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Oterskins, Eagle Feathers, and Native American Alumni at Princeton

ALFRED L. BUSH

TWO objects created by Native American artisans—one from the eighteenth century and one from the twentieth—neatly bracket the small but richly evocative collection of American Indian artifacts now in the care of the Princeton University Library. Both of these objects have connections with European-American figures of importance to Indian people and to Princeton University. An otter-skin binding created by Delaware (Lenape) Indians, the earliest Native creation associated with the college to survive in the collections, came to the Library through the family of one of the institution's first presidents. The most recent addition to this select grouping of ethnographic objects is an eagle feather chief's headdress, the quintessential icon of the American Indian. Presented as a signal honor to a non-Indian friend of the Sioux tribe in the first half of the twentieth century, it was given to the Princeton University Library by the son of the man so honored, a Princeton professor emeritus who is also a Nobel Laureate.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the renowned American theologian and philosopher, was associated with the College of New Jersey from its inception. Its “New Light” Presbyterian origins were honed on Edwards’s religious thought, and his encouragement included spreading the good news of the college’s founding not only in the colonies but especially to Scotland. Edwards’s daughter Esther married the college’s second president, Aaron Burr, and three of his sons were to become Princeton alumni. When President Burr died in September 1757, the college trustees immediately turned to Edwards as his successor. By November, Gilbert Tennent could announce that “Providence has mercifully interposed in the choice of a Successor, the Revd. Mr Jonathan Edwards, formerly of North-Hampton, now of Stockbridge...” Inducted into office upon his arrival in Princeton on February 16, 1758, Edwards was inoculated against smallpox a week later. As a direct result of this vaccination, Princeton’s third president died on March 22, 1758, after slightly more than one month in

office. Two weeks later, Esther Edwards Burr died of the same cause, leaving two small children. As Howard Rice wrote at the time of a Library exhibition of Edwards materials, “[W]ithin a year, Jonathan Edwards and his wife, his daughter, and his son-in-law were all buried in the Princeton cemetery. Many years later his erring grandson, Aaron Burr, Jr., was laid to rest beside them.”¹

Not surprisingly, few items survive to document Edwards’s brief tenure as the college’s president. Certainly the most unusual of these is a volume titled *Johannis Buxtorfi Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldaicum* (Basel, 1645), which bears an otterskin binding embellished by a painted orange and black design. Laid into the book are two clippings from unidentified newspapers stating that the volume originally belonged to David Brainerd, was bound for him by Indians, and was left in Jonathan Edwards’s Massachusetts residence at the time of Brainerd’s death.

David Brainerd’s brief life (1718–1747) was plagued by fragile health. An argument over discipline led to his expulsion from Yale in 1742,² and the lack of a degree may have forced him into missionary work among the Indians on the frontier in New England and the Middle Atlantic colonies. When his labor among the Mahicans near Stockbridge (where Jonathan Edwards served as missionary to the Indians for almost a decade) yielded slight success, he focused his work among the Delaware people (who called themselves Lenape) of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Brainerd’s attempts at converting the New Jersey Natives were as frustrating as his work with Indians in Massachusetts. His deteriorating health did not arm him with the necessary energy, and his youthful missionary zeal prevented any appreciation of the vastly different culture he was encountering and thus thwarted mutual trust.

Brainerd’s final effort was a settlement named Bethel, just outside of what is now Cranbury, New Jersey, and less than ten miles south-east of Princeton. But by the time this little community of barely

¹ Howard C. Rice, Jr., “Jonathan Edwards at Princeton,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1954), 69–71.

² One tradition holds that the uproar resulting from Yale’s refusal to accept Brainerd’s apology and to reinstate him led to the founding of the College of New Jersey. The college’s first three presidents were strong supporters of the pious young man who shared their evangelical impulse. See Harris Elwood Stark’s entry on Brainerd in *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner, 1937), 591.

more than one hundred Lenape began to take shape, Brainerd was so debilitated by tuberculosis that he fled. He spent the last months of his life in the Northampton house of Jonathan Edwards, where the two edited his diaries to present a portrait of sainthood on the American frontier. Family legend has it that only the obviously fatal nature of his disease prevented Brainerd from becoming engaged to Edwards's daughter Jerusha.³

We can speculate that the Delaware binding was produced at Bethel; but it could well date to Brainerd's earlier work elsewhere among the Lenape. It is also only an assumption that it came to Brainerd as a gift. But the binding does speak of the practical side of an infant Delaware settlement strapped for cash: crafts have always been a reliable means to bring money into a struggling Native community. It is also pleasant to speculate that the binding may suggest (if it were a gift) esteem for Brainerd on the part of some of his exotic flock. What is certain is that when Edwards made his fatal move to Princeton, a decade after Brainerd's death in October 1747, this book journeyed with his household effects to the president's house on the Princeton campus. The book, prominently inscribed with the new owner's name inside both front and back covers, was doubly a sentimental relic for Edwards: a reminder not only of the life of a missionary saint and family friend, but also of his own labors among the Indians. It is certainly one of the few books from a Princeton president's library of the eighteenth century known to survive.

The manifestly Native manufacture of the book's binding may also be unique. Clippings from unidentified newspapers found inside the book testify to the curiosity the binding aroused in the nineteenth century. One (ca. 1844) reads:

An Old and Curious Book. We have recently seen, in the library of the Rev. Tryon Edwards of this city, a copy of one of the early editions of Buxtorf's Hebrew Lexicon, printed at Basel in 1645, very nearly 200 years ago. It formerly belonged to David Brainerd, the well known missionary to the Indians; and was bound by them for him with a piece of otter skin painted in their peculiar style, and from which they had cut the fur, evidently with knives of stone or shell. It was left by

³ See James P. Walsh's entry for Brainerd in *American National Biography*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). A brief and authoritative introduction to the Lenape in New Jersey is contained in Gregory Evans Dowd, *The Indians of New Jersey* (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1992).



Otterskin binding created by Delaware (Lenape) Indians for David Brainerd's (later Jonathan Edwards's) copy of *Johannis Buxtorfi Lexicon hebraicum et chaldaicum* (Basel, 1645). Edwards Collection, Rare Books Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Gift of Mrs. Willaim F. H. Edwards.

Brainerd at the time of his death, at the house of the elder President Edwards; and from him has come down, through two generations, to its present owner. It is indeed a rare and curious work.

Almost fifty years later, a second report (1892) repeats much of the same information in connection with the book's display "[a]t the lecture on Brainerd, the missionary to the Indians, given in the Fort Street Church by Rev. Mr. Sexton..." By this time the book was in the possession of Dr. Fitzhugh Edwards, "of the eighth generation of the family in this country. Long ago as it was printed the typography is as clear and distinct as at the present day." The book was presented to the Princeton University Library in 1907 by Mrs. William F. H. Edwards.

Current students are not as impressed with the preservation of the printed text of the Hebrew and Syriac lexicon as they are by the survival of the work of Native artisans. A book being as foreign an object as any aboriginal American might imagine, the Native craftsmen permanently claimed this example by the use of indigenous materials elaborated with designs found on many Lenape objects. Where other bindings created in New England by Native American workmen were judged to be successful because they replicated European binding design so deftly that they could not be distinguished from the work of European workshops, the Princeton Delaware binding unmistakably proclaims the exotic nature of its workmanship. It is a monument to successful acculturation in both directions.⁴ On its front cover the characteristic Lenape geometrical design (four black bands separated by wider orange serration) remains vividly orange and black—anticipating by more than a century the colors that were not to be adopted by the College of New Jersey until after the Civil War.



The eagle feather headdress has become so pervasively identified with the American Indian that it is a stereotype frequently assumed to be a universal accoutrement of all indigenous peoples of North America. In fact, it is a late invention of certain Plains tribes, among whom it

⁴ The historian of American bookbinding Willman Spawm has studied the work of Indian binders in New England; neither he, nor James Green of the Library Company of Philadelphia, nor William Reese of the Reese Company can recall a binding of Native workmanship comparable to the Princeton example.



Eagle feather headdress originally presented to Fred B Fitch, 1939. Western Americana Collection, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Gift of Val Fitch.

was restricted to specific members of highly regarded societies. The earliest surviving bonnet of this type dates only to the first part of the nineteenth century.⁵

The effect of the eagle feather headdress is so dramatically spectacular, particularly when its movable parts are exaggerated when the wearer is riding a horse, that it is easy to see why it would be invented by the preeminent horse-riding people of the Plains and attract so much admiration and attention through the years. No one did more to remove this symbolic article from its specific context to a universal one than William “Buffalo Bill” Cody. His Wild West shows, which toured Europe as well as the United States, created an image of the American Indian that overwhelmed all others. Because Cody often brought authentic Sioux chiefs on tour with him, the eagle feather

⁵ See plate 69 in Peter Bolz and Hans-Ulrich Sanner, *Native American Art: The Collections of the Ethnological Museum Berlin* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), where a headdress collected by Duke Paul of Württemberg about 1830 is described.



“Secretary F. B. Fitch being taken into the Sioux Indian tribe as Chief Eagle Star.”
Photograph courtesy of Val Fitch.

headdress was a conspicuous part of the entertainment. The crude feather headdresses of children’s cowboy and Indian play are descended from these shows. By the depression years of the 1930s, even Pueblo Indians, who had their own rich heritage of ceremonial vestments, would eagerly don a homemade version of the Plains stereotype to appear to be “real” Indians for the benefit of tourists, who would thus be convinced to pay for a photograph or buy handicrafts.

By 1937, the Sioux themselves were presenting the chief’s headdress to non-Indians as a means of dispensing thanks and signal distinction. In that year Fred B Fitch (1890–1960) received the feather headdress now at Princeton. Fitch grew up on a ranch near Merriman, just south of the Nebraska–South Dakota border, which also marked the boundary of the Pine Ridge Reservation of the Oglala Sioux. Having taught himself some of the Lakota language in his teens, he proved an extraordinarily congenial neighbor, even after a riding accident forced him to give up the ranch and move to the county seat, Gordon, where he pursued a gentler career in insurance.

It was as a prominent member of that community—as well as a trusted friend of the Sioux—that he served as secretary of the Sheridan County Fair Association for several years. The ceremonial high-point of the event in 1937 was the presentation of a headdress in a rite in which Fitch was formally adopted into the Sioux tribe as an honorary chief and given the name Wiscarpi Wanbli (Eagle Star). A photograph of this ceremony shows two chiefs, splendidly attired in eagle feather headdresses, placing the headdress on the newly initiated chief. Behind them, a line of Pine Ridge Sioux arrayed in their best ceremonial finery adds tribal confirmation to what a local newspaper described as “the high friendship in which Mr. Fitch is held.”⁶

This friend of the Indian group most associated with a culture rooted in horses could not keep off them and died from injuries suffered in another riding accident. His Sioux friends would certainly have found that a fitting exit. Fred Fitch’s son Val, born on the family ranch and raised as a neighbor of the Sioux, was to follow his father in also being granted an extraordinary honor, the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1980, while a professor at Princeton.



These two artifacts of lost worlds easily turn our twenty-first-century imaginations to the Princeton campus in the spring of 1779, where we might be surprised by an encounter on what is now called McCosh Walk. At the time, a turf wall separated the eighteenth-century campus from a farm, even then called Prospect. On the Prospect side of that wall we would discover an impressive encampment of ten Delaware Indian leaders and their retinues—a perfectly reasonable occurrence. Prospect was then owned by Colonel George Morgan (1743–1810), whose military rank was awarded in 1776, when the Continental Congress appointed him agent of Indian affairs, a post he held until his retirement to Prospect only months before the Indian delegation’s visit.⁷

From the Indian point of view, Morgan was one of the few representatives of the new American government they trusted. This trust

⁶The author is indebted to Val Fitch for recounting this story of his father.

⁷The story of Colonel George Morgan, Chief White Eyes, and George Morgan White Eyes is told in Ruth Woodward and Wesley Frank Craven, *Princetonians, 1784–1790: A Biographical Dictionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 442–52.

was the result of an extraordinary friendship between Morgan and the most important Delaware sachem of the Ohio area, a man called White Eyes. Following an extensive tour of major cities in the colonies in 1774, White Eyes encouraged his people to accept the teachings of Moravian missionaries as a means to gain education and other benefits he had observed in white society. In the early years of the Revolution, White Eyes was able to maintain the neutrality of the Delaware despite pressure from the British and their Indian allies. In 1777 he traveled to Philadelphia to assure Congress that the Delaware wished to remain friendly, and he eventually signed a treaty with the Americans.

During the sachem's stay in Philadelphia, George Morgan acted as his guide and counselor. Their bond of friendship was strong enough for White Eyes to change the name of his eldest son to George Morgan White Eyes. For his loyalty, Congress rewarded White Eyes with the rank of captain in the American army, where he was assigned to act as scout and messenger. In November 1778, while guiding a group of American soldiers, he was deliberately shot by one of them. His tribesmen were told that he had died of smallpox. When Colonel Morgan learned the truth, he denounced the local commander before Congress and resigned his post in protest.

In response to this tragedy, Congress asked the Ohio Lenape to send a delegation of leaders to assure the government of their continued friendship. As a direct result of George Morgan's lobbying, Congress also requested that the Delaware send the dead chief's children east for schooling. The delegation encamped at the edge of the Princeton college campus in the spring of 1779 had brought White Eyes's son, George Morgan White Eyes, and his two cousins to be educated at the expense of Congress—the first instance of federal aid to education in the new Republic.⁸

George Morgan White Eyes was only eight years old at the time, and did not know that his father's death was the result of treachery rather than disease. He and his older cousins, the Killbuck brothers, were left in Morgan's care to be tutored by a member of the faculty of the Nassau Hall Grammar School. It is difficult to imagine

⁸ See John Murrin's introduction to *Princetonians, 1784–1790*, 1. Congress nevertheless expected the Delaware to repay the costs of the boys' education through a land grant; *ibid.*, 443.

the educational gulf these Native youths were trying to leap. They knew some English, but were being prepared for admission to a college where Greek and Latin were required languages of instruction. Understandably, the older boys soon dropped out of school. Overwhelmed with homesickness for a way of life totally foreign to everything in Princeton, they finally received Congress's permission to return to their tribe in Ohio. But the younger White Eyes flourished in the grammar school, finished second in competitions in his class, and was reading Virgil in the original Latin by the time his cousins left.

White Eyes began his freshman year at Princeton in the fall of 1785. He seems to have done well in his early years in the college. But his attitude and progress changed just before the beginning of his senior year, when he learned of the murder of his mother by a party of white men and, for the first time, the truth of his father's death. Colonel Morgan, who was about to leave for Missouri, put White Eyes in the care of a merchant in New York and recommended to Congress that the boy continue his education elsewhere. Nothing was done, and a series of entreaties went unanswered. White Eyes lost all interest in finishing his education and eventually petitioned President George Washington for permission to return to Ohio. In August 1789, he wrote sadly to the president: "I am very sorry that the Education you have given & Views that you must have had when you took me into your Possession, & the Friendship which my Father had for the United States (which I suppose is the chief Cause) are not sufficient Inducements, to your further providing for me."⁹

It is little wonder that White Eyes returned in bitterness to his people, with whom he now had little in common, and turned to drink. He is described by later travelers to his wilderness camp as taking pride in reading from his copy of Aeschylus in the original Greek. In May 1798, White Eyes, while intoxicated, ran at a white man with an upraised tomahawk. His companions insisted he intended only to intimidate, but the man shot and killed him.

George Morgan White Eyes was not the first Native American student at Princeton—Lenape students preceded him in the classes of 1762 and 1776, although neither of them lasted long—and the ones

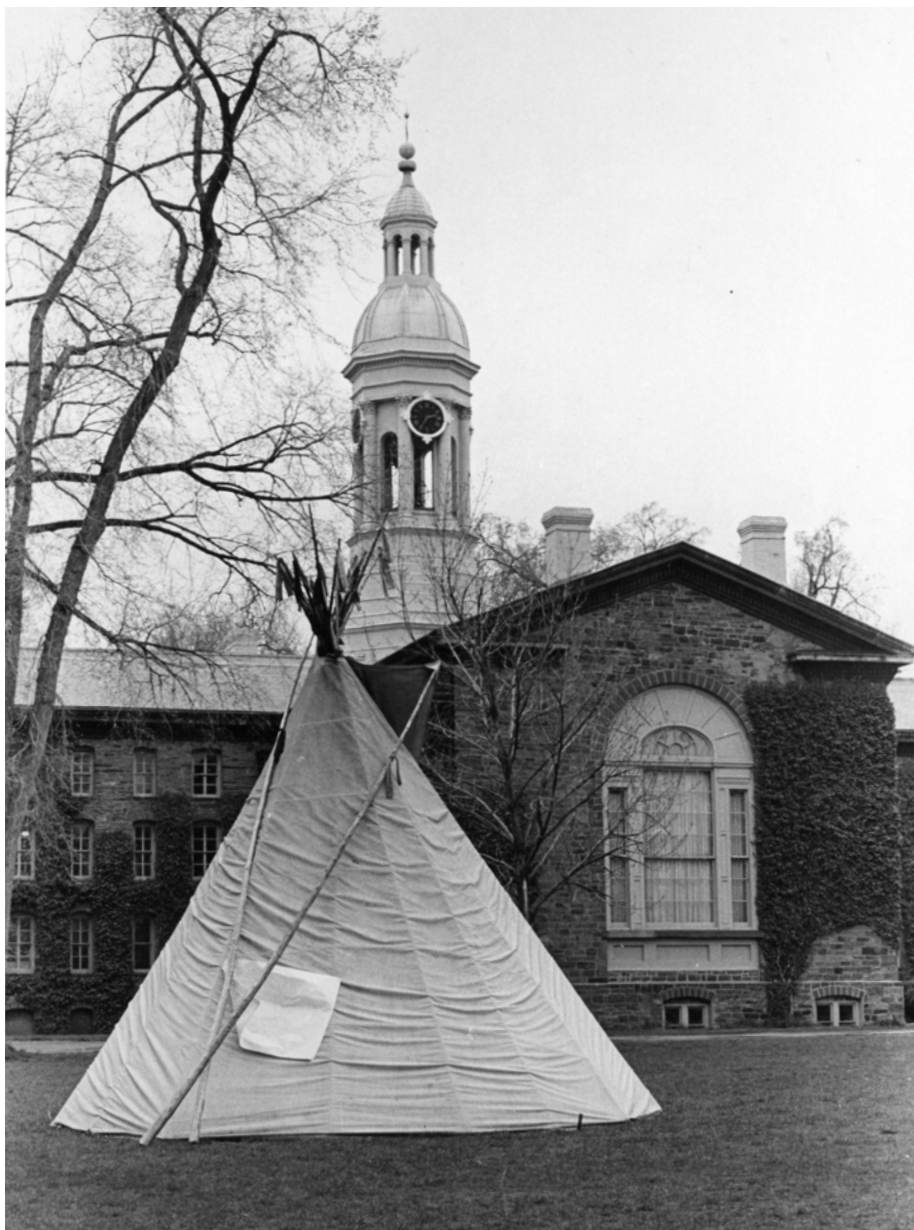
⁹ George Morgan White Eyes to George Washington, New York, August 8, 1789, *The Papers of George Washington: Presidential Series*, ed. W. W. Abbot et al., vol. 3 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 403.

who followed him enjoyed more successful college careers. Given the fact that no representatives of other minorities were allowed to matriculate at Princeton until well into the twentieth century, it is a fascinating commentary on the ambiguity of our view of the American Indian that they alone were allowed to represent the “other” in American society throughout Princeton’s history.

In the nineteenth century John Ross, principal chief of the Cherokees, who had led the nation during the difficult years of removal to Oklahoma, sent twelve members of his family to the Lawrenceville School. Three of them continued at Princeton and became the first Indians to graduate from the college. The most distinguished of this trio was William Potter Ross of the Class of 1842, a nephew of John Ross and his successor as chief. Considered one of the most brilliant of the educated Cherokees, he was twice appointed principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, and his writings are ranked among the finest in Indian literature. His brother, Robert Daniel Ross, of the Class of 1843, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1847, becoming one of the earliest Native American medical doctors.

In the early twentieth century, Howard Gansworth, of the Class of 1901, was a direct descendant of the great Seneca chief Red Jacket. He was born on the Tuscarora Reservation in Niagara County, New York, and sent to the Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He served a distinguished career as a government liaison with Indian people. Paul Baldeagle, of the Class of 1923, left the Pine Ridge Reservation when he was eleven. After graduating from Princeton, he taught English in secondary schools for thirty-five years in the Princeton area and then, in retirement, served in various elected offices in the Borough of Princeton and as a guard at Firestone Library.

From Baldeagle’s graduation in 1923, no Native American enrolled at Princeton until the 1970s. Then, in a single decade, at least twenty-four students with genuine ties to Native American communities matriculated. Some indication of the quantum leap of cultures these students represent is suggested by the fact that at least five of these alumni were raised by parents who were monolingual speakers of their native languages. Two-thirds of them were from reservations, and all of these reservation Indians returned home to better the lives of their communities. They include alumni who have founded



White Roots of Peace Teepee, erected on Cannon Green by a visiting Mohawk group, May 1975. Photograph by Victor Masayesva (Hopi, Class of 1976). Courtesy of Alfred L. Bush.



American Indian students on the steps of Whig Hall, 1973. *From left to right:* Louis Ballard (Osage-Quapaw-Delaware), Class of 1976; Conroy Chino (Acoma Pueblo), Graduate Class of 1973; Lorene Reano (Santa Domingo Pueblo), Class of 1975; Regis Pecos (Cochiti Pueblo), Class of 1976; Lily Shangreaux (Lakota), Class of 1974; Lee Martine (Navajo), Class of 1976; and Patrick Anderson (Tlingit-Aleut), Class of 1975. Photograph by Robin Lloyd (Class of 1973). Courtesy of Alfred L. Bush.

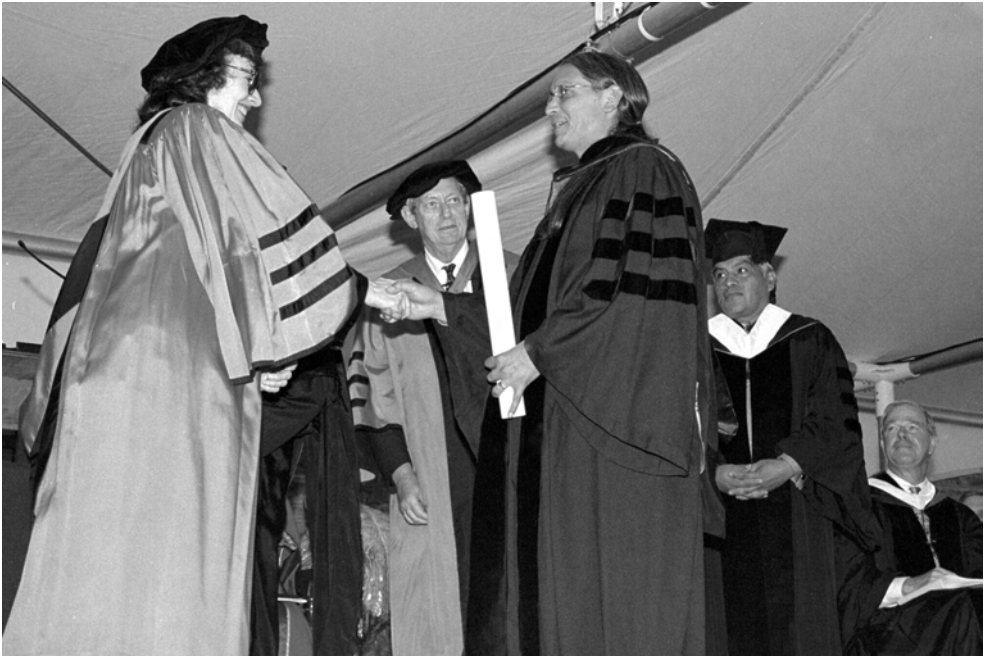
the Alaska Native Lawyers Association, board members of Native corporations, professors, dedicated teachers of young Indians, chairmen of organizations promoting the economic and community development of reservations, and the executive director of the Hopi-Navajo Land Dispute Commission (arguably the thorniest Indian issue in the country today). They include a winner of an Emmy

Award for investigative television reporting, a film maker, a medical doctor, leaders in health care education, the creators of at least two independent American Indian law firms, one of the first poets to write and publish in the Navajo language, an award-winning video and photographic artist whose works have been honored by exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Biennials, the creator of a highly respected and copied organization for the protection of battered reservation women, and the executive director of the New Mexico State Office of Indian Affairs. When ten of these accomplished American Indian alumni acted as faculty for a Princeton Alumni College convened in Santa Fe in 1993, the attendees' evaluations of the presentations were not only enthusiastic; they were also unusually poignant. One participant summed up the experience by commenting, "Nothing has made me prouder of Princeton."

In June 2001 Princeton conferred its first honorary degree on a Native American. Kevin Gover, a Pawnee/Comanche member of the Class of 1978, had just completed a successful tenure as Secretary for Indian Affairs in the Clinton administration. In that position he had supervisory authority over both the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Office of Indian Education and their ten thousand employees. What is more, he was escorted to the commencement platform by Regis Pecos, a member of the Class of 1970 from Cochiti Pueblo and the first Native American to serve as a Princeton trustee.



The sweeping cultural arc—confidently astride two worlds—represented by Princeton's modern American Indian alumni embraces in a most literal sense the motto recast for the University's 250th anniversary: Princeton in the service of all nations. Although these separate nations are found inside our own country, they differ in language, culture, and worldview with as much range as nations abroad. And from their beginnings, with the donation from Philip Ashton Rollins in 1947, the Princeton Collections of Western Americana have made accessible to students and visiting scholars the riches of these many worlds (and the European ones that rushed in upon them from Cabeza de Vaca in 1535 to the present day). The essays in this issue of the *Chronicle* suggest the range of these resources, from a single book to a vast archive, from manuscripts to ethnographic objects, from photographs to brand books. They all capture worlds deeply rooted in more



Kevin Gover (Pawnee/Comanche), Class of 1978, receiving an honorary degree at Princeton University's commencement ceremonies, June 2001. Trustee Regis Pecos (Cochiti Pueblo), Class of 1970, stands at right. Photograph by Denise Applewhite.

than half of this nation that call out for understanding and, like all history, offer lessons of immediate pertinence and utility. These are also lessons with an especially American hold on our imaginations and, as we have been reminded from the days of Frederick Jackson Turner to the present-day of Larry McMurtry and Sherman Alexie, a unique avenue into illuminating the American spirit.¹⁰

¹⁰ Two previous issues of the *Chronicle* have been devoted to the Princeton Collections of Western Americana: volume 9, no. 4 (June 1948), and volume 33, no. 1 (Autumn 1971).