JOHN HECKEWELDER

An unsigned portrait, painted for Peter Stephen Du Ponceau, President of the American Philosophical Society, 1828-1844.
ANY teacher of Pennsylvania history who attempts to give his students an authentic picture of our Indians as they were in the eighteenth century, will find himself indebted, directly or indirectly, to the work of two Moravian missionaries, David Zeisberger and John Heckewelder. Zeisberger was the better linguist and in some ways the more careful scholar. He has for that reason received the greater share of critical attention. But the warm-hearted Heckewelder had qualities that made him the more understanding and reliable student of Indian character. He was a sympathetic observer; that is to say, he was quick to catch the mind of the people he was with, to understand why they thought and behaved as they did. He is able, therefore, to tell us more about the Indians as persons: their ambitions and prejudices, their fears and frustrations, their capacity for friendship, the things that stirred their loyalty or their aversion. He not only lived with these people, he thought with them, shared their political hopes and some of their prejudices, and so won their confidence and affection. The knowledge thus acquired he set down in a body of writings which constitutes one of the best sources available for the study of Indians as they were one hundred and fifty or two hundred years ago.

To estimate the value of his work, we must consider first of all his preparation for it and the very remarkable opportunities he had to observe the Indians under all conditions. Then we may go on to consider what in fine he produced.

He was born at Bedford, England, in 1743, the son of German-speaking refugees (for conscience' sake) from Moravia, a district

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which was then attached to Bohemia and is now a province of Czechoslovakia. His parents were among the few surviving members of the *Unitas Fratrum* or United Brethren, a Protestant church founded in eastern Bohemia about 1457—not to be confused (as it has been in the *Encyclopedia of American History*) with the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, which originated in Pennsylvania during the latter part of the eighteenth century.

The *Unitas Fratrum*, after near annihilation in the religious wars of the seventeenth century, was revived in 1722 by Count Zinzendorf, on whose estate in Saxony members of the Unity from Moravia were given a refuge. When they built themselves a village there, which they named Herrnhut, they became popularly known as Herrnhuters or Moravians. The latter name has survived.

The greatest glory of the Renewed Moravian Church has been its foreign missions, undertaken in the spirit of the Good Samaritan among earth’s crushed, dispossessed, or forgotten peoples. In the year 1740, partly in response to a cry of distress uttered by an Indian prophet and reported by Pennsylvania’s Conrad Weiser, they established a mission among the Mahicans at Shekomeka on New York’s Connecticut border. The Indians were grateful and responsive; but this being a time on the border when scores were still unsettled between England and France, their English neighbors, suspicious of strangers, drove them away. They came with their converts to Pennsylvania, where they hoped the tolerant spirit of the Penns would give them safety. On the banks of the Lehigh, where Lehighton and Weissport are today, they built a model mission town: church, school, and houses (all built of logs), with gardens, farms, and orchards. There they taught reading and writing and such trades as the Indians would need to hold their own in the white man’s civilization that was soon to engulf them. At this town Delaware Indians joined the Mahicans and soon so outnumbered them that we usually think of this as a distinctively Delaware mission.

During John Heckewelder’s school days in England he had been inspired with the ambition to be a missionary among the North American Indians. At the age of eleven he had a chance to prepare for such a career when his parents brought him to this continent. From New York, where he landed, his parents went on to their chosen mission field in the West Indies, while the boy
traveled on foot (in company with Bishop David Nitschmann, who carried him on his back across the streams) to Bethlehem, where he continued his education. We may be sure he had a good one, as far as it went, for the Moravians had inherited a great educational tradition from their founders, who were followers of John Huss, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Prague. John Amos Comenius, who is often spoken of as the father of modern education, was a bishop of their church who had carried them through some of their darkest days in the seventeenth century.

When John Heckewelder came to Bethlehem, there were six young Indians living in residence, and plenty of other Indians camping in the vicinity. The sight of them confirmed his desire to devote his life to work among them. In 1762, at the age of nineteen, he was given his first chance to enter active mission work. In company with the experienced Christian Frederick Post, he traveled to the Indian town of Tuscarawas, thirty miles south of present Akron, Ohio. Here he found Shingas "the Terrible" (who had devastated much of central Pennsylvania during the French and Indian War), his brother King Beaver, and the great Munsee Delaware warrior, Captain Pipe, who was to play a violent part in the Revolutionary War. The Indians now living in this area were Delaware émigrés from Pennsylvania. Having lost their lands, first on the Delaware River, and later on the Susquehanna, they had relocated themselves in the Ohio country where, under the able leadership of Chief Netawatwees or Newcomer (after whom the modern city of Newcomerstown was named), they were attempting a national renaissance and making an astonishing success of it.

Heckewelder did not know, when he arrived, that in a few months Pontiac's War would break out. He did not know that already secret preparations were underway in the woods for pushing the English back across the Allegheny Mountains. He was therefore surprised at the coolness with which his friendly advances were received. When Frederick Post went away on a diplomatic errand, Heckewelder was left to face a darkening situation alone. "Black clouds were rising," as the Indian phrase ran. What bothered Heckewelder most was the growing severity of Shingas, a man whom he had come to admire both for his
renown as a warrior—the greatest, he tells us, the Delawares had ever produced—and for his kindness to the captive white boys whom he had taken into his family and now treated as if they were his own sons. He did not wish to see young Heckewelder killed, yet to warn him of his danger would risk disclosing Indian war plans. It would appear that he tried to get out of this difficulty by putting on a show of unkindness, hoping thus to drive the boy away. But Heckewelder was stubborn, and though he could be hurt he was not easily frightened. In the end the Beaver told him openly that his life was in danger; and some friendly English traders, who recognized the signs, put him on a horse and packed him off for Bethlehem. Most of these same traders lost their lives when war broke out a few weeks later.

For the next ten years Heckewelder was not permanently attached to any mission, but he continued to see the Indians around Bethlehem. At Wechquetank, a few miles to the north, he helped to save a body of Christian Indians from a white mob which was preparing to give these defenseless people the same treatment (with axe and scalping knife) the Paxton Boys succeeded in giving the friendly inhabitants of Conestoga during the ensuing Christmas season.

In 1772 the way opened for him again into the Indian country. He went with David Zeisberger to open a great new mission in the west. Chief Netawatwees had invited the Moravians to bring their Indian converts to the Tuscarawas and there establish model towns where his people could see for themselves what the Christians had to offer as a solution of the race problem. His spies had informed him that the Moravians were helping the Indians without asking them to give up their own best traditions or trying to turn them into white men. Netawatwees assigned the mission a tract some thirty miles long on the Tuscarawas Branch of the Muskingum River, and there the great experiment in race relations was launched: an attempt to show that, under Christian auspices, a way could be found for the cooperation of the two races.

At Gnadenhütten and other mission villages on the Tuscarawas River, Heckewelder spent the next eight years, learning the language and observing not only the Christian converts but also their relatives in nearby Indian towns. Bishop Ettwein, directing the work from Bethlehem, encouraged the missionaries to study
the Indians as well as teach and convert them. And the non-Christian Indians—the Delawares, Shawnees, Wyandots, and Senecas in these parts—studied the Moravians, one of whose principles was to look on Indians as really their brothers and help them whether or not they came seeking conversion.¹

When the Revolutionary War broke out, the mission on the Tuscarawas found itself in difficulties. Moravian sympathies were wholly with the Americans. At the same time the Christian Indians were afraid to come under the shelter of the Americans at Pittsburgh, because they remembered what the Paxton Boys, in defiance of government, had done at Conestoga. They declined similar invitations from the British, who wanted them nearer Detroit. They preferred to remain in their villages on the Tuscarawas. (See illustration on p. 267.)

They were soon in trouble. Indian war parties from Sandusky and Detroit passed through the mission settlements demanding food. To refuse would have been to defy Indian convention and to bring upon themselves reprisals, the destruction of crops and cattle. They had to comply. But to compensate for this they sent runners to Pittsburgh with information about the numbers and destination of raiding parties. In this manner they saved many lives, as the commanders at Pittsburgh later testified. All this while Heckewelder was observing the Indians, Christian and non-Christian, as they appeared when subjected to various kinds of strain and provocation.

Captain Pipe, leader of that part of the Delaware nation which opposed the Americans, had his spies everywhere and knew what the Moravians were doing. In consultation with his British allies he laid plans to put a stop to it. So it was that on September 3, 1781, Captain Pipe, in company with the Wyandot Half King, descended on the mission village of Gnadenhütten with a large body of Delaware, Wyandot, Mingo, and Ottawa warriors, took the missionaries prisoner, and removed them with all their Indian charges to Upper Sandusky. There they were left to endure a hungry winter—it was too late when they arrived to plant anything. Heckewelder had a chance to see how the Indians took the threat of starvation.

In a dramatic scene at Detroit, Heckewelder and his fellow missionaries were tried by the British for treason. They had given information to the enemy. Captain Pipe, who was to present the charges, came into town with some of his warriors shouting the “death cry.” Into the courtroom the Indians brought poles with scalps hanging from them, a reminder that this affair was not boys’ play. But when Pipe was called on to present his charges, in a surprising reversal he turned the chivalrous side of his nature to the fore and cleared the prisoners of blame. “These are good men,” he said in effect. “I should not like to see harm come to them.” Whereupon the British commandant, De Peyster, released them. He gave them horses for the return to Upper Sandusky, and permission to go anywhere they liked—back to their towns on the Tuscarawas if they wished to.

When Heckewelder returned to Captives Town, as their camp at Upper Sandusky came to be called, he shared the Indians’ privations. He did not go with the large detachment that early in March took the trail back to the Tuscarawas to see what they could glean from their deserted cornfields. He stayed with the main body in Captives Town. He was there when from the outskirts of the town, the “alarm cry” was heard and the inhabitants gathered to hear a runner present first news of the disaster that had befallen those who had gone back to Gnadenhütten. A party of American militia had found and killed ninety of these defenseless people, most of them women and children. Two boys escaped. One had been scalped and left for dead. The other had been concealed under a floorboard in one of the two small houses into which these people had been forced to spend the night before their murder.

In the grief that followed this news, Heckewelder had opportunity to learn how much family meant to the Indians: not the complexities of clan and lineage relationships (that was something Heckewelder never fully understood), but the intense love and loyalty that drew kin together and made the Freundschaft the most binding power in Delaware society.

Some of the Christian Indians left the mission. Anton, for instance, hitherto a devout member of the Indian congregation, whose wife, son, and two daughters had been killed at Gnadenhütten, went to war and took his revenge. Most of the converts
remained with the Brethren, but they were never again at ease. They felt themselves perpetually in danger from both white men and men of their own race. The murder of Indian women and children by nominally Christian whites encouraged Indian nativists like Tecumseh (who, at the time of the massacre, was a boy in a nearby Shawnee town) to reach the conclusion that the only good Christian was a dead one, be he white or red. In 1806 Tecumseh's brother, the Shawnee Prophet, captured Joshua, the Moravian Indian choir leader, and burned him at the stake.

You can see from all this what wide opportunities Heckewelder had to know his Indians. He was with them in work and play, in triumph and disaster. He was not, it is true, an eyewitness of the massacre at Gnadenhütten nor of the murder of Joshua, but he was close to those affected by these happenings. He observed and understood their reactions. If ever a man was equipped by experience to know the Indian as a living person, it was John Heckewelder.

What we now have to consider is how well he used his opportunities. What kind of information did he give us about the Indians?

Let us note to begin with that he chose a particular method of inquiry and used it discriminately. He avoided the hectoring condescension which too many white men ignorantly adopted with Indians. Instead, he met them on the level of normal courtesy, and they responded by opening their hearts to him. He got his best information by not pressing too hard for it. Consider what he wrote to Caspar Wistar, President of the American Philosophical Society in 1817:

\[\text{The sure way to obtain correct ideas, and a true knowledge of the characters, customs, manners, \\&c., of the Indians, and to learn their history, is to dwell among them for some time, and having acquired their language, the information wished for will be obtained in the common way; that is, by paying attention to their discourses with each other on different subjects, and occasionally asking them questions. . . .}^2\]

\[^2\text{An Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations . . . (Philadelphia, 1876; reprinted by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania from the edition of 1819), xvii.}\]
So we see that Heckewelder understood his objective and the way to reach it. What, then, did he accomplish? He wrote freely in two languages, German and English, and in both these tongues (though chiefly in German) he left letters, mission diaries, and travel journals recording his immediate experiences among the Indians. Toward the end of his life, he wrote reminiscences (refreshed sometimes by notes made at the time of the events described) and published them in two good-sized books in English. The first was the *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States* (Philadelphia, 1819). If we skip the first five chapters in this book, which purport to trace Delaware and Iroquois history, but which actually are a mere rehash of contemporary Delaware folklore and rationalizing, we shall find it to contain his maturest work. He illuminates Delaware customs and beliefs by illustrations drawn directly from his own vast store of experience. The second book was *A Narrative of the Mission of the United Brethren among the Delaware and Mohegan Indians*. In this, history is presented at first hand, for he was himself one of the main participants in events described. The typical Moravian spirit—a blend of adventurousness, common sense, and generous idealism—is seen on every page. The book contains the best picture we can find of Indian international politics in that area. Embassies are seen moving up and down through the woods between the Delawares, Wyandots, Six Nations, Nanticokes, Cherokees, and Wawiachtenos (or Weas), as when in 1773 reports were received that the Cherokees had declared war on the Weas and that the Delawares, as “grandfathers” to both nations, had been applied to as peacemakers.*

Many of Heckewelder’s letters have been preserved, a good number of them in the Archives of the Moravian Church here in Bethlehem, some in the American Philosophical Society, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Harvard College Library, the Newberry Library, the Indiana State Historical Society, and other public and private libraries. A set of letters discussing Indian languages, exchanged with Peter Du Ponceau of the American Philosophical Society, has been printed as Part II of the *History, Manners, and Customs*.

*Narrative, 128.
The mission diaries, as would be expected, concern themselves for the most part with the internal affairs of the mission: sermons, the visits of other missionaries, the personal problems of Indian parishioners. The intensity of the Indians’ concern with their spiritual difficulties is everywhere apparent. The immensity of the Christian conception seized their minds in a way most sophisticated white men could not understand. Here and there the diaries contain instances of Indian customs or beliefs that had surprised the earnest missionary: as when, for instance, a new convert left the mission because he had had a dream in which his guardian spirit appeared and forbade him to be a Christian. The man’s belief in the guardian spirit whom he had won for himself through the fastings and other ordeals of Youth’s Vigil, and his belief also in the validity of what he heard in dreams, were so compelling that he returned to the faith of his fathers.8

Heckewelder’s travel journals are in a class by themselves. He traveled on foot, on horseback, by canoe or flatboat, more than twenty-six thousand miles through the woods, visiting Delaware, Mahican, Shawnee, Wyandot, and Iroquois towns, everywhere observing intelligently what came before his eyes. He was an excellent reporter. It is the very fact that in these travel journals he limited himself to reporting that makes them now so valuable. He was not tempted in writing them to speculate on things beyond his knowledge. Ten of his travel journals have been preserved, most of them in his own handwriting. Copies of all but two of them are found in the Indian Department of the Moravian Archives.

The first of these journals is unfortunately known to us only in a printed version, and that one incomplete. It is the narrative of his journey to the Indian town of Tuscarawas, in what is now Ohio, on the eve of Pontiac’s war. We find it in Edward Rondthaler’s Life of John Heckewelder, published at Philadelphia in 1847. The journal as it is printed does not cover all the notes he made while on that journey. Years later, “from minutes which I took at the time,” as he tells us, he described in considerable detail the funeral at Tuscarawas of Shingas’s wife, and in so doing illuminated many sides of Delaware life and character, such

8 Salem Diary, January 22, 1781: B 148, F 1, Archives of the Moravian Church, Bethlehem, Pa.
as their grief (both in its instinctive expression and in its ritualized form) and their preparation of the soul for its journey to another world.

His journal describing the trip he made with twenty-two canoe loads of Indians, from Peace Village (Friedensstadt) on the Beaver River to Schönbrunn on the Tuscarawas River in 1773,\(^4\) is full of good things. In it he tells of his visit to Chief Netawatwees and introduces us to the sweat lodge into which the Indian travelers retired “to sweat out their fatigue.” On this trip he first met the Indian, Killbuck—a name that probably suggested to Fenimore Cooper the name “Deerslayer”; for Cooper, who did not know Indians at first hand, got much of his material from John Heckewelder’s books.\(^5\)

A manuscript entitled “Captivity and Murder” describes Heckewelder’s experiences as a prisoner in Indian hands. It has never appeared in printed collections of “Indian Captivities,” but as far as I know them it is the best of the lot. In it he dwells at some length on the first night of his captivity, when amusement and terror took hold of him by turns: amusement when he saw an Ottawa warrior dressed in stolen clothes parading about camp on horseback with a white nightcap on his head; terror when the “scalp halloo” was shouted over him, and again when, having seen a band of warriors go off in search of his wife and baby daughter, he heard the “death cry” shouted as the Indians came back. But it turned out all right. He learned further that night that the death cry sometimes betokened, as it did in this case, no more than that prisoners had been secured. Mrs. Heckewelder and the baby in the cradle had not been disturbed. The warriors, satisfied with having found them, left them in the care of some Moravian Indian women who promised to bring them in safely the next morning.\(^6\)

The journal describing his return to Bethlehem with his wife and daughter in 1786 contains, among other things, a curious account of Indian medical practice. An Indian in the party was

\(^4\)“Br. John Heckewelder Bericht von ihrer Reise zu Wasser von Langundoutenwunch nach Welhik Thuppeek im April 1773.”


bitten by a spider. In a few minutes, Heckewelder tells us, his eyes were swollen shut, his body was covered with red spots, and his heart felt as though it were pressed under a heavy weight. He was sure he was dying. Another Indian who had had experience with such cases made the sick man drink a concoction of powder, tobacco, and rotten leaves, which produced a desired effect. A bout of vomiting got rid of the poison, and in an hour the man was able to mount his horse and go on with the party.7

On the same journey, at the Salt Spring (Niles, Ohio) they saw the remains of a white man who had been murdered by Indians. The Delawares in Heckewelder's party examined the footprints and other evidence like so many Sherlock Holmeses, and gave Heckewelder a full account of what must have happened. A few nights later near Pittsburgh the Heckewelders spent sleepless hours in the public room of an inn. The nightmarish whirl of drunken white men, as he describes the scene, fighting, clawing, breaking heads and tearing bodies, no doubt made the Gnadenhütten massacre seem less incomprehensible to him.

The journal of his trip in 1788 down the Ohio from Pittsburgh to Fort Harmar contains matter of another kind. There is much in it about the Indians, but what interests us more is the picture it gives of the early rush of settlers into the West. He watched the flatboats going down the river carrying people and cattle for new homes in the wilderness, and saw Daniel Boone coming up the Ohio from Kentucky with a cargo of ginseng for the foreign market.8

Four years later, as he shows in the journal of a journey with the United States Commissioners to treat with the Indians at Vincennes, he found the wilderness melting and little towns springing up all along the Ohio. At Vincennes, unhappily, he was ill and did not see much of the Indians, though he gives a dramatic description of the dance that marked the end of the treaty.9 He traveled back with sixteen chiefs and their wives bound for sightseeing in the white man's cities of the East. The chiefs were dignified men who sat quietly smoking their pipes while white soldiers labored at the paddles. There was soon trouble. The

7 Ibid., 213-214.
8 Ibid., 227.
9 Ibid., 283.
white soldiers, finding the canoes so heavily laden that they shipped water, blamed the Indians and swore at them. There was talk of going back. But Heckewelder hit on a device to lighten the canoes without offending their Wea guests. He knew that all Indians, whatever their rank, were lovers of sport. A few white men were therefore sent ashore to start a hunt. When the guns began popping (after wildcat and bear), the chiefs jumped overboard and swam ashore to join the fun. For the rest of the journey the canoes rode lightly, and the danger of an ugly "international incident" was avoided.10

In some ways the cream of Heckewelder's journeys was that of 1793, when he accompanied the United States commissioners to a meeting with Indians at Detroit. He conveys the feeling of apprehension that then lay like a cloud over the frontier. A confederation of western Indians, debating issues of peace and war, was in conference on the Maumee River. Anthony Wayne was maneuvering with his army a few miles away. The issues of the cold war—involving the western confederates, the Iroquois, Great Britain, and the United States—are presented through the medium of interviews with individual Indians or pronouncements made by deputations from the various parties concerned. Of the many journals written about that episode, Heckewelder's is the fullest and best.11

All in all, Heckewelder provides a body of good, nourishing fare for anyone who wants to meet our early Indians and understand them. He reports on all manner of particulars: Indian pictographs on trees and rocks; taboos against eating groundhog or wildcat and against killing "Grandfather Rattlesnake"; Indian foods and their preparation, with special notes on Delaware cooking, which he found fastidious and tasty. He tells what he saw of Indian dress and ornament, preparations for war, the scalp lock and the eagle plume, the use of wampum for national archives, herb doctors, conjurors, night walkers, and rain makers. He discusses their religion and mythology, and explains what is meant by "the World on the Turtle's back."

Best of all is the impression he leaves of Indian personality. He presents us with no stereotypes, no fictionalized "noble savages"

10 Ibid., 286.
11 Ibid., 294-333.
like Cooper’s Delawares, no savage fiends like the Iroquois of Francis Parkman (the Iroquois were Parkman’s Achilles heel). Heckewelder’s Indians are real people, with the stamp of their culture and their own time upon them. They are full of paradoxes such as one would expect to find in a people during a period of transition. The Indians he knew were living in two worlds, the old and the new. They clung to their old traditions the more jealously since they were faced with the danger of losing them. At the same time they were eager to acquire new habits of mind to enable them to survive in the white man’s world that was closing in upon them.

Heckewelder had decided views on one controversial question of his day: was the Indian (to use the white man’s presumptuous word) “civilizable”? Heckewelder believed that the Indians, although they had their own ideas about some things (e.g., the Earth, whom they regarded as their Mother; “you can no more sell land than sell your own mother,” they said), were nevertheless essentially the same as white men. They were moved by the same passions and controlled by the same general principles of right and wrong. Civilizable? The Moravian mission towns had given the answer.

“If it cannot be admitted,” wrote Heckewelder in an address prepared for presentation to the President of the United States, “that a people leading such a life as these Christian Indians . . . had a claim to the word . . . civilization, then I am at a loss for a name that would suit them better. True, they had no courts of judicature among them, no magistrate appointed—but there was no necessity for that in a community in which no one disorderly person was permitted to dwell. Neither could a magistrate, if even one had been placed among them, have lived by the fees of his office, as no crimes were committed that would have come under his jurisdiction.12

After Heckewelder’s death, his views on the American Indian became for a time unpopular. White men desiring to possess themselves of Indian lands (Colonel David Williamson, responsible for the massacre at Gnadenhütten, told Heckewelder after-

12 “Sketch of a report to be laid before the President of the United States, by the President & Directors of the Society for propagating the Gospel among the Heathen”: B 215, F 2, Archives of the Moravian Church.
wards that the lands thereabouts were too good for Indians) called for arguments to justify the native owners' expulsion. Governor Lewis Cass, who was "on the political make," proclaimed the doctrine that the Indian was capable of nothing but hunting and war. Cass became the principal apologist for President Andrew Jackson's policy of Indian removal, and, as Secretary of War under Jackson, prosecuted the Seminole War and the Black Hawk War, neither of which we are very proud of today.

At the end of his History, Manners, and Customs, Part I, Heckewelder expressed the hope that "a wise and benevolent government" would find a way to live with the Indians in peace. In that case, said he, "we shall demonstrate the falsity of the prediction of the Indian prophets, who say: 'That when the whites shall have ceased killing the red men, and got all their lands from them, the great tortoise which bears this island upon his back, shall dive down into the deep and drown them all, as he once did before, a great many years ago; and that when he again rises, the Indians shall once more be put in possession of the whole country.'"

Governor Cass thought the Indians were a dying race. John Heckewelder thought they had it in them to survive. We know now that Heckewelder was right. Today the Indians' increasing numbers, their success in business, the professions, and the arts, and at the same time their tenacious guarding of something distinctive and precious in their own heritage, provide evidence that Indians are not only here to stay but also to make an important contribution to the rich complexities of America's culture. Whether the Indian today chooses to live on lands reserved to him by treaty, or prefers to join the rest of us in the world outside, he is accepted as an integral part of American society. We have reason to hope, therefore, that the prophets cited by Heckewelder may prove to have been wrong, and that the Great Tortoise may bear with us a little longer.

Wallace, Thirty Thousand Miles with John Heckewelder, 220.