CHAPTER 11: OLD WORLD, NEW WORLD

The First American Pilgrims happened to live in the midst of perhaps the most exciting period in the history of the English language—a time when 12,000 words were being added to the language and revolutionary activities were taking place in almost every realm of human endeavour. It was also a time of considerable change in the structure of the language. The 104 pilgrims who sailed from Plymouth in 1620 were among the first generation of people to use the s form on verbs, saying has rather than hath, runs rather than runneth. Similarly, thee and thou pronoun forms were dying out. Had the pilgrims come a quarter of a century earlier, we might well have preserved those forms, as we preserved other archaisms such as gotten. The new settlers in America obviously had to come up with new words to describe their New World, and this necessity naturally increased as they moved inland. Partly this was achieved by borrowing from others who inhabited or explored the untamed continent. From the Dutch we took landscape, cookie, and caboose. (...) Often the new immigrants borrowed Indian terms, though these could take some swallowing since the Indian languages, particularly those of the eastern part of the continent, were inordinately agglomerative. As Mary, Helen Dohan notes in her excellent book on the rise of American English, Our Own Words, an early translator of the Bible into Iroquoian had to devise the word kummogkodonattoo tummooetiteaonganunnonash for the phrase "our question." In Massachusetts there was a lake that the Indians called Chargog gagomanchaugagochaubungamaug, which is said to translate as "You fish on that side, we’ll fish on this side, and nobody will fish in the middle." Not surprisingly, such words were usually shortened and modified. The English-sounding hickory \(^1\) was whittled out of the Indian pawcohiccora. Raugraoughcun was hacked into raccoon and isquonterquashes into squash. Some idea of the bewilderments of Indian orthography is indicated by the fact that Chippewa and Ojibway are different names for the same tribe as interpreted by different people at different times. Sometimes words went through many transformations before they sat comfortably on the English-speaking tongue. Manhattan has been variously recorded as Manhates, Manthanes, Manhatones, Manhatesen, Manhattae, and at least half a dozen others. Even the simple word Iowa, according to Dohan, has been recorded with sixty-four spellings. Despite the difficulties of rendering them into English, Indian names were borrowed for the names of more than half our states and for countless thousands of rivers, lakes, and towns. Yet we borrowed no more than three or four dozen Indian words for everyday objects—among them canoe, raccoon, hammock, and tobacco.

From the early Spanish settlers, by contrast, we took more than 500 words—though many of these, it must be said, were Indian terms adopted by the Spaniards. Among them: rodeo, bronco, buffalo, avocado, mustang, burro, fiesta, coyote, mesquite, canyon, and buckaroo. Buckaroo was directly adapted from the Spanish vaquero (a cowboy) and thus must originally have been pronounced with the accent on the second syllable. Many borrowings are more accurately described as Mexican than Spanish since they did not exist in Spain, among them stampede, hoosegow, and cafeteria. Hoosegow and jug (for jail) were both taken from the Mexican-Spanish juzgado, which, despite the spelling, was pronounced more or less as "hoosegow." Sometimes it took a while for the pronunciation to catch up with the spelling. Rancher, a term borrowed from the Spanish rancho, was originally pronounced in the Mexican fashion, which made it something much closer to "ranker."

From the French, too, we borrowed liberally, taking the names for Indian tribes, territories, rivers, and other geographical features, sometimes preserving the pronunciation (Sioux) and sometimes not (Illinois, Detroit, Des

---

\(^1\) Hickory = nut tree
Plaines). We took other words from the French, but often knocked them about in a way that made them look distinctively American, as when we turned gaufre into gopher and chaudrée into chowder. Other New World words borrowed from the French were prairie and dime.

Perhaps even more improbable is how America came to be named in the first place. The name is taken from Americus Vespucius, a Latinized form of Amerigo Vespucci. A semi obscure Italian navigator who lived from 1454 to 1512, Vespucci made four voyages to the New World though without ever once seeing North America. A contemporary mapmaker wrongly thought Vespucci discovered the whole of the continent and, in the most literal way, put his name on the map. When he learned of his error, the mapmaker, one Martin Waldseemuller, took the name off, but by then it had stuck. Vespucci himself preferred the name Mundus Novus, "New World."

In addition to borrowing hundreds of words, the Mundus Novians (far better word!) devised many hundreds of their own. The pattern was to take two already existing English words and combine them in new ways: bullfrog, eggplant, grasshopper, rattlesnake, mockingbird, catfish. Sometimes, however, words from the Old World were employed to describe different but similar articles in the New. So beech, walnut, laurel, partridge, robin, oriole, hemlock, and even pond (which in England is an artificial lake) all describe different things in the two continent.

Although the residents of the New World began to use new words almost from the first day they stepped ashore, it isn't at all clear when they began pronouncing them in a distinctly American way. No one can say when the American accent first arose—or why it evolved quite as it did. As early as 1791, Dr. David Ramsay, one of the first American historians, noted in his History of the American Revolution that Americans had a particular purity of speech, which he attributed to the fact that people from all over Britain were thrown together in America where they "dropped the peculiarities of their several provincial idioms, retaining only what was fundamental and common to them all. «But that is not to suggest that they sounded very much like Americans of today. According to Robert Burchfield, George Washington probably sounded as British as Lord North. On the other hand, Lord North probably sounded more American than would any British minister today. North would, for instance, have given necessary its full value. He would have pronounced path and bath in the American way. He would have given r’s their full value in words like cart and horse. And he would have used many words that later fell out of use in England but were preserved in the New World.

It has been said many times that hostility towards Britain at the end of the Revolutionary War was such that America seriously considered adopting another language. The story has been repeated many times, even by as eminent an authority as Professor Randolph Quirk of Oxford, but it appears to be without foundation. Someone may have made such a proposal. At this remove we cannot be certain. But what we can say with confidence is that if such a proposal was made it appears not to have stimulated any widespread public debate, which would seem distinctly odd in a matter of such moment. We also know that the Founding Fathers were so little exercised by the question of an official language for the United States that they made not one mention of it in the Constitution. So it seems evident that such a proposal was not treated seriously, if indeed it ever existed. What is certain is that many people, including both Thomas Jefferson and Noah Webster, expected American English to evolve into a separate language over time. Benjamin Franklin, casting an uneasy eye at the Germans in his native Pennsylvania, feared that America would fragment into a variety of speech communities. But neither of these things happened.