



## John Brainerd visits a Lenape community (1751)

*John Brainerd was the younger brother of David Brainerd, a white Presbyterian famous for his missionary work among the indigenous Lenape people. Also known as the Delaware, the Lenape inhabited Pennsylvania and New Jersey. David died young, before age 30, after which John took over his work.*

*In this letter to the Scottish missionary society that funded him, John Brainerd reports on an exploratory visit he made to a Lenape settlement in Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley (which Brainerd spells "Whawomung"). A Lenape Christian, whose name is not given, accompanied Brainerd as interpreter. During this period, colonists were using legal maneuvers to seize Lenape lands; some Lenapes living in the Wyoming Valley when Brainerd visited were refugees from one such expulsion. In the two decades following Brainerd's visit, most Lenapes abandoned their historic homeland and moved west, into what is now Ohio.*

On Wednesday, May the 7th, I set out with my interpreter for Susquehanna, and the next Saturday evening we arrived at an Indian town on that river, called Whawomung [...] When I came to the town, the people generally came together, seeming glad to see me, and treated me with more courtesy and kindness than I expected [...]

The next day the Indians, generally, came together according to appointment. They came, up and down the river, to this as a central place, near thirty miles. Their meeting was not on the account of my coming but to consult about some affairs of their own and, as I understood, particularly with a view to a revelation lately made to a young squaw in a trance. What the particulars of this revelation were, I am not able to say; I made some inquiry, but the Indians seemed somewhat backward to tell. But this much I learned: that it was a confirmation of some revelations they had had before, and particularly that it was the mind of the Great Power that they should destroy the poison from among them.\*

Soon after the Indians were met together, I sent a message to them, desiring to be admitted into their Council and, withal, letting them know that I had something of importance to propose to them; and when they had sat one day, they sent me word that I might come. Accordingly I went, and, when all was ready, I informed them of the errand and design I was come upon, how and by what authority I was sent, and that I had a sincere desire to instruct them and their children in those things that would be greatly for their benefit both in this and the future world. By their

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\* 'Tis said that the Indians keep poison among them and that this is of such a nature that if anyone takes it in his breath, it will cause him, in a few months, to pine away and die. And this is supposed to be in the keeping of their old and principal men, and by this means they keep the people in continual dread of them. And some of the Indians seem to be so sottish as to imagine that they can poison them by only speaking the word, though they are at the distance of twenty or thirty miles, and consequently are afraid to displease them in any point. —J.B.

[Footnote from the source publication]

answer, I perceived that some of their old and leading men, especially, had imbibed some late prejudices against Christianity [...]

They told me that the great God first made three men and three women, viz., the Indian, the negro, and the white man. That the white man was the youngest brother, and therefore the white people ought not to think themselves better than the Indians. That God gave the white man a book and told him that he must worship him by that, but gave none either to the Indian or negro, and therefore it could not be right for them to have a book or be any way concerned with that way of worship. And furthermore, they understood that the white people were contriving a method to deprive them of their country in those parts, as they had done by the seaside, and to make slaves of them and their children as they did of the negroes; that I was sent on purpose to accomplish that design, and, if I succeeded and managed my business well, I was to be chief ruler in those parts, or, as they termed it, king of all their country, etc. They made all the objections they could and raked up all the ill treatment they could think of that ever their brethren had received from the white people, and two or three of them seemed to have resentment enough to have slain me on the spot.

I answered all their objections against Christianity, and likewise the many grievous allegations laid to my charge, and whatever was spoken by any of them. But when I had done, they told me that I had been learning a great while, and 'twas no wonder if I could outtalk them; but this did not at all convince them that I was not upon a bad design, and therefore they would give me no liberty to preach to their people but charged me not to come anymore upon such an errand.

When I saw the Indians so much prejudiced against Christianity, I did not think it prudent to urge the matter any further at this time, but to wait till an opportunity should present for the removal of their groundless prejudices; therefore, I did not attempt to gather any number of them together, but visited them at their several houses, and had much opportunity of conversing with them at my own and of showing them kindness, having good store of provisions of several sorts, which they much wanted and were very glad of.

After some time, they sent for my interpreter, and discoursed with him on the subject of Christianity. They desired him to give them the reasons why he forsook the Indian ways and became a Christian, which he freely and readily did. And when he had done and answered to many questions, they told him they should be glad if the Christian Indians should come and live there; that they should take their choice of all the uninhabited land on Susquehanna, and should have liberty to worship God as they thought right, and that the young people in those parts should have liberty also to join with them if they desired it.

The interpreter told them that the Christian Indians could not come to live there unless their minister came with them. They replied the minister must not come, because he was a white man; that, if one white man came, another would desire it, etc., and so, by and by, they should lose their country. But the minister might live on the nearest land belonging to the white people and visit them as often as he would. This, the interpreter insisted upon, would not do, but the minister must come with them and live on the spot.

The result of the conversation was this: the interpreter, upon his return home, should inform the

Christian Indians that the king and the principal Indians on Susquehanna desired to see them (or at least a number of them), and would have them make them a visit as soon as they could conveniently. Accordingly, soon after his return to the Forks of Delaware, he made the Indians in this place a visit<sup>a</sup> and faithfully delivered his message; and as sundry of the Indians in those parts desired the same of me, I cannot but hope, through the blessing of heaven, it may be a means of removing some of their unjust prejudices against the Christian religion. I have encouraged the matter and propose to send a number of the most judicious of my people, so soon as their circumstances will permit.

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<sup>a</sup> “this place” = Bethel, a settlement in New Jersey founded by Christianized Lenapes under David Brainerd’s leadership. Bethel represented the mission’s greatest success and was John Brainerd’s base of operations. The Lenape interpreter lived not in Bethel but at the Forks of Delaware, in Pennsylvania, closer to the Wyoming Valley.

**Source:** Thomas Brainerd, *The Life of John Brainerd* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Publication Committee, 1865), 230-237, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t0dv1d85g>. Public domain.

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