

CONRAD WEISER

Man of Affairs

By

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CONRAD WEISER'S HOME

Conrad Weiser Memorial Park, Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania

A word to the reader

This pamphlet is the first in a series proposed by the John Conrad Weiser Family Association, composed of interested lineal descendants of the famed pioneer. The Association is pleased to have Arthur D. Graeff, Ph.D., active in many forces for preserving Pennsylvania's rich heritage, as author of this first publication. Dr. Graeff's comprehensive **Conrad Weiser—Pennsylvania Peacemaker** was published in 1943 as volume 7 of the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society. The Weiser Association wishes to express appreciation to the Folklore Society and to Dr. Graeff; to Muhlenberg College, for permission to reproduce the window portraying Weiser; and to Louise Z. Stahl, a descendant of Weiser, for making the lovely sketches which grace this booklet.

**Pastor Frederick S. Weiser, Historian,
John Conrad Weiser Family Association**

Conrad Weiser—Man of Affairs

The importance of historical personages must depend upon the length of the shadows which their figures cast through the centuries. Measurements taken or depths plumbed during their days of achievement on the planet must be temporary. It is doubtful, indeed, that either Conrad Weiser or his contemporaries were aware of the impact of his thoughts and deeds insofar as they affected the two hundred years which have passed. Most events in time or the actors in the scenes must eventually disappear over the horizons of time just as the parallel lines of railway tracks appear to the eye to converge with increasing distance and then bend with a spherical earth beyond the range of vision. Passing time sweeps most men into oblivion, but those who helped in significant ways to mold the future remain as statues studding history.

Judge Conrad Weiser

Wherein lies Weiser's claim to lasting fame? Most of the vignettes which appear on plaques honoring his memory begin by stating that he was the "first President Judge of Berks County." Worthy as such service may have been, and deeply imbedded in local pride though it may be, such official tenure alone would hardly win a niche on the national scene. There are more than 3000 counties in our Union and each of them had a "first President Judge." Actually it is even straining the language to call Weiser a judge; like his forbears in Germany for generations he was a magistrate, without formal training in the law!

Prior to the "erection" of Berks County (1752), Weiser served as magistrate of Lancaster County, his jurisdiction being the major portion of present-day Berks.

After Berks County came into being Weiser continued to hold his commission as magistrate, thereafter designating his "office" as "Heidelberg in Berks." Although several distinguished jurists, such as the learned James Read, a favorite of the Penns, served as one of the judges, Conrad Weiser was designated as "President Judge." As magistrate his powers and duties were hardly judicial in form or purpose. He busied himself in attempts to locate runaway debtors, reporting that some of them had "gone off to Virginia;" he listened to tales of infidelity and other domestic disturbances in settlers' families; he tried to adjudicate religious squabbles between rival factions and frequently advertised in Philadelphia newspapers offering rewards for strayed or stolen cattle.

Some incidents growing out of his office in the minor judiciary were more spectacular. Because he remanded the son of a well-to-do neighbor to Lancaster jail on a serious charge, the neighbor attempted and partially succeeded (1744) in destroying the Weiser cabin by fire, while the family slept. This Weiser believed to be an act of revenge, particularly inasmuch as he had refused to accept a bribe from the accused. The smell of burning shingles woke members of Weiser's family and none suffered serious injury.

On one occasion the Tulpehocken justice was called upon to join with other Lancaster County magistrates to evict squatters from lands still owned by Indians. The lands were in what now is Fulton County (then Cumberland) and most of them were hardy Scots-Irish pioneers. In order to keep the provincial pledges to the Indians several magistrates were sent to the area to disperse the white intruders and burn their cabins. The location is still marked by the name of a small community edging the Pennsylvania Turnpike, known as Burnt Cabins.

Perhaps more exciting to modern readers was Weiser's playing the part of detective in tracking down the clues which led to the arrest and conviction of the Indiana, Mushmeelin, for the murders (1744) of John (Jack) Armstrong and a companion. For his services in this case the Pennsylvania Assembly awarded Weiser 37 pounds. Without writing a "mystery thriller" at this time we may whet your interest to point out that the magistrate-detective used his knowledge of Indian customs and folklore to snare the culprit, who was hanged in Philadelphia. Many legal "firsts" in Pennsylvania grew out of the trial of Mushmeelin which Weiser attended as a witness.

Indian-Interpreter

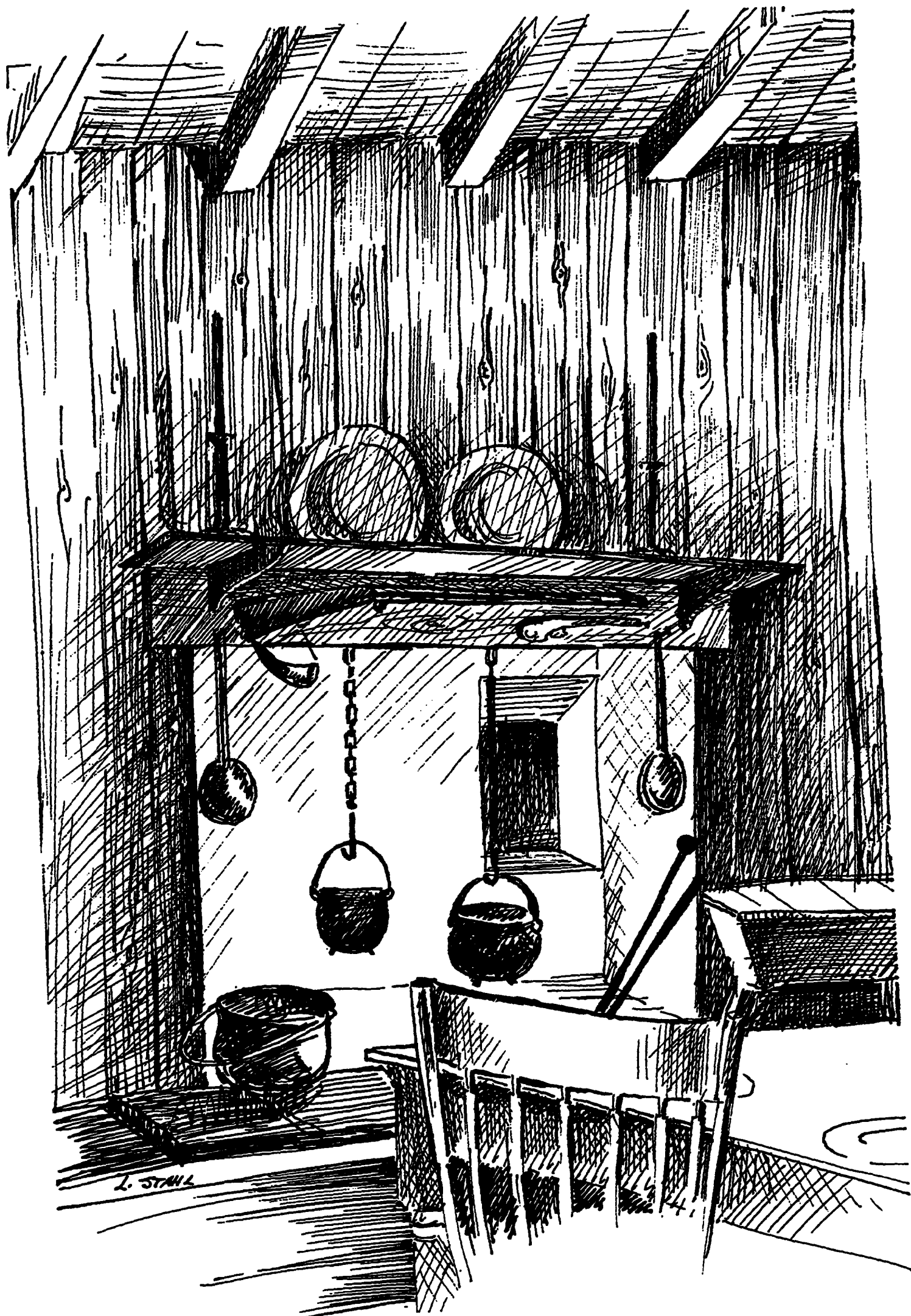
Perhaps second in order of common knowledge about the great man is his skill and frequently employed services as an interpreter at Indian conferences and treaties. Again this identification fails to reveal the true magnitude of his services. There were many colonial interpreters. Every fur trader who roamed the woods to deal with redmen for pelts in exchange for trinkets, baubles and wampum had to be familiar with several Indian dialects. Before Weiser's introduction to the Pennsylvania authorities in 1729, the province found relatively many men who could translate what Indians wished to communicate and negotiations with Pennsylvania nations of redmen, Delawares, Shawanese, Wenroes, Conoys, Muncies, Erie and Nescopecks could have been carried through had there been no "Tarachawagon"—Weiser's Indian name, meaning "He who holds in his hands the reins of the universe."

Our Conrad, however, differed from the fur-trader interpreter in many ways. Most important, of course, was his proficiency in the language of the mighty Six Nations who exercised suzerainty over most of the tribes in colonial Pennsylvania. Long before the arrival of the white man, the powerful (New York) Confederacy had conquered their southern neighbors and put "petticoats" on them—meaning that these subdued nations became women and therefore had to take orders from the manly chieftains whose capital was at Onondago (now Syracuse, N.Y.) several hundred mountainous miles to the north of Weiser's home. Weiser's early years on the American continent had given him opportunity to learn the language of the Mohawks, because he lived with them for almost a year after leaving during his teens, his unhappy home in what is now Middleburg, New York.

The young man must have been endowed with a proficiency in language. We know that he acted as interpreter in controversies between the Palatines along the Hudson and the "high-nettled Dutch" or Hollanders who claimed patroon-patents to lands occupied by the hapless Palatine emigres from war-torn Europe. His quick mastery of English after coming to Pennsylvania, in 1728, adds to the conviction that he possessed a gift of speech, far beyond that of the average settler of the colonial era.

Another factor which made Tarachawagon so important as an interpreter and negotiator was the fact that he was not a fur-trader. His missions to Indian villages were not commercial; he carried no hostile weapons; he did not destroy game in the woods and his reputation as an athlete, competing in games during his stay with the Mohawks, had won the cordial respect of the young braves who became his contemporaries during adult years. His integrity was never questioned by red man or white. Shikellimy introduced Conrad to James Logan, Penn's deputy as "half white and half Indian," while the Penns and their agents nearly always employed the salutation "Honest Conrad" in the many letters sent to him, charging him with responsible tasks or seeking his advice.

Tact, too, was a vital factor in his services as an interpreter. On several occasions the harsh words of some Indian spokesman had to be toned down before their impact reached the ears of white officials; pompous governors, speaking English, would threaten and Weiser's agile tongue would convert the barbs into meaningful figures of speech, so pleasant to the ears of these forest kings. We suspect, also, that he must have been an actor of considerable talent, in order to conceal his own reactions to the angrily uttered statements of both



Interior of the Weiser home

sides of a controversy without portraying his feelings while a quick mind remolded sentences and long speeches to remove the sting of words uttered by a surcharged antagonist or protagonist. Herein, we suspect, lay the secret of his acknowledged powers as a peacemaker.

The Peacemaker

American colonial history contains the names of many doughty men who gained notoriety as Indian fighters. We seek in vain for many garbless laymen who successfully averted bloody conflicts between the denizens of the woods and the Europeans who were, in fact, the interlopers, trespassing upon the uncharted domains of the original inhabitants.

Any recital of the scores and scores of occasions when Weiser served as the intermediary between arrow and bullet aflight would call for a tome or two. At first (1732-1736) his services were confined to placating hotheads, on both sides of the racial barrier, in Pennsylvania. He counselled with the Conoys and protected Penn-granted rights to the Conestogas; he intervened in cases of charged fraud against some of the greedy traders whose fire-water in exchange for furs left dregs of resentment after the "spirits" had fled, leaving only remorse in the minds of their erstwhile hosts.

Matters of a far more serious nature were brewing to the northward. Custom decreed and hope for prestige demanded that young braves from the Finger Lakes and the Mohawk make annual excursion, hatchet in hand, to try to subdue the Catawbas of Virginia and the Carolinas. Ancient bitternesses between the Iroquois and the "Flatheads" as the Catawbas were called by their enemies, had led to the annual treks, years before Weiser came on the scene. At first such forays and subsequent battles provided no alarm to the English settlers between New York and Georgia, but as the new settlements penetrated the interior, they spread abroad the Indian warpaths and the marauding redskins had no compunctions about stealing a farmer's pigs or chickens, enroute.

The southern governors of Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas, concluding that the solution to the problem lay in establishing a truce, or possibly a peace between the powerful Indian rivals, jointly appealed to Pennsylvania and New York to prevent the Iroquois from setting out on their murderous excursions while they, the southerners, would attempt to restrain the Catawbas and their allies, the Cherokees.

Pennsylvania, too, suffered from these Indians on the warpath and the proprietors were willing to send Conrad Weiser, through the snows of February, on foot, across icy streams and over mountains to try to prevail upon the chiefs in the Longhouse (capitol) at Onondaga, to make peace or at least restrain their young braves from heading southward as soon as the snows melted. The account of Weiser's first mid-winter journey with a few companions is available to present day readers in several forms. It is a record of gruelling hardships, almost beyond human endurance. At one point Weiser's spirits flagged and he told his companion, Shikellimy, "Here I will sit down and die." At this juncture his Indian friend upbraided Tarachawagon for faint heartedness and the white man was goaded into resuming the journey.

Yet, in spite of hunger, cold, snow and ice the peacemakers arrived at the Longhouse in time to accomplish their mission and for the spring and summer of 1737 there were no scalps dangling from the belt of redmen traversing the remote portions of Pennsylvania.

The Onondago journey of 1737 was merely the first of many similar missions to the North undertaken by Weiser in the interests of Peace. Each time he was able to arrange a truce, at least, and many of his trips northward (not always in the dead of winter) were to arrange for meetings between the chiefs of the hostile tribes. We are tempted to describe some of these negotiations in detail but must desist, lest we embark upon a tangled skein of data which would consume too many pages in this account. Suffice it to point out that many of the matters that needed settling in advance of a treaty were as vexing and as complex as our negotiators for world peace confront in our own day. Weiser did succeed in preventing the resumption of hostilities, but it would be straining the point to say that full peace was ever established between the Flatheads and the Six Nations. During the decades that followed the impact of other forces, largely due to the white man's expansion in territory, removed both contending nations from the areas of conflict.

Treatymaker

The part played by Conrad Weiser in the formation of Indian treaties throughout the colonies went far beyond the usual duties of an interpreter. Certainly the fact the deputy governors entrusted the seal of the province to the custody and use of an employee is ample proof that final authority was delegated to this "up country Dutchman." Today we would call one so charged as an "ambassador plenipotentiary."

During his early years of service as an interpreter, all treaties in Pennsylvania were written and sealed in Philadelphia. But dealing with an Indian nation in land purchases or liquor traffic regulation, removal of squatter trespassers or punishment of Indians for crimes against the laws of white men was a different procedure from anything within the ken or experience of British deputy officials. The whole tribe, men, women and children, came, sometimes by the hundreds. Each wanted to share directly in the distribution of gifts and it was a frolic, often a bachannalian vacation for the lusty braves who found a pleasant diversion roaming the paved streets, leering into the windows of brickwalled houses and shouting their eerie forest cries to startle the inhabitants. Each new excursion grew more disturbing, even dangerous, to the urban dweller, until the Provincial Council decided that no more treaties were to be made in the City of Brotherly Love. Instead, "Honest Conrad" would be the host at his "plantation at Heidelberg" and the Great Seal of the Province would be placed in the cabin in which he lived.

Henceforth, the delegations from the west and north would be the guests of Weiser and his Anna Eve. They would have some sixty miles less to travel and they would not be overawed by the formalities and amenities of the white man's council chambers. Thus, speciously, they "sold" the idea to the Indians who probably relished the idea of being Conrad's "guests," sprawling over the vast lawns to sleep at night and emptying Frau Weiser's larder each day, sometimes for weeks on end. By controlling the supply of spiritous liquors, the squire of Heidelberg could restrain the tendency toward excessive drinking and the white settlers in the neighborhood could rest peacefully, confident that their Conrad was keeping all matters in hand.

If the historian were permitted the luxury of romantic imagining, he could reconstruct a colorful scene, set on the premises of present-day Conrad Weiser Memorial Park. Not all of it would be as pretty as the distribution of gifts of vermillion-hued ribbons, shining mirrors and sturdy hoes with smoothly planed handles. There would be filth and debris, bickering and dickering, foul language and occasional fighting among the "guests" themselves. Yet in such setting was formed, among others, the Treaty of Heidelberg of 1742.

A host of two hundred Indians was camped at Weiser's in July 1742. They had come southward from New York to receive the items promised them by the land purchase of 1736. The presents had been distributed and the booty divided when another guest arrived to share Weiser's hospitality. It was Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf,



Springhouse in Weiser Park

benefactor of the Moravians and the founder of Bethlehem in Pennsylvania. Nobleman, noble men and sachems with entourage shared Weiser's hospitality.

Acting upon an impulse or presentiment that Weiser "... wanted me, and in strong Faith I obeyed the Call although knowing neither why nor wherefore," Zinzendorf joined the conclave of chieftains and deputies who were crowded in Weiser's small cabin. There the Count proposed a treaty which, if accepted, would permit Moravian missionaries to visit Indian villages throughout the Iroquois domain, there to preach the Christian doctrine. The dramatic scene which followed, added to the providential "summons" to visit Weiser sets up a chain of circumstance which no fiction writer would dare to invent or image because of its incredible overtones. A small child, daughter of an Indian whom Zinzendorf had once befriended "fell about my Neck in the Presence of all the Indians" reported Zinzendorf. This act established the count as a man of merit and, under Weiser's supervision a treaty of permission was concluded. The Indians gave a string of white beads to confirm and ratify the sanctions. Later the nobleman deposited this unusual testament in the Tower of London, where it reposes to this day.

The consequences of this treaty are significant. The Moravians became the most successful non-Catholic missionaries to the Indians.

The inspired young men such as Prylaeus and Post came to Weiser to be taught the Indian languages and it was these garbed men who did much to hold the Six Nations in the British interest during King George's War and the crucial Seven Years' or French and Indian War. Christian Frederick Post was once arrested in New York on the charge of being a French spy but quickly released when Conrad Weiser informed the New York authorities of the man's real status.

The Treaty of Lancaster, (then called Newtown) 1744, served to lengthen the shadow of Conrad Weiser to areas far beyond the confines of Pennsylvania. Officials from Maryland and Virginia attending the conference were amazed to note the skills and powers of Weiser who, by force of circumstance became the chief negotiator while the bewigged and silk-hosed dignitaries stood by admiringly and somewhat puzzled. The treaty negotiated the sale of lands "west to the setting Sun" or, in more precise English, to the topmost ridge of the Allegheny mountains. Not only was Weiser the actual negotiator for three colonies, but he had charge of the care of the redmen, their squaws and children. The tasks involved in setting up cabins to house the visitors, to provide for their welfare and entertainment and to restrain the lusty ones, placate the angry ones (often insulted by taunts from white bystanders) and to prevail among the various recalcitrant deputies, Shikellimy among them, to sign and ratify the completed treaty was a herculean task in protocol, diplomacy and executive acumen.

Impressed by Weiser's skill, Colonel Thomas Lee, progenitor of the great family of Lees of Virginia, urged the Indians to train someone to succeed Conrad when he "will go into the other World." To which the Indians replied, "We hope Tarachawagon will be preserved by the Good Spirit. When he goes under the Ground it will then be time to look out for another . . . while he lives there is no room to complain." After weeks of tension, fraught with problems growing out of covert machinations on both sides Weiser returned to the peaceful pursuits of farming in Tulpehocken until some new summons from some provincial governor, north or south, would send him on a new mission.

These calls came in rapid succession. Two separate missions to New York, each carrying multiple assignments of variegated nature, were made in 1745. During the first one, in May, Weiser was accompanied by six men of vastly different backgrounds. There was Conrad, himself, an Indian by adoption, a German by birth; ambassador of the Catawba Indians; the governors of Pennsylvania and Maryland;

his friend Shikellimy and that sachem's son, Andrew Montour a half-breed French Indian; an Englishman John Joseph Bull (Shebosch, his Indian name) and two Moravian missionaries, Brother Augustus Spangenburg and David Zeisberger, both prominent in subsequent colonial history.

On a journey late in September, 1745, he led a group of distinguished Philadelphians to Albany by way of the Delaware and Hudson rivers. This was to a conference called by Governor Clinton of New York, attended by commissioners from the New England colonies and concerned with Indian problems. The New Englanders pressed Weiser into their service as interpreter and negotiator in an effort to quell alarms about Mohawk uprisings. The Pennsylvania commissioners were displeased to learn that their agent had been assigned to serve Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Hampshire, but apologies by Clinton, based on the urgent need for Weiser's help calmed the tempers of Isaac Norris and John Kinsey, the Pennsylvania commissioners. Conrad? We must assume that he responded to every plea to aid in preserving peace!

From this point onward we must conclude that Weiser's services became indispensable not only to Pennsylvania and southward, but to the governor in New England as well. His reputation for honesty, skill and judgment penetrated every provincial council until eventually the governors of every English colony, except Georgia, had called upon Conrad to act as the executive's representative in negotiations with the Indians.

Colonel Conrad Weiser

Lest the military title used in the caption appears to mar the image of the man of peace, let it be stated at the outset that this appellation, though official, does not conjure up in mind a dashing hero, astride a horse, with upraised sword glinting in the sun while cohorts under command do bloody battle with the foe. Nor was he a desk officer, presiding over military councils or directing warfare behind the lines. It connotes a trust which the provincial officials placed in Conrad's leadership and sagacity during the period of the awesome Indian massacres in Pennsylvania during the early years of the French and Indian War, 1755-1758. It was his commission to build and command a chain of forts, stockades and blockhouses at the south base of the Blue Mountains from the Lehigh River to the Susquehanna. The redoubtable Benjamin Franklin held a similar commission to fortify the areas east of the Lehigh extending to Pennsylvania's edge on the Delaware.



CONRAD WEISER

(No portrait from life of Weiser is known to exist. This artist's conception forms one of the windows of the Egner Memorial Chapel of Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania.)

Naked and defenseless, the frontiers of Pennsylvania were drenched in blood late in 1755 when the triumphant Indians who had whipped Braddock's foplings near Fort Duquesne moved eastward, north of the Blue mountains, to vent their fury against the remote settlements south of the mountains. Delawares and Shawanese, accompanied by a few Frenchmen, plied their way through the gaps in the mountain chain to burn, kill, scalp and take children of white settlers as prisoners. Some of these mad massacres had their roots in pent-up feelings of revenge for such injustices as the fraudulent "Walking Purchase" of 1737, a nefarious scheme in which Weiser and the German settlers had had no part.

The Quaker majority in the Pennsylvania Assembly was deaf to pleas for building defenses until the relatives of victims of the disasters, by a dramatic march on Philadelphia, including wagons laden with the corpses of the dead and scalped, forced the legislators to act.

The chain of forts under Weiser's supervision included such historic spots as Forts Northkill, Henry, Manada and Hunter. After the building of the structures it was Weiser's duty to see to it that they were staffed, that patrols guarded the intervening miles and to give orders and direction to the officers stationed there.

After the forts were built and properly manned the danger of Indian incursions lessened and ended completely in 1757. It was then that Weiser could direct his thinking to the chief motivating force in his life—the ending of hostilities, in Pennsylvania, at least. The Easton Treaties and their complete success put an end to the colonelcy and we deal with Mr. Weiser again.

Provincial Agent

In the course of any survey of this type there must be a climax. The particular events which, in our opinion, reached the highest peak in the many services of Conrad Weiser took place along the northern bend of the Ohio River, when in 1748, he "raised a little Flagg" and thereby claimed the vast Ohio region for the British Crown, and at Easton, in 1757, when he reinforced that claim.

We may be fairly certain that in performing this little act Weiser was aware only of carrying out an assignment given to him by James Logan, as one of the duties pertaining to the Logstown (Alliquippa) Treaty. It is only in the light of subsequent history that this little ceremony becomes significant as a part of the broad canvass of American colonial history.

That "little Flagg" established a prior claim for Britain to the richly endowed Ohio country. One year later, in 1749, Bienville de Celeron, acting for France, buried a series of leaden plates along the banks of the Ohio claiming the land for France. Then the intense struggle between the giants of colonial power began in earnest, culminating in the British triumph at the close of the French and Indian War.

Virginia's charter of 1609, granting domain "west and northwest," was interpreted by Governor Robert Dinwiddie to include the Forks of the Ohio and the entire region which lay beyond it. When the French placed garrisons along the tributaries of the Ohio and built forts from Lake Erie to the junction of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers, the youthful George Washington was sent (1754) to warn away the trespassers. The Seven Years' War of European History was actually a conflict that lasted nine years (1754-1763) in the hinterlands of Pennsylvania and Virginia.

During that war, the influence of Weiser cannot be exaggerated. Perhaps there is no single deed which contributed to the British victory and perhaps, also, the credit we are about to give to Weiser should be shared with contemporaries, but the squire of Tulpehocken must be designated as the man who set up the bulwark against French invasion of the Middle Colonies, thus negating the peripheral military advantages held by the foes of England. In the first place, one may conclude that the irregular conferences, pow-wows, council sessions, debates at Easton in 1756 and 1757 leading to the Treaty of 1757 constitute the crowning event in Weiser's career. The patience, skill, diplomacy and diligence with which he carried through this important turn in American colonial history forms an amazing record for those who will study it carefully. The planning in advance of conferences; the deft handling of the drunken chief Teedyuscung on the one hand and the arrogant Governor Denny on the other is a masterpiece of negotiating skills. Everything centered upon Weiser, his words, his judgment, his integrity and his coordination of efforts.

The net results are almost immeasurable in a backward glance, more than two centuries later. There on the banks of the Delaware Weiser accomplished what all of Braddock's army had failed to do; General Forbes in the second campaign against Fort Duquesne could do no better than get stuck in the mud of Ligonier with a second British army. At Easton the Delawares agreed to call off the war against the English and to send the "Big Hallo," or cheery message,

to their anti-British allies, the Shawanese at Fort Duquesne urging them to lay down their arms.

Trained in languages for the specific purpose by Conrad Weiser, the Moravian missionary Christian Frederick Post, carrying no weapon except the cross and a Bible, gave the "Big Hallo" to the Shawanese at Fort Duquesne. A few days later, the British General, John Forbes, still mud-bound some fifty miles to the east, heard a dull thud. The French had blown up their own munitions at Duquesne and were abandoning the fort and the entire Ohio Valley to the British forces. Without the help of the Indians the French could not continue in possession of the fort at the forks of the Ohio. Thus the chain of events leads back to plans conceived in the humble cabin near the Tulpehocken, their execution, through trial at Easton, to success for Americans and British at the only key inland fort the enemy held. It had been impregnable to bullets and bayonets, but could not withstand the desertion of the Delawares and Shawanese.

Secondly, through his influence, the powerful Six Nations remained loyal to the British and prevented the French from driving a wedge from Canada, through New York and Pennsylvania. Any success of this type would have split the English colonies in halves, each to be conquered separately and leisurely by the French and their red allies. It is a reasonable assumption in the nebulous realm of "it-might-have-been," to believe that a combination of French and the Iroquois Confederacy could have overwhelmed the feeble efforts of the Anglo-Saxon settlements to protect themselves.

Weiser's influence with the Iroquois had been built up through many years of fair dealing. Governors, deputies, commissioners and other transient officials of forest diplomacy were mere functionaries in the treaties made under the leaves of trees, but Weiser's integrity was abiding.

President George Washington spoke knowingly when, in 1793, standing at the grave of Weiser, he uttered the significant words "Posterity cannot forget his services."