Shinnecock Notes
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SHINNECOCK NOTES.

DURING several summers of archæological work on Long Island for the American Museum of Natural History I heard many conflicting reports concerning the Shinnecock Indians; some to the effect that the tribe was extinct, that the people on the Reserve were all negroes, and showed no Indian characteristics whatever. Other reports were more favorable. It was not until the spring of 1902, however, that I had an opportunity to visit the place, and discover the truth of the matter.

The Shinnecock Reservation is situated just west of Southampton on the south shore of Long Island, about eighty miles from New York city. Although an Indian reservation in name, little is apparent at first glance to indicate that such is the fact; it seems to be a negro settlement pure and simple. But a closer examination shows that many of the people have Indian blood. Some are black and woolly headed, having at the same time facial characteristics distinctly Indian. Others have the straight hair and light color of the Indian, but the flat nose, large dull eyes, and thick lips of the negro. A few of the men are typically Indian. Of these, Wickam Cuffee is the best example. He is Indian in color and feature, and claims to be full blooded, but the slight curl in his hair seems to point to some admixture. He speaks with a Yankee accent, and gladly tells all he knows of the old times. Andrew Cuffee, the blind ex-whaler, also presents many Indian characteristics, while Charles Bunn (with a slight tinge of negro) and John Thompson (part white) are good types. Very few of the young men show Indian characteristics. A number of the women are pure or nearly pure blooded Indian. Among them are Mary Brewer,[1] Mary Ann Cuffee, and Mrs. Waters. The preponderance of women over men is accounted for by the drowning of most of the Indian men when the ship Circassian, stranded off Easthampton, was destroyed, on December 31, 1876, by a sudden storm. Then it was that the corpses of the Shinnecock salvers, each incased in a mass of frozen sand, were found scattered along the bleak ocean beach from Amagansett to Montauk. Thus perished the flower of the tribe — the expert whalers who had sailed on many successful voyages out of Sag Harbor or New Bedford — the men whom their white neighbors still speak of as being "noble-looking, strong, and tall."

Many of the survivors, especially the younger ones, have left the reservation, and are now scattered abroad. The only Indian children seen during my entire stay were visitors from Shinnecock families settled elsewhere.

[1] Mary Brewer died December 6, 1902.

Wigwams are distinctly remembered by all the old people, who describe them as follows: Poles were bent into intersecting arches until a dome-shaped frame was made from ten to twenty feet in diameter. After all the poles had been tied firmly together, and horizontal strips put in place, the whole was thatched with a species of grass, called "blue vent," put on in overlapping rows, and sewed fast to the strips. When the top was reached, a hole was left open for the escape of smoke, and the edges of the aperture plastered with clay to prevent the thatch from catching fire. The ground plan was circular or oval, sometimes divided into rooms by partitions of wattle-work and thatch. The door frame was an arched pole, the door of wood, or sometimes merely a curtain of skin or mats. An elevated bench or couch of poles generally encircled the interior, beneath which the goods were stored. In at least one case, at a place where poles were difficult to procure, the floor was dug out in the middle so as to leave a shelf around the wall which answered the purpose of bed, seat, and table. The fireplace was in the centre. Even to-day outdoor storehouses are made by digging a hole and covering it with a roof of poles and thatch.

Wooden mortars were in general use. These were of two sizes: large, with a wooden or stone pestle, for preparing corn; and small, with stone pestle, for grinding herbs. I have been unable to procure specimens of the former, but succeeded in locating, and, after much argument with the owner, purchasing a very old herb mortar made of wood, together with its original stone pestle, handed down several generations at least, in the family of John Thompson. These mortars were made of sections of the trunk of the pepperidge tree, sometimes called tupelo or sour-gum, the wood of which is noted for its toughness and freedom from splitting. The hollows in the mortars were made by laying on live coals and scraping out the charred portion, renewing the coals until the required depth was reached. White oak and maple splints were used in the manufacture of baskets, which were either cylindrical or low-sided, the latter being oblong or circular. Fancy baskets, into whose composition sweet grass entered, were formerly made, but this art has become extinct. The only basket manufactured to-day is the cylindrical type identical with those made by the whites. The splints were sometimes dyed yellow, it is said, by a decoction of the inner bark of a species of oak. The "pack basket" was frequently used half a century ago for transporting burdens of all kinds. It was carried on the back by means of a band across the forehead. Eel traps were also made of the oak splints. Serviceable brushes for cleaning pots are made by splitting the end of a white oak stick into small splints, the process of whittling and splitting taking about half an hour for each "scrub."

Large brooms were also formerly made in this style. Broad flat wooden ladles were common in old times; but few are left to-day. Many of these resemble closely the butter-ladles of the whites. Bows were of hickory, and as long as the men who used them. I doubt if any bows can now be found outside of a private collection. Corn was prepared as hominy and samp, or as "suppawn" (corn meal mush), but the favorite way was to hull the corn with wood ashes, wash it free of lye, pound it in a wooden mortar, separate the hard parts by tossing in a flat basket, and finally cook it in the form of dumplings mixed with huckleberries or beans according to the season.

It is probably fifty or sixty years since the Shinnecock language died out of use — it was spoken in the childhood of such people as Wickam Cuffee, seventy-five years old, and Mary Ann Cuffee, eighty-one years old, by their parents. The few words collected are given below, together with similar words in two other Algonkian languages.[1] The first two examples were obtained from Mahe Bradley at Poosepatuck; the others are Shinnecock.[2] Unmarked vowels are short, and c = sh. The Sauk and Fox words have a "balanced accent," and the final vowels are almost silent: —

English.	Poosepatuck and Shinnecock.	Sauk and Fox.	Abenaki.
turtle	matcík	meci'käha	
snake	skūk		skuks = snake or worm
woman	skwâ	i'kwäwa	skwā
child	papŭs	apenōha	
sea beach	siwā a		sīwán = salt
rain	kémio	kemīyāwi	
house	wíkam	wīkiyāpi	wikŏm
corn mush	suppán	tagwahāni	
shell fish	sétcawa		
thank you	tabutní		
greeting	háhcamī	hau!	
come quick	mekwí		

Very little was obtained in the way of folk-lore or traditions, but it is evident that such exist. More time devoted to the subject would doubtless rescue more words from oblivion, would accumulate a stock of folk-tales showing the negro influence on Indian stories, or vice versa, and would, in all probability, unearth many ethnological treasures from among the musty contents of the old garrets and lofts of the Shinnecock Indian Reservation.

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[1] The Sauk and Fox words were obtained from Mr. William Jones, and the Abenaki from Mr. Elijah Tahamont.

[2] Some of the words given as Shinnecock (*e. g. skwâ* and *papŭs*) may be borrowed from English, though primarily of Indian origin.