

Rev. John Elder and Identity in the Pennsylvania Backcountry

While scholars have often cited the letters of the Reverend John Elder, housed in the archives of the Historical Society of Dauphin County, for information concerning the political atmosphere in the Pennsylvania backcountry during and immediately after the French and Indian War, few historians have taken notice of the clues that Elder's letters provide regarding the complicated nature of identity in the region.¹ Born in Scotland in 1706 and educated at the University of Glasgow, Elder served as the minister of Paxton Presbyterian Church along the banks of the Susquehanna River in northwestern Lancaster County from 1738 to 1792.² During the crisis of Pontiac's Uprising in 1763, when Delaware and Shawnee warriors attacked settlements throughout the backcountry in an effort to stop the further encroachment of British settlers onto their lands, Elder served as a liaison between the backcountry residents and the provincial authorities. In this role, he exchanged numerous letters with Governor John Penn, Colonel Joseph Shippen, and other government officials, providing information on conditions in the backcountry.

Elder's letters reveal the backcountry residents' deepening hatred for Native Americans and their desire to eliminate all Indians, both friendly and unfriendly, from the region in the aftermath of the uprising. Elder routinely referred to Native Americans as "Savages" in his letters to provincial authorities.³ His letter to the governor in October 1763 reveals Elder's belief that all Native Americans should be removed from the region: "it is evident," he wrote, "that till that Branch of the [Susquehanna] River is cleared of the Savages, the frontier settlements will be in no safety."⁴ In a letter to Colonel Shippen in the aftermath of the Paxton Boys' brutal murder of Conestoga Indians living under the provincial government's protection in Lancaster County in December 1763, Elder reiterated the backcountry settlers' insistence on ending all friendly relations with any Native Americans. "The country seems deter-

¹ Rev. John Elder Correspondence, 1754–1763, Elder Collection, MG 070, Historical Society of Dauphin County (hereafter Elder Correspondence).

² *Commemorative Biographical Encyclopedia of Dauphin County* (Chambersburg, PA, 1896), 169–70.

³ John Elder to Gov. John Penn, Aug. 4, 1763, and Oct. 25, 1763; and John Elder to Col. Joseph Shippen, Feb. 1, 1764, Elder Correspondence.

⁴ John Elder to Gov. John Penn, Oct. 25, 1763.

mined,” he reported, “that no Indian Treaties shall be held or Savages maintained at the expense of the province.”⁵

The Elder correspondence also documents the complexity of ethnic identity among European settlers in the colonial Pennsylvania backcountry. Elder’s letters in the wake of the Paxton Boys affair make clear the role that ethnic identities played in the political conflict that emerged after the murders of the Conestogas. After the massacres, the Quaker faction that dominated the provincial assembly had published a series of pamphlets blaming the murders exclusively on the Scots-Irish Presbyterian settlers in the backcountry. In his letter to Shippen, Elder revealed that “the Presbyterians are enraged at their being charged in bulk with these facts [the murders].”⁶

Moreover, Elder’s letter to Shippen provides insight into the confused identity of the Scots-Irish settlers themselves. The Scots-Irish congregants in Paxton Presbyterian Church did not, according to Elder, identify themselves as Scots-Irish during the 1760s; the Presbyterians, he claimed, were particularly angry about being labeled “under the name Scotch Irish and other ill-natured titles” by the pamphlet authors. Further reflecting the ethnic dimension of the conflict, Elder claimed that the Presbyterians were especially outraged because “the killing [of] the Connestoga Indians is compared to the Irish Massacres and reckoned the most barbarous of either” in the pamphlets.⁷ By referring negatively to the Irish killings of Anglo and Scottish Protestants in Ulster during the Irish Rebellion of 1649, Elder and his Presbyterian neighbors demonstrated that they did not identify with the native Irish, either.

In many ways, the Elder correspondence raises more questions than it answers. How did the Scots-Irish Presbyterians in the Pennsylvania backcountry identify themselves? Did they view themselves as Irish, Scottish, Scots-Irish, British, or American? Did all backcountry settlers share a common identity based on their European ancestry and white skin color, in opposition to the Native American ancestry and red skin color of the Delawares, Shawnees, and Conestogas with whom they increasingly came into conflict? These challenges presented by the John Elder letters provide fertile ground for historians of the Pennsylvania backcountry to explore.

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⁵ John Elder to Col. Joseph Shippen, Feb. 1, 1764.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*