

John Pickering an Wilhelm von Humboldt, 24.08.1821

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|5r| Sir, ^[a]

I have lately had the honour of receiving your letter of the 24.th of February last, which you delivered to M.^r Bancroft to be forwarded to me. I need not express to you the high sense I entertain, of the flattering remarks which you have been pleased to make in your letter, and of the favourable impressions which you have received from the review of D.^r Jarvis's Discourse, to which you allude. In truth, Sir, that review was prepared in too much haste and amidst my professional avocations, at the request of some of the gentlemen connected with the North American Review; and I am apprehensive that you may have given more importance to it, than upon a more deliberate perusal you would find it to deserve; nor am I wholly without fears of your discovering, that, like some professed reviewers, I have ventured to write upon a subject with which I was myself |5v| not sufficiently well acquainted. But I shall hereafter have a powerful stimulus to incite me to the diligent pursuit of these inquiries, in the reflection, that what I have already done has procured me the honour of your correspondence, and that I may also by means of my local situation be able to make some inquiries for you, which your distance renders it impracticable for you to make in person, respecting the languages of this Continent.

The American Languages, as you well know, have hitherto excited but little interest in this country; and as M.^r DuPonceau justly observes (in his Correspondence with M.^r Heckewelder) "we have to go to the German Universities to become acquainted with our own country." You, Sir, can justly appreciate the causes of this state of things. I trust, however, that we shall not much longer be censurable in this respect: Your own distinguished example will not be among the least powerful causes to

a) |Editor| Oben rechts WvH in Bleistift: "Pickering." In Tinte: "Nr. 1."

stimulate us to investigation; and I hope, after studying the works of our great masters in Europe, we shall prove ourselves to be worthy pupils of such instructors. From a desire to excite the attention of my countrymen in this part of the United States, |6r| to the study of these languages, I wrote the review which you mention; and I had previously, from the same motive written a [brief notice](#) (in the 9.th volume of the North American Review) of the [Correspondence between M.^r DuPonceau & M.^r Heckewelder](#). I have, in addition to these publications communicated to our [American Academy of Arts & Sciences at Boston](#) an [Essay on a uniform Orthography for the Indian Languages of North America](#). This Essay is published in the fourth volume of the Academy's [Memoirs](#), which is just from the press; but I have had a few copies of it printed separately for distribution among my friends; and I now do myself the honour to send you two of the copies, in addition to one which I forwarded last month to [M^r Bancroft](#) for you. One of the copies I beg you to accept as a small testimonial of my high respect for your services in the cause of learning, and one of them I shall be happy to have you present to [your distinguished brother](#), to whom Science is so much indebted; as to the third copy, you will be pleaded to dispose of it in such manner as you may judge proper. May I take the liberty, on this occasion, to ask |6v| your attention to the subject of a [common orthography](#) for these languages, which would so much lessen the labour of studying them, and would make the books, which are written in them, intelligible to all the nations of Europe alike.

I have already remarked, that these languages have not been much studied in this country. The most important publication here of the present day is the [Transactions of the Historical & Literary Committee](#) by [M^r DuPonceau & M^r Heckewelder](#), which you already possess. Those gentlemen have set an example, which I hope will be followed in other parts of the United States. Our [Massachusetts Historical Society](#) (which was instituted several years ago for the purpose of preserving authentic memorials relative to American History, and which has published eighteen volumes in 8.^o) will devote a part of their work to the subject of the Indians. In their nineteenth volume, which is now in the press, they will republish, under my direction, [an ancient Grammar of the Massachusetts Indian Language](#), composed by the [Reverend John Eliot](#), and [originally published](#) |7r| at [Cambridge](#) in this country, in the year 1666. [This Grammar](#) is now extremely scarce; and, as a record of the Massachusetts dialect at a very early period, it is important, both in the history of the American Languages, and also to enable us to read [Eliot's Indian Bible](#), of which you have doubtless seen some copies in Europe.

I have prepared a short preface & some notes to accompany [this new edition of the Grammar](#); and my learned friend [M.^r DuPonceau](#) has engaged to write some remarks upon it. As I perceive by your List of printed books (which I have just received from [M.^r Bancroft](#)) that you do not possess a copy of [this Grammar](#) I shall take much pleasure in presenting you with one as soon as it is printed. Permit me to observe, by the way, that the dialect, which I have just mentioned, has often been called the Natick language; and, if I am not mistaken, [Professor Vater](#), trusting to some of our American writers, has given it that name in the [Mithridates](#) (I speak from recollection only, not having [that work](#) before me at this time). But that is not the correct appellation; the language took the name of Natick merely from this accidental circumstance, [7v] that [Eliot](#), who was a distinguished missionary, established his first Indian church in a village called Natick; (near [Boston](#)) and from this & other local causes the Indians of that place became conspicuous in our early history, and their village acquired celebrity and gave a name to this dialect.

This language, as you will perceive at once, is a dialect of the Delaware (or Lenni-Lenape) stock, if indeed the Delaware itself is the stock & not merely one of the branches of a common stock.

The same [Historical Society](#) will at a future time publish a small, but valuable, [MS. of the language of the Plymouth Indians](#) (which is nearly, if not quite the same with the Massachusetts dialect) written about the year 1708 by [Josiah Cotton](#),^[b] who was once a preacher among the Indians of [Plymouth](#), a tract of country which is about forty English miles from [Boston](#). This MS. appears to have contained 124 pages, small 4.^{to}; but the two first pages are lost. It is valuable both as respects the history of the Indian dialects and also because every Indian word & phrase has an English translation by the side of it. Believing that it might be a gratification to you to have a [8r] specimen of it, I have copied a Dialogue, which seems to have taken place between the author & one of his Indians. I have selected this Dialogue principally because it contains an historical fact relative to the difference of the respective dialects of Plymouth (which is on the Continent) and of an island near it, which the Indians called Nope, but which Europeans originally called Martin Wyngard's Land, & which has been since corrupted into Martha's Vineyard^[c]. You will observe this small island on the maps of the United States in Latitude 41°. 40' N. and Longitude 70°. 40' W. at the distance of a very few miles from Plymouth.

b) [Editor] [Josiah Cotton](#) (1680–1756): *Vocabulary of the ancient Massachusetts Dialect*, 1708.

c) [Editor] Diese Herleitung des Namens findet sich nur bei Pickering. Dieser verweist noch in seiner *Lecture on Telegraphic Language; delivered before the Boston Marine Society, February 3, 1833*, Boston: Hilliard, Gray and Co. 1833, S. 6 auf diese Etymologie. [FZ]

In addition to the Dialogue I enclose a Table of the Contents of the MS. and I hope it will be in my power to send you a printed copy of the entire work in the course of the next year; but experience has taught me not to be too sanguine in these cases.

The most important MS. of any Indian language, that I know of in this part of the United States, |8v| is a copious [Dictionary of the Abnaki language](#) by [Father Sebastian Râle](#) (or [Rasles](#)) a Jesuit missionary; which was begun by the author in the year 1691, and of which you will find a short bibliographical account in the Appendix to [my Essay on Indian Orthography](#) abovementioned. I feel extremely solicitous, as I have there observed, that this ancient record of an extensive Indian dialect should be published before any accident happens to it; and I would consent to perform the labours of an editor, as well as my slight acquaintance with this subject would permit; though my professional avocations would hardly allow me to devote as much time to it as might be requisite. But I fear, that the expense of printing a volume so large & one which so few persons would want to buy, will prevent the publication of it for some years. If any thing could hasten its publication, it would be the expression of your own opinion & that of other distinguished European scholars in favour of |9r| the measure. I shall certainly make an effort to get it transcribed; so that there may be two chances of preserving the work. I have attached the more importance to this & other ancient repositories of the Indian Languages, because I am extremely desirous to trace the changes which they may have undergone (if indeed they have suffered material changes) since the first settlement of America by Europeans. In reflecting upon this subject I have sometimes imagined it to be not improbable, that the unwritten languages might be less mutable than the written ones; and I have thought this might happen, in part, as a natural effect of the uniformity of the savage life (compared with the perpetual fluctuations of the civilized state) and, in part, from the re-action, if I may so express myself, of the orthography upon the pronunciation in the written languages. We also observe in civilized society, that the illiterate vulgar are the last to change their idiom & their pronunciation; while the well-educated part of the community are continually rectifying their pronunciation by the orthography of their language and vice versa. But how far this supposition |9v| respecting the unwritten languages in general may be well-founded I am not yet able to determine.

I was, however, much struck with the fact stated by [M.^r DuPonceau](#) in respect to one of them (the Wyandot or Huron language, called by some writers the Algonkin) – He observes, that two interpreters of that nation, upon examining the [Vocabulary](#) of

Father Sagard,^[d] which was published two hundred years ago, remarked that their language did not appear to have undergone any material change in all that period. See M.^r DuPonceau's [Report on the Indian Languages](#), in the [Transactions](#) of the Histor. & Lit. Committee, p. XXXV. I have myself made some inquiries of persons conversant with the Indians, as to the simple fact, whether any changes have been noticed by the Indians themselves; and I directed my correspondents to enquire, whether the young Indians ever criticised the words or the pronunciation of the older ones, as being antiquated; and, on the other hand, whether aged Indians ever censured the words or pronunciation of the younger ones as being innovations upon their languages: |10r| But I have not yet obtained any satisfactory answers to my inquiries. The latest information which I have is from the [Reverend M.^r Daggett](#),^[e] who is the Superintendent of the [Foreign Missionary School](#), at Cornwall, a town in the State of Connecticut, about 40 English miles from [New-Haven](#), the capital city of that State. He says in a late letter to me – "I cannot learn from my Indian pupils that their respective languages are undergoing a change. The [Cherokees](#) say, there are two modes of speaking in their nation; the one, being more guttural than the other; but they know not which, or whether either, is the more ancient."

I beg leave to mention here (as you may not have heard of this [Foreign Missionary School](#)) that there are now in that Institution native pupils of the following tribes of our continent, viz: [Cherokees](#), [Choctaws](#), [Stockbridge](#), (i. e. [Mohegans](#) or [Mahicanni](#)) [Oneidas](#), and [Tuscaroras](#); and from other parts of the globe there are the following – natives of [Otaheite](#), [Owhyhee](#) & the [Marquesas](#); and also, some [Malays](#) & a [Chinese](#) & one native of [New Zealand](#), who has lately been received there. |10v| The Institution is yet in its infancy; but I hope for much valuable information respecting the languages of [America](#), if the establishment should prosper.

At the same time that I made the e inquiry abovementioned respecting the changes of the Indian Languages, I also requested information on another point, which seems not to be yet distinctly settled; and that is, whether the Indians use in the abstract the terms by which they express the relation of father, mother & some other social relations. (I hope, Sir, I shall not be troublesome to you with my prolixity; but as I am only a learner, I beg you will permit me to call your attention to this point.)

M.^r DuPonceau, p. 403 of his [Correspondence](#) with M.^r Heckewelder, observes –

d) |Editor| [Gabriel Sagard](#) (vor 1604 – 1650?), auch „frère Théodat“, Missionar der Huronen: *Le Grands Voyage du pays des Hurons, situé en l'Amérique vers la mer douce, és derniers confins de la Nouvelle-France, dite Canada [...]* avec un dictionnaire de la langue huronne, Paris 1632. [FZ]
e) |Editor| [Herman Daggett](#) (1766–1832).

"On the subject of this word Father, I observe a strange contradiction between two eminent writers on Indian languages evidently derived from the stock of the Lenni-Lenape or Delaware. One of them, [Roger Williams](#), in his [Key to the Languages of the New England Indians](#) says, osh |11r| (meaning probably och or ooch, as the English cannot pronounce the guttural ch) father; nosh, my father, kosh, thy father &.^c On the other hand, the [Rev.^d Jonathan Edwards](#) in his [Observations on the language of the Muhhekaneew \(Mahicanni or Mohegan\) Indians](#), speaks as follows: "A considerable part of the appellations are never used without a pronoun affixed. The Mohegans say, my father, nogh, thy father, kogh, &.^c but they cannot say absolutely, father. There is no such word in their language. If you were to say ogh, you would make a Mohegan both stare & smile." On which point [M.^r Heckewelder](#) thus replies to [M.^r DuPonceau](#): "Notwithstanding [M.^r Edwards](#)'s observation (for whom I feel the highest respect) I cannot help being of opinion, that the monosyllable ooch is the proper word for father, abstractedly considered; and that it is as proper to say ooch, father and nooch my father, as dallemons, beast, and n'dallemons, my beast, or nitschan child (or a child) and n'nitschan, my child."

Now [M.^r Edwards](#) informs his readers, in the |11v| Preface to his work, that he went to live in an Indian town (called [Stockbridge](#) by the Americans) when he was but six years old, that he constantly associated with Indians, & their boys were his daily playmates & school-fellows; & by this means (to use his own words) "the language of the Mohegans became more familiar to me than my mother-tongue. I knew the names of some things in Indian, which I did not know in English; even all my thoughts ran in Indian" &c

In consequence of this conflict of opinion between persons so very conversant with the Aborigines as [Williams](#), [Edwards](#) & [Heckewelder](#), I lately requested the [Superintendent](#) of the [Missionary School](#) abovementioned, to ascertain the fact by particular inquiries of his Indian pupils. His answer to my letter fully supports the opinion of [Edwards](#). He observes, in very emphatic terms – "I am satisfied, that there is no word in any of the Indian languages represented in the [Foreign Missionary School](#), by which to express in the abstract the relation of father & most of the other social relations: Adam was the father of all men is a sentence, which my Indian scholars say |12r| they cannot translate without a change of expression. The [Choctaws](#) brought me the following – Adam quo-hut-tuk moo-mah Ingka yut-tuk; but they observed that Ingka had the pronominal prefix of the third person singular, which they said was unavoidable."

Upon my communicating this to [M.^f DuPonceau](#), he was equally at a loss with myself how to reconcile these different opinions. He added this observation: "In my collection [of Indian Vocabularies]^[f] I find the word *Father* in the Creek, ilke, Chickasaw, inke, and Choctaw, iske. In the Mithridates, vol. iii, part 3, p. 305, I find Father, Chickasaw, aunkke, Choctaw, chinkeh; & I find from a note I made in a conversation I had with an Indian interpreter, who was skilled in the two languages, that the word Father is the same in both, & that aunkke signifies my father, & chinkeh, thy father." [M.^f Heckewelder](#) (p. 411) remarks, that "there are few occasions for using these words in their abstract sense, as there are so many ways of associating them with other ideas;" and perhaps this observation of his may lead us to the true solution of the difficulty. I will add, by the way, though it is a little aside of the |12v| present question, that [M.^f DuPonceau](#) in the same letter incidentally drew my attention to the curious coincidence of the Choctaw word Ingka & the Peruvian word Inca; which is indeed worthy of observation.

But, Sir, I am trespassing on your patience by these details, and I will pursue them no farther. Nor should I have gone thus far, except for the purpose of showing how difficult it is for us, even with the advantages of our local situation, to obtain minute & accurate information on subjects which are studied, as the American languages are, by a very small number of persons & only with a view to the common intercourse of life, for which a very gross & general knowledge is sufficient. I do not intend, however, to ask you to receive this as an apology for any of those deficiencies among us which ought not to exist; but only that you may (as I persuade myself will be the case with one of your great learning & candour & one well acquainted with the state of our country) make all just allowances for us, if you should not obtain from us all the information which you may possibly have anticipated. All that |13r| we possess, will be very cheerfully communicated; and we shall feel ourselves honoured by the inquiries which yourself & other distinguished Europeans may make of us concerning our country. But you are well aware, Sir, that the circumstances of our new country are such, that we have not yet among us a class of men of letters by profession; those persons here, who have cultivated letters, are a few individuals in the three learned professions; and those individuals, being seldom men of fortune, can devote to study those fragments of time only, which they can spare from their daily business.

I perceive, that you have in your library [Barton's New Views of the Indian Tribes](#)

f) |Editor| Ergänzung in eckigen Klammern von Pickering.

of America; and I have therefore thought it might be of some use to you, if I should take his List of English words & annex to them the corresponding words in the languages of the Abnaki & of the Plymouth Indians: The Abnaki words are taken from the MS. of Father Râle, and the Plymouth words, from the MS. Vocabulary of Cotton, both of which I have above spoken of. I have added to them a specimen of the language of the Penobscot Indians of the present day, who |13v| inhabit the same part of the country where Father Râle lived a century ago. These words I have obtained from the French Catholic Missionaries. Barton has given specimens of this dialect, many of which seem to be incorrectly printed. I have also thought it proper to subjoin a corrected list of those Abnaki words, which I quoted in my review to D.^r Jarvis's Discourse, and which were very erroneously printed; and I have annexed to these a Specimen of one page of Râles MS. respecting the Indian Particles: This is a curious part of his work. I do not observe on your List of American Books any copy of Edwards's valuable Observations on the Mohegan Language, which I have above cited. This work is entirely out of print; but two years ago, while I was at Boston for a short time as a Member of the Legislature of this State, I met with a printed copy in the Library of the Massachusetts Historical Society, which I transcribed for my own use; and, for want of a better copy, I have taken the liberty to enclose my manuscript one, which I beg you to accept. If this Treatise should be reprinted, I will not omit to send you a copy of it. To these I have added one Number of the North American Review, which contains my Notice of M.^r DuPonceau's Correspondence with M.^r Heckewelder; this is a very brief notice of the Correspondence |14r| and was written (like every thing else of mine) amidst the avocations of professional business.

I also enclose a copy of D.^r Jarvis's Discourse, which the author himself requested me to present to you in his name. Permit me to observe here, that in my review of this Discourse I expressed a doubt whether there was a proper dual number in the language of the Cherokees; but, after the review was printed off I ascertained from one of that tribe, that they have a dual number, and I therefore retracted my doubt in a short Postscript to the Review, p. 218; which I mention thus particularly because I know you are in quest of facts & not of conjectures; and you may possibly have overlooked the Postscript, which is at the very end of the volume. I may remark, by the way, that the Dual number seems to form a distinctive characteristick |sic| of <some of> these languages; but, as I have not facts enough for the basis of an opinion, I repress all speculative remarks on the subject. I will only add here, that if Eliot's Indian Grammar should be published before the sailing of the vessel by

which I send this letter I shall forward a copy in a separate packet: But I fear that will not be the case.

It was my intention, Sir, to have sent you two or three of our printed books, such as [14v] Zeisberger's Harmony of the Gospels, in the Delaware language, his Delaware & English Spelling Book, and a work just published by our American Antiquarian Society, called Archæologia Americana, vol. 1. which contains considerable information respecting the Fortifications, Tumuli, etc. of our Western States. But having mentioned my intention to my friend M.^r Du Ponceau, he has with his usual promptitude & zeal anticipated <me> by forwarding those & some books to you by a vessel that is about sailing from New York.

I have nothing further to add on this occasion, than to assure you, Sir, how great pleasure it will give me to employ myself in collecting facts for you relative to the Indian Languages, & to render you any other services that shall be in my power; at the same time begging you, for obvious reasons, not to expect any great addition to the stock of materials you already possess respecting the American Languages.

Permit me to avail myself of this occasion, to enquire of you, whether Baron Schladen is still living, who was Minister of His Majesty the King of Prussia at the Court [15r] of Lisbon in the years 1798–9. I was at that period Secretary to the American Minister at Lisbon. If you should happen to be acquainted with Baron Schladen, and he should have any recollection of me, may I beg you will do me the honour to present my respects to him.

I beg leave to subjoin to this letter my address, and the names of those gentlemen through whom any communications may be forwarded to me.

I have the honour to be
Sir,
with the highest consideration
your most obedient
& most humble
servant

Jn^oPickering

Salem, near Boston,
in Massachusetts

Aug. 24. 1821.

Address:

To John Pickering, Esquire

Salem, near **Boston**, in Massachusetts,
United States of America.

|15v| And letters for me may be forwarded to the care of the following gentlemen:

1. **Mess.^{rs} Welles & Williams**, Banquiers, à **Paris**.
2. **Mons. Alexandre H. Everett**, Chargé des Affaires des Etats-Unis, à **la Haye**.
3. **Samuel Williams**, Esquire, N^o. 13. Finsbury Square, **London**.
4. **M.^r George Bancroft**, **Göttingen**.

|16r/v vacat|