

The Lenape Origins of Delaware Valley Peace and Freedom

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Benjamin West's famous painting *Penn's Treaty with the Indians* (1771–72) reflects in a number of ways the mythology that developed about the early Delaware Valley. Historians have noted its inaccuracy in several details: there were no brick buildings in Philadelphia in 1682 when Penn arrived and, at age 38, he was thinner and younger than portrayed. More important, though, Penn is shown as the dominant, patriarchal figure bestowing his plans for a peaceful relationship when in fact the Lenape Indians dominated the region at this time. The painting gives the impression that Penn is conferring gifts on his inferiors rather than exchanging goods with trading partners to purchase land.¹

Three myths had developed before West completed his painting and have evolved ever since. The first myth is that the Lenapes were a weak, insignificant people who had little impact on the history of the Delaware Valley. Rather, the Indians controlled the region through most the seventeenth century by means of their superior numbers, strategic use of violence and the threat of violence, and emphasis on peace and freedom.

The second myth is that the history of the Delaware Valley before 1681 is irrelevant—that the region had no history during the seventeenth century unlike Virginia, New Netherland, and New England that experienced wars and expropriation of Native lands prior to 1680. There is a tendency among historians to consider periods when Indians dominated as *prehistory*, and only periods

¹ Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn et al., eds., *The Papers of William Penn*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981–1987), 2:453; Andrew Newman, *On Records: Delaware Indians, Colonists, and the Media of History and Memory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 95–132; Jean R. Soderlund, *Lenape Country: Delaware Valley Society Before William Penn* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 1–6, 170–71; James O'Neil Spady, "Colonialism and the Discursive Antecedents of *Penn's Treaty with the Indians*," in William A. Pencak and Daniel K. Richter, eds., *Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods: Indians, Colonists, and the Racial Construction of Pennsylvania* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 18–40; Mary Douglas, "Forward," in Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), vii.

when colonists took control as *history*. We must consider the seventeenth century in order to place New Jersey and Pennsylvania into the context of the larger development of the British colonies in North America. It is misleading to consider the history of New England, New Netherland, and Virginia from the early 1600s but start New Jersey and Pennsylvania history in the 1670s, long after Europeans and Native Americans first came into contact and established patterns of interaction.

The third myth is that William Penn and the Quakers initiated the ideals that distinguished Delaware Valley society from other North American regions: peaceful resolution of conflict between Europeans and Natives; respect for people of different ethnic backgrounds; freedom of religion; opposition to centralized authority; and emphasis on personal liberty for others as well as one's self. The Lenapes and "old settlers," who included Swedes, Finns, and other Europeans who settled prior to the Quakers and were part of the community known as the "Swedish nation," developed a society based on these features to benefit from trade and keep peace. The kind of liberty that the Lenapes fostered was personal freedom for one's self and others. David Hackett Fischer in *Albion's Seed* called this reciprocal liberty, unlike that of slaveholding societies in which slave owners wanted freedom for themselves but not for everyone.² This liberty reflects the reciprocity that is so important to Lenape culture.

Penn's Treaty with the Lenapes is reputed to have occurred at Shackamaxon, and a treaty may have occurred there soon after Penn arrived in the fall of 1682, but it was not the first meeting between his government and the Lenapes. In the spring and summer of 1682, Penn's cousin and deputy governor William Markham, an Anglican, had negotiated Pennsylvania's first treaty with sixteen Lenape sachems, a treaty that obtained land in what is now lower Bucks County and incorporated principles that we consider part of the legendary Penn's Treaty. With help from Swedish interpreter Lasse Cock and other old settlers, Markham reached a deal with the Lenapes that he hoped would last. The deed was for a substantial territory including land where Penn developed his manor, Pennsbury. In 1677–1680, the Lenapes had contested ownership of some of this land with Governor Edmund Andros, who administered the Duke of York's government in the Delaware Valley. The detail of the 1682 deed, the number of Lenape sachems involved, and the worth of the goods exchanged show that

2 David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 595.