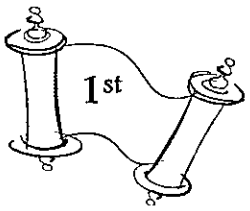
Race and Indian Policy in the Jeffersonian Era



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Ideas about race significantly shaped Indian policy and public opinion about Indians during the Jeffersonian era of 1770-1840. Jefferson himself believed that Indians were capable of reaching a level of equality with whites, but this idealistic view did not last long. By the 1840s, a shift in thinking had occurred leaving Indians inferior simply on the basis of race. The images portrayed to Americans in everyday life painted Indians in a negative and stereotypical light. Scientific research also played a major role in confirming that Indians were racially inferior, and public thought and policy began to reflect these ideas. "The political rhetoric of 1800 was permeated with optimism for the human race and a belief in racial improvability; that of 1850 with pessimism for inferior races and a belief in ineradicable racial weakness," says Reginald Horsman in his essay entitled "Scientific Racism and The American Indian in the Mid-Nineteenth Century.".[1] Thus, the Jeffersonian optimism of the early 1800s was replaced with Jacksonian pessimism that would last through the rest of the century.

Jefferson described the Indian as arduous, brave, noble, affectionate, and sensible, and wrote in Notes on the State of Virginia (1782) "that his vivacity and activity of mind is equal to ours in the same situation."[2] Jefferson believed that the differences between Indians and Europeans were "to be found, not in a difference of nature, but of circumstances."[3] A key statement in Jefferson's reasoning was that "we shall probably find that they are formed in mind as well as in body, on the same module with the Homo sapiens Europaeus."[4] This opinion about Indians was countered by Jefferson's belief that blacks were inferior to whites and were incapable "of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid."[5] Alexander Boulton notes that the ideas of race and slavery "were still in the process of being transformed from rather fluid and unrelated notions to their modern status as frequently conflated categories,"[6] but Anthony F. C. Wallace has written that the controversy over black slaves and free Indians

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[1] Reginald Horsman, "Scientific Racism and the American Indian in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," American Quarterly May 1975: 153.

[2] Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," Thomas Jefferson Digital Archive, University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1993, 7 Dec. 2006 <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefVirg.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all> 184-185.

[3] Jefferson 187. For discussions of Jefferson's ideas about the ability of Indians to civilize themselves, see Harold Hellenbrand, "Not 'To Destroy But to Fulfil': Jefferson, Indians, and Republican Dispensation," Eighteenth-Century Studies Autumn 1985: 523-549, and Reginald Horsman, "American Indian Policy in the Old Northwest, 1783-1812," The William and Mary Quarterly Jan. 1961: 35-53, and "British Indian Policy in the Northwest, 1807-1812," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review June 1958: 51-66.

[4] Jefferson 187.

[5] Roger Kennedy, "Jefferson and the Indians," Winterthur Portfolio Sum.-Aut. 1992: 106.

[6] Alexander O. Boulton, "The American Paradox: Jeffersonian Equality and Racial Science," American Quarterly Sept. 1995: 469.

became "a moral dilemma that bedeviled white Americans in Jefferson's time."[7] Although race-based slavery was an intrinsically American concept, the issue of race regarding the Indians tended to be less problematic, especially in the early nineteenth century. Bernard W. Sheehan noted that Jeffersonian era literature repeatedly used phrases like "dignified and circumspect," "reserved," "deliberate," and "composed" to describe Indian behavior,[8] and Sheehan concludes that "the Jeffersonian age thought highly of the Indian and the place in which he lived."[9] By the 1840s, however, these attitudes were replaced with ones that increasingly emphasized the Indians' racial inferiority.

One of the first examples of this shift appeared in popular culture. As John Coward writes in The Newspaper Indian, by the 1830s "in society and in the press, Indians were routinely judged by Anglo-American standards, a practice that emphasized their perceived weaknesses and slighted their achievements." Coward clarifies that "racial prejudice helps explain such treatment." "The bad Indian, a creature of violence and certain cruelty" is the Indian most vividly portrayed during the 1830s.[10] In The Savages of America, Roy Harvey Pearce provides further evidence of the negative portrayal of the Indian in the early nineteenth century by citing frontier accounts that report the Indian as feared and hated, a dangerous and seemingly blood-thirsty villain.[11] "In the nineteenth century, Indians were the subjects and objects of all kinds of speculation, research, polemic, and jeremiad in the worlds of science and letters," says Stephen Conn in History's Shadow.[12] Native Americans filled American paintings, lithographs, advertisements, and eventually photographs.[13] The images offered to the American public were of "small fact and great fiction," Pearce writes, yet they greatly affected the view of the Indian, influencing thought, action, and policy.[14] Such images, says Coward, "reinforced the identity of these Indians as ruthless, subhuman savages, resistant to the progress and incapable of civilization," an image that persisted through the nineteenth century.[15]

The thoughts and actions of the scientists began to reflect negative racial ideas about the Indians by the 1840s. This new focus "stressed the immutability of racial types and perceived race in deterministic terms and as the source of civilization."[16] Many Americans believed that differences between races were inherent and were signs of inferiority, especially

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[7] Anthony F.C. Wallace, Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 1999) 338.
[8] Bernard W. Sheehan, "Paradise and the Noble Savage in Jeffersonian Thought." The William and Mary Quarterly Jul. 1969: 353.
[9] Sheehan 358.
[10] Coward 56.
[11] Roy Harvey Pearce, The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965) 58.
[12] Steven Conn, History's Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 4.
[13] Conn 8.
[14] Pearce 58.
[15] Coward 61. For a discussion of how race became increasingly important in discussions of Indians, see Nancy Shoemaker, A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[16] Robert E. Bieder, Science Encounters the Indian, 1820-1880 (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1986) 55.

regarding Indians and blacks, and the public called for "more exact criteria by which to determine these racial differences and to ascertain what such variations really meant."[17] Scientists eagerly took up the study of race, and their ideas about "permanent racial inferiority, widely disseminated in books and magazines," says Horsman, and they began to "permeate political and diplomatic arguments."[18] As Robert Bieder explains, physician Samuel G. Morton's phrenological work directly reflected the growing racial concerns.

In *Crania Americana* (1839), Morton observed that Indian crania were smaller in volume than the crania of the Malayan, Mongolian, and Caucasian races,[19] and concluded "that the American race differs essentially from all others."[20] Thus, because Morton argued that brain size and intelligence were related, Indians were inferior in intelligence to those groups with a larger cranial size.[21] Bieder notes that phrenology "not only provided clues to the intellectual quality of the brain but also offered a theory that correlated biology with national character."[22] Therefore, Morton could not only connect brain size with intelligence and racial characteristics, "but also he could measure size against moral traits and cultural development."[23] Other phrenologists assumed that because Indians were not as intelligent as whites, this explained the Indian's rejection of or incapacity to absorb civilization.[24] Although Morton found several redeeming qualities of the Indian, these positive traits weren't enough to counter his overall perception of the Indian as "indolent, revengeful, dirty, lazy, and slow," a perception that many Americans at this time shared.[25] Morton's picture of the Indian was reflected in his scientific findings, and was very different from Jefferson's personal view of the Indian as different from whites only in circumstance.[26] Morton argued from a racialized point of view that dismissed Jefferson's culturally-based assumptions about the ability of Indians to transform themselves.

In perspective, Morton's conclusions served to explain why there were such varying ideas about progress in the world in the 1830s.[27] Cranial size seemed to confirm that some nations were not capable of advancing to the level of the Caucasians, and implied that Indians could never be civilized, although, in reality, these phrenological descriptions were reflections of American stereotypes.[28] Many people who were not phrenologists themselves agreed that "the Caucasian race was proved superior both in civilization and intelligence."[29] As Bieder

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[17] Bieder 63.
[18] Horsman 153-154.
[19] Bieder 69.
[20] Samuel George Morton, "Crania Americana; Or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America: To Which Is Prefixed, an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species," Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London 1840: 561.

[21] Bieder 69-70.
[22] Bieder 64.
[23] Bieder 64.
[24] Bieder 73.
[25] Bieder 75
[26] Bieder 76.
[27] Bieder 78.
[28] Bieder 80.
[29] Bieder 79-80.

says, "By linking racial differences to cranial measurements, phrenology seemingly provided scientific justification for popular conceptions of nonwhite racial inferiority."[30] Horsman also explains that by the end of the 1830s, "those who had been attracted by the idea of separate creations and innate physical differences were given substantial support by the publication of Samuel George Morton's very influential *Crania Americana.*"[31]

"...Morton's initial efforts were supported by other scientists and popularized by publicists and statesmen. The net result of such labors was to supply a 'scientific' basis for a theory of racial inequality," writes Edward Lurie in "Louis Agassiz and the Races of Man".[32] Other prominent scientists, including Josiah Clarke Nott and Joseph Campbell, expanded on Morton's ideas; "Nott's... and Campbell's statements underscore a continuing pattern of thought about the Indians during the 1840s," says Bieder.[33] Nott's remarks were especially characteristic of 1840s American views of the Indian, and although they were pessimistic, his thoughts were "tinged with a regret that suggests a final and imminent farewell."[34] Nott "used Morton's analysis of the Indian and the writings of earlier racial theorists to assert innate Indian inferiority and a complete confidence in the ultimate Indian disappearance."[35]

Bieder also explains that many Americans already believed a tragic end was in sight for the Indian, and that Morton's investigations seemed to provide the scientific proof for Indians' inevitable extinction."[36] The effects of such thinking were suggested in an 1844 essay by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft called "Our Indian Policy," in which Schoolcraft offered a justification of the government's Indian removal policy by using Morton's argument: "It is proved by history, that two essentially different states of society, with regard to arts and civilization, cannot both prosperously exist together, at the same time," wrote Schoolcraft.[37] Schoolcraft believed that the Indian was doomed "by undisputed 'scientific' facts."[38]

Because slavery was the only way Americans had been able to deal with nonwhites, and Indians were known to make inadequate slaves, and because their ability to civilize themselves seemed impossible because of racial limitations, removal across the Mississippi was the only way to remove them from the "white man's sphere of activity" until they could be dealt with further.[39] Morton's theories helped to provide support for Jackson's removal policy that appeased both the humanitarian and the polygenist critic.[40] As Horsman says, "The great popularity of the phrenologists in the mid-nineteenth century ensured a wide dissemination of these racial theories."[41] Also, Horsman writes that "Americans in general were delighted to

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[30] Bieder 79.
[31] Horsman 155.
[32] Edward Lurie, "Louis Agassiz and the Races of Man," Isis Sept. 1954: 230.
[33] Bieder 95.
[34] Bieder 97.
[35] Horsman 158.
[36] Bieder 97.
[37] Bieder 95.
[38] Horsman 164.
[39] Bieder 99.
[40] Bieder 99.
[41] Horsman 158.

accept new interpretations which provided a rationale for the failure of American Indian policy and a justification for the seemingly ruthless appropriation of Indian land."[42]

By the end of the Jeffersonian era American scientists were united in their rejection of the Jeffersonian belief that Indians were capable of being civilized and assimilated to a level equal of whites. This, then, gave Americans solid "scientific reasons to account for Indian failures."[43] However, Roger Kennedy explains that "it is a disservice to Jefferson to pretend that he did not feel the tensions between his youthful efforts to create a new world—free of slavery and respectful of Indians—and that exhausted acquiescence to slavery and the violent 'removal' of Indians that did no honor to the last two decades of his life."[44] But it is equally true that if Jefferson understood the tensions and problems that ultimately helped to justify forced removal, by the 1830s most Americans were willing to accept the idea that, like slaves, Indians were trapped by their race and were incapable of assimilation. Although Bernard Sheehan admits the era was "a very practical and successful age," he duly notes that it did "fail with the Indian," though it was not the first or the last to do so.[45]

[42] Horsman 153.
[43] Horsman 168.
[44] Kennedy 121.
[45] Sheehan 358.

Annotated Bibliography

Bieder, Robert E. Science Encounters the Indian, 1820-1880. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. In Chapter Three: Samuel G. Morton and the Calculations of Inferiority, Bieder details Morton's phrenological investigation and how he became the first scientist to link inferiority to race. He discusses the work of other scientists, like Josiah C. Nott, Louis Agassiz, and Joseph Campbell who "expanded on Morton's ideas" (63). Bieder follows this view of the Indian through its collapse in the 1860s after the Civil War. I used this book because Bieder explains how the public began to believe that racial differences were innate after Morton's findings became well known in America.

Boulton, Alexander O. "The American Paradox: Jeffersonian Equality and Racial Science." American Quarterly, Vol. 47, No. 3. (September 1995): pp. 467-492. Boulton writes in his article about the great paradox in Thomas Jefferson's thoughts about race. Boulton notes that the ideas in the Declaration of Independence are seemingly contradictory to his analysis of race in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. This essay was helpful because it discussed how "ideas of both race and slavery were still in the process of being transformed" in Jeffersonian America (469).

Conn, Steven. History's Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 2004. In this book, Conn describes how Indians were becoming an increasingly frequent subject of science and research during the nineteenth century. Images of Indians pervaded the public through paintings, lithographs, advertisements, and eventually photographs. Conn gives a good picture of how much Americans were exposed to images of the Indian in daily life during Jefferson's era.

Coward, John M. The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820-90. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999. Coward delves into the press and other public sources in society during the early 1800s to discuss how Indians were portrayed as savages that were incapable of civilization. Coward also notes that the racial prejudice of the age helps to explain this poor treatment of the Indians. By bringing race into play as a reason for the mistreatment of Indians, Coward's argument ties directly into the theme of my essay.

Hellenbrand, Harold. "Not 'To Destroy But to Fulfil': Jefferson, Indians, and Republican Dispensation." Eighteenth-Century Studies, Vol. 18, No. 4. (Autumn, 1985): pp. 523-549. This essay gives an in-depth look at Jefferson's complex Indian philosophy and policy. Hellenbrand discusses Jefferson's personal studies of Native Americans and speculates that Jefferson "did not see Indian culture and did not comprehend the white effect upon it" (534). Hellenbrand then goes on to critique Jefferson's policy as President, especially his paternalistic plan for civilization. Hellenbrand's work provided a deeper look at the Indian policy of Jefferson himself as the background for my own essay.

Horsman, Reginald. "American Indian Policy in the Old Northwest, 1783-1812." The William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Ser., Vol. 18, No. 1. (January 1961): pp. 35-53. Horsman describes how United States Indian policy changed in the early 1800s, especially during Jefferson's presidency in his essay. The prominent goal was to obtain land in the Northwest Territory, and according to Horsman the government "convinced itself that what it was doing was in the best interests of the Indians (35)." This essay was useful

because it described the shift in U.S. Indian policy and provided more detail into how the United States was regarding Indians.

Horsman, Reginald. "British Indian Policy in the Northwest, 1807-1812." The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Vol. 45, No. 1. (June 1958): pp. 51-66. In this essay, Horsman discusses British Indian Policy and its influence on American policy in the early 1800s. He counters the view that "British agents were the sole cause of Indian discontent in the pd before 1812." Horsman also claims that the fear of losing land to the United States prompted British action with Indians in the Northwest, which helped the Indians organize in resistance to the U.S. This article gave an alternate perspective on U.S. Indian policy before the War of 1812.

Jefferson, Thomas. Notes on the State of Virginia. New York: 1782. Thomas Jefferson Digital Archive. 1993. University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center. 7 Dec 2006 <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefVirg.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>. Jefferson discusses, among other things, his research and findings on Indians, noting their inherent character and capabilities. Key among Jefferson's thoughts on Indians was that "we shall probably find that they are formed in mind as well as in body, on the same module with the Homo sapiens Europaeus (187)," which counters Samuel Morton's "scientific" conclusions on the Indian.

Kennedy, Roger. "Jefferson and the Indians." Winterthur Portfolio, Vol. 27, No. 2/3. (Summer-Autumn 1992): pp. 105-121. Kennedy writes about Jefferson's personal research on the Indian, heavily discussing *Notes*, and concludes that the more Jefferson studied the Indian, the higher they rose in the "ordering of the races of man" (105). Kennedy also places a focus on Indian architecture and what Jefferson learned of their design. This essay provided more emphasis on the fact that Jefferson believed the Indian was capable of more than public opinion provided for, a perspective contrary to phrenologist's conclusions.

Lurie, Edward. "Louis Agassiz and the Races of Man." Isis, Vol. 45, No. 3. (Sept. 1954): pp. 227-242. The life and work of Louis Agassiz is presented in this essay. Agassiz, like Morton, faced the scientific controversy over whether the different human races were of different origins and species or of the same creation. Much of Agassiz work backed up conclusions made by Morton, especially those that supported a theory of racial inequality.

Morton, Samuel George. "Crania Americana; Or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America: To Which Is Prefixed, an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species." Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London, Vol. 10. (1840): pp. 552-561. In this essay, Morton presents his "scientific" findings regarding race and cranial size. He compares several races of man and concludes that Indian crania are smaller in volume than that of other races. Thus, this seemingly provides evidence for Morton's support of racial inequality and the inferiority of the Indian. Morton's study is especially important in determining racialized treatment of Indians in the United States.

Pearce, Roy Harvey. The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press. 1965. Pearce provides details into the

negative portrayal of the Indian into the 1800s. He claims that frontier accounts reported the Indian to be feared and hated, a dangerous and seemingly blood-thirsty villain. The narratives offered to the American public were of "small fact and great fiction," yet greatly affected the view of the Indian, influencing thought, action, and policy (58). This was an important document in explaining what led to the poor treatment of Indians.

Sheehan, Bernard W. "Paradise and the Noble Savage in Jeffersonian Thought." The William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Ser., Vol. 26, No. 3. (July 1969): pp. 327-259. Referring to the Indian as a noble savage, Sheehan writes that he was "defined by the quality of his environment (328)." Sheehan explains that the situation came to either annihilation, removal to the west, or assimilation, and that the Indian had become a recurrent issue in public affairs during Jefferson's time. This backed my argument that the perspective of the Indian changed to one that reflected race.

Shoemaker, Nancy. A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Shoemaker provides insight into the growth of race as a determining factor in the treatment of Indians. She describes that at the start of the eighteenth century, Indians and Europeans did not refer to the color of their skin, but by Jefferson's time this was beginning to change. Shoemaker also discusses how the term "red" came to describe the Indians' skin color.

Wallace, Anthony F.C. Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 1999. 338 pp. In his book, Wallace discusses Indian Affairs during Jefferson's presidency, also referring to Henry Knox and Andrew Jackson. Wallace begins with Jefferson's personal history with Indians and how it affected his policy as President. Wallace notes removal as a "preoccupation of public servants in the early republic" (14). This book gave me lots of details about Jefferson's life and how it affected his personal policy regarding Indians in the 1800s.