Lenape Land Sales, Treaties, and Wampum Belts

Even the earliest contacts between European traders and native peoples made the question of land holdings and land sales an important issue. The extensive records pertaining to Lenape sales of land to various European merchants and settlers enable us to document in great detail the processes involved. From these data we also can extract the basic rules reflecting native ideas relating to their land holdings and use.

A review of William Penn's several purchases of lands from the Lenape, when considered in relationship to earlier purchases made by

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1 Many of the numerous deeds to lands owned by the Lenape are referenced in several different places, but no complete listing has ever been published. The Penn deeds are the best recorded but most of the others, when noted, often are abstracted and only in the most general way. Examples of these deeds may appear in approximately complete form when they are short in length. Longer transactions, listing grantors, the specific area sold, the quantities of goods paid, the colonial grantees, plus both native and colonial witnesses and often ancillary appendages, do not appear completely and correctly transcribed. Some colonial signatories made only their marks. Transliterations of the native names continues to be problematical to researchers interested in these records.


Many of the deeds from New Jersey natives are available in transcription in the New Jersey Archives in Trenton. William Nelson, Personal Names of Indians of New Jersey (1904, Peterson, New Jersey) culled these documents for native names, but we do not know from his publication if these individuals appeared as grantors or witnesses.

2 Ann F. Diserose, "Land Transactions A Personalized Data Management System for the Analysis of Documents Relating to the Transfer of Land from the Lenape of the Delaware Valley to Colonial Americans." (Dec. 14, 1981) Manuscript on file, Anthropology Section, West Chester University of Pennsylvania. This program has not been tested since the difficult chore of transcribing most of the deeds and the putting the information into a computer lies before us.
various Swedish and Dutch entrepreneurs, enables us to reconstruct Lenape social groups and their patterns of land use in the seventeenth century. The consistency of these patterns from the earliest documented sale in 1629 until the sales of the 1680s reflects the integrity of these Lenape bands during this period. This evidence also indicates that this native population was not subjected to depopulating and disorganizing epidemics of European diseases.

Each Lenape band consisted of an extended family, perhaps numbering as many as twenty-five or thirty members. Each occupied one or more adjacent river valleys feeding into the Delaware or Schuylkill Rivers. Within its activity area each group foraged in a pattern which enabled it to use available resources minimally supplemented by small stores of maize and beans grown while encamped at summer stations. Land rights to these territories were inherited by the descendants of each band, who had the use of these resources and, collectively, the right to sell these resources.

Prior to Penn’s arrival various tracts of land had been purchased from separate Lenape bands. These parcels varied in size, but on the whole each was quite small and intended only to provide a limited area on which to erect a trading post, farmstead, or small settlement. William Penn’s ideas of extensive colonization led him to purchase the rights, or to clear native title, to lands within his Proprietary Colony. This began with systematic purchase of all of the tracts held by these Lenape bands. In each sale all of the adult native male owners acknowledged the contract, by signing both halves of an indenture which

3 The earliest land sale to the Dutch in this region was Gillis Hossett’s purchase of lands in the area of Swanendale, now central Delaware. This document was first published by A R Dunlap, “Dutch and Swedish Land Records Relating to Delaware,” *Delaware History*, 6, No 1 (March, 1954), 27-28. Although some believe that the grantors of this land, known as Ciconicins, were members of one Lenape band, I now believe that the Ciconicins were the peoples immediately south of the Lenape, whose southern border was at Old Duck Creek. Marshall J Becker, “The Lenape Southern Boundary Cultural Interaction and Change in the Early Contact Period 1550-1610” Paper presented at the Launer II Conference, May 13, 1983. Copy on file, Anthropology Program, West Chester University of Pennsylvania.


5 An example of one of the many Lenape land sales made before 1681, and one in which only a limited tract was conveyed, was negotiated on September 25, 1646. This deed was recently published. See Charles T Gehring, translator and editor, *New York Historical Manuscripts Dutch*, XVIII-XIX of the Delaware Papers (Dutch Period), Baltimore (1981), 16-17.
described the land in question; the terms of the sale, which always granted clear and complete title; the names of all grantors and recipients; and the quantity of the goods or the price to be paid for the stipulated tract. These goods were paid at the time of signing, when seals were affixed to these documents and the payment delivered. 6

On those occasions when one or more "owners" were not present at this ritual, their acknowledgment of the sale often included by a subsequent signing and sealing of the original document. 7 At the original signing as well as when later additions were made, both native and colonial witnesses signed the indentures. No case of dissent appears to have occurred among the Lenape. Their general willingness to sell land may have been related to the dispersal of the Susquehannocks in 1674/5, a dispersal providing them with access to lands along the Susquehanna River. 8 Also, Penn protected Lenape rights to lands on which they were camped, perhaps mistaking the annually used but relatively transient summer settlements for permanent villages. 9

The series of purchases by which William Penn cleared Lenape title to all of their former lands involved payment in goods of various kinds. Many of the deeds note that a quantity of wampum was included as part of the purchase payment. This was "cash" wampum rather than "formal" wampum. Wampum belts and short "strings" of wampum of the category which may be called "formal" wampum had a meaning beyond the cash value of the beads incorporated in them. 10 These items did not appear in simple economic transactions such as land sales but were made and presented only when requests were being made for cooperation and joint efforts, such as will be noted below.

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6 Several of the Penn deeds recorded in the Pennsylvania Archives also have been published by Myers (William Penn's Own Account), 338 ff, as noted in note 1 Myers selected many of the most complete and elaborate of these documents

7 Certain deeds have added texts indicating that one or more rightful owners of land were not present at the granting of a native tracts to colonial purchasers In these few cases, all of which appear to have involved lands of the Jersey Indians, an additional payment was made See Marshall Becker, "The Lenape of Southern New Jersey," New Jersey History (in press)


In general, any formal meeting between a group of Lenape and representatives of the colonial government was called a “treaty.” Therefore, meetings held only to discuss land sales as well as the conclaves held in order to sign transfer documents relating to these sales were termed “treaties,” but these were different from meetings at which belts and/or strings of wampum were presented. When the Lenape and colonials met to discuss and to attempt to resolve various issues, presentations (“gifts”) of formal wampum were made. These belts and strings were tendered along with a request; the acceptance of a belt, or string, indicated that the recipients also accepted the obligation to honor that request. For example, when the Lenape made requests to the Proprietors that something be done about sales of distilled spirits to the Lenape, such petitions were accompanied by a presentation of formal wampum. A presentation of such formal wampum from the Proprietors to the Lenape could occur if the former wished cooperation in warning about hostile natives entering the area. Such a request for help from the Lenape would have been made in conjunction with a presentation of formal wampum.

Although the original sales of land to William Penn do not appear to have involved the use of formal belts or strings of wampum, there are situations related to previous land sales which may have included such presentations. Quite often confirmation treaties were held at which land grantors and their heirs would gather to review and to clarify the terms of previous sales. At such a treaty the government might have presented a belt of wampum to a group of Lenape in conjunction with a

11 Perhaps the best documented example of wampum belt presentations occurred during July of 1756 when concerns about the French and Indian War were great. Prior to a “treaty” (meeting) between the famous Teedyuscung (A F C Wallace, *King of the Delaware, Teedyuscung*, Philadelphia, 1949), and the English, Teedyuscung had “made an Exceeding large Belt of Wampum.” Teedyuscung circulated it widely along with a request for aid from other native groups. On 29 July, Teedyuscung was presented with two belts and a string of wampum by the Governor of Pennsylvania along with a request to release prisoners. Teedyuscung replied by presenting a belt, described in the minutes (*Colonial Records*, VII, 207-213), along with his own request. This belt is one of the first known to include human figures, and it postdates Penn’s treaties by many years.

12 Native elders frequently asked Colonial officials to control the sale of alcoholic drink to their people. These “requests” were delivered at formal meetings, and the requests always were accompanied by the presentation of some wampum, usually in the form of a “string” of the beads.

13 At several meetings between Lenape and colonial officials note was made of previous land sales. When belts or strings of wampum were presented at such meetings the exchange indicated some current request and not a payment for past sales.
request that these people acknowledge and accept the terms of the sale as stipulated on the original indenture. The final confirmation treaty involving Lenape lands in the Delaware Valley was the 1737 “Walking Purchase.” Ironically enough, this was not in actuality a purchase. Nor were the Pennsylvania Lenape among the principle native participants. The various requests made at this treaty, including one for acknowledgement of past land sales, were all accompanied by the presentation of formal wampum.\(^\text{14}\)

The well-known William Penn wampum belt, if presented to Penn or some other official by the Lenape or any other native group, may have been made and given in conjunction with any of a number of possible requests. The colonial documents include numerous references to meetings or treaties at which strings of wampum were presented and many at which the more significant “belts” exchanged hands. With only a few notable exceptions do we have any idea what the specific belts presented on any given occasion actually looked like.\(^\text{15}\) Often the width of a belt (the number of rows of wampum) is stated, but the designs, if any, are rarely described. Of interest in determining the configuration of any belt is the problem of longevity for these items. Relatively few examples appear to have survived. Native recipients appear to have disassembled most belts, probably after some interval, to use individual

\(^{14}\) At the Confirmation Treaty of 1737 Manawkyhickon, speaker for the “Delaware,” presented the Proprietor with a small belt of wampum, see Pennsylvania Archives, I, 540. This suggests that the Lenape were making a petition at the same time that they were confirming earlier land sales made to Penn or the Proprietors.

\(^{15}\) Four wampum belts, among the thirty-two belts prepared by the Lenape for presentation to the Five Nations in 1712, are known because the colonial scribe made sketches of them in the margin of the minutes of a meeting at which they were discussed. The Colonial Records, II, 547-548, provides the published version of this meeting, but this version lacks these marginal drawings. William A. Hunter noted the figures during his research and pointed them out to the author. These four belts have only simple diagonal bands such as appear on the ends of the “William Penn” wampum belt. Presumably, these four were the most elaborate of the thirty-two belts in this group as they are the largest and first to have been noted.

Aside from the elaborate belt held in the Treasury at Chartres Cathedral, a late seventeenth century gift, we have very few belts for which dates can be established. Figures do not appear on any of the known earlier belts. Quite possibly the use of figures did not develop as a decorative technique for weaving these belts until after the death of William Penn (see fn 11).
beads, or to fashion yet another belt. Colonial recipients seem to have done much the same with the old belts, with the result being the infrequent survival of any of the earliest examples.

The survival in the hands of William Penn's family of this single example of a wampum belt does suggest that it held special significance in the history of the Proprietary colony, but this belt can be attributed to no specific event. The sale of lands on which central Philadelphia now stands was but one of several "treaties" negotiated in the early days of the colony, and not one is clearly associated with the presentation of a formal belt of wampum. Until a specific reference can be found which describes the Penn wampum belt and the original context of its presentation, we only can assume that at best this belt was but one of many received by the Proprietor or his heirs over the years.

West Chester University

MARSHALL JOSEPH BECKER