

*Early Native Literacies  
in New England*

A Documentary and  
Critical Anthology

Edited by  
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## Mohegan Wood-splint Basket

The Mohegan *manu'ida*, or basket, pictured here is in the collection of the Connecticut Historical Society. It is 12 inches wide, 17 inches long, and 11 inches high. It is rectangular in shape, with sides that curve slightly inward. The rim is double reinforced and single wrapped, creating a sturdy durable frame. The cover is slightly concave, perhaps from age, with sharply defined corners. The warp and weft of the splits are of medium width. The basket is decorated on three sides in Mohegan pink and green, and it is fully lined with pages from an 1817 Hartford, Connecticut, newspaper.



Figure 1-3. Mohegan Painted Wood-splint Storage Basket. (Courtesy of the Connecticut Historical Society, A-1853, Hartford.)

## The Cultural Work of a Mohegan Painted Basket

STEPHANIE FITZGERALD

In stead of shelves, they have severall baskets, wherin they put all their householdstuff: they have some great bags or sacks made of Hempe, which will hold five or sixe bushells.

—Roger Williams

*A Key into the Language of America*

The Mohegan word for painting, *wuskuswang*, is the same word used for writing, inducting painted baskets in a long textual tradition that includes decorative birch bark erching, beadwork, wampum belts, and the written word. These practices comprise systems of signification that were and are read as texts. Because they do not conform to Western conceptions of writing, they have been dismissed, ignored, and largely excluded from the historical record, thus obscuring the long history of Native texts and textualities. Most scholarship on Native decorated artifacts has focused on material aspects. More recently, Hertha Dawn Wong has argued for texts such as pictographic signatures, painted plains tipis, and winter counts as forms of precontact autobiographical narratives.<sup>62</sup>

To consider early Native painted wood-splint baskets as texts is to decenter or problematize current critical conceptions of early Native literacies and textualities. What would a history of Native print culture look like if it included three-dimensional texts such as baskets or tipis? How does the inclusion of forms previously not considered texts change conceptions of literacy and communicative practices? How do we begin to read a basket's narrative? This essay undertakes the project of opening a theoretical discourse that will work toward a paradigm for reading alternative Native textualities.

Indians made baskets and other woven objects long before European and other settlers reached American shores, and they continue these cultural practices to this day. The baskets and other objects are often covered with symbolic designs containing insightful readings into the particular culture from which they originate. According to the specific cultural context, the designs may take the form of figures, geometric shapes, or floral patterns. Baskets, which were and still are ceremonial and utilitarian objects used for transportation and storage of items, prayer ceremonies, and traditional games, function as com-

62. Wong, *Sending My Heart Back*.

municative devices. In sum, by touching every aspect of daily Native life, both past and present, basketry is imbued with cultural and spiritual power.<sup>63</sup>

Both the variety of design patterns and symbols on Mohegan baskets of the early nineteenth century and Mohegan cultural memory support the theory that basket patterns were used as communicative or narrative devices.<sup>64</sup> In 1995 a heavily decorated Mohegan elm bark box was repatriated from the Peabody and Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. Upon seeing a photograph of the box, tribal elder Gladys Tantaquidgeon recalled it as looking "like the one from Oneida."<sup>65</sup> Further research determined that the box had been sent by minister Samson Occom from the Mohegan community in Brothertown to his sister Lucy at Mohegan as a record of the journey. Bearing inscriptions of the Trail of Life and Path of the Sun design patterns, the box embodies the continuity of Mohegan cultural traditions and identity in a time of tremendous change.

The decoding of the text of a basket requires shifting from a Western to a Native perspective and situating both the basket and its text within a specific tribal context. Size, form, style, and varying degrees of decoration all play a role in the making of the meaning and function. Mohegan people made several different kinds of wood-splint *manu'dag*, or baskets. They range from carrying baskets with handles to small sewing baskets and decorative wall pockets to coarse draining baskets and the typical rectangular covered storage basket such as the basket in Figure 1-3. Wood-splint basket making was not a solitary effort; it was one that involved contributions of labor from within the community. The selection of an appropriate log, the soaking process, the separation of the wood rings, and the preparation of the splints are all required before the actual weaving of a basket can begin.<sup>66</sup> The weaving of Mohegan baskets was generally a communal winter activity. It was performed by women to the accompaniment of stories and songs, which in turn become part of the basket, joining together two traditions, oral and textual.<sup>67</sup> Once a ready supply of baskets was completed, they were sold door to door by their makers or by family members on routes that often covered the entire length and breadth of New England.

63. See, for example, Porter, *The Art of Native American Basketry*, and Mowatt, Morphy, and Dransart, *Basketmakers*.

64. McMullen, "Woodsplint Basketry Decoration," 114.

65. Fawcett and Tantaquidgeon, "Symbolic Motifs," 135.

66. For a more detailed explanation of the basket making process, see Tantaquidgeon, "Basketry Designs," 43-33, and Richmond, "Schaghticoke Basket-Making," 130.

67. Frank Speck and Jesse Moses provide a brief account of Mohegan communal basket making in "Some Mohegan-Pequot Legends," 183. Native men did not become involved in the weaving of baskets until the later part of the nineteenth century, when economic conditions forced them to seek new avenues of entry into the cash economy. See Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh, "Weaving the Woods," 90.

Many of these basket sellers, noted for characteristics ranging from wit to storytelling to musicianship, became legendary figures in the communities they visited.

Few late nineteenth-century northeastern Native baskets were signed by their makers (a practice that is culturally Western).<sup>68</sup> The narrative that unfolds in the textual surface of a basket is not an individual creation; it belongs to the tribal community. Authorship, then, is communal rather than individual, and the resulting narrative belongs to the community as a whole.

The Mohegan covered *manúda*, or basket, pictured here is lined with an 1817 Hartford, Connecticut, newspaper, thereby fixing the date of the basket at 1817 or earlier. Newspaper linings were common practice during the nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has considered a similar covered storage basket—probably Mahican or Schaghticoke, based on its distinctive construction and design—lined with pages from the *Rutland* (Vermont) *Herald* dated from 1821 to 1822. Placed by the owner of the basket, using a wheat paste compound, the paper lining protects the contents against not only the rough inner surface of the wood splints but also dust and insects.<sup>70</sup> Ultimately, the newspaper linings are intended not as a means of communication but as protection for the basket contents. To read the Mohegan narrative of the basket, we must make a critical move that elides the Western print symbolic system in favor of traditional Mohegan communicative practices: We must turn to its surface.

The basket is decorated on three sides, painted free hand in Mohegan pink (a mixture of red and white lead) and green, using a handmade twig brush. The design pattern consists of traditional Mohegan symbols: three four-domed medallions and a linked chain of stylized leaves, strawberries, dots, and trellises. The chain forms a triangular-shaped stockade around the green center medallion, which is outlined in a series of pink dots, with a pair of pink spirals flanking the top dome. Below, the medallion is enclosed by two green leaves outlined in Mohegan pink with green dots. On either side of the stockade are two additional four-domed medallions painted in the opposite color scheme: Mohegan pink with pairs of green spirals flanking the top domes. The entire front wall of the basket is framed by a chain of alternating half domes in Mohegan pink and green.

68. Circa 1870, one basket maker marked several baskets with the initials "J.H.S." A number of other baskets have been attributed to this individual through, for example, distinctive construction techniques (see McMullen, "Woodsplint Basketry Decoration").

69. The earliest known example of a newspaper-lined wood-splint basket is a Mohegan basket that was lined with an 1808 Hartford, Connecticut, newspaper. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich points out, other baskets from this period were lined with religious publications dating to the 1820s (see Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun*, 352).

70. See *ibid.*, 342.

The designs are not only aesthetically pleasing but also deeply culturally significant. The artistic renderings displayed on the basket are representations of both the abundant natural landscape and the Mohegan cosmology. As the Mohegan elder Gladys Tantaquidgeon explains, "To the Mohegan, designs and life are more than simple representations of nature. There is a spiritual force that flows through all things, and if these symbols are true representations of that force, this spirit should be expressed in the designs."<sup>71</sup> Thus, Mohegan basket design patterns contain spiritual connotations that serve to reinforce their aesthetic value and provide meaning for those who can read the basket text. For example, one prominent Mohegan design, the Trail of Life symbol, explains the "east-to-west passage of spirits," following the path of the sun.<sup>72</sup> The significance of these two cardinal directions is found in other aspects of Mohegan life, such as the eastern- and western-facing openings in the ceremonial arbor.

A spiritual force is present in this Mohegan *manúda*. One of the primary symbols of the basket, perhaps the most important symbol found in Mohegan culture, is the four-domed medallion. It is thought to represent the four directions, or four cardinal points, as well as the interrelationship of the soul, earth, and universe.<sup>73</sup> Through the use of this symbol, the basket pattern offers a view into traditional Mohegan belief and cosmology. The stylized leaves and strawberries represent not only the Mohegan land but also the plant beings and the food and medicine they provide, which signifies the interdependent relationship between the people and the land. The dot element represents the Mohegan people. The trail design that encloses the central medallion may symbolize the Trail of Life or the Path of the Sun. Together, the symbols and designs of the basket text create a narrative for the reader to decode.

In an analysis of similar basket designs, Ann McMullen has suggested that the inscribed texts are political commentaries on the move to Brochertown by a faction of the Mohegan Tribe, spanning the years from the 1770s to the 1820s. "The message," she writes, "was that people would lose their Mohegan identity when they left the tribal lands."<sup>74</sup> Any text is open to multiple readings, but this particular analysis reflects a non-Native bias. I offer here an alternative rooted in traditional Mohegan cosmology.

Mohegan oral tradition holds that "the People" came from the East, over a desert, and then crossed "the great fresh water." Forced out by their enemies, the Mohawks, they eventually moved on to the eastern side of the Connecticut

71. Fawcett and Tantaquidgeon, "Symbolic Motifs," 99.

72. Fawcett, *Medicine Trail*, 41.

73. Tantaquidgeon, "Basketry Designs," 24.

74. McMullen, "Woodsplint Basketry Decoration," 123.

River, the site of the present-day Mohegan Nation.<sup>75</sup> I read the design pattern of this basket as a possible retelling of the Mohegan original migration story. The combination of traditional symbols such as the Trail of Life pattern with the four-domed medallions creates a fusion of Mohegan history and cosmology. It is no cause for wonder that a basket of this era might depict the migration story. In 1775, some forty-two years before the confirmed date of the basket, Samson Occom, the Mohegan minister and tribal elder, led a group of Mohegans and Long Island Indians to create a settlement at Brotherton, New York, to escape both white influence and white infringement on Indian lands. This move, like the later move from New York to Wisconsin in the 1820s, caused factionalism within the Mohegan community. Mohegan history, in the tradition of most Indian nations, is one of migrations and removals. Thus, this basket bears witness to the particular cultural and historical moment that it inhabits.

The basket represents multiple layers of meaning on several different levels. As a material object, it possesses a utilitarian function. For the non-Native, it is also a Mohegan cultural artifact. Through its utilitarian function, it serves to reinscribe Mohegan history and cosmology into everyday life. As a gendered cultural form, the basket is the embodiment of the role of women in passing on not only the basket-weaving tradition but cultural knowledge as well. Finally, as a text, the basket assumes primacy over its newspaper lining, reducing it to a utilitarian function devoid of communicative practice.



75. Speck and Moses gathered at least two versions of the Mohegan migration story from tribal members in the early part of the twentieth century (see "Native Tribes and Dialects of Connecticut," 216–17).

## Temperance and Morality Sermon

SAMSON OCCOM

This eight-page undated sermon<sup>76</sup> appears in a hand-sewn booklet whose pages measure 6.5 inches by 8 inches. Occom writes on both sides of the page and leaves virtually no margin. The manuscript begins *in medias res* and breaks off before its conclusion; it is missing at least the first two pages and the last page. The extant middle section is reprinted here. The sermon can be found in the Occom Papers, Index # 79998, folder 26 (microfilm pp. 398–402), Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Conn. This sermon is reprinted by kind permission of the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Conn.<sup>77</sup>

[. . . ] whe{n} he drowned his Reason he loses all that Time and he is fit for no Service at all, either for himself, for his Family,{{and?}}<sup>78</sup> for his Country, and how much more is he unfit to Serve God, —And yet, (to astonishment) he is just fit to Se{r}ve the Devil, Yea Drink itself is the Service of the Devil, and

76. The notes in this edition are based on a collaborative edition I produced with several of my graduate students at the University of St. Thomas (Occom, "Temperance and Morality Sermon," ed. Bouwman et al.), available online at the Early Americas Digital Archive, <http://www.mitha.umd.edu/ead/> (Ralph Bauer, site editor). I am especially indebted to Margret Aldrich, Nicole Brudos Ferrara, Keri Henkel, Sara Hoffman, and Marilyn Paulson for their research on Cook's voyages, on syphilis, and on the deity Caukruntooct.

77. I have used a very light hand in editing this sermon. Square brackets, [ ], indicate missing words that I have inserted for readability; square brackets with an enclosure followed by a question mark indicate an uncertain reading of a word or letter. Curly brackets, { }, indicate interlineations, which Occom sometimes indicated with a caret and sometimes simply wrote above the line. (He also wrote carets for which he neglected to write interlineations.) I have included the carets where they appeared in the original. Like most writing of the time period, Occom's capitalizations are varied and frequent by today's standards. Complicating matters is the fact that many lower and uppercase characters, particularly his "C," "G," "A," and "S," are similar in appearance. Capitalization versus lowercasing was therefore often a judgment call on my part. Occom's punctuation is sparing, and he often finishes sentences with a comma, a dash, or a comma-dash combination; frequently, if the sentence finishes at the end of a line, he uses no punctuation. I have inserted punctuation (in square brackets) sparingly and for readability only. Occom's spelling remains intact, except where I have—once again for readability—silently changed the old English "f" to "s" and occasionally altered spelling in square brackets. I have silently emended repeated words, crossed-out words, and words broken at the ends of lines (Occom tended to write to the very end of the line and to break words in odd places to make the most efficient use of the page).

78. Occom includes a strange mark here that looks somewhat like his shorthand for "and."