

A Brief Account of Native American Agriculture and the U.S. Government (USG): Promises Made, Kept, and Unfulfilled—A Retelling of America’s Story

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Introduction

A common portrayal of the first documented agricultural extension work in American history was Squanto of the Patuxet tribe in what is now Massachusetts teaching the newly arrived *pilgrims* how to grow corn and other crops in the New World (Edwards & Rasmussen, 1942), i.e., a story of benevolence and peaceful reciprocity. This may have been the start of an often misrepresented and misunderstood relationship between Native Americans, the settlers who colonized what became the United States of America, and their descendants. Over time, treaties were signed that clearly outlined the USG’s responsibilities to assist American Indian tribes in developing agriculture on their lands, including the provision of agents knowledgeable about farming (Brewer, Hiller, Burke, & Teegerstrom, 2016; Firkus, 2010). However, major challenges associated with enforcing these treaties remain a source of unresolved and contentious issues (Finkelman & Garrison, 2008).

Purpose & Research Question

We examined the historical relationship between Native Americans and the USG regarding their practice of agriculture. As part of a larger study, we sought to answer this research question: What were some of the major events and challenges that Native Americans encountered with USG agencies charged with implementing policies intended to improve their practice of agriculture?

Conceptual Framework/Methodology

We used historical research methods to collect, examine, and interpret data to answer the study’s research question (McDowell, 2002). The terms *American Indian* and *Native American* describe individuals comprising federally recognized tribes in the United States and were used interchangeably while sourcing data and in this abstract. Primary and secondary sources were collected and analyzed, including federal legislation, government policies, treaties, and relevant books. Internal criticism and external criticism were applied to the sources to ensure accuracy and authenticity, respectively (McDowell, 2002). As such, corroboration was sought, the potential for presentism addressed, and contextualization introduced (Johnson & Christensen, 2006).

Selected Findings

Numerous treaties were signed between the USG and American Indian tribes, especially from the 1790s to the 1870s. The USG promised to provide the means necessary for Native Americans to make a living on their lands, and to instruct them on how to do such with the intent that their communities would thrive and be sustainable without significant outside assistance (Moquin & Doren, 1973). A Northern Cheyenne and Northern Arapaho treaty resembles many in detailing the funding of agricultural practices, including equipment, seeds, animals, and instruction from an experienced farmer (Treaty with the Northern, 1868). In a treaty with the Seminole, the USG provided \$30,000 for the improvement of farm land and \$20,000 to pay for agricultural implements (Treaty with the Seminole, 1866). A treaty signed with tribes in Oregon outlined the USG’s agriculturally related obligations, including funds to purchase equipment and implements, livestock, animal teams, and seeds to advance the tribes’ agricultural endeavors (Treaty with the Middle, 1865). The General Allotment Act of 1887 or Dawes Act broke up reservation lands in what was the Oklahoma Territory by issuing allotments to individual Indians making them independent landowners instead of following the traditional practice of shared or communal land use

(Finkelman, & Garrison, 2008). Prior to the Dawes Act, treaties had provisions on how land should be assigned but did not specify individual land ownership with a sole owner having control and responsibility for a given parcel. The Dawes Act, however, distributed land to the heads of families, which mainly meant men, but women were often the farmers and primary providers of most food staples (Jensen, 1977). So, land went untended because many men did not farm and instead sold their land back to the USG (Finkelman & Garrison, 2008; Jensen, 1977). Tribes nationwide experienced a loss of more than 77 million acres from 1881 to 1900 (Finkelman & Garrison, 2008).

Beginning in the early 1900s until the 1980s, Native Americans and some 1862 land-grant institutions (LGIs) worked together to bring extension programs to reservations (Brewer et al., 2016). Prior to the LGIs' involvement, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) assigned agents to reservations who hired *boss farmers* to oversee tribal agriculture and to provide demonstrations on improved practices (Brewer et al., 2016; Racine, 1995). When the U.S. Cooperative Extension Service (CES) attempted to serve Native American communities, this interaction was often complicated due to being intertwined with the USG's legal obligations, as mandated by treaties, *to provide agricultural advisory services specific to reservations* (Brewer et al., 2016). The fact that many reservations span multiple county jurisdictions hindered extension delivery, e.g., counties' plans with varying or even competing priorities (Brewer et al., 2016). As such, access to resources and advisory personnel to conduct programs varied widely and was often unreliable (Firkus, 2010). Some reservations had separate agreements or contracts with the CES or with 1862 LGIs in other ways to provide assistance (Brewer et al., 2016; Brewer & Stock, 2016). As contracts with the BIA expired in the 1980s, a gap occurred in extension work that inspired the Intertribal Agriculture Council and Southwest Indian Agriculture Association, with limited help from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administrators, to push for creation of the Extension Indian Reservation Program as part of the 1990 Farm Bill (Brewer et al., 2016; Brewer & Stock, 2016; GovTrack.us, 2020). The program was intended to support 90 agents to reach as many reservations as possible with a \$10 million budget. It was renamed the Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP). During the first year of operation, 12 offices were established but only \$1 million was devoted to programming (Brewer et al., 2016; Brewer & Stock, 2016).

Conclusions & Recommendations

The USG held that agriculture could provide a foundation for Native American tribes to be self-sufficient and it was best to give individuals ownership of land instead of continuing the traditional, communal approach to land stewardship and use. The tribes, however, encountered many struggles regarding their practice of agriculture, such as funding of inputs, sufficient and reliable advisory services, loss of allotted lands, and challenges to their cultural traditions, including longstanding gender roles. The CES and the USDA could have exposed Native Americans to improved farming practices, but access to their personnel and programs was often irregular and inadequate (Firkus, 2010). Some tribes had bilateral agreements with the CES or other LGI actors to provide extension services (Brewer et al., 2016). As these arrangements ended, new legislation was enacted to secure the provision of extension services to reservations under the 1990 Farm Bill (GovTrack.us, 2020). This resulted in the FRTEP to bring advisory services to Native American reservations to improve their agricultural practices (Brewer & Stock, 2016). To tell this story more fully and accurately, additional research is warranted and the development of learning resources. Such curricula could be taught in the context of U.S. agricultural history through school-based, agricultural education, especially if coupled with more teacher education on multiculturalism (Vincent, Kirby, Deeds, & Faulkner, 2014), which would also support educational aims related to diversity and social justice.

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