The Susquehannocks

By

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In 1608, in his exploration of the Chesapeake Bay, Captain John Smith reached the point where the Susquehanna River meets the Bay. Unable to take his boat farther because of the falls at the point where the river entered the Bay, Smith stopped among the native people called the Tockwoghs to rest and replace provisions. While there, a contingent of sixty warriors visited the Tockwoghs to trade. According to Smith, these warriors "seemed like Giants to the English...the calfe [of the greatest of them] measured 3 quarters of a yard [27 inches] about." Dressed in the skins of bears and wolves, some with the heads or paws of the animals still attached, these people very much impressed Smith, who learned that they came from up the river, perhaps a two-day journey from the Bay, and that their town housed "near 600" such warriors. The Tockwoghs called them Sasquesahanocks, a name somewhat Anglicized in later years to become Susquehannocks, and the river on which they lived came to be named after them - the Susquehanna.

Seven years later, a Frenchman in the service of Samuel de Champlain, Etienne Brule, led an delegation of Hurons into an area on the North Branch of the Susquehanna River to seek an alliance with the Susquehannocks against the Onondagas. Brule's mission came too late; the Onondagas had already defeated Champlain's forces by the time Brule reached the Susquehannock villages, which according to a map he later produced were located around the large earthen mound called Spanish Hill near what would later become Athens, Pennsylvania. Brule spent perhaps as long as two years among these people, and during that time he added to his earlier exploits of becoming the first European to see the Great Lakes with his journey from the Spanish Hill area to the Chesapeake Bay, becoming the first European to traverse the length of the Susquehanna River.

For the next 100 years, the Susquehannocks dominated the Susquehanna River Valley, establishing a series of large towns in Lancaster County, the most important of

which was at Washington Boro, a town that is believed to have housed 2000 people. They traveled east to engage in trade with the Dutch and Swedish settlements in Delaware. They traveled south to engage in trade with the English in Maryland, eventually signing a treaty of alliance with the Maryland colony in 1661; as part of this arrangement, the Maryland colonial government posted fifty English soldiers and cannons at the Susquehannocks' "fort." Throughout this period of the early and mid 17th century, the Susquehannocks controlled the trade between Europeans and their allies in Western Pennsylvania - the Eries and, in Ontario, the Hurons - while they engaged in war with the Senecas, Cayugas, and other members of the Iroquois Five Nations. William Penn visited their town on the Conestoga Creek in Lancaster County in 1700 and offered them his assurances of peace with "Penn's Woods." Eventually, however, warfare and smallpox took its toll on these Native Americans, with the first records of a smallpox outbreak among them coming in 1661. Continuing hostilities with the Seneca; the destruction of their native allies, the Eries, in 1655; the defeat of the Hurons by the Five Nations; and a change in policy in Maryland leading to an all-out attack on them by a combined English militia from Maryland and Virginia in 1675; brought this once influential people to near annihilation. On Christmas Eve, 1763, a vigilante band of settlers from Dauphin County, called the Paxton Boys, massacred a community of Susquehannocks in Lancaster in retaliation for native atrocities in the French & Indian War of 1755-1763 (a war in which the Susquehannocks did not participate) leading historians to conclude that the Susquehannock nation had been done away with.

The point of this brief history is two-fold: first, to note the widespread influence of the Susquehannocks in the Susquehanna River Valley during the 16th and 17th centuries and second, to point to how many different native and European nations had contact with them over that period. One might conclude that the Susquehannocks would be among the best known of the native peoples of Pennsylvania and perhaps the Northeast, and yet very little is known about them today except through occasional excerpts from explorers' or missionaries' accounts and modern-day archaeological excavations of their towns and villages. This is especially true compared to their coresidents of the region of that time, the Lenape or Delawares. Researchers have debated

who the Susquehannocks were and how they lived for decades, going back, in fact, to the 19th century, and yet significant questions remain unanswered.

For example, it is not clear what these people called themselves. John Smith called them by the name used by his hosts, the Tockwoghs, and generally English colonial figures used the name "Susquehannock" for them. But the French knew them as Andastes (alternatively Andastogues or Andastogueronons), and the Dutch called them Minquas. In the 19th century, General John S. Clark (1823-1912), a Civil War military officer and then a researcher/antiquarian, became fascinated with the Iroquoian peoples and their history, including the Susquehannocks, and he collected as much correspondence and historical evidence as he could find, dating back into the 17th century, to try and illuminate Iroquois traditions and cultures. He found that in addition to the labels already mentioned for the Susquehannocks that those people were also known by many other names. He suggested that the label John Smith originally used in his text, Sasquesahanough, was from a Seneca reference to the Susquehannocks, the name being derived from Seneca roots meaning "great falls," presumably the falls of the Susquehanna River near Conewago. Brule called the principal North Branch town of the people he was recruiting for Champlain, "Carantouan," and the Susquehannocks were known as the Carantouans to some. Another name for them that appears in early literature is Gandastogues, which supposedly means "people of the blackened ridge pole," a reference to the aftermath of a Susquehannock attack - a burned structure. Gandastogue is thought to have evolved into Conestoga, the name by which they were known in Lancaster County in the 18th century and which would give their name to a waterway as well as the covered wagons built in Lancaster County for settlers pressing into the western frontier.

There may be two main reasons for the confusing array of labels and the questions about the Susquehannocks and their history. The first is that they were a tribal society, in the sense that anthropologists use the term "tribe." As a reference to a kind of social organization, a tribe refers to a widely distributed group of people who generally share a common history, language and customs (though with local variations) but not a common or centralized political structure. Each tribal community is typically autonomous and often individually named, though many tribal societies around the world do have the potential to come together in a united purpose, such as a common

ritual or an outside threat. In those situations, a loose kind of political structure may emerge built around respected individuals, or what anthropologists call pan-tribal sodalities, organizations that have members from many different locations, cutting across local autonomy. The warrior societies of the Plains Indians served in this fashion, as they would draw communities together for a common purpose such as a bison hunt; the sodality would organize and police the hunt. However, once the common purpose is removed, the autonomous segments will go back to their home territories and have little contact with other like communities. In these autonomous communities, local kin ties and marriage are more important on a daily basis than



Strickler Cord Marked Susquehannock Pottery ca. 1600 From Frey 2008, used by permission.

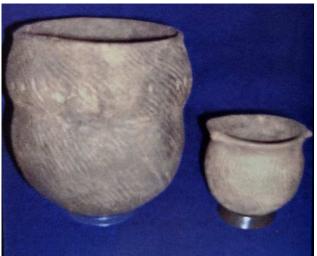
membership in a common ethnicity, and it is not at all unusual for each community to have its own name or identity. What we now think of as the Susquehannock nation, or for that matter, the Lenapes or the Lakotas or other Native American "tribes," is often an artifact of conquest; Europeans tended to ignore the local identities and treat all of them as one nation. Thus, for example, research suggests that what is now called the Lenape Nation in Pennsylvania probably only emerged after contact as European diseases decimated native communities and resettlement measures forced survivors into a common identity and place. (Or as in the case of the alternative label for the Lenapes, "Delaware," a label was imposed on them by outsiders, in this case, English colonial authorities. The English tended to label native people in the Americas for the waterways on which they first contacted them.)

17th century history of the Susquehannocks, that they seemed to be at war with their neighbors for much of their history. As General Clark pointed out from his studies, the one common label that everyone seemed to agree upon was "hostile." This passage from a 1648 account by a Frenchman named Ragueneau seems typical: "They are nations of the Huron language, and of all times allies of our Hurons. They are very warlike and number in a single town thirteen hundred men bearing arms." (see Murray 1931:58). Clark, in fact, says that the Iroquois referred to the Susquehannocks as demons and suggests that the Iroquois name for the West Branch of the Susquehanna, Otzinachson, means "place of the demons" in reference to the Susquehannocks living there (in Murray 1931: 5). Given the history of conflict, it is not unexpected that misunderstandings exist about a people so many were at war with. A commonly reported encounter between a raiding band of Senecas and Cayugas and the Susquehannocks in 1671 is often taken as an example of their prowess in battle. By this point, according to multiple sources, the Susquehannocks had been reduced in numbers by smallpox and war to only 300 warriors, and the combined Seneca/Cayuga force chose to take advantage of this by attacking a Susquehannock town on the river near the Maryland border, only to be beaten back by a group of sixty Susquehannock teenagers, sixteen years of age or younger. The Seneca/Cayugas suffered severe losses in this battle, according to a French Jesuit priest, "while the battlefield remained in possession of the Andastogue boys with a loss of fifteen or sixteen of them" (in Benson n.d.: 27).

Were the Susquehannocks exceptional in their fierceness and skill in war? This seems unlikely, especially given the old assertion that the victors write the histories. There are also multiple accounts of the Iroquois' warlike tendencies, and it is clear that all parties to these conflicts in the 17th century were quick to attack their enemies with the goal of inflicting as much damage as possible and that they tortured prisoners. Note, too, that the surviving accounts are all by Europeans who were quick to both use native warriors as allies when needed and to turn on those allies when convenient. It was, after all, the fur trade, introduced by Europeans, that intensified native conflicts. Once European metal and glass goods began to flow into native hands in the 17th century in exchange for beaver pelts, Native Americans quickly became dependent on them, replacing stone tipped arrows with muskets and clay pots with metal ones; in some areas, native crafts disappeared within a generation, and burials become filled with clay

pipes, glass beads, mirrors, steel knives and swords. A prime example of the intensified conflict is the extermination of the Eries by the Seneca in 1655. The Iroquois nations, in the rush to obtain pelts for trade, had killed all the beaver within their traditional territories. They turned then to their neighbors, making war on them in order to obtain a continuing supply of pelts. Jennings (1968:30) records an example of the dependence the natives in the Northeast on European goods with a telling anecdote: "In 1670 a Susquehannock sachem dinned this into the heads of some stubborn Lenape 'and showed them, here live Christians and there live Christians; declaring to them that as they were surrounded by Christians, if they went to war, where would they get powder and ball?"





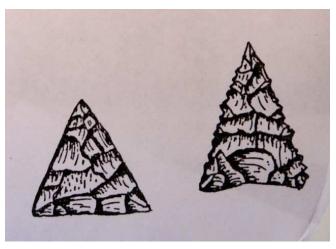
"Shultz Incised" "Washington Boro Incised" Susquehannock Pottery From Frey 2008, used with permission.

Susquehannock Culture

It is generally agreed that the Susquehannocks were culturally related to the Iroquois and that they spoke an Iroquoian family language, rather than the Algonquin languages spoken by the Lenape, Mahicans and others in the Northeast. Brule reported that after having lived with the Hurons, who also spoke an Iroquoian language, he could easily converse with the Susquehannocks he spent time with on the North Branch. Archaeological excavations reveal that most Susquehannock villages were surrounded with tree trunk palisades or fortresses like those of the Five Nation Iroquois of New York State (Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas; the Tuscaroras, originally

from the Carolinas, joined the five in 1722 to become the modern Six Nations.) Also, like the Iroquois, Susquehannocks lived in longhouses within these fortresses - structures 40 to 100 feet long constructed of branches anchored in the ground and covered with bark. (The Six Nations call themselves the Haudenosaunee, or "People of the Longhouse.") Presumably then, like the Iroquois, the Susquehannocks were matrilineal, i.e., they traced descent through the female line, and the people living within a longhouse would have been an extended family of related women with their children and husbands. Men would have married into these households (i.e., they were matrilocal), and women would have chosen their husbands, being people of great influence and respect.

There would likely have been complementary gender roles within their social organization, as is the case among the Iroquois. Men would have cleared the forest for planting; women would have tended the gardens (built around the Iroquois' Three Sisters: maize or corn, beans and squash) and prepared the food for storage or consumption. Men would have hunted wild game and taken advantage of the



Susquehannock projectile points. Taken from Fogelman 1992, used with permission

abundance of fish on the river; women prepared the game to eat. Among the Iroquois, villages were periodically abandoned and/or relocated. After a period of time, the wooden palisades would rot in the moist, acidic soil; local game animals would have been over-hunted, and the fields, which were not fertilized except by the remains of last season's vegetation left behind to serve as a sort of compost, would become less

productive. At the time of European contact, it was noted with regard to the Iroquois that these relocations occurred approximately every fifteen years, though because of the conflicts in which they were involved Susquehannock villages may have moved more often. They buried their dead outside the palisade walls, usually with a variety of grave goods.

Communities could be quite large; as noted above, the Washington Boro site is thought to have housed as many as two thousand people, pointing to their ability to successfully provision large numbers of people for a decade or more, while other outlying communities in Lancaster County were smaller and housed only a few hundred people (see Kent 1984). The Hershey site, for example, was composed of perhaps forty longhouses, each approximately 15 feet wide and 45 to 50 feet in length. An estimated 500 to 600 people lived at this site, which was occupied for perhaps only ten years. The Hershey site is unusual in that it was unfortified (no palisades) and unlike the other Lancaster County sites which sit right on the river, is located a mile away from the Susquehanna (Schulenberg, Weets and Van Rossum 2003).

Having said all this, however, it must be noted that the actual Susquehannock culture - the way people lived day to day - is based on surmises and analogies to the much better known and still extant Iroquois nations. No European wrote about the everyday existence of these people or recorded much of their history, except to the extent that it conflicted with European motives or needs. A good example is the Susquehannock language. In the mid-17th century, a European named John Campanius recorded some Susquehannock words and phrases (in Kent 1984: 30-31). It is not known how accurate Campanius' accounts are (i.e., if they are phonetic transcriptions or whether they were obtained directly from Susquehannock informants), but what there is of them seems to support Brule's account that the people he lived among understood his Huron speech, that is, Susquehannock seems similar to the northwestern varieties of the Iroquois language family. In the 19th century, Clark attempted to obtain derivations of Susquehannock words from the journals and letters he collected by showing them to Iroquois informants; these informants agreed that the words were Iroquois, but disagreed on what they meant.

The Susquehannocks on the West Branch

As noted earlier, the Susquehannocks were a dominant force on the Susquehanna River during the 17th century, with towns stretching from what is today the New York/Pennsylvania border on the North Branch of the river to falls of the Main Branch of the river as it enters the Chesapeake Bay. This includes the West Branch of the river as well. It appears that the motivating factor behind the Susquehannock presence in the river valley as a whole and their specific interest in the West Branch was the fur trade. Jennings (1968:21-22) writes of this, noting:

To outward appearances...the Susquehannocks were the Great Powers in their part of the world, but Susquehannock power was illusory because the mechanism for generating it was beyond Susquehannock control. That mechanism was the fur trade. To maintain their glory, the Susquehannocks had to get the weaponry that only Europeans could supply and that only peltry could buy. To get the peltry, the Susquehannocks had to hunt and fight under rules of competition set by conditions of geography and communication. Great distances lay between hunting grounds and markets. The cycle of the trade could not be completed without secure access to both a source of peltry and a source of trade goods."

In other words, the Susquehannocks were striving to make themselves the middlemen, the key link between European powers and the sources of beaver pelts, which by the 17th century lay primarily to the north and west in the Great Lakes region, an area dominated by the Hurons. There were insufficient numbers of beaver in the river valley itself to maintain the trade the Susquehannocks desired, and, as pointed out earlier, the Iroquois in New York State had wiped out their native population of beaver in the same headlong rush to obtain European goods. The Susquehannocks demonstrated time and again their willingness to travel great distances to secure trading partners. In 1626, Isaack de Rasiere wrote that the Susquehannocks had come to Manhattan offering to serve as middlemen in the fur trade. From the main branch of the Susquehanna River, the Susquehannocks traveled overland through what is now southeastern Pennsylvania to the Delaware and then down that river to the Dutch and Swedish settlements on the coast (defeating the Lenape in 1636 to win this privilege, and then offering themselves to the Europeans as their defense against the Lenape), opening up a trade link to that source of goods. As seen before, they traveled to the Chesapeake Bay and the Maryland colony to trade with the English.

But to make their role as middlemen work they needed to establish a link with the Hurons, and the way to do that was to secure the West Branch of the river for access to the Great Lakes region and the Hurons. In retrospect, this appears to be a grand scheme, but in reality it is unlikely that the Susquehannocks were acting out a plan created by some centralized power; tribal societies simply do not act in that fashion. Rather, the motivator was self-interest, and the geographical reality was the Susquehanna River and its tributaries. In this sense, the Susquehannocks were acting more like 21st-Century commodities traders than what is conventionally thought of as 17th-Century Native Americans. In the short run, this made the Susquehannocks a force to be reckoned with; in the long run, it made them the enemies of everyone, European or native, who wanted the same thing the Susquehannocks managed to maintain for several decades: direct access to wealth. When disease and war weakened their position, the Susquehannocks succumbed and disappeared from the history books.

Because the Susquehannocks were not looking at the West Branch of the river as an area in which to settle, there are no remains of stockaded towns, as in Lancaster County, but their impact was felt nonetheless. In the spring issue of this journal (Vol. 4, No. 1: pp 11-22), I wrote about the Susquehannocks' immediate predecessors on the West Branch, the archaeological culture called the Shenks Ferry Culture, which was located there and on the main branch of the river into Lancaster County in the period from approximately 1350 A.D. to about 1500 A.D. It is now generally believed that the Shenks Ferry people were themselves a conquest society, having moved into the valley from the Potomac region, eventually displacing the earlier Clemson Island Culture, which may have moved north in response, to become the Senecas. In their early history, the Shenks Ferry people lived in small, open villages along the river, hunting, fishing, and growing corn, beans and squash like other Native American cultures in the Northeast. But around 1450 A.D., Shenks Ferry communities began to change. They became larger and surrounded themselves with palisades. The standard explanation is that the Shenks Ferry people were now being threatened in turn by another outside source. That is generally thought to be the Susquehannocks. By 1500, the Shenks Ferry Culture had ceased to exist.

Were the Susquehannocks Driven to Extinction?

As mentioned earlier, in December 1763, the Paxton Boys killed six Susquehannocks in their community on Conestoga Creek in Lancaster County. Fourteen survivors - women, children, and old men - fled into Lancaster town where they were given shelter in the town jail. However, when the Paxton Boys arrived in Lancaster two weeks later, the town authorities withdrew and the vigilantes murdered the surviving Susquehannocks in their "safe" house. According to standard accounts, that was the last of the Susquehannocks; the people who dominated life in the river valley in the 17th century had ceased to exist.

However, today in Pennsylvania it is possible to find people who insist they are descendants of the Susquehannocks, generally through intermarriage in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Could this be possible? That there were individual Susquehannocks who were not in Lancaster in December 1763 is a possibility, again because of the nature of tribal society. The argument for this presumption lies within a debate over why the Susquehannocks moved south from their original home area in southern New York State in the early 16th century. Experts on the Susquehannocks believe that prior to European contact they lived on the North Branch of the Susquehanna at the point where it enters what is now Pennsylvania, and that they spread very rapidly down the North Branch into the Lancaster County area between 1500 and 1550 A.D. In the early 19th century, the historian Francis Parkman argued that the Five Nations Iroquois made war on the Susquehannocks at this time and drove them south. Jennings disputed this in his 1968 article, arguing that there was no concrete evidence of any war between the Iroquois and the Susquehannocks. Rather, he argued, as has been seen earlier in this article, that the Susquehannocks moved south to get closer to European settlements in order to trade for European-made goods. In a rebuttal to Jennings, the anthropologist Elizabeth Tooker noted in an article in Pennsylvania Archaeologist in 1984 that the reason there was no concrete evidence of Iroquois/Susquehannock warfare was that tribal warfare leaves nothing concrete behind to find. Rather, a defeated tribal society, if given the chance, simply disperses. Thus, with no literate observer around to record an event of that type, it would appear that a tribal society simply ceased to be. Tooker suggests a likely scenario: "These Indians

were not assimilated as subject peoples as would be customary after a defeat today, but were adopted as full members of various Iroquois tribes." (1984: 5)

With that argument in mind, what I am suggesting here is that the Susquehannock Nation ceased to exist as a concrete recognizable entity in 1763, but individual Susquehannocks survived. In his important book, *Susquehanna's Indians*, former state archaeologist Barry Kent raises the possibility that not every Susquehannock was at home in Conestoga in December 1763, and he presents possible evidence that surviving Susquehannocks were elsewhere at that time. An expert on the Iroquois culture, Dean Snow, notes that Susquehannocks were living with the Cayugas in the 16th century, and anthropologist William Englebrecht points out that by 1650, individual Susquehannocks were living among both the Onondagas and the Senecas and that "In Pennsylvania, multiethnic communities containing Seneca, Susquehannocks and other Iroquoians were established at Conestoga, Logstown and Shamokin [modern Sunbury] while similar such communities in Ohio came to be known as Mingos" (2003:168).

As a last note, the archaeologist Jay Custer records an interesting discovery he made in the 1990's among legal documents in Lancaster County. This was a claim against the City of Lancaster in 1845 by natives claiming Susquehannock ancestry. The claimants were living among the Oneida in New York State at the time, but were requesting compensation from Lancaster for land that was lost at the time of the Paxton Boys' massacre in 1763. Each claimed descent from Susquehannocks living at Conestoga when the murders occurred. There was no record of a response from Lancaster.

Were the Susquehannocks Giants?

At the beginning of this article, John Smith was quoted as saying in 1608 that the Susquehannocks he met were "like giants to the English," and because of that statement, the idea continues to circulate that the Susquehannocks were extraordinarily large human beings. In my work, interviewing Pennsylvanians who claim descent from Native Americans, I have been told often that a sign of Susquehannock heritage in the modern era is exceptional height, over seven feet tall, one informant told me. This, like Smith's original statement, is undoubtedly an exaggeration; those I have actually met

who claim Susquehannock ancestry are all less than six feet tall. A large number — dozens - of Susquehannock burials have been discovered, especially in Lancaster County where housing developments have been built in areas where Susquehannock towns were known to be located in the 17th century. Forensic research on the skeletal remains suggests that the Susquehannocks were, in fact, short by modern standards. Jennings says "The skeletal remains unearthed at one site show a height ranging from 4 feet, 10.9 inches, to 5 feet, 7.7 inches, with a mean stature of 5 feet, 3.7 inches" (1968:17). Paul A. Wallace probably puts it best when he says, "Like the great Elizabethans, of which he was a belated member, Captain John Smith was intoxicated with words. We must not expect his measurements to tally exactly with those of science" (2005: 11).

Summary

It may seem ironic that the Susquehanna River, the longest non-navigable river in the United States and a key location in the early colonial history of the United States, came to be named for a native people about which we today know relatively little, including whether those people called themselves Susquehannocks or some other version of the river's current name. But then, as noted in my article in the spring issue of this journal, Native Americans have lived in the Susquehanna River Valley for at least 10,000 years, and uncounted numbers of native cultures have come and gone in that time without being known to us today except through some stone tools, hearths and broken pottery. And as this article notes, there remain significant questions about who the Susquehannocks were and why they did what they did, despite the fact that they dominated European interactions with native peoples from New York State through Pennsylvania into Maryland throughout the 17th century. Historians and archaeologists contend that the Susquehannock culture came to a sad end at the hands of the Paxtons on Christmas Eve in 1763. But modern Pennsylvanians and New Yorkers who claim descent from native ancestors insist that some have Susquehannock blood still flowing in their veins. Perhaps further archaeological investigation or archival research will one day resolve some of these questions.

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The author expresses thanks to Gary Fogelman and Paul Frey for permission to use their photos, which appeared first in their publications in the listings below.

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