

WILLIAM PENN ON THE LENI LENAPE (DELAWARE)

Letter to the Committee of the
Free Society of Traders___1683

EXCERPTS

The *Natives* I consider in their Person, Language, Manners, Religion, and Government, with my sense of their Original. For their Persons, they are generally tall, straight, well-built, and of singular Proportion; they tread strong and clever, and mostly walk with a lofty Chin; Of Complexion, Black, but by design, as the Gypsies in England. They grease themselves with Bear's fat clarified, and using no defense against Sun or Weather, their skins must needs be swarthy; . . .

Their Language is lofty, yet narrow, but like the Hebrew; in Signification full, like Short-hand in writing; one word serveth in the place of three, and the rest are supplied by the Understanding of the Hearer: Imperfect in their Tenses, wanting in their Moods, Participles, Adverbs, Conjunctions, Interjections. I have made it my business to understand it, that I might not want an Interpreter on any occasion. And I must say that I know not a Language spoken in Europe that hath words of more sweetness or greatness, in Accent and Emphasis, than theirs; . . .

If an European comes to see them, or calls for Lodging at their House or *Wigwam*, they give him the best place and first cut. If they come to visit us, they salute us with an *Itah* which is as much as to say, Good be to you, and set them down, which is mostly on the Ground close to their Heels, their Legs upright; may be they speak not a word more, but observe all Passages. If you give them anything to eat or drink, well, for they will not ask; and be it little or much, if it be with Kindness, they are well pleased, else they go away sullen, but say nothing. . . .

Library Company of Philadelphia

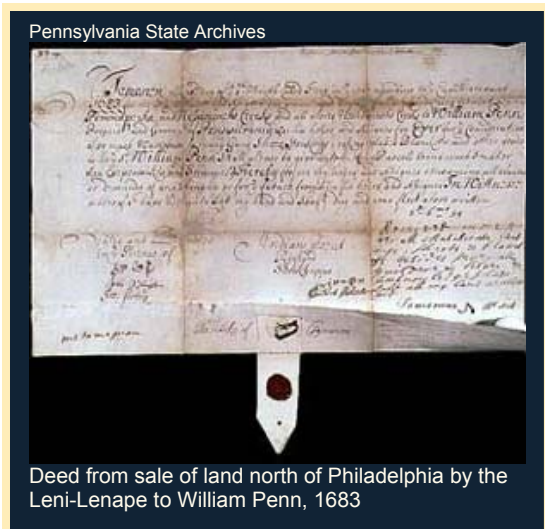


Leni-Lenape family, engraving by P. Lindeström, 1654

New York Public Library



William Penn, 19th-c. engraving by J. Posselwhite

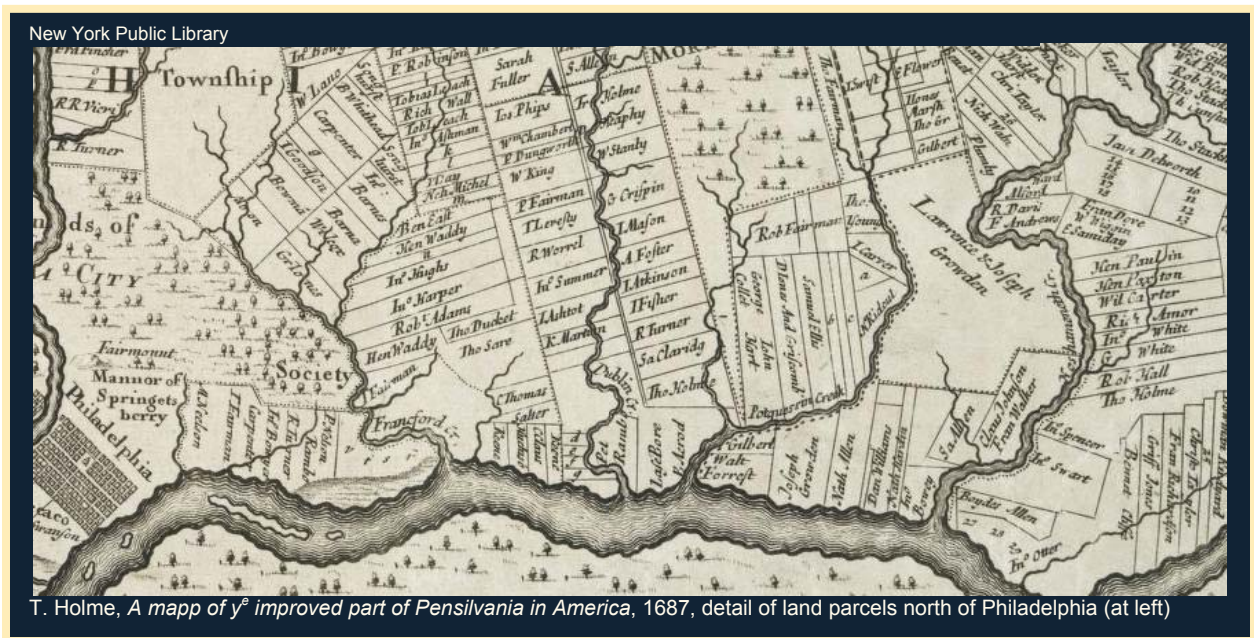


Deed from sale of land north of Philadelphia by the Leni-Lenape to William Penn, 1683

But in Liberality they excel; nothing is too good for their friend. Give them a fine Gun, Coat, or other thing, it may pass twenty hands before it sticks. Light of Heart, strong Affections, but soon spent; the most merry Creatures that live, Feast and dance perpetually. They never have much nor want much. Wealth circulateth like the Blood, all parts partake; and though none shall want what another hath, yet exact Observers of Property. Some Kings have sold, others presented me with several parcels of Land; the Pay or Presents I made them were not hoarded by the particular Owners, but the neighboring Kings and their Clans being present when the Goods were brought out, the parties chiefly concerned consulted, what and to whom they should give them? . . . They care for little, because they want but little; and the Reason is, a little contents them. In this they are sufficiently revenged on

us; if they are ignorant of our Pleasures, they are also free from our Pains. They are not disquieted with Bills of Lading and Exchange, nor perplexed with Chancery-Suites and Exchequer Reckonings. We sweat and toil to live; their pleasure feeds them, I mean, their Hunting, Fishing and Fowling, and this Table is spread everywhere; they eat twice a day, Morning and Evening; their Seats and Table are the Ground. Since the European came into these parts, they are grown great lovers of strong Liquors, Rum especially, and for it exchange the richest of their Skins and Furs. If they are heated with Liquors, they are restless till they have enough to sleep; that is their cry, Some more, and I will go to sleep; but when Drunk, one of the most wretchedst Spectacles in the world. . . .

I have had occasion to be in Council with them upon Treaties for Land, and to adjust the terms of Trade. Their Order is thus: The King sits in the middle of an half Moon, and hath his Council, the Old and Wise on each hand; behind them, or at a little distance, sit the younger Fry, in the same figure. Having consulted and resolved their business, the King ordered one of them to speak to me. He stood up, came to me, and in the Name of his King saluted me, then took me by the hand and told me, That he was ordered by his King to speak to me, and that now it was not he, but the King that spoke, because what he should say was the King's mind. He first prayed me, To excuse them that they had not complied with me the last

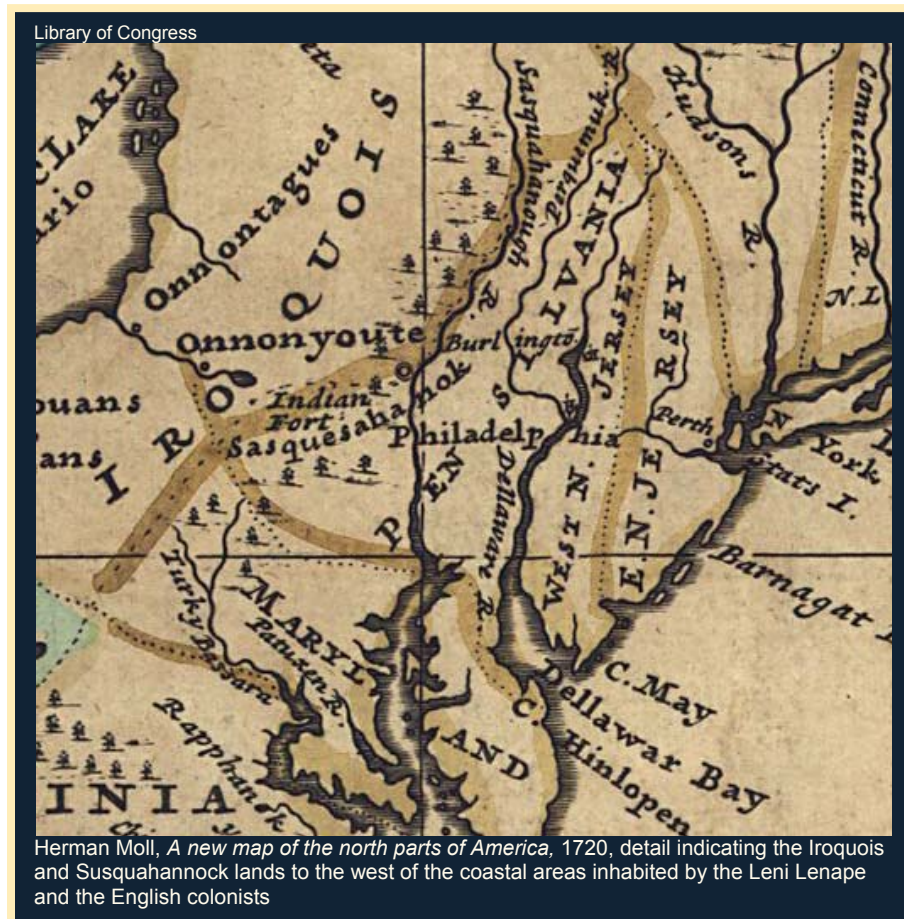


T. Holme, A map of y^e improved part of Pensilvania in America, 1687, detail of land parcels north of Philadelphia (at left)

time. He feared there might be some fault in the Interpreter, being neither Indian nor English; besides, it was the Indian Custom to deliberate and take up much time in council before they resolve; and that if the Young People and Owners of the Land had been as ready as he, I had not met with so much delay. Having thus introduced his matter, he fell to the Bounds of the Land they had agreed to dispose of, and the Price, (which now is little and dear, that which would have bought twenty Miles, not buying now two.) During the time that this Person spoke, not a man of them was observed to whisper or smile; the Old, Grave, the Young, Reverend in their Department; they do speak little, but fervently, and with Elegancy: I have never seen more natural Sagacity, considering them without the help (I was agoing to say the spoil) of Tradition; and he will deserve the Name of Wise that Outwits them in any Treaty about a thing they understand. When the Purchase was agreed, great Promises past between us of Kindness and good Neighborhood, and that the Indians and English must live in Love, as long as the Sun gave light. Which done, another made a Speech to the Indians in the Name of all the Schamakers or Kings, first to tell them what was done; next, to charge and command them, To Love the Christians, and particularly live in Peace with me, and the People under my Government: That many Governors had been in the River, but that no Governor had come himself to live and stay here before; and having now such a one that had treated them well, they should never do him or his any wrong. At every sentence of which they shouted, and said Amen in their way.

We have agreed that in all Differences between us, Six of each side shall end the matter. Don't abuse them, but let them have Justice, and you win them. The worst is that they are the worse for the Christians, who have propagated their Vices and yielded them Tradition for ill and not for good things. But as low an

Ebb as they are at, and as glorious as their Condition looks, the Christians have not outlived their sight with all their Pretensions to an higher Manifestation. What good then might not a good People graft, where there is so distinct a Knowledge left between Good and Evil? I beseech God to incline the Hearts of all that come into these parts to outlive the Knowledge of the Natives, by a fixed Obedience to their greater Knowledge of the Will of God, for it were miserable indeed for us to fall under the just censure of the poor Indian Conscience, while we make profession of things so far transcending.



Herman Moll, *A new map of the north parts of America*, 1720, detail indicating the Iroquois and Susquahannock lands to the west of the coastal areas inhabited by the Leni Lenape and the English colonists