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Pauleena MacDougall

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**Some observations on the Penobscot writing of Joseph Polis (1809-1884)
By Pauleena MacDougall
University of Maine**

He was "stoutly built, perhaps a little above the middle height, with a broad face, and, as others said, perfect Indian features and complexion "¹ so writes Henry David Thoreau, about Joseph Polis, hired by Thoreau to guide him to the Allagash and East Branch of the Penobscot River in July, 1857. Thoreau learned a great deal from Polis about Indian place names, legends and names of birds and plants. And in one place along the East Branch, Thoreau noted that Polis inscribed a few words on a tree in his own language.

Niasoseb. Polis clioi sia Olta oouke ni quambi.

Nr~ya Sosep Polis Kala~jihlesa Olta wz|wiko nihkjpzi

I (pron.), Joseph Polis, (personal name), I am going in that direction (AI 1p. sg.. pres. perf.), Old Town (place name), (AI 3p. sg. He lives continuously, he camps), now (pc.).

Polis translated the words for Thoreau: "I alone, Joseph Polis start for Old Town right away."²

Another writer who knew Polis well, fur trader Manly Hardy describe him this way: "He was a very mysterious man, full of quiet drollery. He would come up, and, extending his hand at full arm's length, look one gravely in the face and perhaps give some exclamation in Indian, asking its meaning, although he knew you did not

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co, 1966 ed.), 207

² Thoreau, 262.

know...He collected and sold curiosities, made and sold baskets, snowshoes and canoes. He kept a little shop on the left side of Main Street before one came to the rise by the school house. He was always pleased to talk with his customers and often would try to mystify them. He was deeper than a well, always giving one the idea that they didn't know much about him. He would have been a powwow man, if they had had such things in these days. He was a Protestant; he was shamanistic--and so believed to possess special powers of his own fully equal to the priests'.³ He was the son of Polis Wassoos Mitchell and a member of the bear clan.

Polis learned to read and write at the age of 14, when Josiah Brewer taught school on Indian Island. He wrote very well in English, as one can see from the letter in your handout, but he also wrote from time to time in Penobscot.

He inscribed the above message on a tree on July 26, 1853. This little bit of writing tells us that Joseph was literate, but it is a small sample, that teases the imagination. However, there are other writings of Joseph Polis. I have found three more, the first, a letter Polis wrote to John Francis, a Passamaquoddy at Pleasant Point, Maine in 1841,⁴ the second a list of words Polis wrote down for the priest, Vetromille in 1854,⁵ and the third a church calendar drawn by Polis in 1866,⁶

Native writings in the Penobscot language are scarce. Mary Alice Nelson, known as Molly Spotted Elk composed a small dictionary, but I have seen little in the way of other examples of narratives. Two of the pieces I plan to discuss include narrative, but the first, the letter to John Francis, is perhaps the most valuable, since it is the most

³ Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, *Old John Neptune and Other Indian Shamans*, (Portland, Maine: Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1945), 185-186.

⁴ Letter in the Huntington Library, Bronx, New York.

⁵ Papers of Vetromille, Maine Historical Society, Portland.

lengthy. I have included a photocopy in your handout. The letter is addressed to John Francis, Indian Village, Pleasant Point, with a note in English to "Please deliver to John Francis."

John Francis was the son of Francis Joseph Neptune. Francis traveled to Indian Island to take part in the famous incident of cutting down the Liberty Pole in 1849. The Penobscots accused him of trespassing, as a result of this incident. Since Joseph Polis was also involved in the liberty pole incident, they undoubtedly knew each other well, were allies or perhaps, had kinship ties.

The letter is dated "At Old Town, Jun 15th, 1841."

There is no English translation with this letter, and I have tried my best to translate it word-for-word, but there are a few mysteries I have yet to solve.

Nigoanbi nista alokan bimikiskus Kamantsi hun ta olit hhin si oi ni sana Siek elikk aoikhukun nos bebal lk euk_____

Ni|hjzppi Now (pc.) ni|srta twice (pc. adverbial number), a|lohkzn work

(AI 3p.sg. subjectless) pe|mrkisirkahk (II m.reflex. throughout the day)

ka|mzc (pc.very much), z~ta (pc. not) wrli|trhzsit (AI m. reflex. conj?

When s/he is happy) wrni|szno (AI she is pregnant?) sz|krlikke (AI 3p. sg.

S/he believes strongly), awi|hkhikan (INAN writing), nos bebal lk eiik This last part

I've puzzled over quite a bit. Not sure whether the nos is a prefix |nrwrs-| or a separate

word, like nohso- follow. Bebal could be a reduplicated root. Some candidates are |pal-|

miss, off course, fumble; |prl-| remove, peel. I have also considered pzli|hkhz TA I

am proud of him, but none of these seem to work satisfactorily.

⁶ Photostat copy in Special Collections, Raymond Fogler Library, University of Maine.

Ni nu oa nia Soseph Poris mina hungoanmk

Ni (pc. then) na (AN demonstrative pron. that one), owa (Demonstrative pc. and pron.

This, this one), nrya (pron. I), Joseph Polis mina (pc. again) z | j zmrk (pc. more)

Kataw san tekie nta tsai ahibna Siban hi ke

Kataw (pc. it is likely) pe | hsantek (II conj. when it is full), nrtahapa pc. it is

impossible that ??? [Why S capitalized?]

olelmgoeke Senangoabani hesi mkelsta mug msini

wrle | lrmrje AI he has good fortune, he is lucky Senz- | man??[why capitalized??] [wa | penrme AI he is in a hurry?]

Knant kumne na beman wsiuaw ni goanbi

Krnz | tkawzna TA We (exclusive) walk towards him, na demonstrative pc. that one

nrprnz | wrsrwino AN a living person. nihkjzpi (pc. now).

Nia Joseph Polis

I, Joseph Polis

Denia Mul ???

2. Sample 2. Word list

The second sample, is a word list was obtained by a priest named Vetromille who was assigned to Indian Island in the 1850s. In a letter to Vetromille signed J. F.

Spaulding, dated March 1, 1859 is a sample of Penobscot words. The letter states “Most of the Indian words are in Joe Poris handwriting.” The letter can be found in the

Vetromille collection of the Maine Historical Society in Portland, Maine. [See handout].

Alitungwat nerves. The word is derived from R1- thus, so, medial itehz- mental process, II final.

Kakiso oikbe basket stuffs ka|kiso is II "it is brittle" and oikbe is wi|krpi
 AN for the tree, INAN if referring to a strip of wood young black ash used in basketry,
 also, "strips, grains, layers of wood."

Kansk = AN cedar kz|ksokosi 'arborvitae, northern white cedar

Snaw = AN rock maple ssnr~w

Lenanbe = AN man, any man a|lrnzpe

Kau=kee=so not translated, would mean he falls flat. Kaw- fallen, lying flat, -iso
 reflexive ending. ka~wahsrn INAN fallen dead tree, or log,

Nonaskaoan = meet |wanask-|meet nrwa|naskawz TA I meet him.

Kakiso brittle trees that don't bend. ka|hkiso AI m. reflex. "he is brittle, dried,
 crisp

Kake mad easily = temper[?]

A stick is kani=ka: when it will break (not bend). An axe handle for example which is
 brittle is "ka ki"

Bot a ousin = any meeting Potawasin general meeting potawa|srwikrwzm INAN
 council house, pota|wasin, meeting, council

Polis Sometimes he writes his last name, Polis with an l sometimes with an r. L
 and R seem to be allophones of the same phoneme.

Kissok = the air, atmosphere, Ki~sohk INAN atmosphere, air, Kisj sky,
 kisko~k in the sky

What news? Is kew halitungout

Kehj ali|||tzjat? What news? Polis usually writes a w for a KW. [does it
 have a line over it?]

3. The third sample is a church Calendar

A letter to Fannie Hardy Eckstorm from the librarian of the Bangor Public Library states; For Mr. R.B. Roberts, who is preparing a book on writings by American Indians, I have recently had made a photostat of the Penobscot Indian Church calendar, 1866 made by Joseph Polis and on display in the collection of the Bangor Historical Society. Mr. Roberts asked for a translation of the writing on the calendar. I am unable to supply it and suggested to him as possible translators: Princess Watawaso, and Rev. George Dulac at Indian Island....

The photostat remains in the Bangor Historical Society collections. A photocopy of the calendar is in your handout.

Months:

1. ankelosamoesit Zkrlo-ssa|mrwehsit ki~sohs past participle from AI "he provides a little food grudgingly."
2. tugoasanikisos tajasjayi|-kisohs "month of crusts of ice on snow."
3. bantumoi kisos prnztamrwi|-kisohs "laying eggs month."
4. amosoe kisos zmrssrwi|-kisohs "month of smelts."
5. kikaaikisos kkihkayi|-kisohs "planting/sowing month."
6. anetkoikisos (Could this be wrnztka|hikewak they go hoeing?) (Grubbing hoe month nohkkahikani|-kisohs)
7. abiton nibine kisos apihton niprni|-kisohs "summer occupies month" (acihtayi|-kisohs "month of ripening").
8. oukiisokisos wikkehsrwi|-kisohs fall fish, white chub month
9. maatseoatoki kisos mzcewatohki|-kisohs "moose and caribou rutting month."

10. asbasgratso asrpa|sjacrss Ice on the edge of lakes and streams month.

11. abonumoei kisos aponamawi|-kisohs (inserted 13th month) (herring?)

12. ksti-kiso kci|-kisohs "Old month".

At the bottom of the calendar is:

Minag ntliton Santeooig higan mina

Now (pc. with focusing enclitic, it is now), nrtrli|ton I think it

e|hsznrtrk (INAN part. Sunday) wi|hkhikan (INAN writing)

Goan bege wlelemgannegoggolelmgoebna

Kewzpeke ??? Wrle~lrmzkanekok (TA conj, when I glorify him)

KoKole|lrmrkrweprna (TA inclusive, we are pleased, delighted with you)

Halalogagoe helagimlaw tebelmlaw

Ahalo|hkekrwe (AI redupl. neg. 3 p sg. he doesn't continues to accomplish?)

alake|milaj (AN part. One who commands), Tepe|lrmrlaj AN part. God

("Owner")

Nia Soseb bolis, 1866.

Goddard and Bragdon, in their very impressive work on the Native Writings in Massachusetts noticed that Massachusetts speakers retained many of the characteristics of oral societies, including certain stylized phrasing, apparently derived from native rhetorical style.⁷ Repetition of the writer's name is one example. We find some similar aspects in the Polis sample, in particular, the phrase, "I, Joseph Polis." There are, in addition, influences on Polis's orthography from both French and English. The use of the an to represent alpha, the use of the word Tepe|lrmrlaj "Owner" to represent God,

both come from French missionaries. In another place, Polis uses -hun- to represent the alpha, a practice followed by English writers. And finally, the occasional use of r in the name Polis, is also an influence from English speakers.

A few general remarks about the phonology and orthography of the samples.

Consonants: consonants in Penobscot are c, cc, h, hw, k, kk, kj, j, l, m, n, p, pp, s, ss, t, tt, w, y. All of these consonants are not found in the sample. However, we do find:

c ts
 h h, w, null
 k k, (intervocalic or word initial),
 kk
 J g, but also sometimes as a w, or
 null.
 s, ss s
 M, m
 N sometimes labialized if it occurs
 before p or b
 P (intervocalic or word initial) b,
 otherwise p, null before s
 T, tt t

Vowels in Penobscot are a, z, e,
 r, i, o.
 a a, o, u, aa
 z an, a, aa, (word initial)-hun, o
 e a,e
 R e, null, i, (after w-) o
 i i, long I written sometimes as
 double i.
 o o,u
Glides and liquids
 l usually l, but sometimes r
 w (when word initial o), (when
 intervocalic), oi

Polis seems to follow the French missionary orthography in writing the vowel Siebert describes as mid back tense and writes as an alpha, by following an a with a nasalized n.

Syncope of short vowels--Unstressed short vowels are often not written.

Word boundaries

Sometimes word boundaries are difficult to distinguish. Generally, Polis places a space between words, but sometimes he places a space between syllables. For example

⁷ Ives Goddard and Kathleen J. Bragdon, *Native Writings in Massachusetts*, (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1988), 19.

nihjzppi, now he writes as nigoan space bi. He may have been writing as if he were sounding it out syllable by syllable. However, in the 1866 sample, Polis has no problem writing very long words, such as wrle|lemzkanekok as a single word. I find it easier to read his 1866 writing than the 1841 sample. Perhaps this is in part, due to Polis's increasing skill at writing Penobscot.

That is the extent of my analysis to this point, I would be interested in any suggestions or remarks you may have.