

## John Pickering an Wilhelm von Humboldt, 27.11.1827

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Mattson 1980, Nr. 12021

[31r] Sir,

It is a great while since I received your last letter (which was dated the 29.<sup>th</sup> of June 1824) and you may, perhaps, be surprised at my apparent neglect in replying to it. The truth is, that the delay has proceeded from causes altogether beyond my controul [*sic*] – from circumstances mostly of a personal nature, which it would be impertinent towards you & unpleasant to myself to trouble you with. I beg you, Sir, to be assured, that nothing less than the irresistible force of circumstances would have occasioned any interruption of a correspondence from which I derive so much pleasure & instruction, & which I hope now to continue without so long an intermission in future.

Since I last wrote to you, I have removed to this city (**Boston**) which is the capital of New England, and where the advantages for pursuing my professional business are much greater than they were in Salem, my former residence. **Boston** is also the centre of our Northern literature, and is only three miles (English) from our University of **Cambridge**, where there is a **valuable library**, to which I [31v] have access. This, in addition to the literary society of this city, affords facilities for study, which are not to be found in our smaller towns. But although I am thus more favourably situated both for business & study, yet I do not expect to devote so much time as heretofore to literary pursuits; for I find, that in a large town one is obliged to give an undivided attention to the object of pursuit, whether it be business or study; and, as I cannot live by literature, I must decide to live by my profession, the law, and indulge myself occasionally only as an amateur in literature.

I beg to make my acknowledgements to you for the valuable present of your Berlin Academy's Transactions, and the copies of **your own Memoir**, which last, you will allow me to say, is full of interest to all who like to take extensive & philosophical

views of the subject. I delivered the several copies of it intended for [M.<sup>r</sup> Everett](#) & other gentlemen.

In return for your favours, I am now able to send you the long-wished for "[Grammar of the Language of the Lenni-Lenapé or Delaware Indians](#)", by [David Zeisberger](#). This work is just published, from the Translation of [M.<sup>r</sup> DuPonceau](#), in the Memoirs of the [American Philosophical Society](#) at [Philadelphia](#).

[32r] It is undoubtedly *[sic]* the most important publication that has yet been made upon the subject of the Indian Languages; and, as the author was a German, & adopted a German orthography, the work will be the more interesting to yourself & other literati in that part of Europe to which the rest of the world looks for instruction on this & almost every other subject of human knowledge. You will now possess the means of knowing with exactness the structure of a very extensive Indian language, or rather a stock or family of languages, from a work composed many years ago by an honest & intelligent missionary, who formed the grammar merely for practical use & not to support any theories or speculations in philology. So that whatever results we shall be obliged to come to, they will be results which rest upon well established facts; and, I may add, they are facts which are in accordance with those stated an hundred & fifty years ago in [Eliot's ancient grammar of the Massachusetts Indian Language](#), which, as you know, is but a dialect of the Delaware stock. Indeed I cannot but think, that [Zeisberger's Grammar](#), so much more full & exact than any other, will excite the greatest interest among the philologists of Germany & other [32v] parts of Europe, & give a new impulse to these studies.

During the last three years some other publications have appeared respecting the Indians & their Languages; & some others are in preparation; of which the following are the principal:

1. [An Article in the North American Review, for Jan<sup>y</sup>. 1826](#), which is understood to be from the pen of [Governour Cass](#), who presides over a part of the United States known as [The Michigan Territory](#), which borders on Lake Michigan. The author has been a negotiator & agent of the Government for many years with the Indian Tribes, & is well acquainted with their habits of life &.<sup>c</sup> and the parts of his review relating to this subject are deserving of much attention. But as to their languages & general philology, he assumes to know much more than he has a right to do; & he has indulged himself in unjust animadversions upon the late [M.<sup>r</sup> Heckewelder](#) & [M.<sup>r</sup> DuPonceau](#): His ignorance of this subject was soon exposed with some severity

(but not undeserved) by another review published at [New York](#), in an article entitled

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2. "Examination of an Article in the [North American Review](#) respecting the [North American Indians](#) &.<sup>c</sup> By [Kass-ti-ga-tor-skee](#), or The Feathered Arrow." This pseudo-Indian name is understood to be a ludicrous compound of the Latin word [33r] [Castigator](#) (which has an allusion, in its first syllable, to the name of [Cass](#)) and an arbitrary suffix, [skee](#), to give the whole name an Indian costume. There has been no reply to this "Examination"; but the author of it has been threatened with a reply, though I confess I could not perceive that it was unsound in any part.<sup>[a]</sup>

3. [A Spelling-Book of the Chahta \(or Choctaw\) Language](#), in 12.<sup>mo</sup>

4. [Chahta Holissoo](#), or Chahta Reading Book, for children. in 12.<sup>mo</sup><sup>[b]</sup>

5. [Id. second part, containing passages of Scripture in the Chahta language alone.](#) in 12.<sup>mo</sup>

In these three last books, the Missionaries have adopted my system of orthography.

6. [Cotton's Vocabulary of the Massachusetts Language](#) (which I mentioned to you in my letter of [Aug. 24, 1821](#)) is now preparing for the press by our [Massachusetts Historical Society](#).

7. [A Gazette or Newspaper, in the Cherokee & English languages, is about to be published in the Cherokee nation.](#) The types are now making in this city ([Boston](#)) for a new set of [characters made by a native Cherokee](#). I should inform you, that this native (whose name is [George Guess](#), & who is called by his countrymen "The Philosopher") was not satisfied with the alphabet of letters, or [single sounds](#), which we white people had prepared for him, [33v] in the sheets of a [Cherokee Grammar](#) formerly sent to you, but he thought fit to devise a new [syllabic](#) alphabet; which is quite contrary to our notions of a useful alphabetic system. He has, by his own analysis, reduced all the [syllables](#) of their language to about [eighty three](#), & his alphabet accordingly consists of 83 arbitrary characters, instead of 16 or 18 Roman letters. He has, however, taken the Roman letters as the basis & has only added to them some little marks, or has distorted their shapes in order to suit his purpose. This is much to be regretted as respects the facility of communication between these Indians & the white people; & the plan seems to us to be very unphilosophical.

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**a)** [Editor] Laut Müller-Vollmer 1976, 267 verbirgt sich John Pickering selbst hinter diesem Pseudonym.

**b)** [Editor] Der Titel ist so nicht zu finden; vgl. aber *Annual Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* 27, 1836, S. 135.

But, strange as it may appear, the fact is, that either by force of national pride (for which we cannot blame them) or by reason of the greater convenience of this syllabic alphabet, the use of the new characters has spread among them in the most inconceivable manner, & they learn with great rapidity, both the old & *|sic|* people & the young. So strong is their partiality for this national alphabet, that our missionaries have been obliged to yield to the impulse, & consent to print their books in future in the new character instead of the Roman letters. As soon as the newspaper is begun, I shall not fail to transmit *|34r|* some of the numbers to you, which will certainly be a great curiosity to the world. I send you a journal, called the Missionary Herald, giving some account of this new alphabet. [See p. 212.](#)

You will perceive by the above list of publications, that we are not idle; & I hope every succeeding year will be more fertile. I shall not omit to inform you of our progress from time to time.

I have been long hoping to see your great work on the American Languages; but I know how laborious an undertaking it must be, & therefore I wait with all the patience I can command.

I hope you will receive this letter & the accompanying books in safety, & that I shall have the pleasure of a letter from you, informing me of what has been done in Germany on the subject of the American languages. I hope above all things, for the benefit of learning, that the weakness of your eyes has entirely left you, and that you are now able to pursue your favourite studies, by night as *|34v|* well as by day, so that I may have many more opportunities of making my acknowledgements to you for new instruction.

I have the honour to be with the highest consideration,

Sir,

your most obedient

& most humble

servant

Jn<sup>o</sup>Pickering

Boston, Massachusetts,

Nov. 27. 1827.

Address:

To John Pickering, Esquire

Boston

in Massachusetts

United States of America.