Pennsylvania’s Frontiers: Introduction

William John Campbell
University of Memphis
wjcmpbl1@memphis.edu

John Smolenski
University of California, Davis
jsmolenski@ucdavis.edu

Colonizers in seventeenth and eighteenth-century British North America lived in a world with many frontiers. Looking at the map, they did not perceive a single, westward-rolling frontier line separating settled from unsettled or civilized from savage. Rather, they focused on discrete spaces most exposed to military attack, by land or by sea, and in most in need of military protection. Frontiers represented the vulnerable limbs of the imperial body politic. Though they lived in different places with specific local characteristics, the colonizers living on these frontiers frequently had a shared perspective on governmental affairs. They saw themselves as crucial to the expansion of British power in the Americas, as they continually pointed out to provincial and royal officials when they requested additional aid or protested official policy. To be sure, these frontier communities could not have existed without the involvement of indigenous peoples socially, culturally, and economically. Yet colonizers often viewed warily those Native Americans with whom British officials in Whitehall allied, even as they relied on first peoples as commercial and military partners. As such, these colonizers had an uneasy relationship with local and overseas governments, appreciative and antagonistic by turns.1

Colonial Pennsylvania exemplified this larger pattern. The early colonizers of “Penn’s Woods” feared Indian attacks during wartime in 1694, 1704, 1739, and 1747, but they also feared the arrival of French and Spanish warships up the

---

Delaware River.\(^2\) Not until the outbreak of the Seven Years War in Pennsylvania did western enclaves of colonizers become “frontiers” in the more typical, military sense.\(^3\) Moreover, provincial colonizers eyed government officials with similar suspicion. Pacifist Quaker politicians drew the ire of the colony’s non-Quakers when they refused to authorize public money to pay for a provincial defense (only with the withdrawal of Friends from the government in 1755 and 1756 did the colony assemble its first colonial militia). These feelings did not entirely abate after the war ended in 1763, as the Crown attempted to incorporate “friendly” Native Americans into a larger imperial sphere.\(^4\)

The state and national governments garnered little more love, if any, after independence.

Surveying the historiography, one can similarly find several Pennsylvanian frontiers. Most scholarship over the last two decades has focused on relations between colonizers and indigenous peoples, complicating traditional, celebratory accounts of William Penn’s “Peaceable Kingdom.” Penn’s policy of acquiring land through purchase rather than conquest may have avoided the widespread bloodshed that marked King Philip’s War to the north or Bacon’s Rebellion to the south, but this type of “soft” colonialism nonetheless displaced first peoples with remarkable speed.\(^5\) Scholars have also explored an element of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century life that made colonizers living in frontier settlements uneasy, namely that these communities were quite often as much Indian as Euro-American. Delawares and Shawnees lived


\(^3\) Spero, “Frontiers,” 216.
