

Historical Background

Kevin Kenny, "Peaceable Kingdom Lost, Part 2"

The myth of the Peaceable Kingdom, already in decline by the time of William Penn's death in 1718, disintegrated gradually over the next few decades. Penn's son and principal heir, Thomas, cast off the Quaker faith and converted to Anglicanism. He and his brothers continued to negotiate with native peoples but they did not hesitate to use fraud and intimidation. In 1737 they swindled the Delawares out of a huge tract of land in a transaction known as the "Walking Purchase." For the Delawares, the measure of this land was how much a man could walk in a day and a half. The Penns, however, sent out a team of relay runners who marked out a tract almost as big as Rhode Island. Most of the Delawares who lived there were forced to move west of the Susquehanna River, which at that time marked the western boundary of European settlement. The "Walking Purchase" remained their primary grievance when they went to war against Pennsylvania twenty years later.

Immigrants from the province of Ulster, in the north of Ireland, also posed a threat to Pennsylvania's native peoples. These settlers began to arrive in Pennsylvania at the beginning of the eighteenth century and set up as squatters along the frontier, ignoring the land rights of the native peoples and the Penn family alike. They claimed the land by "tomahawk right"—marking trees at a distance from one another with their axes, and declaring the territory between these trees as their own. As early as 1730, a generation before the Paxton massacres, a group of Ulster squatters temporarily occupied Conestoga Manor, declaring that it was "against the Laws of God and Nature that so much Land Should lie idle while so many Christians wanted it to labour on and raise their Bread" (James Logan to John, Thomas, and Richard Penn).

Conflict between western colonists and native peoples intensified during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). Expelled from their lands in eastern Pennsylvania, most of the Delawares and Shawnees west of the Susquehanna River sided with the French as the lesser of two evils and launched devastating raids on frontier settlers. The colonial government in Philadelphia responded by declaring war on the Delawares and, for the first time, establishing a militia. A handful of strict Quakers remained true to William Penn's pacifist vision, but the Peaceable Kingdom had come to an end. Frontier settlers did most of the fighting during the war and, from their perspective, both branches of the government in Philadelphia—the Quaker-dominated Assembly and executive branch, run by the Penn family—seemed indifferent to their wishes.

No sooner had the British defeated the French in 1763 than Pontiac's War, the largest Indian

war in colonial American history, erupted. Delawares and Shawnees once again launched raids east of the Susquehanna River. Frontier settlers re-lived the nightmare of the Seven Years' War. It was in this context, in December 1763, that the Paxton men carried out their massacre.

The Paxton Boys arose directly out of a local militia created by the colonial government in response to frontier demands for defense in the summer of 1763. Colonel John Armstrong of Carlisle commanded a unit west of the Susquehanna River and the Rev. John Elder, the "fighting pastor" of Paxton Presbyterian Church, commanded a unit to the east. These two units were supposed to be strictly defensive, but Elder and Armstrong used them to launch raids against the Delawares. When raids failed, the Paxton Boys, led by Lazarus Stewart and Matthew Smith, attacked the Conestoga people instead.