

On the Turtle's Back: Stories the Lenape Told Their Grandchildren**Camilla Townsend and Nicky Kay Michael****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023.****250 pages****ISBN: 9781978819153****DOI: [10.14713/njs.v11i1.380](https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v11i1.380)**

The oral traditions and folklore of any culture are an invaluable opportunity to gain insight into their past and offer a gateway to understanding who they are as a people today. *On the Turtle's Back: Stories the Lenape Told Their Grandchildren* by Camilla Townsend and Nicky Kay Michael is an important contribution to the history and culture of the Lenape people. The authors, through their diligent study of unpublished archival material, retrieved and published the voices and stories of two crucial Lenape storytellers from Oklahoma in the early twentieth century, Charles Elkhair and Julius Fouts. This contribution builds upon the works of folklorist John Bierhorst, anthropologist Robert S. Grumet, and historical accounts by David Zeisberger and John Heckewelder in the eighteenth century. The stories are based on the notes compiled by anthropologist Mark Harrington in the first decades of the twentieth century and held at the Archive Center of the National Museum of the American Indian Smithsonian in Maryland.

The book's introduction provides succinct biographies of Charles Elkhair and Julius Fouts and how they came to Harrington's attention. Elkhair and Fouts were members of the first generation of Lenape to live most of their lives in Oklahoma. Both had brief boarding school experiences and both had personal and family connections to the Lenape Big House ceremonial practices. The background of both storytellers and the historic context in which they gathered their stories is important to appreciating the variations that Elkhair and Fouts brought to their recollections, many of which have multiple versions and interpretations across time *and* compared to other Native American cultures. The Lenape move to Oklahoma in the 1860s was a

culmination of a 200-year diaspora from their historic homelands in the Delaware River valley of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The authors briefly take note of the impact of Baptist missions, tensions between cultural traditionalists and modernists, and internal divisions of Lenape governance during the era in which Harrington collected the stories.

Another important aspect of the introduction is the account of the relationship between anthropologist Mark Harrington and the storytellers. A brief biographical narrative of his personal history is provided and an account of how he became acquainted with the Lenape in Oklahoma. Townsend and Michael speculate that Fouts initiated the relationship with Harrington and was motivated to do so because it was a good association for the Lenape community. Their relationship with the federal government was precarious due to their land and sovereign status. However, while Harrington's work made the publication of these stories possible, the authors pass up an opportunity to enlighten readers about the duality in Harrington's motive for collecting the Lenape stories in the first place. Harrington gained access to the oral accounts by befriending Elkhair, Fouts, and other Native Americans for economic and professional gain, first and foremost. He was, like other collectors and anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, preying on Native Americans who were destitute and oppressed by federal policies, trying to culturally and physically survive a period of extreme struggle. While Harrington's work does contribute to the understanding of Lenape culture, it also resulted in the removal of items and artifacts from their communities.

The stories provided by Elkhair and Fouts are organized into thematic chapters: Creation Stories, Big House Stories, Culture Hero Stories, Humans Learning Lessons, Talking to the Dead, The Coming of the Whites, and Tales of Ordinary Life. Each grouping begins with the authors' thoughts on how the stories reflect the perspective of Lenape living in Oklahoma in the

early 1900s. Each chapter begins with a general discussion of the grouping, but where the authors excel and make this collection important is the analysis they provide before each of the twenty-six stories included in the seven chapters. The brief discussion preceding each story highlights the historical contexts, explains obscure words and meanings, and often cites other scholars providing multiple layers of analysis. Whether the reader is someone interested in Lenape history and culture or a specialist in Native American Studies, folklore, or anthropology, this compilation will not disappoint.

On the Turtle's Back: Stories the Lenape Told Their Grandchildren includes a selection of photographs and maps and an "Afterword in Three Parts." Part 1 of the Afterword provides an account of what happened to the Lenape who contributed to Harrington's notes after he left Oklahoma. Part 2 provides interviews with four elders who were children when the Harringtons collected them, and Part 3 is a very brief conclusion. Following the extended Afterword are four appendices that expand on materials mentioned or used previously in the text. They include the Iroquoian and Munsee versions of the Turtle's Back creation story with a Munsee-English translation. Appendix B provides John Heckewelder's eighteenth-century Lenape account of the Dutch arrival in Manhattan. Appendix C is another story, "The Woman Who Wanted No One." Truman Michelson, an anthropologist, collected this story after Harrington's work with the Lenape was complete. The appendix includes facsimiles of his transcription of Lenape language with his direct English translation. Finally, Appendix D is a list of Lenape leadership from 1800 to the present.

In summary, *On the Turtle's Back: Stories the Lenape Told Their Grandchildren* is a significant contribution to the story of the Lenape people and to anyone interested in learning about their culture provided in their own voices. Townsend and Michael should both be

congratulated on producing an ethically sourced volume of oral testimony that will find a place in many homes, libraries, and schools.

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