

# Sketch of the Brothertown Indians

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By Thomas Commuck

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Wisconsin:*

SIR:—My means of furnishing interesting information, such as would be acceptable to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, being extremely limited, I have thought that it would not be wholly uninteresting to give a small sketch of the *Brothertown Indians*, who, as you probably are well aware, are now enjoying all the rights, privileges, and immunities of citizenship, and who now, are a part and parcel of that heterogeneous mass of human beings, of almost "all nations, tongues, and kindred," who have happily chosen Wisconsin as their "Home, Sweet Home;" and although the sketch may contain many grammatical errors (the writer never having studied that branch of English education), still, it is hoped, that you will be able to comprehend it.

It is a well known fact in American history, that at the time of the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth Rock, there were several powerful Indian tribes inhabiting the Atlantic coast in the state of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York. It is equally well known, that fierce and bloody wars were waged and carried on between the whites and said tribes, until the latter became nearly extinct, and those who survived were so crushed in spirit as to excite no fear, and as little notice or interest in the public mind at that time. And as the country grew up and increased in the number, wealth and enterprise of their civilized and christianized conquerors, the small and scattered remnants of those once powerful tribes, sank in a corresponding degree into insignificance, and scarce received a passing notice amidst the mighty rush and bustle

consequent upon the planting and consolidating a mighty Republic; and even at the present time, it is perhaps thought by thousands of American born citizens, that some, if not all, of the aforesaid tribes, have become now entirely extinct—if not, they ask, Where are they? The answer to this question forms the subject of this letter.

Some time in the year 17—, I am unable to give the precise date, but it was many years after the tribes above spoken of were conquered and dispersed, some here and some there, an Indian by the name of David Fowler, of the Montauk tribe, who lived on the east end of Long Island, having acquired a tolerable English education, took a tour into the interior of the State of New York.\* Fortunately, he fell in with a large and powerful tribe of his "Red Brethren," called the "Oneidas," the principal chief of whom, finding that Fowler possessed a good degree of the "book learning," and other useful knowledge of the "pale faces," kindly invited him to set up his lodge, and rest among them awhile; and in the meantime to open a school for educating the children of the Nation. To this proposition, Fowler consented, and remained among them a year or eighteen months; during this time the chief made many enquiries relative to his red brethren in the East, particularly of the following tribes, to wit:—*Narragansetts, Pequots, Montauks, Mohegans, Nahanticks*, and another tribe who were called *Farmington Indians*, what their Indian name was is unknown. Fowler gave a true statement of the fallen

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\*This first visit of David Fowler to the Oneidas was in June, 1761, and continued till the ensuing August, when he returned to the white settlements, having in charge three Mohawk youth, one of whom was the famous Joseph Brant, to be educated at Wheelock's Indian School. Fowler had entered this School at Lebanon, about 1759; and after his return from the Oneidas and Mohawks, in 1761, continued his studies; and in March, 1765, was approved as an Indian teacher, and set out for the Oneida Nation on the 29th of April following. He at once commenced his Indian School at Canajoharie; but a famine which visited Western New York this year, obliged the Oneidas to remove in search of food to another quarter, and Fowler returned to New England for further aid. "We have no means," says Dr. O'Callaghan, "of following up the remainder of his career, but he is stated to have been alive in 1811, at Oneida, an industrious farmer and useful man." See Wheelock's *Indian Narrative of 1763*; and *Doc. Hist. of N. Y.*, vol. iv.—L. C. D.

and degraded condition of those tribes, and ended by intimating, that unless they soon emigrated to some more friendly clime, where they would be more free from the contaminating influence, and evil example, etc., of their white brethren, and be farther removed from that great destroyer, worst of all, "*Fire-Water*," they would become wholly extinct. The Oneida chief listened with deep emotion to the pitiful, yet truthful tale, of the many wrongs and oppressions, insults and stratagems, that had, from time to time, been unsparingly practiced upon them, and saw at once, that not a glimmering beam of hope shone along their pathway, to cheer their gloomy condition, and beckon them onwards to a prospect of a brighter future; and at the close of the narrative, very generously gave to Mr. Fowler, for the benefit of his eastern brethren, a very valuable tract of land, about twelve miles square, situated fourteen miles south of where the city of Utica, N. Y., now stands; at the time instructing him to return without a moment's delay, to his own tribe, and spread the glad news among the other tribes, and endeavor to prevail on as many as possible, from each tribe, to emigrate as soon as convenient, and take possession of the same. These instructions Mr. Fowler carried out, and in due course of time, a few from each of said tribes emigrated and took possession of the tract, and commenced a settlement; and in consequence of the good wishes, and kind and brotherly feelings that actuated and bound them together, they unanimously concluded to call the new settlement by the name of *Brothertown*, and thus a *new Nation* sprang into existence, phoenix-like, from the ashes (if I may so call it), of six different tribes, and they were ever after, while they remained in the State of New York, known as the Brothertown tribe of Indians.

Here, sir, I might leave them, and let it be again supposed that they had become extinct; but the fact that the writer hereof (who is a Narragansett), united them in 1825, and has continued with them until the present time, he trusts will be deemed a sufficient apology, if he feels inclined to continue

their history to the present time, after their settlement in their new home as aforesaid. Their pale-faced brethren began, after awhile, to settle among them, worked some of their land on shares, some leased the lands for a term of years, and, in some instances, for the extraordinary term of ninety-nine years; and at their own risk, commenced making valuable improvements, both in clearing the lands and erecting buildings. It will readily be perceived, that such a procedure would, in process of time, lead to difficulties and perplexities. As might have been expected, the white men refused to leave the soil until they had received ample, and, in some instances, extortionate, sums of money, as indemnity for their improvements. Finally such strife and contention grew out of this state of affairs, that the parties found it necessary to apply to the Government of the State of New York, to adjust their difficulties. On examination, the Legislature found the case so complex, and the claims of each party such, that equal justice could not be meted out to each in any other manner than to divide the whole tract of land into two equal parts. The Indians were then allowed to choose one part, and all the whites who were found residing on such part, were forthwith required to leave, and settle on the other half of the town or tract, and all the Indians who were found residing on the last-mentioned half, were required to remove on to the first-chosen part. The part on which the whites now found themselves, was then thrown into market, and the money arising from the sale thereof, was deposited in the Treasury of the State of New York, for the benefit of the Brothertown Indians. It will be borne in mind, however, that the whites were first indemnified for their improvements, out of said money, when the Brothertowns drew the interest on the remainder, annually, until the year 1841, when they petitioned and drew out the principal, about \$30,000.

After their difficulties were adjusted by the Legislature, as aforesaid, the whites and Brothertowns lived as neighbors, and trafficked together in peace and harmony for several years; and

the Legislature passed several acts which were intended as a safeguard to their rights and property. This code had its desired effect for a while, but at length the genius of the ever-restless pale-face discovered flaws in said code, of which they took advantage, and immediately commenced trespassing, by cutting and carrying away much valuable timber. This, of course, led to much litigation, which, in the end, was almost sure to prove disastrous to the poor Indian; for the white man could carry away fifty or a hundred dollars worth of timber, and when sued, the Indian would obtain a sixpenny judgment against him. And, even if anything like a righteous judgment was obtained, the trespasser would carry the suit up, and thus again the Indian would, in the end, make a losing business, in the shape of lawyers' fees. Added to all of these discouragements, intemperance began to prevail, to an alarming extent, among the Nation. What was to be done? Annihilation began again to stare them in the face, as it had formerly done on the Atlantic coast. Once more the subject of seeking out a new home in the Far West, was agitated and fairly discussed, and, after the most mature deliberation, the Brothertowns concluded to send delegates to treat with some of their red brethren of the West, for a portion of their lands. An attempt was first made in Indiana, which failed, though two or three individuals succeeded in obtaining a half section of land each, by a clause in the treaty with the Delawares in 1818. These individual tracts were sold by the parties, by consent of the President of the United States, but unfortunately for the purchasers, and their successors, the heirs of said Indians who obtained and sold said half sections, discovered, a few years ago, that there was some want of legality in the purchase by the whites, and the said heirs-at-law set up a claim to the said lands, and the question is now at issue between them and the whites, who are in possession, and who will probably finally triumph.

About the same time above spoken of, the Stockbridge, Munsee, Seneca, Tuscarora, and Oneida tribes were negotia-

ting a treaty, by consent of the President of the United States, with the Menomonee, Winnebago, and other tribes who owned the country at and around Green Bay. They succeeded in making a purchase of a large tract of land, and partly paid for it, but unfortunately they were likely to fail in being able to pay up the last installment; and, at this critical juncture, the Brothertowns, who had also sent delegates to Green Bay to obtain lands, were told by the Stockbridges, Munsees, &c., that if they would advance money to pay up the last installment, they should become equal owners in the whole purchase. This the Brothertowns did, and once more fondly began to anticipate an end to all their difficulties and perplexities. This, I believe, was in 1827. This treaty was ratified by the President, and Senate of the United States; but by the interference of certain prominent and self-interested individuals, who resided at Green Bay, and who were aided by the influence of certain Government officials, the several tribes concerned came very near being cheated out of their purchase. It would be tedious to go into all the particulars of this nefarious and scandalous attempt. Suffice it to say, that after the most strenuous exertions of the tribes, from year to year, which was necessarily accompanied with the expenditure of large sums of money, during a course of some ten or twelve years, they at last succeeded in securing, each, a small reservation. By this final adjustment, the Brothertowns obtained one township of land, eight miles long by four miles wide, on the east side of Winnebago Lake; and this in lieu of a tract thirty by twelve miles square, which they in justice and equity ought to have had. As early as 1831, four families of the Brothertowns emigrated from the State of New York, and took possession of what they justly considered their lands, and remained there until the final settlement of their difficulties. The whole tribe then emigrated in a very few years, and commenced clearing up farms, in the dense forest, which covered their whole township. Having no laws which they could enforce, for the protection of their lives and

property, and having, in all their ways, manner of living, appearance in dress, and speech (not having spoken or known anything of their own tongue for one hundred years), become perfectly assimilated to their white brethren, they concluded to petition Congress for citizenship. Their prayer was granted, and an act was passed for their benefit, on the third day of March, A. D. 1839. From that time they have lived under the laws of the State, have officers of their own in most cases, and have sent three of their own men as members of the Legislature, to-wit: William Fowler, Alonzo D. Dick, and W. H. Dick. These men are noted in one of the volumes of Gen. Smith's History of Wisconsin, as being "Stockbridge Indians;" but this is a palpable mistake, as they were all three Brothertown Indians. It is to be hoped that this error will be corrected in future editions of this work.

#### Indian Words of the Narragansett Tribe

Suck-wish, . . . . .	Come in.
We-quo-sen, . . . . .	How do you do, <i>or</i> good morning.
Much-a-chucks, . . . . .	Boy.
Taw-but-nee, . . . . .	Thank you.
Chee-boy, . . . . .	Devil, <i>or</i> Evil Spirit.
Quett-hunk, . . . . .	A stick to poke the fire with.

The above words are all I know of the language of my tribe. I am now nearly 52 years of age. They were taught me by my grandmother when I was a little boy. She died in 1825, aged 84 years. These words were taught her, by her mother, when she (my grandmother), was a little girl. You may judge from this how long it must be since the Brothertowns used their native tongue.

A few more words and I will close this already too long communication. Here, then, are the Brothertown Indians on the east side of Winnebago Lake, in Calumet County, trying to imitate our white brethren in all things except their vices.—Here we have taken our last stand, as it were, and are resolved

to meet manfully, that overwhelming tide of fate, which seems destined, in a few short years, to sweep the Red Man from the face of existence. The thought is a sad and gloomy one, but the fiat seems to have gone forth, and we must submit. Already, has intermarriage with the whites so changed the Brothertowns, in complexion, that three-quarters of them would be readily considered as white, were they where not known, and in another generation our *Indian blood* will probably become so intermixed with the general mass of mankind, that if the inquiry is made, Where are the Brothertown Indians? echo will answer, *Where?*

Thus, Sir, I have endeavored to give a true outline, or sketch, detailing who the Brothertown Indians are, which I respectfully dedicate to the State Historical Society. If it shall be deemed worthy of acceptance, happy shall I be. But if it shall be deemed worthy only of the flames, let it be so; even in that case, I shall have one consolation—that I have contributed all that lay in my power.

I have the honor to subscribe myself,

Yours most respectfully,

THOMAS COMMUCK.\*

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\*Poor Commuck! The following winter after penning the preceding sketch, he was drowned, through a hole in the ice, near his residence, in Calumet County — whether by accident or design, is not known. In the 1st vol. of *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, is a brief *Sketch of Calumet County*, from his pen. He was a true friend of the Historical Society; and had he lived a few years longer, he would doubtless have contributed additional papers of historic interest. His love for preserving the history of his people should shame many a white man whose opportunities have been far greater, but whose contributions have been — nothing.—L. C. D.