

## Changes in Wabanaki Treatment Since MollyOckett's Day Austin Bear grade 11 Telstar High School

Since white men have begun the exploration of the new world, they have been prejudiced against the peoples already living there. The explorers felt that the natives were beneath them, thinking they were like animals. The native people have suffered atrocities, been treated extremely cruelly, ranging from slavery, torture, and death. Even in Maine, the Wabanaki people have suffered, even having their children taken away. Slowly, conditions are changing, as new programs such as the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission have been started to help healing, and to support the Wabanaki to continue their culture and traditions. With the newer changes, conditions differ greatly for the Wabanaki and other Native Americans since MollyOckett's day.

Starting when Columbus "discovered" the Americas, the Natives Americans have been viewed as "savage," and less than human. They have been enslaved, and when that is not possible, they have been tortured and killed. While not always intentional, a large number of Indians died due to diseases, including smallpox, measles, cholera and bubonic plague. While the Europeans had immunity to the diseases due to being around domesticated animals, the Indians did not, because of their lack of proximity to goats, sheep, pigs, cows and other livestock. However, there were times that the Indians were poisoned. One such account was by Jeffrey Amherst, commander-in-chief of the British army at Fort Pitt. He gave orders to give the Indians blankets that had been infected by smallpox, "[Serving] to extirpate this execrable race."

Other run-ins were meant to be violent. Starving colonists would attack the villages in attempts to gain food. An

enormous toll was taken on the native population, between small battles, drawn-out wars, and forced labor systems called *encomiendas*.

Colonists were paid for each Indian killed, males bringing fifty pounds a scalp, females twenty-five, and children twenty pounds a scalp.

In 1830, the Federal Indian Removal Act brought on the "Trail of Tears", displacing 100,000 Indians from their homelands, when the Act caused the removal of what was considered the Five Civilized Tribes. These tribes included the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and the Seminole. In 1848, the California Gold Rush had major implications on Native American culture. Gravel and toxins ruined farming ground for Indians, causing starvation. There have been advancements in the last century, but they have been very slow. While they first started to get better in the early 1900s, deeper research showed the conditions in the reservations. This led to policies that included health care, education and land care. This caused withdrawal planning, which was meant to relocate natives into the cities, and forcible removal of children from their families. In 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed, protecting children, and the custody of their parents (United to End Genocide).

While some of the contact from the Europeans and Wabanaki people was peaceful trading, the Europeans considered the Indians to be savage, and uncivilized. Diseases wreaked havoc upon the people, and the white men stole from and captured the Wabanaki people. During both the French and Indian war, and the American Revolution, the Wabanaki fought to protect their own lands, being in the middle of the warring French and British. Starting in 1744, The English posted bounties upon them

scalps of the Wabanaki people. In 1879, the term was coined, “Kill the Indian, save the man”. Children were forcibly taken from their homes, trying to remove the Wabanaki culture, and turn them into an American (Wabanaki Timeline).

When they were taken away from their homes, the children were sent away to boarding schools. While there, they were regularly beaten and raped, sometimes murdered. They were prohibited of their Native cultural traditions, causing embarrassment, and loss of cultural identity. The abuse of the children escalated into abuse of all Native Americans, even the imprisonment and murder of spiritual leaders. Relocation led to living in poverty in cities, and many health problems including alcoholism (Transcending historical traumas).

While struggling, Maine slowly recognized more and more rights of the Wabanaki. The Indians received the right to vote in state elections in 1967, being the last state to do so. In 1975, the Wabanaki won recognition for a land claim, one of the most complex ligations ever brought before the US courts. ( International Center for Transitional Justice ). In 1999, Wabanaki leaders met with state agencies to help enforce the 1978 federal Indian Child Welfare Act. Not only setting a higher standard for protection, it laid the foundation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Bangor Daily News).

In 2011, Governor Paul LePage of Maine, by signing the Declaration of Intent, helped begin establishment of the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The commissioners of the TRC are both indigenous and non-indigenous, and all have different professional backgrounds. Rather than

working with archives and books, this commission works with the memory of people, and depends upon the experiences of people. It is meant to help the Wabanaki people heal from past abuse, as well as help Maine realize their responsibility for past practices. ( International Center for Transitional Justice ). One distinct part is that there is no blame, just making sure it will not happen again. The TRC has three main purposes, including creating understanding about what is happening to Wabanaki children through the welfare system, and acting on gained information to be able to better support the children, and promote healing to those who have suffered abuse ( University of Southern Maine).

There have been many changes since Molly Ockett's time, succeeding in helping to improve conditions on treatment, and child welfare. While slow, the truth and reconciliation commission has helped the Wabanaki people a great deal. Wabanaki people suffered from having their land taken from them in a white man's war, they suffered disease, and they suffered the loss of their children. These children suffered abuse, torture, and death. Finally conditions are getting better. While the Wabanaki people were cruelly treated, this treatment was not limited to the Northeast, rather, it was to all Native Americans, who suffered enslavement, torture and death. Slowly rising from the level of a "savage," the Wabanaki are slowly breaking free of a prejudice that is centuries old.



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