

Historical Background

Kevin Kenny, "Peaceable Kingdom Lost, Part I"

The Paxton Boys, frontier militiamen on an unauthorized expedition, 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*, "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 people were in the town at the time, "the rest being out among the neighboring White People, some to sell the Baskets, Brooms and Bowls they manufactured." The Paxton murderers killed these six and burned their settlement to the ground.

The Conestoga people lived on a 500-acre tract, which William Penn had set aside for them seventy years earlier, near the town of Lancaster, one hundred miles west of Philadelphia. By 1763 only twenty Conestoga people were living there—seven men, five women, and eight children.

After the murders, local magistrates removed the remaining fourteen residents to the Lancaster jail and workhouse for their safety, but on December 27 the Paxton murderers rode into that town to continue the attack 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 reported, "and entered with the utmost Fury in their Countenances." Within a matter of minutes they had slaughtered the fourteen individuals sheltering at the workhouse, including the eight children.

The Paxton murderers were fully aware of the symbolic and political significance of their actions. They murdered unarmed, peaceable Conestoga people to make the point that all Indians were the same. And they slaughtered the Conestogas on government property in broad daylight. In perpetrating the massacres, they repudiated the settlement policy of William Penn.

Inspired by Quaker principles, Penn had founded his colony in 1682 as a "holy experiment" in which Christians and Indians could live together in harmony. He drew the model of his colony from the "Peaceable Kingdom" envisioned in the Book of Isaiah. That dream proved surprisingly resilient. In fact, the nineteenth-century Quaker artist Edward Hicks produced a series of paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom in which he always included Penn's legendary meeting with the Delaware peoples under the elm tree at Shackamaxon, in present-day Philadelphia. In pursuit of his vision, William Penn treated the native peoples in his province with uncommon respect (John Penn to James Harrison).

Yet for all his popularity, Penn's holy experiment always rested on colony-building foundations. There would have been no Pennsylvania, after all, had he not received a gift of 29 million acres from King Charles II in 1681—a gift that made him the largest individual landlord in the British Empire. Within this immense territory, Penn purchased land from native peoples and, by his understanding, fairly. But he did so because he needed to get clear title to their land so that he could sell it to settlers and try to make a profit from his colony.