

Historical Background

Kevin Kenny, "Peaceable Kingdom Lost, Part 3"

At the end of January 1764, a month after the massacres, reports reached Philadelphia that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Paxton Boys were marching eastward, threatening to sack the city unless their grievances were met. They also demanded the right to "inspect" 140 Lenape and Moravian Indians who had been removed from the frontier and placed in protective custody. Given what the Paxton Boys had done to the Conestogas, the residents of Philadelphia could only imagine what this "inspection" might entail.

When several hundred Paxton Boys reached Germantown, just six miles outside Philadelphia, they were met by a delegation led by Benjamin Franklin, who persuaded them to write down their grievances. Their spokesmen, Matthew Smith and James Gibson, submitted a *Declaration and a Remonstrance* for consideration by the colonial government, and what followed was a war of words instead of a war of weapons. Presbyterian supporters of the Paxton Boys in alliance with the Anglican faction surrounding the Penn family battled Benjamin Franklin and the Quaker party in print. The debate, which featured more than sixty pamphlets and ten political cartoons, went far beyond the immediate issue of the Conestoga massacres to address the fundamental question of how Pennsylvania ought to be governed.

Despite Franklin's efforts, the Paxton murderers went unpunished. Nobody was investigated, let alone arrested or prosecuted. As a result, like-minded settlers on the Pennsylvania frontier felt free to behave in similar ways. The result was wave after wave of violence on the frontier, culminating in total war against indigenous peoples during the American Revolution. In Pennsylvania, the Paxton Boys' brutality was the exception as late as 1763, but during the Revolution it became commonplace.

Ironically, Benjamin Franklin and the Paxton men ended up supporting the same side in the American Revolution. But that is because there was more than one revolution going on—the familiar struggle for lofty principles of liberty and equality in the east, and a lesser-known struggle involving land and American Indians in the west. Some historians have seen the Paxton Boys as frontier democrats fighting against the privilege of the Penn family who extended their fight for democracy into the revolutionary era. John Elder, Matthew Smith, John Armstrong, and Lazarus Stewart all rallied to the patriot cause, to be sure, but they were fighting for the same thing as they had fought for in the 1760s—access to land, personal security, and vengeance against indigenous peoples.

In their *Remonstrance*, the Paxton Boys had demanded greater political representation for the western counties in the Pennsylvania Assembly, but that was only one of nine grievances; all of the others concerned the "savages" in their midst. The American Revolution did more than destroy the privilege of the Penn family; it doomed the region's native peoples. During the Revolutionary War, American patriots enacted the brutal logic of the Paxton Boys on a devastating scale.