin Landau, for his help in obtaining information and photographs that contributed substantially to the preparation of this note.

1. Personal communication from Frederick Mish, Editor-in-Chief of *W10*. I am grateful to Mr. Mish for providing me with a copy of this citation.

2. "The Building of 'Fonthill,' at Doylestown, Pennsylvania, in 1908, 1909 and 1910," typewritten description found among Mercer's papers, reprinted in *Memo-*

rial Services, Sat., May 3, 1930, published by the Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, PA. Mercer was president of the Bucks County Historical Society for 20 years (1911 to his death).

3. Personal communication from David April, Site Administrator of the Fonthill Museum of the Bucks County Historical Society. I am grateful to Mr. April for his kind cooperation in this and in other related matters that required confirmation or information.

4. The engraving is a copy of a woodcut believed to have been published in 1505 and based on an account by Amerigo Vespucci, part of which Winsor translated from the German. In the left quadrant, Mercer's tile displays the word *CARIBS*, referring to an Indian people thought to be cannibals. Indeed, in the sixteenth century the word *Carib* was synonymous with *cannibal*. However, there is no evidence that the Indians depicted in the original woodcut were Caribs. Winsor makes no reference to Caribs (see *Columbus and the New World* 1989–90, 8), and a contemporary source identifies the Indians as the Tupinamba (Sturtevant 1976, 1: 420).

5. Mercer apparently never used *Native American* 'American Indians' in any of his books or articles. A close examination of *The Lenape Stone* (1885), his first book, devoted to an analysis of an archaeological discovery supposedly originated by the Lenape (Delaware) Indians, reveals no such uses; *Indian* or *North American Indian* is used throughout. David April, who is far more familiar with Mercer's work than I am, has told me that he has never seen *Native American* used in any of Mercer's written work and does not believe it was used. My own check of several of Mercer's works most likely to include allusions to Indians confirmed this.

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