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Author(s): David L. Preston

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Pennsylvanians at War: The Settlement Frontiers during the Seven Years' War

by David L. Preston

Marie Le Roy and Barbara Leininger and their families were among the thousands of Europeans who immigrated to Pennsylvania in the early 18th century. The Leiningers, from the city of Reutlingen in the Rhine Valley, arrived in the colony in 1748; the Le Roy family, from Switzerland, immigrated in 1752. Both families quickly occupied lands that the Pennsylvania government purchased in 1754; their new homes on Penn's Creek in the Susquehanna Valley were located only a few miles from the Indian town at Shamokin.

Above: Indian Massacre at Wilkesbarre, engraved by John Rogers after a painting by Felix Octavius Carr Darley in the mid-19th century. The image depicts an event that occurred in the Wyoming Valley of Pennsylvania in 1778, when a combined force of loyalists and Indians attacked settlers, but graphically suggests what settlers in Pennsylvania's hinterlands most feared during the French and Indian War.

Despite the French occupation of the Ohio Valley, George Washington's defeat at Fort Necessity, and Indian attacks on Virginia's frontier, settlers were willing to risk their lives and property in the land rush that followed the purchase in late 1754 and early 1755. But after the defeat of Major General Edward Braddock's army at the Monongahela in the summer of 1755, panic among ordinary settlers crescendoed as rumors of impending Indian attacks spread. Hundreds of European settlers began fleeing eastward. Still, life seemed to go on in its familiar patterns for many families who remained on the frontier in the fall of 1755.

On October 16, the Le Roys' servant braved the chilly morning to round up stray cows; Mrs. Leininger had gone to a nearby grist mill; and Indians, who routinely came to trade for rum and tobacco, stopped at the Leininger house. Perhaps the hosts thought nothing of the visit, having traded with Indians before; or did they interpret the warriors' requests as demands? The Delawares had painted their bodies black and their faces both red and black; distinct geometric patterns on their cheeks and circles around their eyes made them look especially foreboding to the colonists. The eight Delawares—Keckenepaulin, Joseph and James Compass, Thomas Hickman, Kalasquay, Souchy, Machynego, and Katoochquay—who came to the Mahanoy Creek settlement that morning were not intent on trading. The two English-speaking Delawares who had stopped at the Leiningers finished smoking their pipes and announced, "We are Alleghany Indians, your enemies. You must all die." They immediately shot Barbara's father, Sebastian, and tomahawked her 20-year-old brother, John Conrad. Barbara and her sister Regina were taken captive. A half a mile away at the same moment, the other Delawares approached the Le Roy homestead, entered, and split Jean Jacques Le Roy's skull with two tomahawks.

Marie's brother Jacob vainly struggled against the warriors and he, his sister, and a small girl visiting were taken captive. The family stood powerless as the Delawares ransacked and fired their house and placed Jean Jacques's body in the flames, with two tomahawks sticking in his skull, so that his lower torso was burned off. The warriors led the captives away toward the Ohio country. Unsure of their fates and still in trauma, they grieved as the warriors flaunted the scalps of their deceased kin and neighbors before their eyes. The Delawares adopted Marie and Barbara, and they lived together for three and a half years, though the girls never thought of their new lives as anything but "the yoke of the heaviest slavery." During their captivity they would witness Pennsylvania soldiers, filled with vengeance and hatred, destroy the Indians' village at Kittanning in 1756.

The Seven Years' War fundamentally altered the ways that ordinary colonists and Indians on the Pennsylvania frontier interacted with and viewed one another. The fiery conflict refined Europeans' and Indians' elemental attitudes towards one another. Despite decades of peaceful if uneasy coexistence, colonists and Indians regarded each other with an increasingly racial hatred—a process that Pontiac's War (1763–1764) and the American Revolution (1775–1783) only exacerbated. The war also spawned grassroots violence—a cycle of raids, revenge, and a series of individual and mass murders—that endured on the Pennsylvania and Ohio frontiers for another 40 years. One reason why the

war and its legacy were so violent was that it was fought between former neighbors who had once shared and contested a common world in the Susquehanna and Delaware valleys. Marie and Barbara's English-speaking captors, for instance, brought along French and German Bibles as trophies so that unfortunate captives might "prepare for death." The naturalist John Bartram, who had explored much of the Pennsylvania backcountry before the war, recorded that "most of ye Indians which are so cruel are such as was

The image shows the first page of a handwritten petition. The text is written in cursive and reads: "To the Hon^{ble} Robert Hunter Morris Lieut^t Gov^r of the Province of Pennsylvania &c. The Petition of us the Subscribers living near the Mouth of Penns Creek on the West Side of Susquehanna humbly sheweth That on or about y^e 16th of this Inst^o October the Enemy came down upon said Creek & kill'd & scalped and carried away all the men women Children amounting to 25 Persons in Number & wounded one Man who fortunately made his way & brought us in the news, whereupon we the Subscribers went out & buried the dead whom we found most barbarously murdered & scalped; we found but 13 which were men & elderly women & one Child of two weeks old, the rest being young women and Children we suppose to be carried away prisoners to the House where we suppose they finished their Murder, we found burnt up the Man of it, named Jacob King, a Switzer, lying just by it, he lay on his back barbarously burnt & two Tomhaws sticking in his forehead, one of the Tomhaws marked with W L we have sent to your Honour. The Terror of which has drove away almost all these back Inhabitants except us the Subscribers with a few more, who are willing to stay and endeavour to defend the Land, but as we are not able of ourselves to defend it for want of Guns & ammunition & but few in Number so that without Assistance we must fly, & leave the Country to the mercy of the Enemy, we therefore humbly desire that y^e Honour would take the same into

First page of a petition dated October 20, 1755, from settlers on John Penn's Creek to Lieutenant Governor Morris describing the recent Indian raid and asking for protection. Penn Papers, Indian Affairs.



Settlers Implored Washington's Protection.

almost daily familiar at their houses ate drank & swore together was even intimate playmates." Having personally observed the often amicable interactions that had occurred between settlers and neighbor Indians in the decades before the war, Bartram perceived the settlers' feelings of betrayal—emotions that aroused their desire for vengeance against natives.

Pennsylvania's frontier settlers were paradoxically victims and aggressors during the frontier wars. Most became ardent advocates and practitioners of harsh retribution against their native foes. But the Pennsylvania government's egregious land deals had in fact done more to bring down the Ohio Indians' wrath upon unsuspecting frontier farmers like the Le Roys.

When the war erupted in the Ohio Valley in 1754, it would be difficult to imagine a colony more vulnerable to attack and unprepared for war. The frontier landscape was one of dispersed and isolated farms concentrated in fertile valleys separated by long mountain ridgelines. The Quaker leadership and population of the colony eschewed violence, there were no militia to mobilize, no large caches of arms and ammunition to distribute, few fortifications, and only a handful of native communities on the colony's borders

that could act as potential allies. The demilitarized and defenseless structure of Pennsylvania's settlement frontier predisposed its inhabitants to pursue violence against all Indians without distinction.

From 1755 to 1758, Shawnees, Delawares,

Mingoes, Ottawas, Potowatomis, Ohio Iroquois, Caughnawagas, Canadian militia, and French regulars utterly devastated the British settlement frontiers in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. They destroyed farms, crops, and livestock, captured small and large frontier forts, and killed around 1,500 frontier settlers and took about 1,000 captive. Thousands of colonists became refugees and large sections of the frontiers were nearly depopulated. The pejorative terms that colonists and modern historians use to describe the Indians' expeditions—"raids" for "plunder" and "booty," "devastations," and "ravages"—detract from the highly organized and successful military campaign that Shawnees, Delawares, Mingoes, and other natives mounted from 1755 to 1758. In pursuing their aims to preserve their sovereignty and lands, the Indians and their French allies virtually paralyzed two of the most powerful British colonies.

Frontier warfare in Pennsylvania certainly involved

professional armies and elaborate fortifications, but most ordinary frontier settlers experienced the war as an assault against their families, lands, and houses. They were the strategic targets. From the Leiningers' or Le Roys' points of view, the Indians' war methods were completely arbitrary and brutal, their attacks terrifying in their invisibility and suddenness. Indian warriors slipped through the cordon of frontier forts that the government erected from 1755 to 1757 and destroyed settlements at will. Able to live off the land and to elude colonial pursuers with ease, Indian warriors painted both red and black were easily demonized by the colonists. Indian warriors struck at the jugular of backcountry society: the close family, kin, and ethnic ties that were the basis of community. Almost the entire population of Penn's Creek was killed or captured in October 1755. Of the 93 settlers who remained in the Great Cove Valley in 1755, 47 were killed or captured. Colonial patriarchs were reduced to despair over the "broken remains of our dismembered families." To watch as one's family was dismembered literally and metaphorically was more than some men could bear. Mary Jemison remembered that her father, Thomas, was "absorbed in melancholy" over his powerlessness to stop a French-Indian war party from capturing his entire family in 1758. Mary recalled that he was "so much overcome with his situation—so much exhausted by anxiety and grief, that silent despair seemed fastened upon his countenance, and he could not be prevailed upon to refresh his sinking nature" by eating food. Once prosperous farms that represented bastions of independence to frontiersmen and

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decades of toil were reduced to ashes.

Visible and invisible reminders of Indian "brutality" kept the memory of frontier wars painfully alive in the colonists' minds for decades. The Pennsylvania countryside was littered with the human wreckage of the war. One young girl, who had been "shot in the Neck, and through the Mouth, and scalped," apparently survived her wounds. In 1766, a widow named Cunigunda Jager sent a petition to the Pennsylvania Assembly seeking relief for her daughter Catherine, a former captive, stating "that her said Daughter is a very unhappy young Woman, having spent in the Indian Idleness those Days of her Life in which Girls learn to qualify themselves for Business, and is now unable to support herself; and what makes her Misfortune still greater, she has a Child by an Indian Man, for which other young Women look upon her with Contempt and Derision." So great was the community's disdain for Indians that they viewed Catherine Jager as polluted and defiled by what may have been a consensual relationship with an Indian man. The colonists' deep wounds—physical and mental—festered with a putrid hatred of Indians for decades.

After living among the Delawares for nearly four years, Barbara Leininger and Marie Le Roy finally escaped from the Ohio Valley town of Muskingum and made their way to Fort Pitt, the new British post constructed after the expulsion of the French in 1758. Their wagon ride from Fort Pitt to the Susquehanna Valley undoubtedly offered them a chance to reflect on their pasts and futures. They had witnessed, for example, the first major colonial salvo against the Indians at Kittanning in September 1756. Lieutenant Colonel John Armstrong led seven companies of Pennsylvania soldiers against the

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native village, killing dozens and burning houses and crops. Though it did not halt French-Indian attacks on their settlements, the Pennsylvanians' attack on Kittanning was a defining moment in the colony's history. It symbolized how the Seven Years' War had transformed colonist-Indian relations; it established both a precedent and a paradigm for future

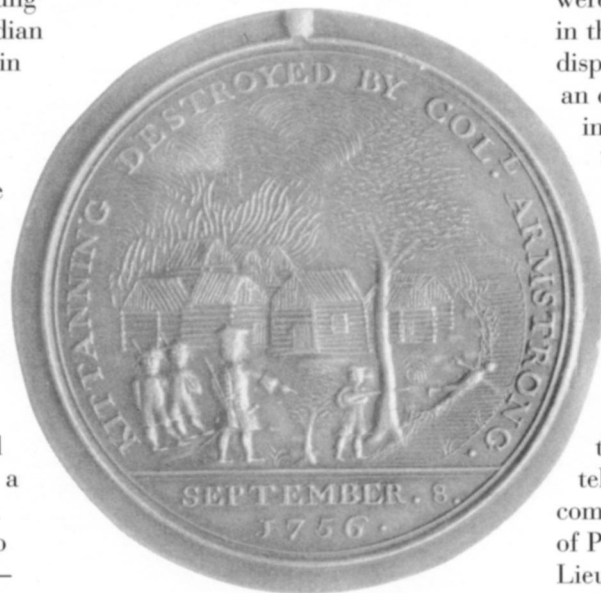


Photo of a medal presented to Colonel John Armstrong and his troops in 1756 by the city of Philadelphia, following the raid on the Indian settlement at Kittanning. Society Photo Collection.

mass killing of Indians and the total destruction of Indian towns and crops.

Following the Seven Years' War and Pontiac's War, Euro-American settlers and hunters and British garrisons continued to encroach on Indians' agricultural and hunting lands in the Ohio and Susquehanna valleys. Forbes' road, over which Barbara and Marie traveled, was a British military road that subsequently became a major artery for Euro-American settlers moving westward. The chain of British

military outposts that they passed—Forts Pitt, Ligonier, Bedford—became the nuclei of future settlements, as British officers gave licenses to civilian farmers, traders, and artisans to supply their troops in the field. Euro-American settlers not only returned to their devastated homes following the war, but soon breached the Appalachian Mountain barrier. By the early 1770s there were at least 10,000 colonists living in the Ohio Valley. The colonists' dispossession of the natives was also an extremely violent one. The infamous Paxton Massacre of 1764, the brutal slaying of 10 Indians by Frederick Stump and John Ironcutter in 1768, and dozens more murders and assaults pockmarked the postwar era. In retrospect, the attack on Kittanning was only the beginning of the violence that colonists unleashed upon the natives. Perhaps the most telling indicator of change was a commemorative medal that the city of Philadelphia had struck for Lieutenant Colonel John Armstrong and his officers. The reverse of the medal shows a provincial officer directing his troops as the Delawares' log cabins burn in the background. Off to the side, a soldier fells an Indian with his musket; the Indian falls lifeless into the Allegheny River. The colony that had long celebrated William Penn's friendly relations with the Delawares now commemorated their destruction. ♦

David Preston is assistant professor of history at The Citadel in Charleston, SC, the author of "Squatters, Indians, Proprietary Government, and Land in the Susquehanna Valley," published in William Pencak and Daniel K. Richter, eds., *Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods* (2004), and at work on a book entitled *The Texture of Contact: European and Indian Settler Communities on the Iroquoian Borderlands, 1720–1780*.