

Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn's Holy Experiment

The Paxton Boys struck Conestoga Indiantown at dawn on December 14, 1763. "Fifty-seven Men, from some of our Frontier Townships, who had projected the Destruction of this little Commonwealth," Benjamin Franklin wrote in his *Narrative of the Late Massacres in Lancaster County*, "came, all well-mounted, and armed with Firelocks, Hangers [a kind of short sword] and Hatchets, having travelled through the Country in the Night, to Conestogoe Manor." Only six Indians were in the town at the time, "the rest being out among the neighbouring White People, some to sell the Baskets, Brooms and Bowls they manufactured." The Paxton Boys, frontier militiamen on an unauthorized expedition, killed these six and burned their settlement to the ground.

The Conestoga Indians lived on a 500-acre tract near the town of Lancaster, which William Penn had set aside for them seventy years earlier. By 1763 only twenty Conestogas were living there—seven men, five women, and eight children. They survived by raising a little corn, begging at local farms, soliciting food and clothing from the provincial government, and selling their homemade brooms and baskets. Rhoda Barber, born three years after the Paxton Boy massacres, recalled in old age what her family had told her about the Conestogas. They "were entirely peaceable," she wrote, "and seem'd as much afraid of the other Indians as the whites were." Her older brother and sisters used to spend whole days with them and were "so attached to them they could not bear to hear them refus'd anything they ask'd for." The Indians "often spent the night by the kitchen fire of the farms round about" and were "much attached to the white people, calling their children after their favorite neighbours."

Local magistrates removed the remaining fourteen Conestoga Indians to the Lancaster workhouse for their safety, but on December 27 the Paxton Boys rode into that town and finished the job they had started two weeks earlier. Fifty men, "armed as before, dismounting, went directly to the Work-house and by Violence broke open the Door," Franklin observed, "and entered with the utmost Fury in their Countenances." Within a matter of minutes they

had slaughtered the fourteen Indians sheltering inside, including the eight children. After the massacres, the Paxton Boys claimed that Conestoga Indiantown was theirs by right of conquest. Some of them tried to settle on the site of the abandoned town, but provincial officials tore down their cabins and drove them off. The Paxton Boys did not succeed in their goal of seizing land, but by annihilating the Conestoga Indians they repudiated the utopian vision laid down by William Penn when he founded Pennsylvania eighty years before.

Inspired by Quaker principles of compassion and tolerance, Penn saw his colony as a "holy experiment" in which Christians and Indians could live together in harmony. He referred to this ideal society as the "Peaceable Kingdom." The nineteenth-century Quaker artist Edward Hicks produced a series of allegorical paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom, juxtaposing a theme from the Book of Isaiah with Penn's meetings with the Delaware Indians. In pursuit of this harmonious vision, Penn treated the Indians in his province with unusual respect and decency. The Conestogas called him "Onas" and the Delawares knew him as "Miquon"; both words mean "feather," referring to the mysterious new quill pen wielded at treaty negotiations. The Conestogas conferred the name Onas on Penn's children and grandchildren as well, in the hope that they might embody his benign spirit.

Yet for all Penn's decency, his holy experiment rested firmly on colonialist foundations. There would have been no Pennsylvania, after all, had he not received a gift of 29 million acres from Charles II in 1681—a gift that made him the largest individual landlord in the British Empire. Within his immense charter, Penn purchased land from Indians fairly and openly. But he did not do so simply out of benevolence. He needed to free the land of prior titles so that he could sell it to settlers and begin to recoup the vast expenses incurred in setting up his colony. As an English landlord, Penn naturally believed that land could be privately owned by individuals and that its occupants could permanently relinquish their title in return for money or goods. This idea ran counter to the ethos of Pennsylvania's Indians, who held their land in tribal trusts rather than as individuals and used it to sustain life rather than to make a profit. Indians often sold the same piece of land on multiple occasions, transferring rights of use and occupancy rather than absolute ownership. Penn wanted harmony with Indians, but he also needed to own their land outright. His holy experiment, therefore, never properly took root. But it left an enduring legacy: Pennsylvania did not fight its first war against Indians until the 1750s, when the Delawares and Shawnees, driven ever westward as they lost their land, launched devastating attacks on the province.

William Penn's holy experiment, already in decline by the time of his death in 1718, disintegrated gradually over the next few decades and collapsed during the Indian wars of the 1750s and 1760s. His son Thomas reverted to Anglicanism, casting off the Quaker faith that sustained his father's humane benevolence. Thomas Penn and his brothers continued to negotiate with Indians, but, unhampered by religious scruples, they did not hesitate to use fraud and intimidation. In 1737 they swindled the Delawares out of a tract of land almost as big as Rhode Island in a sordid transaction known as the "Walking Purchase." Although William Penn's legacy ensured that relations

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with Indians were at first more harmonious in Pennsylvania than in other American colonies, the eventual outcome was everywhere the same: expropriation, conquest, and extermination. The colony moved from the false dawn of Penn's holy experiment, through the avarice and subterfuge of his sons, to the carnage of the French and Indian War and the ruthless brutality of the Paxton Boys. By the end of 1763, with the annihilation of the Conestoga Indians, what was left of the Peaceable Kingdom had broken down entirely.

The Paxton Boys were Pennsylvania's most aggressive colonialists. Very little is known about them as individuals, but their general profile is clear. They lived in the hill country of northwestern Lancaster County and across the Susquehanna River in Cumberland County. Contemporaries referred to the region as the "frontier," and it was the first to be attacked during Indian wars. Some of the Paxton Boys were squatters, others farmed small plots of low-quality land; all of them hated Indians, and they detested the provincial government for failing to protect them during wartime. Those who were American-born—the great majority—were the children of settlers who came to Pennsylvania from the northern Irish province of Ulster. Contemporary accounts agree that all of them were Presbyterians.

On both sides of the Atlantic, Ulster Presbyterians served as a military and cultural buffer between zones of perceived civility and barbarity, separating Anglicans from Catholics in Ireland and eastern elites from Indians in the American colonies. What they wanted above all else was personal security and land to call their own. Ulster settlers began to arrive in Pennsylvania at the beginning of the eighteenth century, intruding on unpurchased Indian lands as squatters, to the consternation of the provincial government. As squatters they immediately came into conflict with the Penn family, who were simultaneously the rulers and landlords of the province. As early as 1730, a generation before the Paxton Boys, a group of Ulster squatters temporarily occupied Conestoga Manor, declaring that it was "against the Laws of God and Nature that so much Land Should lie idle while so many Christians wanted it to labour on and raise their Bread."

Idle land, hungry Christians, and the "Laws of God and Nature"—these were the words used to justify the dispossession of Indians in the eighteenth century. Together they gave rise to a powerful argument on the relationship between private property and colonialism. The English political philosopher John Locke stated the case cogently in 1690. God had given the earth "to mankind in common," Locke believed, but private property emerged when men applied their labor to nature. By rendering land more productive they gave it value, which properly belonged to the individuals who did the work. Making land productive was not just an opportunity for individual enrichment; it was also a religious obligation. "God, when he gave the world in common to all mankind, commanded man also to labour, and the penury of his condition required it of him," Locke explained. "God and his reason commanded him to subdue the earth, *i.e.* improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour."

But what about those who did not wish to "subdue" the land and did not see it as a commodity to be exploited? What, in other words, of the Indians

in the "wild woods and uncultivated waste of America," as Locke put it, "left to nature, without any improvement, tillage or husbandry"? European settlers had the opportunity to seize this "waste" land for themselves; indeed, they were morally obliged to do so, provided they respected the property rights of other colonists. William Penn found this idea anathema. He had too much respect for Indians to treat them in this way, and he protected their interests as well as his own by decreeing that settlers could acquire land only through his government rather than by direct purchase or seizure. For the Paxton Boys, on the other hand, the idea of seizing Indian land made perfect sense. They were not in the habit of reading John Locke in their spare time; their actions were driven not by political theory but by a desperate desire for land and safety during wartime. They scorned the property rights of other colonists, from the proprietary government downward.

The Paxton Boys used violence as their sale tactic. Locke, by contrast, had argued that violence toward Indians was unnecessary because English claims to American land already rested on impregnable economic and religious grounds. For the same reason, Indians deserved no compensation for idle land lost to industrious settlers. In practice this model of peaceful dispossession never worked; it was a smokescreen for forcing Indians off the land. The Paxton Boys pushed the logic of displacement to its most brutal extreme. Nobody was arrested or prosecuted after the massacres, which encouraged other settlers to behave in similar ways. The result was wave after wave of violence on the frontier, culminating in total war against Indians during the American Revolution. The Paxton Boys' brutality was anomalous as late as 1763, in Pennsylvania at least; by the time of the American Revolution, it had become commonplace.

During the Revolution waging total war against Indians became an act of patriotism. The anti-Indian campaigns of the Revolutionary War enacted the brutal logic of the Paxton Boys on a devastating scale. Now the violence was systematic rather than sporadic. In 1779 General John Sullivan led an expedition up the Susquehanna River to Iroquoia, where he waged a scorched-earth campaign against the Six Nations, destroying forty Iroquois villages, including the sacred ceremonial center of Onondaga. Pennsylvania militiamen similarly devastated the Ohio country. At the end of the war Britain transferred to the United States most of North America east of the Mississippi and south of Canada. Because four of the Iroquois nations had fought on the British side, the Iroquois confederacy forfeited all territory to which it laid claim. The United States assumed sovereignty over this vast expanse of Indian land by right of conquest.

A few years before the Revolution the Penn family gave exclusive use of the farm at Conestoga Indiantown to an Anglican minister named Thomas Barton as a reward for his years of service to the proprietary interest. Barton had outspokenly defended the Paxton Boys in a pamphlet published directly after the massacres, yet he had no sympathy for the idea that Conestoga Indiantown rightfully belonged to them. The Paxton Boys, he noted, "took possession of this Farm—built Cabbins and settled upon it under the ridiculous notion of a *right by Conquest*." Yet this "ridiculous notion" was fast becoming ubiquitous on the frontier even as Barton wrote. When the newly founded

Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography published his letter in 1880, the editors noted that the Paxton Boys had believed "they stood in the same position of a nation who conquered its neighbors and enemies by force of arms." The editors also observed that "only a few years later this idea was carried to a successful conclusion by our patriotic forefathers." This statement was not intended ironically or critically. The Paxton Boys did more than declare an end to Pennsylvania's Peaceable Kingdom. They ushered in the new order that reached fruition during the American Revolution.

. . . In the opening decades of the eighteenth century Pennsylvania forged an alliance with the powerful Iroquois confederacy, which claimed the small Indian nations of Pennsylvania as "tributaries" by right of conquest. The Iroquois invariably claimed to have defeated the ancestors of the subordinate nations in battle; although details of a decisive military victory were often lacking, they backed up the claim with elaborate diplomacy and the threat of force. The Iroquois sometimes required the subject nations to pay a tribute in the form of wampum (beads made from polished shells, woven onto strings or belts and used for currency and ceremonial purposes) or other gifts. More important, they denied their tributaries two fundamental rights: the power to buy or sell land and the power to go to war. Pennsylvania's emerging alliance with the Iroquois, which gave both parties leverage against the colony of New York, hastened the dispossession of the Delaware Indians, most of whom moved across the Susquehanna River to the Ohio country.

. . . [T]he French and Indian War . . . set against the back-drop of the larger imperial conflict that engulfed North America between 1754 and 1763, . . . originated in the Ohio country, triggered in part by Virginian adventurers led by George Washington. When a British expedition under General Edward Braddock suffered catastrophic defeat near the French stronghold of Fort Duquesne in 1755, the western Delawares, led by three remarkable brothers, Shingas, Pisquetomen, and Tamaqua, went to war against Pennsylvania. By the end of the year Teedyuscung, the self-styled king of the eastern Delawares, had joined the campaign. In 1756 Pennsylvania took the fateful step of going to war for the first time in its history. The declaration of war, which included scalp bounties for Indians, signaled the collapse of the Peaceable Kingdom and provoked a crisis among Pennsylvania's small but influential faction of strict pacifist Quakers, led by Israel Pemberton Jr., who supported the Delawares' efforts to negotiate a peace with Pennsylvania. The treaty negotiations, combined with the conquest of Fort Duquesne, brought the fighting in Pennsylvania to an end in 1758. But memories of the French and Indian War died hard among frontier settlers, who blamed the Quakers for failing to provide adequate defense and harbored deep suspicions about local Indians, including the Conestogas.

No sooner had the French and Indian War ended with the first Peace of Paris in 1763 than the great Indian uprising known as Pontiac's War began. . . . After the massacres at Conestoga Indiantown and Lancaster, several hundred Paxton Boys marched on Philadelphia, threatening to sack the city. Due in large part to the efforts of Benjamin Franklin, the rebels chose to write down their grievances rather than proceed with their march. They submitted two documents, the *Declaration* and the *Remonstrance*, castigating

the provincial government for its policies regarding Indians during wartime. Only one of their grievances was redressed before the American Revolution: the restoration in 1764 of scalp bounties for Indians killed or captured during wartime, which had been discontinued in 1758, when the Pennsylvania phase of the French and Indian War ended. But the Paxton Boys won a larger victory, escaping unpunished after exterminating a group of Indians who lived under the protection of the government.

The Paxton crisis unleashed an extraordinary exchange of pamphlets in Philadelphia. . . . The debate went beyond the massacres and the march on Philadelphia to address the fundamental question of how Pennsylvania ought to be governed. The Penn family, as proprietary governors of the province, controlled the executive branch; the Quaker party dominated the Assembly. From the mid-1750s onward the two branches were locked in disagreement, especially when it came to funding military defense. From the perspective of frontier settlers, the government seemed callously indifferent. In the political crisis triggered by the Paxton Boys, the Quaker party and its supporters squared off against an uneasy coalition of Presbyterians and Anglicans, 'who rallied to the proprietary interest. Franklin's *Narrative of the Late Massacres*, attacking the Paxton Boys, Presbyterianism, and the Penn family, triggered a pamphlet war in 1764 that culminated in his ill-conceived proposal for royal government in Pennsylvania. Only twelve years later Franklin was at the forefront of the patriotic movement to rid the American colonies of monarchy. Yet he was consistent throughout this period in his contempt for archaic forms of power and privilege; he merely broadened his focus by 1776 to include George III as well as the Penns.

. . . After the Conestoga massacres the frontier descended into anarchy. John Penn's Quaker critics insisted that his failure to pursue the Paxton Boys had undermined the reputation of the provincial government and given carte blanche to like-minded frontier settlers, thereby threatening to provoke another Indian war. When the Fort Stanwix Treaty of 1768 cleared the way for large-scale settlement in Pennsylvania west of the Allegheny mountains, violent seizure of Indian land became the norm rather than the exception. Having disappeared from view for almost six years after the Conestoga massacres, the Paxton Boys reemerged in 1769. They offered their services as mercenaries to the Susquehanna Company, a Connecticut land speculation venture intent on planting a colony in the Wyoming Valley of northern Pennsylvania.

Lazarus Stewart, who led the attack on the Lancaster workhouse in 1763, brought a group of Paxton Boys into the Wyoming Valley, where they finally acquired the land they had long been fighting for. As the American Revolution approached, the Paxton Boys cast themselves as Yankee patriots doing battle against the arch-Tory Thomas Penn. They fought their last battle in July 1778, when an army of loyalists and Iroquois Indians invaded the Wyoming Valley. The Paxton Boys died as patriots—of a sort—fighting Indians over land. The Indians won the fight that day, but they could not hope to prosper in the world the Paxton Boys had helped create. Wholesale destruction of Indian culture came later in the Peaceable Kingdom than in other American colonies, but Pennsylvania was the gateway to the west—and hence to the future.