

## The Paxton Boys

Revived from the archives by Virginia Woodward



This picture is on display in the teller's area at our museum.

The Paxton Boys were a vigilante group that murdered at least twenty Native Americans in events sometimes called the Conestoga Massacres.

Backcountry Presbyterian Scots-Irish frontiersmen from

central Pennsylvania, near Paxton Church, Paxtang, Pennsylvania, now Dauphin County, formed a vigilante group in response to the American Indian uprising known as Pontiac's Rebellion. The Paxton Boys felt that the government of colonial Pennsylvania was negligent in providing them with protection.

Since the nearest belligerents were miles away, the Paxton Boys attacked the local Conestoga or Susquehannock people, who lived peacefully in nearby small enclaves in the midst of white Pennsylvania settlements.

Many Conestogas practiced Christianity. The Paxton Boys claimed that the Conestogas secretly provided aid and intelligence to the hostiles. On December 14, 1763, more than fifty Paxton Boys marched on a village near Millersville, PA, murdered six Natives, and burned their cabins. After the massacre, colonialists found the Conestogas' 1701 treaty signed by William Penn, which pledged that the colonists and the Indians "shall forever hereafter be as one Head & One Heart, & live in true Friendship & Amity as one People", in a bag in the ashes of the cabin.

On December 14, 1763, Governor John Penn placed the remaining fourteen Conestogas in protective custody in Lancaster, but the Paxton Boys broke in, killed, and mutilated all fourteen people on December 27, 1763. The result was that just two members of the Conestoga tribe survived. Governor Penn issued bounties for the arrest of the murderers, but no one came forward to identify them.

In January of 1764, 140 Natives living peacefully in eastern Pennsylvania fled to Philadelphia for protection. The Paxton Boys marched on Philadelphia in January of 1764 with about two-hundred and fifty men. British troops and Philadelphia militia prevented them from doing more violence. Benjamin Franklin raised the local militia, and negotiated with the Paxton leaders which ended the siege. A third of the Native Americans died of smallpox contracted in the crowded barracks where they had been provided refuge.

Like the frontier vigilantes of the Regulator movement in North Carolina, the Paxton Boys revealed the tension between the established societies of the Atlantic coast and the precarious areas of white settlement on the western frontier. One leader of the "Paxton Boys" was Lazarus Stewart who would be killed in the Wyoming Massacre of 1778.