The Nanticoke Indians in Early Pennsylvania History

There has long been a popular impression that American Indian tribes were established in permanent locations along the Atlantic seaboard during the period of English colonial settlement. Everyone knows that as the Europeans—particularly English, Dutch, Swedes and French—moved into new areas, they made various alliances with one another or with native groups and so from time to time controlled the balance of power within any given area. But that Indian tribes were also on the move, and also involved in changing international or intertribal relationships, is not so generally realized. Actually, the Indian nations were just as much a variable factor on the several frontiers as were the Europeans. One of the regions where these developments can best be observed is the Susquehanna Valley during the eighteenth century, since this was an area into which moved a number of Algonkian, Iroquoian and Siouan-speaking tribes to escape the pressure of whites settling along the Atlantic Slope. Such groups had not only to make their peace with the provincial authorities of Pennsylvania, but had also to adjust their relationships with one another and with the powerful Iroquois League of the Five Nations (Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca, Oneida and Cayuga) who lived to the north and who were their enemies of long standing. In fact, as we shall see, the Five Nations placed conquered tribes on specific lands in Pennsylvania and appointed an agent to watch over them.

One of the more interesting Indian groups, not native to the state of Pennsylvania who moved into Pennsylvania during the colonial period, were the Nanticoke—a people who have been only superficially treated by the historian. The group, or tribe as we might more properly term them, known as the Nanticoke Indians, lived at the beginning of the colonial era, and presumably in prehistoric times, along the Nanticoke River and its tributaries in Delaware and
the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where they were first observed by Captain John Smith in 1608. Other Eastern Shore Indian neighbors of the Nanticoke, e.g., the Choptank, Pocomoke, Assateague, Indian River Indians, Tockwhogh, Ozinies, and so on, were not before 1700 called Nanticoke by the whites or by themselves; nor were any of the Indians of the Western Shore of Maryland so termed.¹ However, before the next century had passed, all of the Eastern Shore Indians and the Conoy of the Western Shore were loosely to be called Nanticoke. This mode of reference became common after the tribe entered the pages of Pennsylvania history.

The year 1698 marked a turning point in Pennsylvania Indian history, and one that is significant in relation to the later white settlements in the commonwealth. At about that time the migrations of some Indian tribes from the South began. Hitherto the Susquehanna-Iroquois (called Susquehannock, White Minquas and lastly the Conestogas) who were not members of the Five Nations Confederacy, although linguistically of the same family, occupied their ancient home in the Susquehanna River Valley. It is true that some of the members of this once powerful tribe had been routed by incursions of the whites, and those remaining in the Susquehanna Valley were under the influence of their enemies, the Five Nation Iroquois, who lived north of them, and who had defeated them in a bloody war and since had held them in subjection. Both shores of the Delaware River, and Eastern Pennsylvania between that river and the Susquehanna, constituted the home of the Lenni Lenape (Delaware Indians) who had also fallen under the subjection of the Five Nations and been reduced to the disgraceful position of "women" by their conquerors. This meant that they could not go to war nor negotiate peace treaties.²

Beginning about 1690, the Shawnee, a southern tribe of Algonkian linguistic affiliation, started to move northward into Pennsylvania. In 1698 they brought sixty of their families to the Susquehanna to live, after first obtaining permission from the Susquehan-

¹A discussion of the geographical locations of the Eastern Shore tribes during the protohistoric period by the present author entitled, "Indian Tribes of the Delmarva Peninsula," is found in the Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of Delaware, III (1942), 25-36.

²The full significance of the subjugating and feminizing of the Delawares has been generally overlooked by the historian. The author's Ms., "The Delaware Indians As Women," which will be published in due time, treats of this little known phase of Indian history.
nock. The reason given for their exodus from the South was that they had been "rendered uneasy by their neighbors," a gross understatement, and the Pennsylvania authorities agreed to permit them to live within the province if the Susquehannock promised "to become answerable for their good behavior." The Susquehannock agreed, but since they were themselves under the domination of the Five Nations, the Shawnee also fell indirectly under Iroquois overlordship. Great numbers of Shawnee followed the first emigrés, but they did not find happiness in their new abode, and caused trouble for both Pennsylvania and Maryland authorities. Moreover, the Shawnee did not willingly accept the Five Nations overlordship, claiming that they had never been defeated by the latter. Finally, about 1728, to escape Iroquois pressure, the Shawnee departed from the Susquehanna region, and moved west to the Ohio River, where they put themselves under the protection of the French.

About 1700, while the Shawnee were still living on the Susquehanna, another group of Algonkian-speaking Indians from the Western Shore of Maryland called Ganawese (also Piscataway and Conoy) settled in Pennsylvania. They "had fled from Maryland having differed with the English there and were afraid to return." The Ganawese or Conoy were found in 1706 living on the Susquehanna with the Susquehannock and Shawnee, their principal settlement being "some miles above Conostogoe" (present Lancaster) at a town called Conojoholo, or Connejaghera, on the east side of the river near present Washington Borough. Later they founded Conoytown, at the mouth of Conoy Creek in Lancaster County, the site of the present Bainbridge. The Conoy, like the Delawares, had fallen under the dominion of the Five Nations and were forced to pay tribute to them and accept their overlordship.

While these Shawnee and Conoy migrations to the Susquehanna Valley were in progress, the Nanticoke Indians living on the Eastern Shore were having their own difficulties with the Maryland white settlers and with wandering Five Nations war parties who raided their villages. In 1693 the Nanticoke sent a belt of wampum to the

3 Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, VI, 725.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., I, 244. For a complete historical account of the Conoy see Wm. B. Marye, "Piscataway," Maryland Historical Magazine, XXX (1935), 183-240.
6 Ibid., I, 244-246.
Governor of Pennsylvania asking that he persuade the Seneca (a Five Nation affiliate) to do them "no harm in hunting as was done the previous summer." Other references, which need not now detain us, reveal that the Five Nations sent marauding parties into the Chesapeake Bay region to harass the natives on both shores, take prisoners, and otherwise force them to accept their domination.

In June, 1706, one of the Susquehannock chiefs brought a wampum belt to Philadelphia and laid it before the Governor. The belt, he said, had been delivered by "the Onondago, one of the Five Nations to the Nanticokes when they made the said Nanticokes tributaries." The Nanticoke, apprehensive of further attack from the Five Nations, had come up to the Susquehanna region with the belt. They wanted to show it to the Five Nations representatives who were shortly expected to come to receive the Nanticoke tribute, as evidence of their peaceful intentions. Thus, we find the Nanticoke under Iroquois influence prior to their appearance in Pennsylvania, a relationship that has not previously been uncovered by writers on this tribe.

The following year, the Nanticoke reported that they had been at peace with the Five Nations for twenty-seven years and were again on their way to pay tribute to the Onondaga and to ask that peace between them be continued. The nature of the tribute is difficult to reconcile with modern values; it consisted of nineteen belts of wampum and miscellaneous strings of shell beads. At this meeting, the Nanticoke representatives were said to be from the following Indian towns on the Eastern Shore: Matcheattouchousie, Natchcouchtin, Witichwuaom, Teaquois, Byengeahtein and Nataquois. The last village may be the same as the village Nautaquack, shown on John Smith's map and from which the name Nanticoke may possibly be corrupted. In passing it might be remarked that Nanticoke

7 Ibid., I, 372.
8 Ibid., I, 246.
9 Ibid., II, 286–387. The Nanticoke were recognized as being wealthy in terms of "roenoke" and "peake," the Indian bead money. Their homes were situated in an area where seashells were more readily accessible than among inland tribes.
10 Travels and Works of Captain John Smith, volumes 1 and 2, ed. by E. Arber, Bradley edition (Edinburg, 1910). Smith in 1608 recorded the names of five Nanticoke villages, Nause, Saropinagh, Arseek, Kuskarawacke and Nautaquack. However, there were other villages not known to him, for in 1696, the Nanticoke claimed to live in ten towns on the Nanticoke River. Maryland Archives, XX, 434.
is generally accepted as a derivation of the Algonkian word form "unectgo," meaning "tidewater people."

In 1722, the Nanticoke representatives again visited the Five Nations with their tribute, and in 1743, six of them appeared at Onondago with further tribute.\textsuperscript{11} The reader will remember that Onondago was the principal capital of the Five Nations, situated near the present town of Pompey in New York. It is important to remember that at this time the Nanticoke were still residing in their ancestral homes and had not yet moved up to Pennsylvania.

The movement by the tribe to Pennsylvania began in 1742 or 1743. At first a few individuals came, to be followed later by larger groups. In the following excerpt from a speech made by Canassatego, a Five Nations chief, on August 16, 1749, it is clear that the Five Nations actually arranged for the Nanticoke to settle in Pennsylvania. The italics are mine:

\begin{quote}
We now speak on behalf of our Couzins the Nantycokes. You know that on some differences between the people of Maryland & them we sent for them & placed them at the mouth of the Juniata where they now live; they came to us while on our journey & told us that there were three settlements of their Tribe left behind in Maryland who wanted to come away but the Marylanders kept them in fence & would not let them.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Canassatego continued by saying that the Marylanders made slaves of the Indians, sold them and their children for money and otherwise abused them. He asked the Governor to write to the Maryland authorities for permission for the three remaining Nanticoke "tribes" to remove to Pennsylvania and join their kin.

The previous year, 1748, a Moravian missionary noted in his diary that "on the 21st day of May, 1748, a number of Nanticokes from Maryland passed by Shamokin on their way to Wyoming." Others travelling by land went through Bethlehem in their journey north.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1749, both the Conoy Indians who had left Conoytown and the

\textsuperscript{11} Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, IV, 660.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., V, 401. Before the Nanticoke were able to leave the Eastern Shore it was necessary for them to obtain permission from the Maryland authorities. Thus, in a treaty with the Five Nations on Sept. 13, 1755, the Maryland government inserted the clause "that the Nanticoke Indians should be permitted if they should desire it to live among the Six Nations, . . . . and Whereas the said Nanticoke Indians have applied to the Governor & Council for Leave to depart this Province," etc. See Maryland Archives, XXVIII, 338.
\textsuperscript{13} John Heckewelder, An Account of the History, Manners, etc. (Historical Soc. of Pa., Memoirs, vol. XII), 91.
Nanticoke were living at the mouth of the Juniata River.\textsuperscript{14} Two years later, in 1751, the Nanticoke were at Wyoming, having moved up from the mouth of the Juniata. The relations of this tribe with the Pennsylvania authorities were very friendly, as the following statement made by them in Philadelphia on August 16, 1751, shows:

We passed about nine years ago by your door, we came from Maryland and asked your Leave to go and settle among our Brethren the Delawares and you gave us leave. You will wonder that you have not seen us since, so we now come down to tell you that we did for some time live at the mouth of Juniata but are now settled at Wyomen. This you should know for we now belong to you.\textsuperscript{15}

To this the Governor replied: “We shall not fail to take the same care of you as we do our Brethren so long as you merit our Protection.”

The Delawares, who had also moved to the Susquehanna, had been assigned to two towns, Wyoming and Shamokin, by their overlords, the Five Nations, and were under the watchful eye of an Iroquois agent.\textsuperscript{16} It will be remembered that Shamokin is known today as Sunbury and that Wilkes-Barre is built on the site of Wyoming. From the foregoing it is apparent that the Susquehanna Valley had become a haven for the Shawnee, Conoy and Delaware peoples, as well as for the Nanticoke refugees. Still other tribes, for example, the Tutelo, Tuscarora and Twightwee, moved into Pennsylvania in successive migratory waves. However, less is known about them than about the Nanticoke.

It is difficult to trace the specific route of the Nanticoke through Pennsylvania as they moved from place to place, pausing for a few years or months at each temporary home. By 1754 the tribe had traveled upstream to “Olsenecny, a Branch of Sasquehahanan where formerly some Onandagos and Shawone lived.”\textsuperscript{17} By 1756 some of them had settled at a town called Chinkanning, in company with a few Delawares, including the great Delaware chieftain, Teedyuscung, who was largely responsible for the Delawares’ emancipation from the Five Nations during the French and Indian Wars.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, V, 388.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., V, 543. It is clear from this citation that a few of the first Nanticoke refugees lived for a while among the Delawares when they first came to Pennsylvania. As others joined them they established villages of their own.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., IV, 539.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., VI, 35.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., VII, 67.
lived at Otsaningo. In the same year, this group lent their weight to the English, who were endeavoring to persuade the Delawares to remain friendly. Thus the Otsaningo Nanticoke rendered at least a temporary service to the commonwealth. However, the Delawares later went on the warpath.\textsuperscript{19} Some of the Nanticoke also occupied a town called Otlincanke, where there were "30 cabbins and about 60 men, Nanticokes, Conoy and Onandagos and one Shawnese family."\textsuperscript{20} The Nanticoke chief at this time was one Skayanas, whose English name was Fisher.

The next year, 1757, at a council at Easton, three Nanticoke came to ask the Governor if he "might send some Person with them to Lancaster to take care of them and supply them with necessaries on the Road as they were come to take the bones of their Friends which died at Lancaster to their own Town to be buried with their Relations."\textsuperscript{21} Here we see evidence of the ancient Nanticoke custom of moving the bones of their honored dead as the group changed their place of residence. Heckewelder mentions seeing them bringing the bones of their dead from Maryland to Pennsylvania to be reburied in 1750–1760.\textsuperscript{22} And Brinton claims that the Pennsylvania town Towanda received its name because the Nanticoke reburied some of the venerated bones of their ancestors near there. The name of the town, he believed, was corrupted from a Nanticoke word "Tawaudenuck," which means "where we bury our dead."\textsuperscript{23} The details of Nanticoke burial customs have recently received archeological attention by the writer in a separate paper.\textsuperscript{24}

A very important reference to the Nanticoke is found in the minutes of a conference held at Easton in 1758. At this conference there appeared: "Nanticokes and Conoys, now one nation, Robert White alias Wolahocremy; Pashaamokas, alias Charley, with sixteen men, twenty women and eighteen children. Kandt, alias Last Night, with Nine Men, Ten Women and One child."\textsuperscript{25} This indicates that

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., VIII, 194.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., VII, 67.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., VII, 707.
\textsuperscript{22} Heckewelder, \textit{op. cit.}, 90.
\textsuperscript{23} D. G. Brinton, \textit{The Lenape and Their Legends} (Phila., 1885).
\textsuperscript{25} Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, VIII, 175. The italics are mine.
the identity of the Conoy was being lost and that both native groups were fusing into a single entity called Nanticoke. At the time both lived together at Chenango on the headwaters of the Susquehanna. They were poor, and are described as having "hardly anything to eat or drink."  

In 1761, the Nanticoke asked the Pennsylvania Governor for an order permitting them to go down to Maryland to bring up the balance of their people who had not yet removed to Pennsylvania. Those left behind on the Eastern Shore were described as "several of their people still residing in Dorset & Somerset and settle them on the north branch of the Susquehanna with the body of their nation." Subsequently, July 13, 1767, eleven Indians went down to Dorchester and Somerset counties on the Eastern Shore to invite the remaining Indians to remove to Otsaningo. This, too, is an important citation, because the Indians of Dorchester County were largely members of the tribe called Choptank and were originally treated by the Maryland authorities as a distinct political entity apart from the Nanticoke. It is thus apparent that the term Nanticoke had come to be used to include the Choptank Indians. In the earlier migrations, some of the Choptank had joined their Nanticoke neighbors in the exodus from the Eastern Shore and doubtless Indians from the Pocomoke, Assateague and other tribes also moved into Pennsylvania. It is important to note that all lost their specific tribal identities and became known by the generic term Nanticoke after they settled in Pennsylvania. Previous to 1742, the term had been delimited to those living on the Nanticoke River, but after that, and down to the present, it was carelessly used by both Indians and whites.

At a conference at Lancaster in 1762 a Seneca Indian asked that a horse be given to Robert White, the old Nanticoke chief, "because he carries all our messages and is old. You did give him a mare before, but she is dead; she was with foal and died." The request was granted. Thus we find the Five Nations solicitous for the well-being of their subjects and the English also willing to show generosity.

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27 *Maryland Archives*, IX, 537, Entry for August 27, 1761.
29 *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania*, VIII, 736.
in their treatment of the Nanticoke. Robert White, who was called a former Indian of Somerset County, was a descendant of the true Nanticoke and consequently is the last recorded Nanticoke chief-
tain.30

Eventually the Nanticoke, following the Susquehanna headwaters, crossed into New York state, and left the jurisdiction of Pennsyl-
vania. In New York they settled successively on the east branch of the Susquehanna at the Indian towns of Chenango, Chugnut and Owego. In their sojourn of forty or fifty years in Pennsylvania they were sufficiently recorded to give us a continuous picture of the tribe dating from Smith's observations in 1608, down to the latter part of the eighteenth century. They left behind in Pennsylvania some of the place names already mentioned, as well as Nanticoke Creek and the town of Nanticoke in present Luzerne County.

On January 27, 1777, the Nanticoke reappear briefly in the Pennsyl-
vania documents. A delegation of seventy Indian men and one hundred women and children consisting of Cayuga and Seneca of the Six Nations (formerly the Five Nations) and "Amatincka, or Raising Anything Up," a Nanticoke leader and some of his people presented themselves before the Continental Congress at Easton. They ex-
pressed a desire to be neutral during the Revolution.31 As we know today, the overwhelming majority of the Six Nations united with the English against the colonists, but apparently the Nanticoke per-
sisted in their neutrality. They had probably been reduced to such a small number that they were inconsequential in the affairs of war. At the time of the Wyoming Massacre, July 3, 1778, when Sullivan raided the Iroquois towns, destroying Chemung and Onondaga, the Nanticoke are not mentioned and had apparently moved further north into Canada with their Iroquois hosts.

The last important historical reference to the Nanticoke is re-
corded in Heckewelder's history of the Indian nations. He notes that in 1785 a group of Indians came to see their old chief, Robert White, who then resided in Canada. Heckewelder said "the whole body"

30 Brinton, op. cit., and other authorities give Wynicaco as the last "Nanticoke Emperor" following a letter written to Thomas Jefferson by William Vans Murray in 1792. This is an erroneous conception inasmuch as Wynicaco was actually a Choptank Indian chief. This is pointed out in the writer's paper, "Wynicaco—A Choptank Indian Chief," now awaiting publication by the American Philosophical Society.

31 C. Hale Sipe, The Indian Wars of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, 1929).
consisted of fifty men and that "they were going through Canada to the Miami country to settle beside the Shawanos in consequence of an invitation they had received from them."\(^{32}\) The "Shawanos" were, of course, the Shawnee, who were then settled in the midwest, but later moved to the Indian Territory. Thus some of the Nanticoke apparently merged with the Shawnee, and their descendants could probably be found today in the Far West, while other members of the tribe remained in Canada with the Iroquois.

Dr. Frank G. Speck in 1924 found approximately three hundred Indians of Nanticoke descent still living on an Iroquois reservation in Ontario, Canada. The notes and entries in the council records indicated that the Nanticoke had been adopted into the Iroquois League and that their own language and customs had given way to those of the Iroquois.\(^{33}\) A second group of Nanticoke descendants, whose blood has been variously diluted with whites and unspecified Americans, is still found today along Indian River in Delaware. There they maintain a tribal organization legally incorporated under the state laws. For the most part they are descendants of Indians who did not join in the earlier migrations to Pennsylvania. Dr. Speck has also conducted extensive investigations among this second group, and the writer has recently been engaged in ethnological work among them.\(^{34}\)

The data herein presented are offered as conclusive evidence that the Susquehanna Valley was considered a haven by Indians of the colonial period who had been forced from their native habitat either through Iroquois pressure or white intrigue. Beginning in 1698, the land originally inhabited by the Susquehannock became a temporary home for many expatriated tribes, including the Nanticoke, Choptank, Conoy and other Eastern Shore Indians, all of whom became known as Nanticokes. Although the Five Nations held these tribes in subjection, nevertheless, they were very gracious in their treatment of the Nanticoke. They did not disrupt nor denationalize them,

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\(^{32}\) Heckewelder, *op. cit.*, 92.


\(^{34}\) Various papers by Dr. Speck relating to this group have been published by the Archaeological Society of Delaware. A monograph, "The Nanticoke Community of Delaware," was published by the Museum of the American Indian (N. Y., 1915). The present author’s study among the Nanticoke and "Moors" of Delaware is now being prepared for publication as a book by the University of Pennsylvania Press under the title, "Delaware’s Forgotten Folk."
but adopted them into the League. The Pennsylvania whites welcomed the Nanticoke and treated them kindly and considerately while they lived in the province. The Nanticoke behaved peacefully and were more kindly disposed toward the Pennsylvanians than they had been to the Marylanders. However, in the face of an advancing civilization, more complex and aggressive than their own, they slowly retreated from their temporary haven and finally merged completely with their Iroquois hosts, losing their political identity and language.

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