



CORNPLANTER OR KI-ON-TWOG-KY, SENECA CHIEF

By F. Bartoli, New York, 1796

Oil on canvas, 30" by 25"

Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society, New York City

PENNSYLVANIA'S LAST INDIAN SCHOOL

BY ERNEST C. MILLER*

WHEN it was announced that the elementary school on the Cornplanter Indian Grant, in the northeastern corner of Warren County, was to close on the last day of 1953, I hastened to make a last visit to see one of the state's most unusual schools, operating on Pennsylvania's only Indian lands. The neat red brick schoolhouse of two stories is located near the center of the Grant, along the only road through the land, and only a hundred yards from the Allegheny River.

When it was full of black-haired and black-eyed Indian children, it was a stimulating place to visit. The brightly painted green seats were surrounded with blackboards covered with writing, shelves were filled with natural history exhibits such as stuffed birds, nests, strange flowers, deer horns, and unusual pieces of wood found in the forest by the school children. Other shelves were filled with more or less the usual variety of books.

The front wall of the room was draped with an American flag, and beneath it hung a handsome portrait of Chief Cornplanter.¹ The teacher, Miss Lucia E. Browne,² was finishing her twenty-fourth year as "the Indian teacher," a record seldom equalled in this country among those teaching Indians.³

An inspection of the school revealed that the cellar held coal for the furnace, oil for the lamps, and even an adequate supply of candles for use on especially dark days. Because of the danger of floods in the spring, the furnace and firebox were built very high. On the second floor, an apartment for the teacher consisted

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¹This portrait was copied from the original by F. Bartoli, painted from life in 1796, and now owned by the New-York Historical Society. See frontispiece.

²Miss Browne died December 7, 1956, and was buried at Corydon, Pa., just across the Allegheny River from her beloved school.

³Teacher's Record Card, in the office of John Mallery, Jr., Superintendent of Schools, Warren County, Warren, Pa.

of a living room, dining room, bedroom, and kitchen. When the road leading into the Grant became dangerous or impassable, extra food and supplies were brought in for the teacher. Since there has never been electricity on the Grant, the teachers have never had refrigeration, and cooking has been done on a kerosene range.

Such were the physical aspects of the school in 1953, when it was about to close because only one child attended. But the story of the last Indian school in Pennsylvania cannot be properly understood without at least a glance at the career of the famous Cornplanter.

Cornplanter (Ki-on-twog-ky), a chief of the Seneca band, was born about 1752 near Avon, New York,⁴ of a Dutch father, John Abeel (often spelled O'Bail), and a Seneca woman who was a member of an influential Indian family.⁵ From the time his father turned him away from his house on the Mohawk River with nothing but polite phrases, the young half-breed lived, fought, thought, and finally died as an Indian. Fortunately, he inherited the best virtues of both the white and the Indian blood from which he stemmed.

After the British victory at Quebec and the peace of 1763, the French withdrew from the country which is today northwestern Pennsylvania. Later, the Seneca joined with Pontiac (1720-1796), who led an unsuccessful conspiracy of many tribes in an attempt to expel the English from the Ohio region. Defeated in this attempt, the Seneca traveled in greater numbers than ever before to the upper Allegheny River, and by 1775 were generally settled in towns from the present day Kinzua, Pennsylvania, to Olean, New York.

It was at a council meeting to which they were summoned at Oswego in July, 1777, that the greater part of the Six Nations decided to fight on the side of the British during the Revolutionary War. Cornplanter and a few others seemed loath to approve of this decision, but they were outvoted and after the decision had been made, they fully supported the Indian cause. Corn-

⁴"A Copy of Corn Planter's Talk," State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Draper Manuscripts*, Brant Papers, Vol. 16, 227. This is an unpublished autobiography dictated by Cornplanter to Henry York, an Indian interpreter, on February 13-14, 1821. It was copied and sent to Draper by Charles Aldrich, a Warren newspaperman who later became State Historian of Iowa.

⁵Arthur C. Parker, "Notes on the Ancestry of Cornplanter," *Researches and Transactions of the New York State Archeological Association* (Rochester, N. Y., 1927), 2-4.

planter was among the Indian leaders made a captain by the British.⁶

By 1779, the Seneca found they had guessed wrong in siding with the British. General Sullivan in New York State and Colonel Daniel Brodhead in western Pennsylvania had burned their crops and towns, defeated them in battle, and made life extremely difficult.⁷ It must be remembered that west of the Alleghenies the Revolution was chiefly an Indian fight, with the Mohawk, Joseph Brant, serving the British interests among the tribes. When peace came in 1782, these western Indians had trouble believing the British had been defeated, for the Americans were still holed up in Fort Pitt and did not act like victors.

About this time, Cornplanter moved to the upper Allegheny River region and became the spokesman for the Seneca located there. His position of leadership, though it was several times taken away from him for short periods, when he did not follow the wishes of his people, was solidly based. For one thing, his uncle was Kiasutha, who had been a brilliant leader of the western New York Seneca, and for another, his mother and wife both came from prominent Seneca families. More important, Cornplanter had shown his prowess in battle; his diplomatic skill and his ability to speak for his people were demonstrated at Oswego and Fort Stanwix.

The Americans, recognizing his ability, supported Cornplanter and relied on his influence. They used his services often. In 1784 Joseph Brant's British leanings were increasingly unpopular, and he did not attend the meetings at Fort Stanwix. His place was taken by two others, a Mohawk chieftain and Cornplanter of the Seneca. Cornplanter's determination to live at peace with the Americans seemed to be gaining favor.⁸

Cornplanter was called on to aid Pennsylvania at the treaty of Fort Harmar (Marietta, Ohio) in 1789. At this assembly Pennsylvania materially bettered its title to Indian lands included in

⁶ The situation in which the Genesee-Allegheny Seneca nation found itself is explained in Merle H. Deardorff's "The Religion of Handsome Lake: Its Origin and Developments," *Bureau of American Ethnology*, Bulletin 149 (Washington, 1951), 82-83.

⁷ Sullivan left Easton on June 18, 1779, with 2,500 men and on August 22, some 1,500 additional troops under General James Clinton joined him. Brodhead left Fort Pitt August 11, 1779, with 600 regulars, volunteers, and a few Delaware warriors.

⁸ Merle H. Deardorff, "The Cornplanter Indians," *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends* (Philadelphia, 1951), 170-171.

the now famous Erie Triangle area. Following the treaty, one of the commissioners, General Richard Butler, wrote President Mifflin of the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council suggesting a gift of land to the Seneca chief for past services and "to fix his attachment to the State."⁹ On January 22, 1791, Mifflin, who had now become governor, recommended that a land gift be made by the new legislature.¹⁰ In place of land within the Erie Triangle, however, Cornplanter requested three separate tracts elsewhere, and an act granting this request was passed January 29 and approved three days later. A survey of the tracts was ordered two days after that.

As finally surveyed, one tract called "Richland," near the present site of West Hickory, in Forest County, was promptly sold by the chief to his good friend General John Wilkins, Jr. Another, the "Gift" tract, was the site of the present Oil City and included a famous oil spring much used by the Indians. This was sold in 1818, and it is said Cornplanter received worthless money and notes as payment, but neither he nor his heirs ever succeeded in recovering the land or securing suitable payment. The third tract, called "Planter's Field," comprised six hundred acres on the west side of the Allegheny River, beginning just south of the New York State line. It included Jenuch-Shadega, the main town of Cornplanter and his people, and two river islands named "Donation" and "Liberality."¹¹

These lands were given Cornplanter in fee, and the land is still owned by his heirs. It is tax exempt, but it is not an ordinary reservation, and the national government has no special jurisdiction over it.¹² The fact that Cornplanter personally owned the land made it a natural haven for many Indians who were fearful of the gradual but steady encroachment upon their lands by the white settlers.

⁹ General Butler's letter to Mifflin can be found in Isaac B. Brown's "Early Footprints of Developments and Improvements in Northwestern Pennsylvania," *Extracts from Part One, Annual Report of the Department of Internal Affairs for 1904* (Harrisburg, 1905), 37.

¹⁰ *Pennsylvania Archives*, First Ser., XII, Appendix, 85.

¹¹ Merle H. Deardorff, "The Cornplanter Grant in Warren County," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (March, 1941), 7-9.

¹² Recently, serious consideration has been given to the construction of a flood control dam across the Allegheny River at Kinzua, Pa., which would flood the Grant lands. Apparently these lands could be acquired if Pennsylvania, by legislation, authorized the purchase in fee of the title to the affected area. See *Cherokee Nation v. Kansas Railway Co.* (135 U. S. 641), 656.

Though he never wrote or spoke English, and seemingly did not understand it, Cornplanter spent much of the winter of 1790 in Philadelphia where he became quite friendly with certain Quakers.¹³ During a meeting at Canandaigua, N. Y., in 1794, some Quakers again saw Cornplanter and not long after, in January, 1796, they sent him a letter offering their services to his people, which Cornplanter accepted. Thus it came about that in May, 1798, five Quakers arrived at Cornplanter's town. The two older and more experienced men were John Pierce and Joshua Sharples; the younger men were Halliday Jackson, Henry Simmons, Jr., and Joel Swayne. They had been sent out by the Indian Committee of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends. This Committee had been founded in 1795 to aid the Six Nations. Simmons elected to remain with Cornplanter, while the other young men went into New York state, and the older men returned to their homes.¹⁴ Two days after the Quakers arrived, Cornplanter addressed them, saying in effect, "Brothers, if your young men stay here, we want them to learn our children to read and write."¹⁵

On November 23, 1798, the first school opened on the Grant with classes held in Cornplanter's home, and with adults as well as children in attendance.¹⁶ The same year a small schoolhouse was built nearby and the teacher soon found that schooling depended on the weather, for the poorer the weather the larger was the attendance. This has always held true for all schools on the Grant. Between 1801 and 1815, there is no record of any school at all, the chief reason being that Cornplanter had ordered all Indians except his family and close relatives to move off his lands, which he hoped to lease to the whites. He was unsuccessful, and after a year or so the Indians started to drift back to Cornplanter's land and resumed residence there.

In March, 1815, the Presbyterian Western Missionary Society at Pittsburgh engaged Samuel Oldham to teach at Cornplanter's for \$250 a year. Oldham must have persuaded his employers that

¹³ Cornplanter and five other Indians arrived in Philadelphia October 22, 1790. Cornplanter had previously visited the city in 1786.

¹⁴ Simmons had spent a year with the Indians at Oneida, N. Y., so he was the best fitted of the three for such work.

¹⁵ Joshua Sharples, "Extracts from His Diary—A Visit to Cornplanter in 1798," readily available in Arch Bristow's *Old Time Tales of Warren County* (Meadville, Pa., 1932), 378-379.

¹⁶ Anthony F. C. Wallace (Ed.), "Halliday Jackson's Journal to the Seneca Indians, 1798-1800," *Pennsylvania History*, XIX, No. 2 (April 1952), 141.

the work was difficult and yet worthwhile, for on July 3, 1816, his salary was increased to \$500, a substantial increase for those days. Mrs. Oldham was encouraged to teach Indian girls the domestic arts, for which she also received compensation. Late in April, 1818, both the Oldhams were employed for another year, but in September of the same year, Oldham wrote to Pittsburgh of the "... unpleasant circumstances in relation to ye school at Corn Planters Town." Rev. Michael Law was dispatched to visit the Grant and report on the trouble, and while his report is not known to exist today, it is certain that the school was closed down by October 10.¹⁷

It was about this time that Cornplanter, angry at the whites because of their land-grabbing policies, turned against the Americans. Not only did he destroy his uniforms, medals, and all other gifts received from friends like George Washington and Thomas Mifflin, but he even took another name for a while. Doubtless it was during this period of turmoil that he caused the school to close.

Early in 1827, Timothy Alden, founder and first president of Allegheny College at Meadville, visited the Cornplanter people and with sorrow notified his friends that the chief had now altered his earlier views, and felt that the Christian religion was not suited to his people and that education for youth was a waste of effort. Alden was convinced that Cornplanter was temporarily deranged.¹⁸

A change came, however, in the fall of 1835, when two Friends visited the Allegheny River Indians. Heavy flood rains of October 18-20, they reported, had ruined two-thirds of the crops and the people were in desperate need. The Quakers spent a thousand dollars to buy food to assist them in this emergency. They also reported that the Indians "... were unanimous to have their children instructed" and hoped that the Friends would supply a teacher.¹⁹ Cornplanter's influence was fading at this time and he died the following year.

For a short time in 1837, twenty-five to thirty people attended a school on the Grant, but conditions were unstable and the

¹⁷ Edwin I. George, unpublished thesis, "Transcription of the Original Records of the Western Missionary Society" (Pittsburgh, 1936). The original record is owned by the Western Theological Seminary at Pittsburgh.

¹⁸ Timothy Alden, *An Account of Sundry Missions performed among the Senecas and Munsees* (New York, 1827), 138-144.

¹⁹ "Report of the Committee to Promote the Gradual Civilization of the Indian Natives," *The Friend*, Vol. IX, No. 35, 277.

Quakers felt compelled to close it. It remained closed till 1857. The Reverend Lewis L. Spencer, a Methodist minister at Columbus, was elected superintendent of schools in Warren County during 1855. The next year, while traveling from Kinzua to Corydon, he heard laughter and saw Indian children playing along the river bank. Determined that they should have the advantages of an elementary education, he energetically set to work to provide it. First, he persuaded the Honorable Daniel Lott of Warren, a member of the state legislature, who had long been interested in the Cornplanters, to introduce and have passed a bill appropriating \$100 yearly for the operation of an Indian school.²⁰ Next, through Marsh Pierce of the Seneca, a grant of \$200 was voted by the Indians for the erection of a school building, and while only \$175 of this sum was ever collected, the building was nevertheless speedily constructed and opened in September of 1857.²¹

The first teacher in the State School was Miss Juliet Leadeth Tome, who was eighteen years old when she went to the Grant school. She boarded with the Marsh Pierce family and received sixteen dollars a month for her work. Able and willing, she learned much of the Seneca tongue and proved to be a good choice for the position. When Rev. Mr. Spencer made his first report to the State in December, 1857, he wrote in part:

The children have made better progress than is usually witnessed among the whites of the same age. I know of but one hindrance now to their becoming intelligent, industrious and happy. There are several *things* in human form in the neighborhood who furnish them with *whiskey*, and who are defiant of law, because no one is willing to incur the expense of prosecution.

There is a lively interest in favor of the school among the whites in the vicinity, and we know of nothing to hinder the triumph of the enterprise. At the time of my last visit, I found the Indian children in extreme want of clothing, but am happy to state that upon presenting the matter to several ladies in Warren they promptly furnished of "second-hand" garments enough to supply their present necessities.²²

²⁰ Act No. 429. Pennsylvania Pamphlet Law, 1856, 410.

²¹ N. R. Thomson, "Warren County Schools," *Historical Atlas of Warren County* (Washington, Pa., 1878), 10.

²² *Report of the Superintendent of Common Schools 1857* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1858), 246.

Long before 1890, when the federal Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported that Indian teaching was particularly arduous, teachers on the Cornplanter Grant had found they were far removed from the comforts of home. As this report indicated, "the training of Indian pupils devolves almost wholly upon the teachers, whose work is not supplemented and reinforced by the family, the church, and society."²³



BRICK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Built 1903, on the Cornplanter Indian Grant

Over the years, Pennsylvania's Legislature has passed the laws necessary to keep the school operating, increasing funds from time to time to meet advancing costs. By 1903, the old wooden schoolhouse had to be replaced, and the present brick school was constructed. The legislature appropriated up to \$3,000 for the work.²⁴ Governor Pennypacker appointed three Commissioners to supervise the building of the new school; these men were O. J. Gunning, Warren County superintendent of schools, W. L. Mac-

²³ General T. J. Morgan, *Indian Education*, Bulletin 1, Bureau of Education (Washington, 1890), 19.

²⁴ Act No. 130, P. L. 1903, 169.

Gowan of Warren, and Homer Ensign of Corydon. The actual construction was done by George Lott of Warren.²⁵ The brick was shipped into Corydon by rail and then transported across the river on sleds when the ice was thick. Even though the last load of bricks broke through the thinning ice, the building was finished and presented to the Indians on December 17, 1903.

Directed by their teacher, the Indian children presented a program, in the course of which State Superintendent N. C. Schaeffer spoke for the Commonwealth, and Alfred Halftown responded for the Cornplanters. At this time, the Cornplanter Memorial Library of more than four hundred books was donated to the school.²⁶ To make the year even more outstanding, the Cornplanter School, under the direction of Miss Estella Noyes, was awarded a bronze medal for excellence in an educational display submitted to the exposition at St. Louis.²⁷ It is disappointing to report that through the years only two Indians have taught at the school: Bennie Huff, in 1889-1890, and Mrs. Abbie Parker, in 1891-1892.²⁸

Perhaps the widest publicity the Grant and its school ever received was when Pennsylvania's Governor Arthur H. James was adopted into the Seneca tribe during the summer of 1948. At this time eleven Indian pupils, under Miss Lucia Browne, offered a program and Dr. S. K. Stevens, State Historian, presented to the school a modern copy of Bartoli's famous portrait of Chief Cornplanter.²⁹ Governor James (O-Dahn-Goht) and his entourage brought an influx of other visitors and tourists to the Grant. But today, ten years afterwards, directions to it are not marked, and the road leading into the Grant is so poor that many would-be callers turn back after a hasty glance.

The last teacher, Miss Browne, remained at the school longer than any of the others; she started there in 1912-13, and returned in 1930 to stay until the closing in 1953. At times she had up to forty pupils. Her grandmother had been the first teacher in the brick school, and Miss Browne was certainly the last, for now there are no children on the Grant.

²⁵ Warren (Pa.) *Mirror*, May 27, 1903.

²⁶ H. L. Blair, *History of Education in Pennsylvania with special emphasis on Warren County* (Warren, Pa., 1954), 38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁸ Interview with Miss Lucia E. Browne, Corydon, Pa., August 6, 1954.

²⁹ Cornplanter Documents, *Warren County Historical Transcripts*, in Warren Public Library, Vol. I, 11.

Two of Miss Browne's recent pupils have finished at Warren High School, making a daily round-trip of forty miles to attend. These boys, Ronald and Mervin Bowen, are sons of Elwood and Ella (Redeye) Bowen, descendants of Cornplanter. In manner they are reserved, possessing the dignity that only Indians can maintain. Well liked by their fellow students, they are good workers at school. Ronald, a football player who was also interested in wrestling and track, had difficulty in getting home evenings after school. He had to "hitch" a ride to Kinzua or Sugar Run, walk four miles along the east bank of the Allegheny River to where he had a boat chained, and then row across to his home on the Grant.³⁰ Warren friends helped him whenever possible.

Now the school windows and doors have been boarded up, Cornplanter's portrait has been removed to the office of the county superintendent for safe-keeping, and the original bell from the building has been donated to the Warren County Historical Society. So ends a century and a half of Indian education on the Cornplanter Grant.

³⁰ Warren (Pa.) *Times-Mirror*, December 13, 1954.