




MISCELLANY

COMPUTER-ASSISTED EVIDENCE FOR THE ANTIQUITY OF THE TERM *NATIVE AMERICAN*

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In a 1994 article in *American Speech*, the distinguished lexicographer Sidney I. Landau (1994, 202–3) pointed out that the *Second Barnhart Dictionary of New English* (BDNE2 1980) describes the term *Native American* as a “new name” for American Indians, which “probably derives from the designation *Native American Church* . . . referring to a religious denomination of American Indians which combines traditional Indian beliefs and rituals with aspects of Christianity.” The BDNE2’s earliest citation for the term is dated 1973. Landau also noted that *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* (1972–86) has an ambiguous citation dated 1956, with its first clear example from 1973. He found that the files of the Merriam-Webster dictionaries contain a 1925 citation from a Kansas newspaper, also ambiguous. Landau then presented his own research, through which he discovered a 1909 inscription, “First Known Pictvre [*sic*] of Native American,” in a home built by the archaeologist Henry Chapman Mercer.

Landau’s article was the product of sophisticated research using traditional techniques of historical lexicography that went well beyond what others had unearthed. He used historical dictionaries, the largest lexicographical citation file, and his own discovery to arrive at a picture of *Native American* as a term dating to the early twentieth century. Yet this picture is an entirely wrong one. *Native American* was a common phrase in the nineteenth century, and its origins trace to the eighteenth century or earlier, which is not surprising in view of the obviousness of the collocation of the two words. I know this because I have applied a novel type of research, searching electronic historical texts, to the question of the antiquity of *Native American*. Such techniques will not always improve upon the results of conventional historical-lexicographical methods by any means, but in some cases, such as the present one, they yield dramatic results transforming our understanding of the word or expression under examination.

In two previous articles in *American Speech* (Shapiro 1998, 1999), I described one such transformative investigation of the origins of a term,

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namely, the sentence adverb *hopefully*. I explained that full-text on-line databases, both commercial services such as Lexis-Nexis and scholarly resources such as JSTOR, allow large collections of historical texts to be fully searched and sorted by date. As the size, diversity, and chronological depth of these electronic resources expand, they become increasingly powerful tools for uncovering early occurrences of words and phrases.

I searched for *Native American* in a number of scholarly databases on the World Wide Web, including Making of America (a digital library of primary sources in American social history), Early Canadiana Online (a collection of primary sources in Canadian history), and Internet Library of Early Journals (20-year runs of two nineteenth-century British periodicals). I also searched for this phrase in the electronic version of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, which sometimes allows one to find quotations containing a term that are earlier than the first use for that term printed at the corresponding headword.

My searches yielded many nineteenth-century examples of *Native American* and two occurrences from the 1700s. The oldest usage is dated 1737 and appears in the *OED*'s entry for the word *Creole*. The second oldest is from a 1795 book included in Early Canadiana Online. I list all the pre-1850 citations below, together with identification of which electronic resource produced the citation. (I exclude citations that employed *Native American* in the sense, also common in the 1800s, of a person of European descent born in the United States.) These examples push back the historical record, not only of *Native American* used as a noun, but also of that term used attributively (see 1824 and 1849 quotations below).

APPENDIX

Citations for *Native American*

- 1737 *Common Sense* (1738) I. 280 (*OED*, sv *Creole*) As to his Birth and Parentage, I cannot say whether he is a Native American or a Creole, nor is it material.
- 1795 W Winterbotham *An Historical, Commercial, and Philosophical View of the American United States* 88 (Early Canadiana Online) One great peculiarity in the native Americans is their colour, and the identity of it throughout the whole extent of the continent.
- c.1806 Cornwall Bayley *Canada: A Descriptive Poem, Written at Quebec, 1805* 19 (Early Canadiana Online) Since the poem on Canada was committed to the press, the author has met with several little treatises upon the subject of the origin of native Americans.

- 1824 William H Keating *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, &c., &c.* 372 (Early Canadiana Online) Soon after our arrival at the lodge, an Indian entered it, whom it required but little skill in physiognomy, to mark out immediately as a stranger; his complexion was at least one shade darker than that of the Dacotas; his features differed materially; his face was rounder and shorter; his mouth was wider; his eyes had more of the European than native American character.
- 1830 John Tanner *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* 387 (Early Canadiana Online) The idea has been a favourite one with many ingenious and pious men, that in our native Americans we see the long lost tribes of Israel.
- 1836 John McIntosh *The Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus* 40 (Early Canadiana Online) One great peculiarity in the native Americans is their colour, and the identity of it throughout the whole extent of the continent, except the coasts of Labrador, as we have already mentioned.
- 1838 *Princeton Review* X. 301 (Making of America) Nations, in whom the brain is large have always conquered and oppressed at pleasure those who were so unfortunate as to have smaller heads. When, and by whom, has this important historical fact been ascertained? The only confirmation of it given by Mr. Combe is the subjugation of the Hindoos, and the native Americans, by Europeans.
- 1842 James C Prichard *Natural History of Man* 20 (*OED*, sv *mixture*) The tribe of people, termed . . . Cafusos . . . are known to have sprung originally from a mixture of native Americans with the Negroes imported from Africa.
- 1845 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 57: 101 (Internet Library of Early Journals) She stood like an ancient pillar, to point out where the building it once belonged to was placed; and was looked upon by her descendants pretty much as a native American looks upon a venerable squaw of some Indian nation—the connecting link between New York and the woods.
- 1849 S G Goodrich *Lives of Celebrated American Indians* 43 (Early Canadiana Online) The genius of Ercilla, as well as that of Lope de Vega, has been exercised in celebrating his [Caupolican's] patriotism, and the military exploits by which the Spanish invaders were taught to respect and fear the prowess of the native Americans.
- 1849 George Warburton *The Conquest of Canada* 228 (Early Canadiana Online) To the first inquirers into the religious faith of the native Americans, the subject of their mythology presented very great difficulties and complications; those Indians who attempted to explain it to Europeans, had themselves no distinct or fixed opinions. *Id.* 384 Their hosts called themselves Illinois . . . Marquette considered them the most civilised of the native American nations.
- 1850 George Law trans J B Boussingault *Rural Economy* 153 (Making of America) *Chica*. This and the former dye-stuff are in use among the native Americans for staining the skin.

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