



## *A Narrative of the Late Massacres in Lancaster County* Benjamin Franklin (1764)

*In 1763, various indigenous nations west of the Appalachians launched attacks on British forts and settlements, an event known as Pontiac's War. Some of these attacks occurred in western Pennsylvania. In retaliation, a militia of white Pennsylvanians, dubbed the Paxton Boys (from the village of Paxton, a.k.a. Paxtang), massacred a Susquehannock community in eastern Pennsylvania, whose village was known to whites as Conestoga Manor. The Susquehannocks of Conestoga Manor had no involvement in Pontiac's War. The governor of Pennsylvania offered a financial reward to encourage informants to identify individual perpetrators of the massacre; but no one came forward, and no one was ever prosecuted for the killings. In the pamphlet excerpted here, Benjamin Franklin, who lived in Pennsylvania, denounces the Paxton Boys.*

On Wednesday, the 14th of December, 1763, fifty-seven men from some of our frontier townships, who had projected the destruction of this little commonwealth, came, all well mounted and armed with firelocks, hangers, and hatchets, having traveled through the country in the night, to Conestoga Manor. There they surrounded the small village of Indian huts and, just at break of day, broke into them all at once. Only three men, two women, and a young boy were found at home, the rest being out among the neighboring white people, some to sell the baskets, brooms, and bowls they manufactured, and others on other occasions. These poor defenseless creatures were immediately fired upon, stabbed, and hatcheted to death! [...] All of them were scalped and otherwise horribly mangled. Then their huts were set on fire, and most of them burned down. Then the troop, pleased with their own conduct and bravery, but enraged that any of the poor Indians had escaped the massacre, rode off and, in small parties, by different roads, went home.

The universal concern of the neighboring white people on hearing of this event, and the lamentations of the younger Indians when they returned and saw the desolation, and the butchered, half-burned bodies of their murdered parents and other relations, cannot well be expressed.

The magistrates of Lancaster sent out to collect the remaining Indians; brought them into the town for their better security against any further attempt; and, it is said, condoled with them on the misfortune that had happened, took them by the hand, comforted, and promised them protection. They were all put into the workhouse, a strong building, as the place of greatest safety.

[...T]hose cruel men again assembled themselves, and hearing that the remaining fourteen Indians were in the workhouse at Lancaster, they suddenly appeared in that town on the 27th of December. Fifty of them, armed as before, dismounting, went directly to the workhouse and, by violence, broke open the door and entered with the utmost fury in their countenances. When the poor wretches saw they had no protection nigh nor could possibly escape, and being without the least weapon for defense, they divided into their little families, the children clinging to the parents; they fell on their knees, protested their innocence, declared their love to the English and that, in their whole lives, they had never done them injury; and in this posture they all received

the hatchet! Men, women, and little children were, every one, inhumanly murdered! in cold blood!

The barbarous men who committed the atrocious fact, in defiance of government, of all laws human and divine, and to the eternal disgrace of their country and color, then mounted their horses, huzzahed in triumph, as if they had gained a victory, and rode off—unmolested! [...]

The only crime of these poor wretches seems to have been that they had a reddish-brown skin and black hair; and some people of that sort, it seems, had murdered some of our relations. If it be right to kill men for such a reason, then should any man with a freckled face and red hair kill a wife or child of mine, it would be right for me to revenge it by killing all the freckled red-haired men, women, and children I could afterwards anywhere meet with.

But it seems these people think they have a better justification: nothing less than the word of God. With the scriptures in their hands and mouths, they can set at nought that express command, *Thou shalt do no murder*, and justify their wickedness by the command given Joshua to destroy the heathen. Horrid perversion of scripture and of religion! to father the worst of crimes on the God of peace and love! [...]

We pretend to be Christians and, from the superior light we enjoy, ought to exceed heathens, Turks, Saracens, Moors, Negroes, and Indians in the knowledge and practice of what is right. I will endeavor to show, by a few examples from books and history, the sense those people have had of such actions.

*[Franklin fills several pages with examples of ancient Greeks, Turkish and Arab Muslims, Spanish Catholics, black Africans, and indigenous Americans who demonstrated honor by extending hospitality, showing mercy, or keeping promises even to enemies. He then returns to the victims of the Conestoga Manor massacre.]*

These poor people have always been our friends. Their fathers received ours, when strangers here, with kindness and hospitality. Behold the return we have made them! When we grew more numerous and powerful, they put themselves under our protection. See, in the mangled corpses of the last remains of their tribe, how effectually we have afforded it to them!

Unhappy people! to have lived in such times and by such neighbors!

- We have seen that they would have been safer among the ancient heathens, with whom the rites of hospitality were sacred. They would have been considered as guests of the public, and the religion of the country would have operated in their favor. But our frontier people call themselves Christians!
- They would have been safer if they had submitted to the Turks; for ever since Mahomet's reproof to Khaled, even the cruel Turks never kill prisoners in cold blood. These were not even prisoners. But what is the example of Turks to scripture Christians?
- They would have been safer though they had been taken in actual war against the Saracens, if they had once drunk water with them. These were not taken in war against us

and have drunk with us, and we with them, for fourscore years. But shall we compare Saracens to Christians?

- They would have been safer among the Moors in Spain, though they had been murderers of sons, if faith had once been pledged to them and a promise of protection given. But these have had the faith of the English given to them many times by the government; and in reliance on that faith, they lived among us and gave us the opportunity of murdering them. However, what was honorable in Moors may not be a rule to us, for we are Christians!
- They would have been safer, it seems, among popish Spaniards, even if enemies and delivered into their hands by a tempest. These were not enemies; they were born among us, and yet we have killed them all. But shall we imitate idolatrous papists, we that are enlightened Protestants?
- They would even have been safer among the Negroes of Africa, where at least one manly soul would have been found with sense, spirit, and humanity enough to stand in their defense. But shall white men and Christians act like a pagan Negro?

In short, it appears that they would have been safe in any part of the known world, except in the neighborhood of the CHRISTIAN WHITE SAVAGES of Paxtang and Donegal!

O ye unhappy perpetrators of this horrid wickedness! Reflect a moment on the mischief ye have done, the disgrace ye have brought on your country, on your religion and your Bible, on your families and children! Think on the destruction of your captivated countryfolks (now among the wild Indians) which probably may follow in resentment of your barbarity! Think on the wrath of the united Five Nations, hitherto our friends, but now, provoked by your murdering one of their tribes, in danger of becoming our bitter enemies. Think of the mild and good government you have so audaciously insulted; the laws of your king, your country, and your GOD that you have broken; the infamous death that hangs over your heads—for JUSTICE, though slow, will come at last. All good people everywhere detest your actions. You have imbrued your hands in innocent blood; how will you make them clean?

**Source:** [Benjamin Franklin], *A Narrative of the Late Massacres, in Lancaster County, of a Number of Indians, Friends of This Province* [...] (Philadelphia, 1764), 5-6, 8-9, 13-14, 25-28, <https://archive.org/details/narrativeoflatem00fran>. Free eBook from the Internet Archive.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. A long paragraph reformatted as a bulleted-style list for readability. A typographical error in the source publication corrected (*when* → *then*). Spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation modernized or Americanized. Italics omitted except where they set off a biblical quotation, but use of all caps and small caps for emphasis retained. The religious terms *word of God*, *scripture*, *popish*, *papists*, *heathen*, and *pagan*, capitalized in the source publication, have been converted here to lowercase, along with many other words that are capitalized in the source per antiquated convention. The capitalizing of *Negro* reproduces the consistent usage of the source; the racial label *white*, inconsistently capitalized in the source, is consistently presented here in lowercase.

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