CONRAD WEISER AND THE DELAWARES

By PAUL A. W. WALLACE, PH.D.
Lebanon Valley College

In paying tribute to the memory of one of Reading's founders, we are reminded that some cities are harder to found than others. Rome was not built in a day, and it took Conrad Weiser to build Reading.

Some time ago I came across a letter written by the Rev. Richard Peters, provincial secretary, to Thomas Penn in 1752, describing the difficulties that attended the founding of Reading. Apparently when it first arose (not, by the way, "at Heaven's command"), Weiser was placed in charge. "It was very lucky," wrote the secretary, "that I gave the management of that Town to Conrad, whose Imperiousness has been of great Service, for they build regularly, and if they dont, or are any way abusive, Conrad deals about his Blows without any Ceremony, and down drops the Man that dares to resist his ponderous Arm—but withal I must say that it is guided by good Sense and a necessary fortitude."²

In handling such a subject as Conrad Weiser's relations with the Lenni Lenape or Delaware Indians, it may seem that I am committed to the unpleasant task of examining Achilles' heel. The most vulnerable spot in Weiser's career is commonly said to be his blind antipathy to the Delawares—an antipathy, we are told,

¹ Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, Reading, Pennsylvania, November 13, 1936.
² Penn MSS.: Official Correspondence, V, 217 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).
that forced an Indian war on Pennsylvania and drenched her frontiers with blood.

I may as well say at once that I do not share such a view. I find it difficult to reconcile that legend of blind antipathy with what we certainly know of Weiser's painstaking and judicial turn of mind. Besides, a study of the original documents presents the strongest evidence that his policy was not based on prejudice at all, but on a very full understanding of what was actually going on in the woods at that time and an intuition of things to come.

If I may be permitted the roundabout method of approaching Achilles' heel through his head, I should like to spend a moment examining Weiser's character, to see what kind of a man we have to deal with. First may I say that Richard Peters' description of him is to be taken seriously. The passage just quoted about his imperiousness, good sense, and fortitude is one of the very few intimate sketches of the man that have come down to us. His contemporaries often speak of him, but as a rule they mention only his honesty, and let it go at that. It seems that he inspired such perfect confidence in those who worked with him that they seldom stopped to analyze his motives. Governors of colonies, church leaders, and Indian sachems relied on his knowledge and advice; but they took him for granted as they took the sun in heaven. They did not think of him as a man with a personality separable from his work. To them he was one of the basic facts of the American scene, like the forest and the mountains and the sea. The Six Nations went so far as to name him after one of their major deities, Tarachawagon.

Of course he was human, intensely, and full of paradoxes which are perhaps more apparent today than they were in his own time. But if we are inclined to smile at some of the absurdities of his career—such as when he grew a pilgrim's beard and took his wife and eight children to share his intended solitude at Ephrata—we should do well to remember what Richard Peters said of him before we put him down as a picturesque anachronism or an "innocent dreamer," which a recent writer has called him.

Admittedly his character is a puzzle. A man who was a judge, monk, farmer, linguist, merchant, woodsman, diplomat, hymn-writer, town-builder, county ranger, lieutenant colonel on active service, and pillar of four separate churches, is liable to be mis-
understood by ordinary people. But in all these varied manifesta-
tions of his genius, there is a key to explain him.

He was a man deeply rooted in religion, law, and the land—
three things on which an ordered society is founded. In every-
thing he did he was intent on achieving for himself and for others,
peace, security, and justice—under authority, human or divine.
He believed in an ordered world, and he worked and fought to
maintain one.

Even his religious vagaries become intelligible in this analysis.
When Caspar Stoever’s Christian soldiers (who put gunpowder
into the Moravian pastor’s firewood) had brought the authority
of the Tulpehocken church into confusion, he fled to Ephrata,
hoping to find peace in withdrawal from the world. He left the
Cloister when he found that authority there rested not on the
Eternal but on a system of fantastic mummeries that put Beissel,
the showman, in the place of our Lord. He followed the Moravi-
ans for a time because of their reliance on the central spring of
our religion, the winning personality of Jesus. He came back
finally to the Lutheran Church, which offered the support (so
much needed by a man of action) of definite sanctions and a
clearly organized body of doctrine.

There was never anything soft about Conrad Weiser. He was
a man of vision, but no dreamer. If, as it is said, “the style is
the man,” his character may be gauged from his letters and jour-
nals. They are evidently the work of a practical man, full of
common sense, observant, and penetrating. They are often hur-
rried, but never vague or flabby. There are no smooth eighteenth
century phrases in them, for he had picked up his English in the
backwoods of New York; but his style has the freshness of the
forest and the snap of a woodsman swinging an axe.

Last winter I ran across the first draught of one of Governor
Denny’s speeches to the Indians—unsigned, but written in Conrad
Weiser’s very positive hand. The substance of the printed speech
is all there, although the expression is rough. It is strong, con-
centrated, and nourishing, like a slice of good wholesome brown
bread. All that Governor Denny did was to spread the molasses
of official language over the surface and have it entered in the
minutes as his own.

Weiser handled his private business with assurance and success.
He built up a large and valuable property. His credit was good everywhere, as he told James Logan proudly in 1736 when 110 Indians stopped at his house and he had to provide them with food. Even Benjamin Franklin, whose business policy was one of "no credit to the Dutch," took Weiser's signature in 1738 when paper was needed to save the publication of the Ephrata hymn-book from disaster. While Braddock was making his slow and irritable way to the Monongahela, he wrote to Governor Morris that the one competent thing the colonies had done for him was in the matter of providing transport wagons—which we know had been undertaken by Conrad Weiser and Benjamin Franklin.

Weiser was independent and self-reliant. On the Onondago journey he quarreled with the great Shick Calamy over a matter of woodcraft, and made the chief accept his decision, which it was admitted afterwards had been right. On that journey Conrad Weiser was on trial before the Indians. They had known already from his handling of the conferences of 1731, 1732, and 1736, that he was honest and understanding—that he spoke, as they put it, their words and not his own; but these hard-bitten, wolf-eyed men of the forest were not satisfied with tame virtues. They demanded hard grain in the men they chose to call their leaders. That brave journey, made through flood and famine to stop the Catawba War, won him their entire loyalty. When, some time afterwards, they named him Tarachawagon (which means, as the Mohawk Chief, William Loft, at Brantford translated it for me, "You Must Hold up the Sky for Us"), we may be sure they were honoring him, not as a dreamer, but as one who had mastered the forces that held their fate.

He held up the sky for all of us. His contribution to the history of America was the winning and holding of the Six Nations' alliance, which gave the English colonies a decisive advantage over the French in the struggle for North America. Weiser, of course, was not the first to see the importance of such an alliance. James Logan had been intent on it long before Weiser came into the province. But before Weiser's day it had proved an elusive prize, and in the 1720's the English felt it slipping out of their reach. Logan wrote anxiously in 1728 about a report, apparently reliable, that "the Five Nations," as he called them, were secretly engaging the Twilightees to attack the English. That
was the year before Weiser came. He arrived just in time to show James Logan and the council how to win the Six Nations over.

Weiser's policy, in a word, was to give official recognition to the authority of the Six Nations over their tributaries, in particular over their "nephews" the Delawares, whom the colony had hitherto treated as a virtually sovereign power. By this means he raised the Six Nations to the highest peak of their prestige, and drew them tightly to the English by making the latter guarantors of their supremacy. We do not know precisely the way in which that policy first took shape, but we do know that within two years of Weiser's appearance in the province Logan was in possession of the key to the Indian situation. In August, 1731, he wrote in a letter to the three Penns these guarded but significant words in reference to a projected treaty with the Six Nations: "The intended subject of the treaty, is to put them if possible on measures to strengthen both themselves and us I must not be more particular here. If we can succeed, it may prove to advantage to other of these colonies."

And now for Achilles' heel! The idea has got around that Pennsylvania's Indian policy grew out of Weiser's prejudices, he being an adopted Mohawk, a member of the tribe that had long been the Delawares' worst enemy. It is often said that by his injustice to the Delawares, however beneficial his schemes may have turned out to be for the English colonies as a whole, he inevitably drew on his province the horrors of an Indian war.

This is no place for an exhaustive defense, if one were needed, of Conrad Weiser and his policy. But there are two or three things that certainly should be said if we are to stop doing an injustice to a great man. In the first place, it should be said very definitely that Weiser's policy grew out of a clear understanding of the situation then facing the colonies, and further, that he acted with the best interests of this province foremost in his mind.

To most colonials of Weiser's day, an Indian was an Indian and that was all there was to it. But Weiser knew the complexities of American forest politics, where conditions were not

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unlike those in Europe today. There were many Indian nations, with deep-rooted traditions and loyalties, interlocked in a network of alliances, ententes, and dependencies. He had grown up on the Schoharie, in a nest of mountains where three great rivers and arteries of travel take their rise within a few miles of one another: the Delaware, the Hudson, and the Susquehanna. It was, therefore, a cosmopolitan center, where fragments of many tribes were found, in particular the great Six Nations’ Confederacy and their powerful tributaries, the Delawares. There he saw the essential antagonism between these two people, differing in racial stock, in language and traditions.

The Delawares, as William Penn had found them, were on the whole a good-hearted people, sensitive, kindly, and mystic. Their tribes, however, lacked cohesion and their people self-control. They were fair-weather friends, but difficult to do business with over any matters that might be in dispute. The Six Nations, on the other hand, were of Iroquois stock—a more practical people, better organized, more politically minded, born statesmen. Whether this difference was inherent in their mentality, or merely an accident of the time, it is not necessary to determine. It is enough to know that the strongest authority then existing among the Indians was the Confederation of the Six Nations with its central Council Fire at Onondago. Whatever the story books may tell us to the contrary, that League, which had been founded by Hiawatha, was in intent and effect a League of Peace, as it is called officially to this day. It provided the strongest cohesive bond the Indians ever knew, and many tribes appealed to it for protection and justice. The Delawares, however, who had been subdued many years before and for some reason given the contemptuous designation of “women,” resented their subjection and longed for independence.

The deep antagonism between the Delawares and the Six Nations was one of the prime facts that determined Weiser’s policy. It was already an ancient story when Weiser appeared on the scene—and it has lasted down to our own day. On the Six Nations’ Reserve near Brantford, the Delawares are still living under the wing of their ancient enemies, who have given them asylum, but whom in their hearts they hate. Chief Joseph Montour is there, a descendant of Madame Montour and of King Teedyuscung
(whom he has been said to resemble). At the age of eighty-seven, Montour is still a good hater. He told me recently how he had once "licked" six Tuscaroras in a fight, and he ended his lively description of the way in which he upset the last of them and bounced him on his head (until, I suppose, his scalp was hardly worth taking), with the remark that "one good Delaware is worth eight or ten Six Nations." He expressed his surprise at the eminence the Six Nations have attained—without either bravery or brains. "There are only 150 of us Delawares on the reserve," he said, "and 5,000 of the Six Nations, but we could lick the whole lot of them." He told me, with an odd light in his eye, that the word "Mohawk" is a Delaware word, a nickname his people long since gave their enemies. It means literally "man-eater," he explained, but it is used in their vocabulary to denote no nobler a carnivore than the common louse.

When Weiser came to Pennsylvania in 1729, it was no longer possible for the province to remain neutral, as William Penn had kept it, in the quarrel simmering between these tribes. As the Half-King Scaroyady once said, "You can't live in the woods and stay neutral." Shortly before Conrad arrived, the Onondago Council had sent Shick Calamy down to the Shamokin district to watch over their Delaware tributaries, who had been openly talking about independence.

The word "independence" has an attractive sound to us, but we must remember that if Pennsylvania had sided with the Delawares and recognized their independence in the face of the Onondago Council, a war would certainly have resulted with the Six Nations. Not only that, but with or without independence, the Delawares were in a mood to attack the English settlements, and Pennsylvania needed help in restraining them. In the year 1728 the province was disturbed by several of these war scares, and panics of the sort were familiar long before Braddock's defeat.

Without going into the ethics of colonial expansion, it is sufficient to observe that, under the pressure of popular movements in the colony, Pennsylvania was doing the Delawares a wrong that could not be righted. Advancing settlements, even before the days of Daniel Boone, were driving the Indians off the land. It is true that Pennsylvania continued William Penn's policy of buying the lands from the Indians, but the Indians were pushed off
first and the lands paid for afterwards. That is what happened in Lebanon Valley. The Palatines who first settled here in 1723 destroyed the Indian grain with their cattle, and the sale of valley lands in 1732 was not, properly speaking, a sale at all but belated compensation for lands already taken from their owners. The authorities on occasion tried to remedy these abuses by evicting white trespassers on Indian lands. Such efforts were unsuccessful and dangerous, as the story of Simon Girty will bear witness. The whites were here to stay, and no amount of presents or “pay” could blind the Delawares to the fact that, long before the Walking Purchase, they were being relentlessly pushed out of their homes. It stands to reason that if you take forcible possession of your neighbor’s house, even though you pay him half a cent a foot for his land and let him sleep in the backyard, you will have a permanent enemy at your door.

This permanent and irremovable grievance of the Delawares was a second fact in the situation that determined the direction of Weiser’s Indian policy. By acknowledging Six Nations’ suzerainty over the Delawares and by underpinning the authority of the Onondago Council, Weiser tried to avert the immediate danger of a Delaware war. It was not a blind policy, not at all blind to the particular interests of his own province. It saved one generation from the Delaware tomahawk, and it might have saved the next if Conrad’s hand had been allowed to shape colonial policies through the crucial years of 1754 and 1755.

By 1736, the policy was in full operation. In that year the Six Nations gave the province two deeds. The first was a release of their claims to disputed lands on the Susquehanna; the other extended the first release to cover any claims they might have had to certain lands on the Delaware. There was an interval of two weeks between the deeds. The second document was the crucial one, since it assumed Six Nations’ suzerainty over lands to which they had hitherto made no claim. Joseph Walton, whose book, Conrad Weiser and the Indian Policy of Colonial Pennsylvania was written before certain papers had come to light, says that the second deed was signed at Philadelphia by a few drunken Indians after most of the influential ones had left the city. “No doubt,” he writes, “Shikellimy was the Indian agent who accomplished this, and that he used Conrad Weiser to bring it to pass.”
As a matter of fact, the second release was not signed at Philadelphia at all, but at Conrad Weiser's place in Tulpehocken; and not by a handful of Indians, but by the main body of the chiefs on their way back to Onondago. The matter was presented to them by Weiser at the written request of James Logan, then president of the Council. Logan had apparently intended to take the matter up during the conference, but his serious illness prevented it. His object, as he explained in his letter, was to forestall the action of a certain Jersey Delaware, Nootamis, who claimed lands which his tribe had already deeded to Pennsylvania.  

Nootamis hoped, said Logan, to invalidate the deed by appealing to the Six Nations (invoking, I suppose, their superior title), and by this means to get some color of a grant for himself.

The release was signed after a sober, day-long debate. "They have signed the larger deed," wrote Weiser on October 27, "after had it in Consideration for Morning till night . . . it went very hart about syning over their right upon delaware because the sayd they had nothing to doe there about the land, they war afaired they Shoud doe anything a mis to their gosens the delawares." Whether Logan was entirely frank about this transaction we need not discuss now. Weiser's statement of the grounds on which the Six Nations hesitated—lest "they Shoud doe anything a mis to their gosens the delawares"—shows that blind prejudice was not operating here.

Weiser had a sympathetic understanding of the Delawares. Of course he knew their weaknesses. He knew why the Six Nations in 1736 called them "a people of no virtue." He knew that their head chief, Sassoonan, was a drunken old sot who sold the contents of the tribe's council bag for liquor. But Weiser's understanding of them included a knowledge of their ambitions and a genuine sympathy with them in their misfortunes. It was to Weiser the provincial secretary turned in 1757 when he wanted help from the man who knew them best. "Please to send," wrote Richard Peters, "an account of the Original of the Delaware Indians, their Rights, Possessions and History are best known to you & shoud
be particularly set forth together with their Subjection to or connections with the Six Nations."

Among the Weiser papers there has been preserved a curious fragment entitled "Private Sentiments of Ohio." It is undated and unsigned, but written in Weiser's hand, evidently at some time not long after his Ohio journey, to which it refers. In it he suggests a means of restoring self-respect to the Delawares. "Persuade the nation," he writes, "to take of the petticoat from the delawares and give them a Breech Cloath to wear and Call them for the futter their Brethren or Children and leave out the word Cousin (because in the Indian language at Signifies a Subject or one that is under Command)."

Perhaps he had in mind admitting them to citizenship in the Confederacy, in some such way as the Tuscaroras had been admitted a few years earlier, "on the cradle-board," as the Indian phrase ran. In any event, he proposed a means of ending the long feud between the tribes, a means honorable to the Delawares, but undertaken through the proper Six Nations' channels and under their aegis. If the Delawares had held their hand in 1755, such an incorporation would probably have taken place.

To the charge that Weiser's policy drove the Delawares into the hands of the French, we reply that the alienation of the Delawares was an accomplished fact before Weiser appeared on the scene. His policy served to postpone the Delaware war and very nearly to prevent it altogether.

Even after Braddock's defeat, with all the motive the Connecticut Purchase had given them to revolt, the Delawares held back, nursing a wholesome fear of the Onondago Council. What did precipitate the war was an ingenious bit of diplomacy carried on behind the lines at Fort Duquesne.

Jean Daniel Dumas, who defeated Braddock, seems to have been the only man in the woods who, in the conduct of Indian affairs, was able to meet Weiser on equal terms. He might even have outwitted the old German fox if he had been given time, but fortunately for the English colonies, he was removed from Fort Duquesne in 1756.

Correspondence of Conrad Weiser, II, 31 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).
Ibid., II, 27.
Dumas knew as well as Weiser the power exercised by the Six Nations over the Delawares, but that very thing he now set out to break. The Connecticut Purchase having given him a handle, he moved the Delawares to assert their independence. He went farther. Just as it had been Weiser's policy to keep the Delawares in fear of the Six Nations, it became Dumas' policy to make the Six Nations afraid of the Delawares. How well he succeeded may be seen from a letter he wrote to the Minister from Fort Duquesne, July 24, 1756:

Since last year, Monseigneur, it has been my honor to command here with infinitely greater success than I could naturally have expected. I have succeeded in setting against the English all the tribes of this region who had been their most faithful allies...

May I also, Monseigneur, congratulate myself on having largely determined the policy of the Five Nations, setting those of this river in defiance of them and arresting parties from the five towns who pass here on their way to attack distant tribes; I have succeeded in making almost all of them attack the English, and if any of them resisted I have always managed to destroy them, so that I have put the Iroquois in fear of the Delawares and Shawnees unless they follow their example; and since the war parties I have intercepted here have taken scalps and prisoners to their villages, they find themselves engaged in the war, so to speak, in spite of themselves.8

Now, with this situation among the Indians on the Ohio in our minds, we are in a position to realize the crucial importance of Scaroyady's embassy, when he came east after Braddock's defeat to show the English how to play their cards. Scaroyady was the half king or vice-regent, appointed by the Onondago Council to superintend the new Indian colony on the Ohio. He was an old friend of Weiser's and a campaigner under Washington and Braddock. He knew very well what was going on among his Indians on the Ohio, where Dumas was working, not yet quite successfully, to make the Delawares lift the hatchet against the English. The Delawares were much harder to move than might have been expected, but the French were insistent and threatening,

8See F. J. Audet, Jean-Daniel Dumas Le Héros de la Monongahéla (Montreal, 1920), pp. 22-34.
and the Indians found a decision being thrust on them. "You can't live in the woods and stay neutral." The Delawares knew that the French would back them against the English, but would the English back them against the French?

Scaroyady asked for assurance that they would. "One word of yours," he said, "will bring the Delawares to join you." Neither the governor nor the Assembly would speak that word. The Assembly was playing politics and the governor was playing safe—hiding behind his commission from the Proprietaries. News went back to the Ohio that Brother Onas could give the Delawares neither active help nor effective opposition. The massacre at Penn's Creek was the result.

Weiser was with Scaroyady when he made that appeal. When it failed, he shouldered for a time the chief burden of the defensive war to which Pennsylvania's neglect of his advice now committed her. Though he had described himself the year before as "old and infirm" and looking forward only to death, he now became overnight a soldier. Holding his line of forts along the Blue Mountains, he kept the sky from falling on Pennsylvania during the severest months of the campaign. Before he died he saw peace come again to the province—under the authority, as he had foreseen, of the Six Nations.

I should like, in conclusion, to touch briefly on the Easton Peace Conference of 1758, where Weiser's Indian policy was so clearly vindicated, and where also we find curious evidence of his essential sympathy with the crushed and humiliated Delawares.

King Teedyuscung led the Delawares at the conference, which opened with some appearance of a triumph for his people. He boasted himself not only king of the Delawares, but spokesman as well for ten nations, including the Six Nations' Confederacy. He was a genial rogue, with all the Delaware sensitivity and changes of mood. At one time he had come under the influence of the Moravians, who christened him, Gideon. And now for some time past he had been carrying around a peace pipe in one hand and a tomahawk in the other, keeping his scalping parties active in the neighborhood of the peace conferences he held at various times between 1756 and 1758. The Moravians called him "Honest John," but that was because they did not have to pay for his liquor. The sly fox had failed to drive the English into the sea, as he
had once boasted he would do, but at least he had led his people out of the land of Egypt. They had achieved their independence of the Six Nations. They had carried a hatchet, and they were now about to make a peace on their own authority.

When the conference assembled in October, the walls of Jericho did not fall before the trumpets of this Delaware Gideon. Instead, all the pent-up exasperation which the Six Nations had stored up in their hearts against their rebellious nephews, was detonated with a roar.

Nichas, the Mohawk, rose suddenly and pointing at Teedyuscung spoke in terms so inflammatory that Weiser declined to translate them, urging that the Six Nations be permitted to express themselves in a private meeting with the governor and his Council. Weiser’s intervention saved the conference from disaster.

Accordingly the deputies of the Six United Nations met Governor Denny and brought matters to a final issue. Chief after chief rose to speak: Nichas for the Mohawks, Tagashata for the Senecas, Assarandonquas for the Onondagos, Tokaaio for the Cayugas, and Thomas King for the Oneidas and Tuscaroras. All flung this question at the governor: “Who made Teedyuscung a Great Man? Was it you?”

Sir William Johnson, whom Braddock had put in charge of Indian Affairs, over Weiser’s head, thought he had done a smart thing at Fort Johnson in 1756 when he complimented the Delawares by putting a hatchet into their hands and formally removing their petticoats, all on his own authority—afterwards assuring the Six Nations that the Delawares would still be good children and listen to the advice of their elders. It was an equivocal gesture, and the Six Nations were not deceived. They knew that Johnson by his act had recognized Delaware independence, and they nursed their anger. Now Pennsylvania was to pay for Johnson’s indiscretion.

Fortunately Conrad Weiser was on hand to save the province once again. Governor Denny might not like him (there was no love lost between these two), but even Governor Denny could not fail to see the significance of Weiser’s traditional Indian policy. So Weiser was given charge of the situation. Conferring privately with Denny and the Six Nations, he gave the latter positive assurance that in the eyes of Brother Onas their authority over their tributaries was unchanged and would remain so.
Teedyuscung was fairly beaten. His revolution had collapsed. His final plea to his uncles, the Six Nations, was only for a gift of land for his people, that they might end their wanderings and come home. “Uncles,” he said, “I sit here as a Bird on a Bow; I look about and do not know where to go; let me therefore come down upon the Ground, and make that my own by a good Deed, and I shall then have a home for Ever.”

The metaphor of the bird on a bough sums up the long, unhappy story of the Delaware people; and the passage in which it occurs deserves a place in primitive literature by the side of “Logan’s Lament.”

It may be interesting to know that the man who turned that passage into English as I have given it, was Conrad Weiser. There were two translations made at the time, by two different men. Isaac Still’s is cold and colorless, but Conrad Weiser’s has the life and warmth of Indian metaphor. In it he has caught, in a few understanding words, the feeling of a crushed and homeless people.

It was the Six Nations, not the Delawares, who made the peace. Tagashata rose in council and addressed the English in these words: “Brethren: We now remove the Hatchet out of your Heads that was struck into them by our Cousinz, the Delawares; it was a french Hatchet that they unfortunately made use of, by the Instigation of the French; we take it out of your Heads and bury it under ground, where it shall always rest and never be taken up again.”

That was the last time that Tarachawagon was to hold up the sky for the Six Nations or for Pennsylvania. He died in 1760, a few months after the fall of Quebec had put the seal on his work by removing the threat of French conquest. After his death the Indians continued to hold him in reverence, but the white men promptly forgot him. By them he was remembered only in his work: the English colonies made ready for independence.

9 Pennsylvania Colonial Records, VIII, 203.
10 Ibid., VIII, 181.