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In April 1701 forty Indians from the lower Susquehanna Valley came to Philadelphia to make a treaty with William Penn. They were led by Connoodaghtoh, the “King of the Indians inhabiting upon and about the River Susquehannah.” About ten years earlier Connoodaghtoh had led a group of his Susquehannock Indians from Maryland back to their homelands on the Susquehanna River. They settled along Conestoga Creek, where they became known as the “Conestogas.” The Shawnees were represented in Philadelphia by their king, Opessah, who, like Connoodaghtoh, had recently returned from Maryland to Pennsylvania. Also at the conference was the Onondaga chief Ahookasoongh to represent the Iroquois confederacy, which claimed the Indian nations of the Susquehanna Valley as tributaries by right of conquest.¹

The treaty signed in Philadelphia on April 23, 1701—the only surviving Indian treaty negotiated by William Penn—reiterated Pennsylvania’s commitment to nurture good relations with the Indians living in the province. Thus far in Pennsylvania’s history, the treaty stated, “there hath always been a Good Understanding & Neighbourhood” between Penn “and the several Nations of Indians.” Henceforth there would be “a firm & lasting Peace” between “the said William Penn, his Heirs & Successors, & all the English & other Christian Inhabitants of the said province...& all the severall People of the Nations of Indians aforesaid.” Pennsylvania’s Christians and Indians would “for ever hereafter be as one head & one heart, & live in true Friendship and Amity as one People.” Neither side would “hurt, Injure or Defraud” the other, nor commit “any Act of Hostility or Violence, Wrong or Injury.” Pennsylvania’s Indians would “have the full & free priviliges & Immunities of all the said Laws as any other Inhabitants.” All that was required of them was to acknowledge and live by “the Authority of the Crown of England and Government of this Province.”²
The Conestoga Indians who negotiated with Penn were descendants of the once mighty Susquehannocks, the dominant Indian nation in the lower Susquehanna Valley in the seventeenth century. In 1675, weakened by disease and threatened by the Iroquois confederacy, the Susquehannocks had resettled in Maryland at the invitation of that colony. Harassed by militias from both Virginia and Maryland, they fought back, triggering Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676 and suffering catastrophic defeat. In the wake of Bacon’s Rebellion, Governor Edmund Andros of New York invited the surviving Susquehannocks to settle in his province under the protection of the Iroquois, with whom he had just forged a powerful alliance known as the “Covenant Chain.”

By inviting the Susquehannock Indians to New York, Governor Andros hoped to secure control of their homeland in the Susquehanna Valley. Some Susquehannocks took up the invitation, scattering among the Iroquois nations, but many decided to join Pennsylvania’s Lenape Indians along the Delaware River instead. Connoodaghtoh led a third group back to the lower Susquehanna Valley. Sometime around 1690 William Penn gave these Indians a 500-acre tract on Conestoga Creek. About four miles from the town they abandoned when they left for Maryland, they founded a new one, which became known as Conestoga Indiantown. Thus, in a convoluted process, the Conestogas regained control of some of their lost territory in the lower Susquehanna Valley.

The Iroquois continued to claim the valley’s Indians as tributaries, but the Conestogas, aware that Iroquoia lay 300 miles to the north, looked instead to William Penn as their protector. He willingly assumed this role as it helped him counter the ambitions of both the Iroquois and New York in the Susquehanna Valley. Governor Thomas Dongan of New York had purchased the valley from the Iroquois in 1683 on behalf of his master, the Duke of York. But in 1697, out of office and resident in London, Dongan sold the region to William Penn for the token sum of £100. Two Conestoga negotiators executed a deed confirming their approval of this purchase in September 1700, and it was written into the Philadelphia treaty in April 1701.

Although Penn’s central concern in 1701 was land, military defense was also a pressing issue. Quaker Pennsylvania had no militia, and Penn needed to ensure that local Indians would not turn against him. Iroquois oversight of the tributary nations would help in this regard. But given the risk of Pennsylvania’s Indians gravitating toward the French in future military conflicts, Penn knew that good diplomacy was even more important. The treaty of 1701 made a significant diplomatic concession to the Susquehanna Valley Indians by granting their request that the Conoys of the Potomac region, over which Pennsylvania
claimed jurisdiction in a boundary dispute with Maryland, would have “free Leave” to settle in the lower valley.\(^5\)

Penn’s other main goal in 1701 was to foster trade between Indians and Philadelphia’s merchants, to the mutual benefit—as he saw it—of both parties. The Indians had an abundant supply of animal pelts, coveted in Philadelphia and Europe. In exchange for these furs merchants provided a variety of imported goods, including guns and ammunition, which were much in demand among Indian hunters. Under the treaty of 1701, Pennsylvania pledged to prevent the “Abuses that are too frequently put upon the said Indians” by requiring all who engaged in the Indian trade to be licensed by
the government. The Indians were to do business only with licensed traders. As a quid pro quo Penn and "his heirs & Successors" promised to "take care to have them the said Indians, duly furnished with all sorts of necessary goods for their use, at Reasonable Rates."6

All parties to the conference of 1701 could derive satisfaction from the outcome. By treating Pennsylvania's Indians respectfully, Penn laid the basis for a lasting peace while consolidating his colonial control over the lower Susquehanna Valley, including its lucrative Indian trade. The Iroquois, with their interests in the Susquehanna Valley threatened by the rise of Pennsylvania, successfully cast themselves in the role of intermediaries between Penn and the small Indian nations in his province. They thereby created the potential for a new alliance with Pennsylvania that might serve as a counterweight to their alliance with New York. The year 1701 was a turning point in the diplomatic history of the Iroquois more generally; they also struck separate deals with the French at Montréal and the English at Albany. On the basis of the "Great Settlement" of 1701 the Iroquois carved out a position of neutrality between the French and English empires, which allowed them to influence the balance of power during much of the half-century to come.7

The Indians of the lower Susquehanna Valley, even though they were negotiating from a position of weakness, also made some important gains in Philadelphia. Other than the Conestogas, the most significant group in the lower valley were the Shawnees (or Shawanese). An Algonquian-speaking nation originally from the Ohio country, they had migrated to the Carolinas and present-day Alabama and Georgia in the seventeenth century. After settling along the Savannah River, from which they probably derived their name, they migrated north to the Potomac River and in the 1690s began to move into Pennsylvania. One group of Shawnees, led by Opessah, moved to the lower Susquehanna Valley around 1697, settling along Conestoga and Pequea Creeks.8

The Conestogas and Shawnees were prepared to help William Penn if they could achieve some of their own ends by doing so. In return for recognizing Penn's ownership of the Susquehanna Valley they extracted an assurance that they could continue to live there with the same rights "as any other Inhabitant." Moreover, they were able to counter the Iroquois claim of overlordship by turning to Penn as their champion. Two months after the treaty of 1701 Penn visited Conestoga Indiantown. No record of this visit survives, but he presumably met Connoodaghtoh and other local chiefs, and he may have inspected the lower Susquehanna River with a view to building a city there as a western counterpart to Philadelphia.9
Penn decided not to pursue this idea, and by the autumn he was preparing to return to England. Learning of his departure, Connoodaghtoh and Opessah led a delegation of Indians to Philadelphia, where they presented an appreciative farewell address in which “the Kings and Sachems of the Ancient Nations of the Sasquehannah and Shavanah [i.e., Shawnee] Indians” paid homage to their “Loving and good Friend and Brother William Penn.” The Indians expressed their appreciation to Penn for protecting them from “any Wrong from any of the People under his Government.” Invoking the recently signed treaty, they expressed their earnest hope “That we and our Children and People will be well used and be encouraged to continue to live among the Christians according to the Agreement that he and We have solemnly made for us and our Posterity as long as the Sun and the Moon shall endure, One head, One Mouth, and one Heart.”

For the next sixty years the Conestoga Indians continued to live peacefully under the agreement signed with William Penn. The treaty parchment was among their most cherished possessions. They carried it with them to several subsequent conferences in Philadelphia, and it was found among the charred remains of Conestoga Indiantown on December 14, 1763.

The treaty conference of 1701 came toward the end of William Penn’s second and final visit to his colony. As proprietary governor, Penn was both political ruler and principal landlord of Pennsylvania. He lived there for only two brief periods, in 1682–1684 and again in 1699–1701. After he was incapacitated by a stroke in 1712 his second wife, Hannah, managed the province. Before his stroke he had laid down a policy on land and Indians based on Quaker principles of tolerance and pacifism. Inspired by a spirit of providential mission, Penn envisioned his colony as a “holy experiment.”

Treating Indians humanely was an essential part of Penn’s vision. The spirit of Quaker tolerance did not yet extend to African slaves, of whom Penn acquired several, but his policy toward Indians was notably enlightened by the standards of the time. Shortly after his arrival in 1682 he reportedly met with leaders of the Lenni Lenape (Delaware) Indians at Shackamaxon in present-day Philadelphia. The record of this conference survives on both sides only in oral tradition and in nineteenth-century paintings by Benjamin West and Edward Hicks, who glorified Penn’s pacifist egalitarianism. In all likelihood there was a series of meetings rather than one.

In 1701 there were probably no more than 5,000 Indians in Pennsylvania. The largest and most powerful Indian nation in the province was the Lenni
Lenapes ("original people"). At the time of their contact with Dutch traders in the 1620s they were living along the Atlantic coast from Delaware Bay to Manhattan Island, on the west bank of the lower Hudson River, and in the lands drained by the Delaware River that later became Pennsylvania and New Jersey. In English they came to be known as the Delaware Indians. By 1701 English and German colonists were displacing them from their homelands in southeastern Pennsylvania. Many resettled in the fertile lands of the Forks of the Delaware, where the Lehigh and Delaware Rivers met. Others moved west into the Susquehanna Valley.¹⁴
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