

Hatred on the Frontier

WHITES VS. INDIANS



(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Massacre of the American Indians at Lancaster by the Paxton Boys in 1763

As the population of the American colonies grew, more and more settlers moved westward. In the early 1700s, the western frontier of the colonies stretched roughly from western New York to Georgia. It was a hard life on the frontier. Settlers worked at felling trees and clearing the land for farming. It was also a dangerous life. The American Indians who resented the intrusion of the whites into their territories often fought with the settlers. The results of the bloodshed were terrible for both groups. In Georgia about one-half of the Cherokee population was killed off. During the first half of the century it was estimated that 2,000 settlers in western Pennsylvania were killed or captured.

The colonial westerners also came into conflict with the French. Much of the area between the Mississippi and the colonial frontier was controlled by the French. Throughout this area French fur traders did business with various tribes. Furs were popular in Europe, and the French, as well as some of the colonials, traded guns, tools, clothing, and rum for furs of animals trapped by the Indians.

The fur trade was often conducted honestly, but sometimes traders cheated the Indians. In one instance colonial traders gave a number of kegs of rum for furs. When the Indians returned to their village, they discovered the kegs were filled with water instead of rum. Naturally, Indians who were tricked or cheated became resentful toward whites.

Most of the conflict between Indians and colonial whites came over the control of land. Many Indians complained that whites were forcing them off the land that had traditionally belonged to their tribes for hunting and farming.

The British government tried to develop fair policies for dealing with Indian property rights, but these policies were difficult to enforce in the wilderness.

Tensions between Indians, British colonists, and French settlers led to battles and wars throughout the first half of the century. A major conflict erupted over control of the Ohio River Valley. It led to the French and Indian War of 1754-1763.

Throughout the war there were horrible instances of whites slaughtering and scalping Indians, and Indians scalping and slaughtering whites. One of the worst cases occurred in August 1757, at Fort William Henry in northern New York. The French general, Montcalm, with Indian allies from over 30 tribes, surrounded the fort. Lieutenant Colonel Monro, commander of the fort, was unable to get reinforce-

ments and had to surrender. Montcalm had promised Monro that he and his men would be safe. It was not to be. At the time of the surrender, hundreds of Indians, inflamed by battle and rum drunk in victory celebrations, massacred most of the unarmed prisoners.

Hatred between Indians and whites increased in 1763 as a result of Pontiac's Uprising. Pontiac, the brilliant Ottawa chieftain, believed it was time to push back the colonial whites. Many other tribes agreed. All along the frontier occurred some of the most fierce Indian-white battles of the century.

The settlers in western Pennsylvania suffered greatly during these times. Their growing hatred of Indians was matched by their disgust with the government back east in Philadelphia. The settlers were convinced their government was failing them.

For one thing, the settlers did not believe they were fairly represented in the elected assembly. By 1760 there were five western counties in the Pennsylvania colony. Because of an old system of representation, the eastern counties had almost three times as many representatives in the assembly as did the western counties. This system was in effect even though the population of eligible voters in the east and west was about equal.

There was also religious hostility. Most of the settlers were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. Throughout Pennsylvania there were many different religious groups, but the government was controlled by the Quakers, the religion of the colony's founder, William Penn.

The Quakers in the east did not fully understand the problems of the frontier settlers. Also, their religious beliefs opposed violence. The Quakers, through their Association, gave gifts and friendship to Indian tribes that they believed were friendly and not at war. Many of the settlers were angered at this practice. They claimed it was not easy to tell friendly from enemy tribes.

The settlers also believed the government did not do enough to protect them during the wars. At one point, settlers brought wagonloads of their dead neighbors to Philadelphia. The wagons were driven through the streets to dramatize the settlers' need for protection. In spite of these demonstrations and requests from British military leaders, the assembly never voted enough money for troops to satisfy the settlers and the British.

The horrors of war and the political disputes with Philadelphia formed the background for a series of events that, some believe, almost led to civil war in Pennsylvania.

The winter of 1763 was harsh on the frontier. Battles with Indians were severe. Men, women, and children were killed. Hatred and fear consumed both Indians and whites. A group of settlers at the town of Paxton on the Susquehanna River took brutal action.

At Conestoga, about 50 miles from Paxton, lived a group of Indians. The Paxton men were convinced that the Conestoga Indians, who appeared to be living in peace with the whites, had provided aid to enemy tribes. They also believed that one of the Indians had murdered a white woman. On December 14, 1763, Matthew Smith and a group of other settlers attacked the Conestoga Indians and killed three men, two women, and one child.

News of the massacre shocked eastern officials. The Conestoga Indians had been living in peace and had made their living by selling baskets and brooms. Governor John Penn ordered the capture of the murderers, and the assembly voted to provide protection for any Indians who requested it.

The government's response further inflamed the Paxton men. When they heard that fourteen of the surviving Indians were being housed, for their protection, at a jail in Lancaster, they galloped to that town. The Paxtons claimed that one of the Indians was a murderer but, in their rage, they attacked the jail and killed all the Indians.

Eastern officials were horrified. Governor Penn offered a reward of 200 pounds for the capture of any of the leaders of the Paxton Boys. In addition, about one hundred and twenty-five Indians were brought into Philadelphia to be protected at a military barracks.

Not all the citizens of Philadelphia supported this move. Many were sympathetic to the Paxtons. Crowds shouted insults at the Indians when they were brought into the city. One observer claimed that a clear majority of the Philadelphians opposed protecting the Indians in the city.

The Paxton Boys were in a frenzy. In taverns and stores they could talk of little other than the Indian massacres and unacceptable government policies. How could the government that had not given them enough protection now decide to protect Indians? A plan was made to attack the Indians in the city. If any Philadelphians stood in the way they too might be killed.

News of the coming attack caused panic in Philadelphia. There were rumors that 5,000 rough frontiersmen were going to invade the city. About a thousand citizens joined a volunteer militia. Barricades were built for the streets. A system of warning bells was put into

effect. When the bells rang, the volunteers would take their weapons to key points in the city. One night there was a false alarm, and armed citizens waited through the cold winter night for an attack that never came.

Not long afterward in February 1764, the Paxton Boys marched to Philadelphia. They stopped outside the city at Germantown. About two hundred and fifty tough frontiersmen carrying rifles and tomahawks were in the group. The rumor that thousands would arrive proved incorrect.

Philadelphia officials met to decide what to do. In an effort to head off conflict, Benjamin Franklin and some other leading Philadelphians were sent to speak to the Paxton leaders. After hearing the complaints of the Paxtons, Franklin and the others promised that the government would seriously and quickly consider their requests. As a result of the promise, most of the Paxton Boys returned to their homes. Matthew Smith and a few stayed behind to write up their requests for government action. Armed conflict had been prevented.

The Paxton Boys asked the government to do a number of things. Among their requests were: (1) more military protection for the frontier, (2) equal representation for the western counties in the assembly, and (3) a system of payments for Indian scalps. Payment for scalps had been provided by the government in earlier Indian wars. The payments were designed to encourage frontiersmen to do battle with the Indians thus helping the military. The policy had been discontinued, but the Paxton Boys wanted it to begin again.

In spite of the promises, the government had no intention of seriously considering the Paxton requests. Most of the officials were disgusted with the actions of the frontiersmen. Benjamin Franklin later called the Paxtons cowards and madmen. Some officials thought the requests were an attempt to divert attention from the massacres. They thought the requests were intended to cover up savage behavior. Other officials did not want to change the system of representation because they feared the frontier would get too much power in government. The government did not act directly on any of the Paxton Boys' requests.

Later in the summer of 1764, however, battles associated with Pontiac's Uprising led the governor to offer rewards for the scalps of any Indians over the age of ten. In March of 1776, 12 years after the Paxton March, the western counties received equal representation in the assembly.

The Indians in Philadelphia were gradually returned to the frontier. None of the Paxton Boys was ever brought to trial for the massacres.

The major sources for this story were:

Hindle, Brooke. "The March of the Paxton Boys." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, October 1946, pp. 461-486.

Jacobs, Wilber R. *The Paxton Riots and the Frontier Theory*. The Berkeley Series in American History. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967.

ACTIVITIES FOR "HATRED ON THE FRONTIER"

Answer all questions on a separate sheet of paper.

Historical Understanding

Answer briefly:

1. Identify two causes of conflict between the American colonists and various American Indian tribes.
2. What was one underlying factor that led to tension between eastern and western colonists in Pennsylvania?
3. What triggered the French and Indian War?

Reviewing the Facts of the Case

Answer briefly:

1. Why did the Paxton Boys attack the Indians at Conestoga and Lancaster?
2. How did the Philadelphia government respond to the attacks?
3. What promise did Franklin and the others make to the Paxtons?
4. What were the requests of the Paxtons?

Analyzing Ethical Issues

There are a number of incidents in this story involving the following values:

EQUALITY: a value concerning whether people should be treated in the same way.

LIFE: a value concerning when, if ever, it is justifiable to threaten or take a life.

PROPERTY: a value concerning what people should be allowed to own and how they should be allowed to use it.

TRUTH: a value concerning the expression, distortion, or withholding of accurate information.

For each of the values above—equality, life, property, and truth—write a sentence describing an incident from the story involving that value, as illustrated in this example:

Equality: *The Paxtons believed that the colonial government provided better protection for the Indians than it did for western settlers.*

Expressing Your Reasoning

1. Benjamin Franklin and other leaders promised they would quickly and seriously consider the Paxtons' requests. Was it right to make the promise even though they did not intend to keep it? Why or why not?
2. The Pennsylvania government authorized the protection of some of the Indians. Was it right to protect the Indians in the city? Why or why not?
3. The Paxtons wanted a reward for Indian scalps. Later in the year Governor Penn offered a reward for the scalps of enemy Indians. In a paragraph express your judgment of the Governor's action. Indicate whether or not you agree with him and support your position with reasons.
4. *Seeking Additional Information.* In making decisions about such questions as those above, we often feel we need more information before we are satisfied with our judgments. Choose one of the above questions about which you would want more information than is presented in the story. What additional information would you like? Why would that information help you make a more satisfactory decision?