Tangled Memories of Wampum Diplomacy in Philadelphia

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Abstract
Throughout North America, Indigenous Native American and First Nations histories are often presented as fragments of a broken past. Isolated objects, historical markers, archaeological sites, lost memories, curious folklore, and uninhabited places evoke memories of something that happened long ago, to someone else, in another time. The influential tribal individuals and nations who shaped and experienced those events are often depicted as tangential to the narrative of the emerging American nation, and imagined to have vanished from the scene. Yet, Indigenous histories are best seen as part of an on-going stream of events that are never entirely past, even (especially) when they are inextricably entangled with American and Canadian histories. Native histories are sometimes recoverable if one knows how to read past the stories in stone.

Disciplines
Anthropology | Archaeological Anthropology | Indigenous Studies | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social and Cultural Anthropology

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Throughout North America, Indigenous Native American and First Nations histories are often presented as fragments of a broken past. Isolated material objects, historical markers, archaeological sites, lost memories, curious folklore, and uninhabited places evoke memories of something that happened long ago, to someone else, in another time. The influential tribal individuals and nations who shaped and experienced those events are often depicted as tangential to the narrative of the emerging American nation, and imagined to have vanished from the scene. Yet, Indigenous histories are best seen as part of an on-going stream of events that are never entirely past, even (especially) when they are inextricably entangled with American and Canadian histories. Native histories are sometimes recoverable if one knows how to read past the stories in stone.

It seems crucial to note that markers to the Indigenous past (on statues, historical plaques, roadside monuments, etc.) always do more than merely commemorate the past; they re-script and re-interpret key moments in the past, by revealing some histories and concealing others. The images and texts that appear on these markers are not mere factual recountings; they are instructional guides intended to introduce audiences to powerful individuals and past events that shaped future worlds. These markers are always incomplete, idiosyncratic, and selective. They represent only a small window into the past and they rarely (if ever) honestly represent the complicated inter-cultural on-the-ground interactions that characterized those memorable encounters. So, for example, the text on the marker at Penn Treaty Park (shown above), where a treaty with William Penn was said to have been transacted under an elm tree, identifies Penn unequivocally as an agent of “social justice and peace” while “other colonies were in conflict and in great distress with the Indians.”[1] Any visitor who assumes this to be a true representation of colonial settlement in Pennsylvania will naturally be puzzled by the decades of violent warfare that followed.

Museum exhibitions are similarly incomplete. Whenever the material residue of the past—objects, documents, portraits, clothing, and other material things—is placed on display, those things can take on iconic meaning as figurative (if not literal) witnesses to history. The prominence of certain things (e.g., wampum belts) will be determined not just by their significance in the past, but by their significance in the present, and their relations with other things and people in the museum. In every museum, of course, staff are compelled to weigh multiple influences when composing exhibitions: available collections, curatorial choices, loan possibilities, design concepts, space limitations, time limits, logistical challenges, donors’ desires, consultants’ opinions, etc. etc. The occasionally quixotic combination of these influences will determine which objects are selected for display, what events will take precedence, how cultural interactions will be re-conceptualized, and whose stories will be told.
Recalling Native Encounters and Diplomatic Performances

Histories of the colonial origins of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania are inextricably entangled with histories of the Lenni Lenape (Delaware) people and the complexities of subsequent diplomatic relationships with the member tribes of the Haudenosaunee/Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy. With this in mind, some of the most compelling “hidden histories” of Native American people in Philadelphia can be best understood by revisiting some of the places where wampum diplomacy was most visible in the past, and where it is almost invisible today.

Several statues and monuments commemorate Penn’s treaty with Lenape Chief Tamanend. In the park at Shackamaxon (shown above), there are statues and plaques honoring Penn, the wampum belt, and even the elm tree itself, but no depictions of Native leaders. The most dramatic rendition of an Indian in town is the twenty-foot tall statue of Tamanend at the intersection of Market and Front Streets in Old City in 1994. He stands on the back of a turtle, stretching out his right hand in greeting; the eagle on his shoulder clutches a wampum belt in his claws. Tamanend faces the statue of William Penn mounted high atop City Hall, fifteen blocks (one and a half miles) away. Then there is Benjamin West’s (re-invented) painting, “Penn’s Treaty with the Indians” (1771-1772), which visually sets the stage for a potentially peaceful era of colonial territorial expansion.

As white settlers encroached on Native lands, their interactions became increasingly unpredictable, sometimes violent. In the aftermath of Penn’s death, colonial land speculators attempted to take more Lenape land. In 1732, Penn’s son, Governor Thomas Penn, invited the Haudenosaunee to expand their influence over the Lenape by establishing a “Council Fire” at Philadelphia. He declared that the path to Onondaga would be figuratively (if not literally) cleared of “every Grub, Stump & Log, that it may be straight, smooth & free for us and you.” Then, in 1737, he proposed to settle the bounds of a contested 1686 sale of Lenape lands by arranging for the duplicitous “Walking Purchase” that circumscribed, not the original bounds, but a massive area of roughly one million acres of land. The Lenape complained, but the new relationship with the Haudenosaunee limited their options. Although recognized as cultural “grandfathers,” the Lenape were now cast in the political role of “women” responsible for maintaining peace, and were compelled to accept the terms of the 1737 deed.

Despite occasionally uneasy relations, Native people were regularly present in Philadelphia, coming into the city to shop for trade goods, to sell ash-spint baskets, or to meet with the Society of Friends (Quakers), who had formed the Friendly Association for regaining and preserving Peace with the Indians. Large groups of Native visitors camped on the outskirts of the city, on the grounds of other grand estates. Smaller groups were housed in inns like “The Indian King” and “The Indian Queen,” or lodged at the State House. During the mid-1700s, Native visits were so frequent that John Penn (grandson of William Penn) asked the Provincial Council to consider setting aside a formal spot within the bounds of city for diplomatic encounters. One local historian recalled:

“From a very early period it was the practice of Indian companies occasionally to visit the city...Such of the Indians as came to the city on public service were always provided for in the east wing of the State-house, up-stairs, and at the same time, their necessary support there was provided for by the government. Old people have told me that the visits of Indians were so frequent as to excite but little surprise... On the 6th of 6 mo., 1749, there was at the State-house an assemblage of two hundred and sixty Indians: of eleven different tribes, assembled there with the governor to make a treaty. The place was extremely crowded; and Canaswetigo, a chief, made a long speech. There were other Indians...
about the city at the same time, making together probably four to five hundred Indians at one time. The same Indians remained several days at Logan's place, in his beech woods.”[8]

The surviving records from the Native council gatherings and treaty meetings held between 1736-1762 indicate that many agreements were made, and many wampum belts were exchanged, but it is not clear where all of those belts went to, or even if they were preserved.[9] Although the original wampum belt given to William Penn in the 1680s (see above) survived, as did several others, many of the wampum belts handled in Philadelphia may have been taken apart and the beads re-used for other purposes, in other locales.

In January 1755, Pennsylvania Governor Robert Hunter Morris invited the Mohawk chief Hendrick/Theyanoguin to Philadelphia to help settle disputes over the sales of tribal lands beyond the Susquehanna to Connecticut speculators. Hendrick’s arrival, accompanied by twelve Mohawk leading men and his granddaughter, Molly Brant (sister to Joseph Brant), was staged as a formal procession with a public welcome:

“The News of the Indians Approach soon reached Philadia. and a little Distance from yt. Town some of the Govrs. Council and other Gentlemen met the Indns. with the Govrs. Compliments desiring they would halt a little & then proceed slow as the Citizens intended to receive them in a complimentary Manner. Accordingly entering Second Street coming from Germantown the Town Militia was drawn up on both sides & a numerous populace assembled & following with Acclamations of Huzza for King Henry [Hendrick]…every imaginable respect to Friendship was shown him by every one that had an opportunity of having his Company.”[11]

The group attended a dance assembly where they made a dramatic appearance:

“The antient King of the Mohawks…came down with some of his Warriors this Winter to Philadelphia, and assured them of his Friendship, though he own’d many of the young Mohawks were gone over to the Enemy; they were entertain’d at the Stadthouse, and made their Appearance also among the Ladies on the Assembly Night, where they danced the Scalping Dance with all its Horrors, and almost terrified the Company out of their Wits. I must tell you they brought with them a beautiful young Lady…”[12]

Molly Brant was more than just a “beautiful young lady;” she was a consort and (via a Mohawk ceremony) wife to Sir William Johnson, and was considered a powerful political force among the Haudenosaunee in her own right.[13]

During the meeting with the Governor, Hendrick insisted that the fraudulent land sales had been made by “Mr. Lydius at Albany with a few drunken Oneida Indns. without the Knowledge & Consent of the Six Nations.” The Haudenosaunee were asked to police the boundaries to prevent conflict. At some point during this meeting, John Penn gave Hendrick a wampum belt to mark an agreement to set aside the so-called “Wampum Lot” in perpetuity for the conduct of Native diplomacy.[14] The site was roughly one square city block in size, situated not far from the Delaware River, a few blocks from the State House, and across the street from City Tavern. The logic of having a dedicated Indigenous space was straightforward; Native delegations “refused to negotiate a treaty or even talk about it, until they could stand on their own ground, and build a council-fire on their own land.” That being said, the lot was not (as some have imagined) an Indian reservation, and Native people did not actually camp there.[15]

In addition to Lenape and Haudenosaunee delegations, the city hosted visitors from multiple Native nations: Cherokee, Creek, Ottawa, Shawnee, Wyandot and many others. Local artists painted their portraits and sketched them into scenes.[16] William Russell Birch’s illustration of four unnamed Native visitors in “Back of the State House Philadelphia” and Charles Willson Peale’s enigmatic portrait of Mohawk war leader Thayendanegea/Joseph Brant offer tantalizing glimpses into this past.[17] Native visitors made use of both the State House lawn and the Wampum Lot as outdoor spaces where they could meet by themselves to consider how best to respond to political relations.[18]

During the American Revolution, diplomacy with Native nations shifted dramatically. The Oneida and some Tuscarora chose to ally with the American colonies, but most of the Haudenosaunee (Cayuga, Mohawk, Onondaga, and Seneca) remained in alliance with Great Britain. Even after the war, there were important diplomatic gatherings with Native leaders during the years between 1790 to 1800, when the capital of the new United States was located in Philadelphia.
After the War of 1812, many Haudenosaunee families left western Pennsylvania and New York state to relocate to lands set aside for them by the British along the Grand River in Ontario, Canada; some of the Lenape from eastern Pennsylvania went with them. [19]

It is not clear what happened to the wampum belt given to Hendrick, who died at the Battle of Lake George a few months after his trip to Philadelphia; if he followed protocol for the time, it should have been delivered to Onondaga. At some point, the Oneida nation apparently acquired it, and kept it to claim ownership of the diplomatic space. In 1865, when a group of Philadelphia citizens proposed to build on the Wampum Lot, they learned that "the wampum belt established a proprietary right given by the commonwealth" that, apparently, could not be legally forfeited. Charles Knecht attempted to negotiate the purchase of the land by inviting Seneca Civil War veteran Ely Parker to Philadelphia to assist, but Parker found that, "nothing could induce the Oneidas to give up the belt or surrender the title to the property." Nonetheless, the Chamber claimed title to the lot. Tall brick buildings were then constructed that took up most of the space. [20]

Reclaiming the Wampum Lot and Other Diplomatic Spaces

On Thanksgiving Day in 1922, the city was reminded of the Wampum Lot’s history by a small delegation of Native leaders who gathered there to speak about the importance of on-going diplomacy between sovereign Native American nations and the American government. Speakers included Chief Albert Shenandoah (Oneida), Chief Mountpleasant (Tuscarora), Chief Strong Wolf (Ojibwa), Chief Red Fox (Blackfeet), Gladys Tantaquidgeon (Mohegan), and White Cloud (Mohawk). The event was organized, in part, by Penn anthropologist Frank Speck, and attended by members of the Friends’ Meeting and the Philadelphia chapter of the Boy Scouts. The delegation retraced part of the route of Hendrick’s 1755 procession, meeting with the Colonial Dames before traveling to City Hall and then on to Independence Hall, where they met with Justice Schaeffer of the Supreme Court and several direct descendants of William Penn before proceeding to the Wampum Lot. The eyewitness accounts have apparently been lost, but the Bulletin of the Friends Historical Society reported:

Chief Shenandoah told of the wampum belt for the tract of land on Second Street, alleging that it is still in the possession of the Oneida tribe, and how the proof of the existence of the tract has been handed down from generation to generation...The pipe of peace was smoked under the leadership of Red Fox; and William Penn-Gaskell Hall, seventh in descent from William Penn, responded to the speech of Mountpleasant. [21]

Chief Shenandoah stayed in the home of a descendant of James Logan (William Penn’s secretary and agent for Indian affairs). In gratitude, he declared: "Peace to this house. The hospitality of Stenton and the Logans is still green in the memory of the Six Nations. Indians do not forget." [22]

Despite the pomp and ceremony of this event, Philadelphia’s public memory of Native space was fragile. By 1940, one local historian was inclined to dismiss the existence of the Wampum Lot entirely by absurdly suggesting that settlers "were never troubled by visiting Indians claiming a right to camp in their gardens." [23] By 1982, the city had transformed what was left of the Wampum Lot into "Welcome Park," an outdoor park that, although it depicts the seventeenth century history of William Penn and his land transactions with the Lenape, makes no mention whatsoever of Native diplomacy at the site in the centuries thereafter. [24] This kind of historical erasure is, sadly, not uncommon in America’s public parks. Attempts to preserve Native histories in stone all too often end up freezing them in the past.
Today, in Philadelphia’s outdoor parks and indoor museums, Native American histories are visible in some places and hidden in others. For example, the newest institution devoted to colonial history, the Museum of the American Revolution (MAR), has an entire gallery dedicated to the Oneida Indian Nation, in memory of the fact that the Oneida stepped away from their historical alliance with the other members of the Haudenosaunee to ally themselves with the American colonies in rebellion against Great Britain. The MAR staff have done a remarkable job of collaborating with the Oneida nation to construct an exhibit that pays careful attention to representing Oneida perspectives, past and present. Yet, there is no discussion of the crucial diplomatic negotiations and treaty-making efforts in earlier years with other members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Nor is there any representation of the Lenape nation who first welcomed Penn’s colony, and laid the foundations for Philadelphia’s wampum diplomacy.

In 2015, a delegation of tribal leaders from North and South America gathered at the Wampum Lot/Welcome Park site to speak to the necessity for multi-national relationships. The speakers included: Rev. John Norwood (Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape); Chief Sid Hill (Onondaga), Tadadaho of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy; Betty Lyons (Onondaga), President and Executive Director of the American Indian Law Alliance; Tupac Enrique Acosta (Nahuatl-Xicana), from the Embassy of Indigenous Peoples, among others. They were welcomed by a small group of local residents and members of the Society of Friends, including Paul Ricker, head of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s “Indian Committee.” This event marked the first time, in nearly a century, that Lenape and Haudenosaunee leaders had come together with non-Native people at the Wampum Lot to conduct diplomacy. Although there was no procession, no Governor’s appearance, and no press coverage, the group delivered moving speeches and read a declaration that denounced colonial domination and reclaimed the site as Native space.

There is much more to be said about the recovery of Native memories in Philadelphia, and there are many questions to be asked about the inter-cultural and inter-tribal nuances of colonial diplomacy. There is also a great deal more to be said about the wampum belts that marked and witnessed those encounters. Even though material evidence seems to be scarce, there are multiple opportunities for recalling the past and reviving Native memories in Philadelphia. If we thoughtfully revisit and reconsider the distinct objects, monuments, and sites that evoke these memories, and consult with contemporary Native nations, we might begin to better understand who the Native people were who lived these histories, why they were so insistent on making speeches and posing for portraits, and where their descendants are today.

Sources Cited:

[1] The date, location, and terms of Penn’s treaty with Tamanend are still not entirely clear; the actual date may have been the land deeds signed in 1683, not 1682. For a brief discussion of the controversies surrounding the site, see Andrew Newman, “Treaty of Shackamaxon,” The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia (Camden, NJ: Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities at Rutgers, 2013).


The caption on this engraving reads: “The brave old Hendrick the great Sacmem or Chief of the Mohawk Indians, one of the Six Nations now in Alliance with. & Subject to the King of Great Britain.” This hand-tinted engraving, published in London in 1755 and “Sold by Eliz. Bakewell opposite Birchin Lane in Cornhill,” is based on an earlier portrait, perhaps the one said to have been painted by William Williams in Philadelphia in 1755. *Accession #32623, EN74 B169b in the JCB Archive of Early American Images, at the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.*

For more information on Molly Brant, see Barbara Graymont, *Konwatsi’tsiaienni, Mary Brant,* Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. IV (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 1974–2017). Her presence in Philadelphia in 1755 was also reported by Daniel Claus, who noted that an unnamed Captain “fell in Love wth. Ms. Mary Brant who was then pretty likely not havg. had the small pox.” See Walcott, ed., *Daniel Claus’ Narrative of his Relations with Sir William Johnson*, 8.


Hamersly, [no title], in *The United Service*, 378.

*Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1923), 24-26. Red Fox (Francis St. James) was a prominent Indian rights activist and founder of the “Tipi Order of America,” a fraternal pan-Indian society.


*Welcome Park* was designed and developed as a public historical site by the Friends of Independence National Historical Park in 1982.

The Oneida nation participated in the design and construction of the Oneida gallery in the Museum of the American Revolution. The second floor atrium is also dedicated to the Oneida Nation. See “Oneida Nation Celebrates Opening of the Museum of the American Revolution,” on the Oneida Nation website.


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