

As an outcome of the Seven Years' War, France lost all its territorial possessions on the North American mainland, with Spain taking over France's claims west of the Mississippi River, and Britain taking over France's claims east of the river. Indigenous peoples in the Ohio River valley and the Great Lakes region, many of whom had been French allies during the war, spurned the new British administration and launched renewed attacks on British forts and settlements. Collectively, these attacks were known as Pontiac's War. The British government negotiated an end to the conflict by pledging not to let colonists settle west of the Appalachians.

The following selection comes from an anonymous French account of Pontiac's War, believed to have been written by a former French colonial official who continued living in Detroit. The author recounts how Pontiac, an Odawa military leader, persuaded other indigenous people to wage war against the British, in part by invoking a vision recently proclaimed by a Lenape prophet. This account refers to the prophet simply as "the Wolf," a term that the French applied to Lenapes, but historians know this prophet by the name Neolin.

An Indian of the Wolf nation, eager to make the acquaintance of the Master of Life—this is the name for God among all the Indians—resolved to undertake the journey to Paradise, where he knew He resided [...] This Wolf Indian [...] imagined that he had only to set out and by dint of traveling would arrive at the celestial dwelling. This he did [...] Early in the morning, he arose and equipped himself for a hunting journey, not forgetting to take provisions, and ammunition, and a big kettle. [...]

[After walking for about ten days,] he saw before him what appeared to be a mountain of marvelous whiteness [...] When he reached the top, [...] he saw coming toward him a handsome man, clothed all in white, who took him by the hand and told him that he was going to satisfy him and let him talk with the Master of Life. The Wolf permitted the man to conduct him, and both came to a place of surpassing beauty, which the Indian could not admire enough. Here he saw the Master of Life, who took him by the hand and gave him a hat all bordered with gold to sit down upon. The Wolf hesitated to do this for fear of spoiling the hat, but he was ordered to do so and obeyed without reply.

After the Indian was seated, the Lord said to him: "I am the Master of Life, and since I know what thou desirest to know, and to whom thou wishest to speak, listen well to what I am going to say to thee and to all the Indians:

"I am He who hath created the heavens and the earth, the trees, lakes, rivers, all men, and all that thou seest and hast seen upon the earth. Because I love you, ye must do what I say and love, and not do what I hate. I do not love that ye should drink to the point of madness, as ye do; and I do not like that ye should fight one another. Ye take two wives, or run after the wives of others; ye do not well, and I hate that. Ye ought to have but one wife and keep her till death. When ye wish to go to war, ye conjure and resort to the medicine dance, believing that ye speak to me; ye are mistaken—it is to Manitou that ye speak, an evil spirit who prompts you to nothing but wrong and who listens to you out of ignorance of me.

“This land where ye dwell, I have made for you and not for others. Whence comes it that ye permit the Whites upon your lands? Can ye not live without them? I know that those whom ye call the children of your Great Father supply your needs; but if ye were not evil, as ye are, ye could surely do without them. Ye could live as ye did live before knowing them—before those whom ye call your brothers had come upon your lands. Did ye not live by the bow and arrow? Ye had no need of gun or powder, or anything else, and nevertheless ye caught animals to live upon and to dress yourselves with their skins. But when I saw that ye were given up to evil, I led the wild animals to the depths of the forests so that ye had to depend upon your brothers to feed and shelter you. Ye have only to become again and do what I wish, and I will send back the animals for your food. I do not forbid you to permit among you the children of your Father; I love them. They know me and pray to me, and I supply their wants and all they give you. But as to those who come to trouble your lands—drive them out, make war upon them. I do not love them at all; they know me not and are my enemies and the enemies of your brothers. Send them back to the lands which I have created for them, and let them stay there. Here is a prayer which I give thee, in writing, to learn by heart and to teach to the Indians and their children.”

The Wolf replied that he did not know how to read. He was told that when he should have returned to earth, he would have only to give the prayer to the chief of his village, who would read it and teach him and all the Indians to know it by heart; and he must say it night and morning without fail, and do what he has just been told to do. And he was to tell all the Indians, for and in the name of the Master of Life:

“Do not drink more than once, or at most twice, in a day; have only one wife and do not run after the wives of others, nor after the girls; do not fight among yourselves; do not ‘make medicine,’ but pray, because in ‘making medicine,’ one talks with the evil spirit; drive off your lands those dogs clothed in red who will do you nothing but harm. And when ye shall have need of anything, address yourselves to me; and as to your brothers, I shall give to you as to them; do not sell to your brothers what I have put on earth for food. In short, become good, and ye shall receive your needs. When ye meet one another, exchange greeting and proffer the left hand, which is nearest the heart.

“In all things, I command thee to repeat every morning and night the prayer which I have given thee.”

The Wolf promised to do faithfully what the Master of Life told him, and that he would recommend it well to the Indians, and that the Master of Life would be pleased with them. Then the same man who had led him by the hand came to get him and conducted him to the foot of the mountain, where he told him to take his outfit again and return to his village. [...]

The adventure was soon noised about among the people of the whole village, who came to hear the message of the Master of Life and then went to carry it to the neighboring villages. The members of these villages came to see the pretended traveler, and the news was spread from village to village and finally reached Pontiac. He believed all this, as we believe an article of faith, and instilled it into the minds of all those in his council. They listened to him as to an oracle and told him that he had only to speak, and they were all ready to do what he demanded of them [...] He said:

“It is important for us, my brothers, that we exterminate from our lands this nation which seeks only to destroy us. You see as well as I that we can no longer supply our needs, as we have done, from our brothers, the French. The English sell us goods twice as dear as the French do, and their goods do not last. Scarcely have we bought a blanket or something else to cover ourselves with, before we must think of getting another; and when we wish to set out for our winter camps, they do not want to give us any credit, as our brothers, the French, do.

“When I go to see the English commander and say to him that some of our comrades are dead, instead of bewailing their death, as our French brothers do, he laughs at me and at you. If I ask anything for our sick, he refuses with the reply that he has no use for us. From all this, you can well see that they are seeking our ruin. Therefore, my brothers, we must all swear their destruction and wait no longer. Nothing prevents us; they are few in numbers, and we can accomplish it. All the nations who are our brothers attack them—why should we not attack? Are we not men like them? [...] Remember what the Master of Life told our brother, the Wolf, to do. That concerns us all, as well as others. I have sent wampum belts and messengers to our brothers the Chippewas of Saginaw, and to our brothers the Ottawas of Michillimackinac, and to those of the Thames River to join us. They will not be slow in coming; but while we wait, let us strike anyway. There is no more time to lose. When the English are defeated, we shall then see what there is left to do, and we shall stop up the ways hither so that they may never come again upon our lands.”

Source: M. Agnes Burton, ed., *Journal of Pontiac's Conspiracy, 1763*, trans. R. Clyde Ford (Detroit, MI: Published by Clarence Monroe Burton under the Auspices of the Michigan Society of the Colonial Wars, [1912]), 22-40, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/yale.39002032938731>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. An additional sentence break inserted for readability. Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern usage. The capitalizing of *Whites* reproduces the usage of the source publication, in both the English translation and the French original. The capitalizing of religious names and titles (*Master of Life, Paradise, Manitou, Great Father*), as well as the capitalizing of *He* in reference to the Master of Life, also replicates the source.

These edited excerpts from the *Journal* are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



© 2021 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.