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“A People before Useless”
Ethnic Cleansing in the Wartime Hudson Valley, 1754–1763

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ABSTRACT  This article investigates the issue of ethnic cleansing against Native peoples in early America and the relationship between ethnic cleansing and genocide. It examines the efforts of colonial officials in New York and New Jersey to remove Native groups in the Hudson Valley region during the Seven Years’ War. In an atmosphere of suspicion and animosity, colonial authorities first sought to exert control over local Natives through surveillance and internment in colonial towns. Then, following an outburst of genocidal violence from ordinary colonials, they began to encourage the Natives to leave their homelands, first for refuge among the Mohawk allies of the British and then for Native settlements in the distant Susquehanna country. Cast as an effort at paternalistic protection of vulnerable Natives, the official effort at ethnic cleansing worked in tandem with indiscriminate violence from ordinary colonial, as officials both exploited and exaggerated the genocidal attitudes of the colonial population to encourage Native removal. Though colonial officials abandoned this ethnic cleansing program after the return of peace to the region in 1758, the evidence presented here shows that largely nonviolent efforts at removal or ethnic cleansing cannot easily be disentangled from the threat of genocide or extermination.

On October 19, 1763, Johannes Hardenbergh, a local official at Kingston in Ulster County, New York, wrote a short letter to Sir William Johnson, Great Britain’s northern superintendent of Indian affairs, informing him that there was “a considerable number of Indians residing amongst us who goes by the name of the Esopus Indians who some years ago was invited by deputies sent by the Mohawk Nation to come & make their place of inheritance among them.” In March 1756, during the height of the Seven Years’ War—a time when colonial suspicions of local Natives ran high—Hardenbergh had joined other county officials in writing to Johnson for advice on what to do with dozens

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of Esopus Indians who had sought refuge at Kingston after local colonials had murdered several of their people. This letter had helped spur Johnson to take the initiative to have these refugees and other Hudson Valley Natives relocated to Mohawk country, where he expected them to settle permanently. In 1763, however, Hardenbergh dispassionately told Johnson that most of the Esopus Indians had returned to Kingston over the summer and wanted to renew their treaty relationship with Ulster authorities. He penned these lines at a time of intercultural tension when the Seven Years’ War was a recent memory and Pontiac’s War had just broken out. In the same letter Hardenbergh acknowledged a warning from Johnson about threats of attacks from Indians in Susquehanna country. The return of the Esopus Indians, however, was of no concern. Hardenbergh thought these people were “both honest & loyal & that it would be best to hold a conference with them—but that cannot be done without some expense as y’r Honor well knows”; his primary worry was that Kingston would be stuck with the bill. Johnson evidently agreed. There is no impression in his records that he was alarmed by the return of the Esopus Indians from Mohawk country.¹

The homecoming of these Esopus Indians represented the end of an improvised and uneven, but still ambitious, governmental attempt at ethnic cleansing against Native people in large parts of the Hudson Valley region. Motivated by distrust of local Natives and a concern for colonial security, colonial leaders first moved to place local Natives under surveillance and then to have them interned in colonial towns. When this effort failed to produce the desired results, they began to encourage the resettlement of local Natives among the Mohawk allies of the British. Finally, they arrived at a vision of emptying New York and northern New Jersey of Natives by encouraging their emigration to Susquehanna country. Though neither wholly novel nor vigorously pursued, this campaign was striking in its ambitions and underlying motivations. It was, of course, an attempt at Indian removal, and as Theda Perdue and Michael Green point out in their study of the Cherokee Trail of Tears, removals of Native people have been a consequence of colonial land acquisition since colonization began and thus integral to settler

¹ I would like to thank Steve Warren, Jeremy Kingsbury, and the anonymous reviewers for EAS for their helpful suggestions and comments.

colonialism. The displacement of Natives through land seizure had a long history in the Hudson Valley and had contributed to destructive war between Dutch and Natives before the English conquest of the region in 1664. Wartime hostility and relocations targeting nonbelligerent Natives were likewise not unprecedented in the wider northeastern region; hundreds of Christian Natives were interned on Deer Island in Boston Harbor during Metacom’s War (1675–76).2

What was new about the attempted removal in the 1750s was both its geographic scope—it was meant to encompass many Native people from large parts of New York and New Jersey—and the reasons behind it. Unlike the perpetrators of the republican-era atrocities the term Indian Removal usually calls to mind, Sir William Johnson and other officials who supported this project sought to remove these Natives not because they wanted their lands but because they saw them as a troublesome and subversive population that threatened colonial security and order. They sought their displacement because of who they were, not because of the land they owned. Their mere presence was the problem. It caused unease among colonial whites. That is why I term this attempted removal an effort at ethnic cleansing.3

Scholars debate both the usefulness of the term ethnic cleansing to understanding historic displacements of Native Americans and the relationship between ethnic cleansing and genocide. Gary Anderson argues that ethnic cleansing is the best term to describe the long history of dispossession of Native American people, both because of the relatively limited scope of violence compared to modern genocides and because colonizing authorities did not seek the destruction of entire peoples. Other scholars reject the label ethnic cleansing in favor of the term genocide. They have identified individual instances of genocide at various points in American history. Jeffrey Ostler, for example, holds that from the time of the Seven Years’ War, British and later U.S. officials often considered genocide of Native groups a viable option in the face of their determined resistance to white authority, and Native peoples were aware of this threat. By contrast, in his recent study of southern Indian Removal, Claudio Saunt eschews both ethnic cleansing and genocide in


favor of the terms deportation, expulsion, and extermination, according to what best fits particular circumstances. Tai S. Edwards and Paul Kelton, meanwhile, suggest that considerations of genocide need to include how deliberate acts of colonial violence—including killing and forced relocation—made Native populations vulnerable to mass death caused by nonhuman factors, primarily the introduction of pathogens from the Eastern Hemisphere. In the Hudson Valley region, colonial officials did not seek the destruction of local Natives either as individuals or as collective peoples, but they did want them gone, the result of which would be a more homogeneous ethnic landscape of white colonials and enslaved Black people. The term ethnic cleansing aptly describes these attitudes and approaches, but genocide and ethnic cleansing cannot neatly be disentangled.

The attempted removal of Indians from the Hudson Valley region during the Seven Years’ War may be understood as a government-sponsored effort at ethnic cleansing, expressed in generally paternalistic terms, that worked in tandem with, and depended on, the genocidal attitudes and actions of ordinary white colonials. As Margaret Jacobs argues, the distinction between genocide and ethnic cleansing is not an either/or question. In the Hudson Valley in the 1750s, one depended on the other. Colonial officials in New

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York and New Jersey did not seek to destroy local Natives but saw their presence as threatening and came to exploit unofficial violence against them as a rhetorical and practical tool to control and ultimately remove them. When Esopus leaders in March 1756 asked New York governor Sir Charles Hardy “how they must behave themselves, to avoid being destroyed by the whites,” they evinced the kind of awareness of genocidal attitudes Östler attributes to many eighteenth-century Natives. The governmental response was that the Esopus must accept, first, internment in colonial towns and, ultimately, removal from their Hudson Valley homeland. Government agents kept their hands clean of blood but were willing to use the threat and reality of indiscriminate violence by colonists to place local Native people under colonial supervision and ultimately justify and effect their displacement.5

When it comes to the distinction between genocide and ethnic cleansing, it is useful to consider Gary Anderson’s argument that nineteenth-century U.S. government deportations of Native people prevented genocide by removing the Natives from areas where they would continue to be targeted by genocidal white civilians and paramilitaries. When the alternative is extermination, ethnic cleansing may be preferable. But when colonial authorities reacted to settler violence against Natives by getting Indians out of the way, they were in practice complying with the wishes of the perpetrators—and might even have incentivized further attacks. Moderate gentlemen in New Jersey and New York did not endorse mass murder, but when their response to genocidal outbursts from settlers was to remove the victims, they were hardly the benevolent protectors of diplomatic rhetoric. Peter Silver has suggested that by the time of Pontiac’s War, Pennsylvania officials had concluded that close intercultural relations would always lead to trouble. They deliberately painted all “backcountry” colonials as enraged “Indian haters” as part of an effort to encourage ethnic separation by getting the Natives to leave. This article argues that a similar development took place in the Hudson Valley region in the 1750s when colonial officials exaggerated the anti-Native hostility of ordinary whites as justification to implement internment and eventual removal of local Natives.6


The ethnic cleansing project in the Hudson Valley region during the Seven Years’ War arose and then imploded for reasons particular to this time and place. Its roots lay in provincial authorities’ and local whites’ shared distrust of local Natives. Colonial officials grappled with what they saw as a security threat from Native people whose loyalty they suspected but with whom they were not openly at war. After first attempting to restrict the movements of these people and place them under supervision, the government of New York moved to intern them in colonial towns. When this attempt at control only exacerbated tensions and led white settlers to murder local Natives, Sir William Johnson seized the opportunity to have these Natives removed from their homelands, first into Mohawk country and then farther afield. But this attempt to control them also failed—or remained incomplete—for reasons specific to this time and place. Colonial officials wanted to avoid local hostilities, and the fact that the Natives they distrusted were not open foes tied their hands. They could not expel these people by force because it might trigger the unrest they feared. It was perhaps thus a given that the removal project would cease once relative peace returned to the region in 1758. Ethnic cleansing was no longer needed, and local whites may never have loathed their Native neighbors as much as the government claimed. But the project also failed because of the means it relied on. Instead of force, it came to depend on Indigenous diplomatic networks that operated on a dynamic of their own, outside the purview of British officials. When these networks ceased to draw Native people out of the Hudson Valley region, this ethnic cleansing attempt ground to a halt.

On the eve of the Seven Years’ War, the Natives of the Hudson Valley were vastly outnumbered by colonial inhabitants but maintained a strong presence in their homelands. The Munsee-speaking Esopus Indians lived in various parts of Ulster County, New York, between the west bank of the Hudson and the northern Delaware River, as well as in parts of Orange County to the south. Wappinger people (also Munsee speakers) still lived in their historic homeland in Dutchess County east of the lower Hudson, but by the mid-eighteenth century Wappingers could also be found in parts of southern Orange and northern New Jersey, such as on the Pompton River. Mahicans (whose language was closely related to Munsee) lived on both sides of the Hudson, roughly from Catskill Creek northward on the west side and from northern Dutchess on the east. Mahican people resided in parts of the region between the Hudson and the Housatonic River to the east. The Protestant mission town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, which by midcentury had become the center of Mahican politics, lay on the upper Housatonic; by
that time Stockbridge had become a mixed settlement, home to both Mahican and white colonial families. Many Munsees living on the upper Delaware and in the Susquehanna and Ohio countries were descended from Munsee-speaking Hudson Valley people; Mahicans had also made these regions their home. The Schaghticokes who lived on the Hoosick River, an eastern tributary to the northern Hudson, descended from refugees from New England who had settled there after Metacom’s War. All these Native groups had strong and cooperative ties to one another. Their relations with local colonials were historically peaceful; the last war fought between Natives and Europeans in the region was between the Dutch and the Esopus Indians in the 1660s.⁷

North of the Hudson Valley lived the Iroquois Six Nations (Mohawks, Oneidas, Tuscaroras, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas), New York’s foremost diplomatic partners and Britain’s premier allies in the Northeast. Both the Iroquois and British colonial officials considered Hudson Valley people Iroquois dependents and junior members of the Anglo-Iroquois Covenant Chain alliance, though Iroquois control over these people was often elusive. William Johnson, New York’s agent to the Iroquois from the 1740s and Britain’s northern superintendent of Indian affairs from 1756, drew his power from maintaining ties to the Iroquois; through them he hoped to control other Native peoples. Johnson and other officials accorded far less importance to Hudson Valley Natives and often referred to them vaguely as “River Indians”; I use this term to identify people whose group affiliation is unclear. Johnson and other observers also used terms such as “Mohickanders” to refer to any Natives (not just Mahicans) with Hudson Valley backgrounds; I have alerted readers to such cases. For convenience’s sake, I refer to locations inhabited by these Natives by geographic categories (colony and county names, in particular) commonly used by the British, while recognizing that the Natives themselves would rarely have used these names.⁸

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The Seven Years’ War came to the Hudson Valley in a dramatic fashion when Abenaki raiders from the Catholic mission towns of St. Francis and Bécan­cour in the St. Lawrence River Valley struck and burned a Dutch settlement on the Hoosick River in late August 1754. This attack combined with reports of other acts of violence to create a tense atmosphere across the mid-Atlantic region. The Hoosick raid received widespread coverage in the regional
newspapers. A “Friend to publick Liberty” warned the readers of the Pennsylvania Gazette that the “Fate of Hosack” was a warning of worse things to come. Within two days of the raid, another force from St. Francis captured eight British colonials from No. 4 (or Charlestown), New Hampshire, on the northern Connecticut River, and an attack on an English house in Stockbridge raised colonial nerves to panic levels; members of a household in Sharon, Connecticut (south of Stockbridge), were so spooked by sounds of nocturnal Native gatherings that they shot at what they thought was a Native man who appeared in a doorless doorway.9

That the local Schaghticokes accompanied the Abenakis back from Hoo­sick and thus defected from their alliance with New York was especially worrisome. The Schaghticokes had been a barrier against Franco-Indian incursions since their settlement in the area in the 1670s, but they also had long-standing ties to the Abenakis, and those Schaghticokes who were dissatisfied with their growing indebtedness to colonial creditors and pressure on their lands had been moving north to Canada for decades. By 1754, the fifty to sixty Natives still remaining at Schaghticoke had renewed their alliance with the English at the Albany Congress in July. But then, in an ominous turn of events, they had gone over to the French alliance, “whereby the Enemy were strengthened by that Exasperated Tribe.” In a long tirade against French and Indians published in the New York Mercury on September 16, “Philopatris” described all Native allies as disguised enemies and did not doubt that “those we call Friend Indians had a great Hand in the Destruction of Hosack.” Conjuring up fear of a Native attack on New York City itself, this writer hinted at genocidal measures when he likened Indians and French to ancient Carthaginians and darkly concluded, “DELANDA EST CARTHAGO” (Carthage must be destroyed). A week prior, another writer for the Mercury held that the attack in Stockbridge was by men “supposed to be of the Sort called

9. Lieutenant Governor James de Lancey to Board of Trade, October 8, 1754, De Lancey to Marquis Duquesne, October 16, 1754, and Duquesne to De Lancey, December 26, 1754, all in NYCD, 6:908–9, 911, and 936, respectively; New York Mercury, September 2, 9, and 16, 1754; Boston Post-Boy, September 9, 1754; Boston Gazette, or, Weekly Advertiser, September 17, 1754; Pennsylvania Gazette, September 19 and 26, 1754 (quote); Council Meeting, September 3, 1754, New Hampshire, Provincial and State Papers, 40 vols. (Concord, NH, 1867–1943), 6:28; Declaration of James Johnson, December 10, 1754, Massachusetts Archives Collection, 1629–1799 (hereafter MAC), 8:289–91, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston; Susanna Johnson, A Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Johnson (Walpole, NH: David Carlisle, 1796), 11–25; Deposition of Thomas Jones, October 14, 1754, and Deposition of John Palmer, October 14, 1754, both in Indians, series 1, Connecticut Archives, 1629–1820, 2:82 and 83, respectively, Connecticut State Archives, Hartford.
Friend Indians.” Similarly, colonials also blamed the alleged nightly gatherings near Sharon on local Natives. Some colonials were ready by late 1754 to see all Natives as potential enemies.10

As Delawares, Shawnees, and other warriors from Native towns in the Susquehanna country began to attack colonial settlements in Pennsylvania in October 1755 following Braddock’s defeat in the Ohio Valley, New York and New Jersey authorities began to ponder how to control local Native populations. Following strikes against colonial settlements at Minisink on the upper Delaware in November, colonial leaders moved to restrict Native people’s freedom of movement. New Jersey authorities wanted to have all local Natives registered and issued certificates of identification; unregistered Natives could then be arrested. New York executive council member Cadwallader Colden was equally suspicious; after a small number of Natives visitors came to Pakanasink in Ulster County, Colden lectured a militia captain about his duty to arrest any suspicious Natives and bring them in for interrogation. Local Natives also fell under suspicion. In a letter sent to Colden at his Ulster estate, James Alexander wrote that if New York and New Jersey raised funds for defense, “I think you’ll be Safe from the attacks of those foreign Indians—I wish you were as Safe from those Neighbour Indians that frequent your house.” These people—presumably local Esopus Indians—still had neighborly relations with Colden and other colonials, but Colden was distrustful and thought it would be prudent to invite the Natives to “make their Wigwams in one or more of the well settled Towns where they can be constantly under the eye of the Inhabitants.” If they refused, he vaguely suggested that “it is proper that they be otherwise secured from doing hurt to his Majesties Subjects.”11

10. Colin G. Calloway, The Western Abenakis of Vermont: War, Migration, and the Survival of an Indian People (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 166–67; Midtrød, The Memory of All Ancient Customs, 165–68; Speeches of the Schaghticokees and River Indians, July 8, 1754, De Lancey to Board of Trade, October 8, 1754, De Lancey to Duquesne, October 16, 1754, and Duquesne to De Lancey, December 26, 1754, all in NYCD, 6:880–82, 908–9, 911, and 936, respectively; Timothy Woodbridge to John Worthington, October 9, 1754, MAC, 32:547–48; Johnson to John Bradstreet, December 17, 1762, JP, 3:975; A Supplement to the New-York Mercury, September 16, 1754; New York Mercury, September 9, 1754; Deposition of Thomas Jones, October 14, 1754, Indians, series 1, Connecticut Archives, 1629–1820, 2:82.

In December 1755, the government of New York settled on a policy of relocating the Natives in Ulster and Orange Counties to colonial towns, turning these settlements into internment camps with local colonials as guards. At a meeting on December 26, the executive council first mulled a proposal to have the Natives in these counties disarmed but ultimately decided against it, concluding that this might “exasperate the Indians, and induce them to join the Enemy Indians infesting the Frontiers.” Instead, the council landed on Colden’s earlier suggestion to invite the Natives to relocate to colonial towns. The stated rationale behind this policy was the danger that colonial troops might take local Natives for enemies, but this was disingenuous. Colden’s original proposal focused on surveillance, and the council had considered having the Natives disarmed. Internment, not protection, was the foremost goal. The council’s recognition that the Natives would need to “be furnished with necessaries to enable them to subsist their Families” reveals that these officials expected them to stay put in these towns for as long as the crisis lasted and refrain from hunting or other subsistence activities. Suspicion of the local Indians was certainly implied in a proclamation published by Governor Sir Charles Hardy directing the justices of Ulster and Orange to send emissaries to invite the Natives into the towns. Though the rationale cited in this invitation was the danger that ranger units might mistake these peaceful Native people for enemies, the preamble pointed to attacks made in neighboring Pennsylvania, “in which the Delaware, Shawnee, and other Indians lately esteem’d friends to the English are supposed to be principally concerned.” The point was clear: Natives who were still “esteem’d friends” might also become enemies.12

New Jersey also wanted to control the movements of local Natives but settled on a different approach. At a treaty with several Native groups held at Crosswicks in central New Jersey in January 1756, provincial agents claimed that a recent Indian attack in northern New Jersey “has made our People who live in the upper Parts of this Colony so Angry, that it is become dangerous to any Indians to go there,” and the agents wanted the Natives “to contrive some Bounds for your own Security, where you may be safe, and our People easy with it.” Similar to New York authorities, they used the image

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of ordinary colonials as indiscriminate Indian haters to restrict the freedom of the Natives. The Native delegates consequently proposed boundaries within which members of each group would confine their movements. Colonial agents also wanted to enlist them as keepers of nineteen Natives who had been arrested in northern New Jersey and confined to prison at Trenton on unspecified charges; another man, Philip, had fallen under suspicion because he had relatives at Wyoming in Susquehanna country. The Cranberry Indians (a local New Jersey group) professed themselves willing in principle to receive these people but then turned the English rhetoric on its head when they replied that “the Fears and Jealousies of our English Neighbours, are so great, that (as we are informed) it would not be for their or our safety to have them among us.” In the end, the Native delegation from near Crosswicks agreed to shelter these unfortunates.13

The New York government’s plan to have local Natives in Ulster and Orange placed under supervision in colonial towns might have worked only if this policy calmed colonial nerves, but in the tense atmosphere of early 1756, this was unlikely. In mid-February, colonials in Ulster and Orange were ready to go on the offensive and petitioned the executive council for permission to march against Natives gathered at Shohawkin on the upper Delaware. On February 25, an Englishman was killed by three Native men near a house at the Wallkill River in Orange, and the following day, Native warriors burned a house at Minisink, killing three to five men and capturing a woman named Margery West. Some colonials were then ready to blame local Natives for such incidents of violence, and while there was no clear evidence that local Natives were behind the killing at the Wallkill, West’s later testimony shows that by this time some Hudson Valley Natives had joined or supported the war against the English, including the members of a family who had left the Wallkill region only recently. Of course, local colonials could not have known this in early 1756, as these were people who had left their home areas, not hidden enemies who had stayed behind. Local colonists, however, were not always ready to make this distinction.14

The folly of the government’s scheme became evident with an outbreak of violence against Natives in Ulster in early March. On March 2, a party


of men led by the aptly named Samuel Slaughter came to a colonial house in Wilemanton at the Wallkill River and killed an Esopus married couple whom they found there. Their bloodthirst unsated, they went the next morning to a wigwam about a mile and a half away and there killed and scalped two men, three women, and two children. When a delegation of Esopus leaders came to New York City on March 14 to complain to the governor, Hardy expressed sympathy and condemned the murders, but reproached the Natives for simply moving closer to the colonial settlements and not actually going “into the Towns, by which means the Misfortune that some of you lately met with, had been avoided.” He was annoyed that the Natives had not precisely followed his instructions. He also tried to exploit the murders to place the Natives under greater oversight.15

Governor Hardy then reiterated his calls for the local Natives to move into colonial towns. He did so by publishing another proclamation ordering the justices of Orange and Ulster “to invite all the Settlement Indians not already come in, to retire into the Towns for their Safety,” and seized on the idea of pushing Native men to enlist as military laborers. Hardy told the Esopus delegates that their people should “engage themselves as Battoe Men, which will afford both you and your Families a comfortable Subsistance during the Service.” Bateaux were flat-bottomed transport boats that colonials used to haul supplies to such British posts as Fort Oswego on Lake Ontario. Having Natives enrolled in this service offered several advantages. Native men would help meet the military’s need for labor. In addition, since Natives confined to colonial towns could not hunt or pursue other subsistence activities and were dependent on English supplies, Native men would help offset some of these costs by drawing military wages. Just as important, this measure fit the government’s desire to control the local population.16

From the standpoint of the Natives, the governor’s schemes had several drawbacks. Whether their men enlisted as military laborers or stayed put in colonial towns, their freedom of movement would be curtailed. But this was what Hardy intended. He betrayed his unease with the government’s lack of control of Native comings and goings when he questioned them “to discover

15. Proclamation of Governor Hardy, March 8, 1756, CP, 82:88; “Proclamation,” Pennsylvania Gazette, March 18, 1756; Meetings with River Indians, March 14 and 15, 1756, both in CM, 25:112 and 112–13, respectively.

whether any of their Tribe, many of whom have lately absented themselves, are gone over to the Enemy." Even more seriously, if the adult men were away on military service, their families would be left largely bereft of protection and support. They would have to trust Hardy’s promise that colonial towns would give “such Assistance as they may stand in Need of”; they would also have to believe that the colony’s assurances of protection “from being hurt by the Inhabitants” were as reliable as Hardy claimed—a dubious assertion when an Indian couple had been murdered inside a colonial house. Keeping these women and children as de facto hostages would remove any possibility that their menfolk might join the enemies of the British. As to these men’s personal safety, there was no reason that military service would shield them from harassment from colonials; in fact, some Esopus men who did enlist as “Battoe Men” later complained that “in our way up to Oswego where we went to earn a penny to support our Wives & Children who are in a distressed Condition,” some colonials “abused & threatened us for Murdering their People on the Frontiers of Pensilvania, New Jersey & New York.”

The policies enacted by New York and New Jersey were also negatively perceived by other Natives, and the restrictions placed on Natives in these provinces soon led to rumors that the English had enslaved them. This perception might hinder diplomatic overtures, and in April 1756, Pennsylvania governor Robert Hunter Morris instructed negotiators traveling to Susquehanna country to assure the Natives there that the Natives living among the English in New Jersey and Pennsylvania enjoyed freedom and plenty. A month later, after a Mohawk speaker referred to rumors of River Indians “being taken Prisoner & made Slaves of by the English” circulating among the Delawares, Sir William Johnson grew worried. At a conference at Easton, Pennsylvania, in November, the Delaware leader Teedyuscung insisted that the English “throw down the Fence that confines some of my Brethren and relations in the Jerseys,” so that these people might see their friends and relatives; only then would it be clear “that they are not servants but a free People.” Teedyuscung also wanted the Native man named Philip freed from jail in Trenton. William Denny, the new governor of Pennsylvania, promised to do what he could, but the effort to control local Natives had obviously led to unanticipated complications.

18. Message of Governor Morris to the Susquehanna Indians, April 26, 1756, JP, 2:452–54, and Meeting between Mohawks and River Indians, May 28, 1756, both in JP, 2:442–54 and 9:465, respectively; Meeting with the Onondagas, June 27, 1756,
Government policies were only part of the problem, however; some local colonials also harbored genocidal impulses and were ready to terrorize any Natives they met. Slaughter’s gang in Ulster County was not unique in their loathing of the Natives. Hostile attitudes toward local Natives had been widespread across the mid-Atlantic region at least since the raid on Hoosick in 1754. When the Esopus delegates went to lay their case before Governor Hardy, they needed “a proper Guard of white Men, to protect them from the Insults of the enraged Populace.” After the murder of a Native woman in Somerset County in June 1756, New Jersey authorities called out militia to prevent rioters from freeing one of the killers from jail. Native people were aware of these hostile feelings: a man from the Moravian mission town of Pachgatgoc in western Connecticut (which remained free of colonial violence during the war) reported that in wake of the killings in March, the Wappingers in the Highlands east of the Hudson had warned him not to cross the river, “because the white people are said to be so very angry with the Indians.”

One should not, however, caricature all local colonists as genocidal terrorists. That Slaughter’s first victims were killed inside a settler’s house shows that some colonists still maintained neighborly relations with local Natives, and others were likely ambivalent. If Native neighbors fled colonial violence, they might return as foes with a dangerous knowledge of local geography. In late 1756 Colden reported that Ulster colonists believed that recent attacks in their parts had been made “by Indians who deserted from us last fall”; Colden himself thought these locals were acting as guides for French-allied enemies from farther away. As Silver suggests was the case in Pennsylvania in the early 1760s, some local colonials felt it might be better to have Native neighbors close by than to push them into the arms of the enemy.

By portraying ordinary colonists as genocidal paranoids, colony officials sought to cast themselves both as gentlemen who were too refined to share


20. Colden to Archibald Kennedy, November 17, 1756, LPC, 9:165; Silver, Our Savage Neighbors, 172.
the delusions of the rabble and as paternalists who could shield Natives against the hostile white populace. Because the Natives were not safe in going about their own business, governmental restrictions were for their own good. These officials thus cast themselves as protectors rather than jailers, a disingenuous notion considering that they had moved to place local Natives under colonial supervision at an early date. The widespread rumors that the River Indians had been enslaved showed that Native people remained unconvinced by this version of events.

Amid these various developments, Sir William Johnson hit upon the idea of removing Hudson Valley people to Mohawk country, making Iroquois rather than colonial towns internment camps for unwanted Natives, with the Mohawks as guards. At a meeting with Mohawk leaders on March 23, Johnson revealed that he had received a letter from the magistrates at Kingston asking his advice on what to do with forty to fifty Esopus Indians who had sought refuge in that town after the murders along the Wallkill earlier that month. In Johnson’s version, these events had transpired because the victims had resisted a party that came to arrest them “upon strong suspicion of their being concerned in the murder of some of their neighbours [white settlers] a few days before.” According to Johnson’s records, the Mohawks informed him three days later that they would go to Kingston “and bring those Indians living or left about that part of the Country to settle among us at the Mohawks” and requested economic assistance from Johnson until the refugees could fend for themselves. Johnson cast the attempt to remove Esopus people to Iroquoia as a Mohawk initiative, but this development fit Johnson’s interests so well that he likely had a hand in convincing them to implement this policy. After all, Johnson placed the disposition of these refugees on the agenda at his meetings with the Mohawk leadership, and though the Mohawks were ready to send envoys to Kingston, they were “unacquainted with their language and strangers in that part of the Country” and requested that Johnson provide an interpreter who understood the Munsee language of the Esopus people. Although the Mohawks could not have had much recent contact with these Natives, Johnson wanted them to tidy up the mess made by Ulster colonials. 21

To Johnson, the plight of the refugees was an annoying distraction from more consequential matters. The war with the French and their allies to the

21. Meeting of the Mohawks at Fort Johnson, March 23, 1756, Meeting of the Mohawks, March 26, 1756, and Instructions for Jacobus Clement, April 8, 1756, all in NYCD, 7:94 and 96.
north was not going well for the British. Indeed, a day after the Mohawks had agreed to invite the Esopus refugees to their country, a Franco-Indian force destroyed Fort Bull, which served as a way station between Albany and the vital garrison at Oswego on Lake Ontario. Johnson was further preoccupied with efforts to convince the Shawnees, Delawares, Munsees, and other Natives living in the Susquehanna and Ohio countries to cease their attacks on colonial settlements; he had spent most of February 1756 attempting to convince Iroquois leaders to use their influence to bring the Delawares and Shawnees to his council fire. Unrest involving Native groups in the Hudson Valley was thus an unwelcome sideshow that diverted attention from weightier concerns.22

Johnson never had much time for the River Indians. His plan was to have the refugees permanently settled in Mohawk territory, where they might strengthen the Mohawks—his foremost Native diplomatic partners—with additional manpower and thus serve Johnson’s own influence. Johnson’s power was built on his ties to the Mohawks, and through them he sought to influence the politics of the other Six Nations, though he failed in his paramount goal of persuading the Iroquois league as a whole to abandon their policy of neutrality between the European powers. Not until the fortunes of war had clearly turned against France did the majority of the Iroquois join the conflict. Still, Mohawk warriors had joined Johnson’s campaign against Crown Point in the summer of 1755 (and would continue to provide varying levels of military support for the British war effort), while the Esopus Indians had paid little heed to Johnson’s recruiting efforts. When in late April Mohawk leaders reported that the Esopus refugees had accepted their offer of shelter, Johnson revealed his expectation that they would be “incorporated with you” and his hope that “they will be an addition to your strength and Welfare.” In a letter to William Shirley, Johnson expressed satisfaction that the “incorporation” of the Esopus Indians “amongst the Mohawks will strengthen our Indian Interest, & render a people before useless servicable to the common Cause.” The colonial press echoed this view, with one correspondent observing that the so-called incorporation would both strengthen the Mohawks and keep the River Indians “from murdering any more of our People, as evidently they formerly practised.” The removal of the Esopus Indians to

Mohawk country would both strengthen these Native allies and rid colonial settlements of a potentially subversive Native presence, allowing Johnson and the colonial government to focus on more important matters.23

By late May 1756, both Esopus Indians other refugees had begun to arrive in Mohawk country. The precise movements or even identity of these people cannot exactly be determined, but on May 21, David, a headman of the Mohawk community at Schoharie Creek, asked Johnson for clothing and other supplies for the “River Indians” who “were lately come to live amongst us.” In a message to Seth, the other principal headman at Schoharie, Johnson referred to these people as “Indians who are lately come from different parts to settle at your Castle.” Since some Mahicans had lived at Schoharie even before the war, some of these refugees were likely Mahicans from various locations in the Hudson Valley. These Mahicans probably sought refuge among the Mohawks because they felt threatened by colonial neighbors. Terror from below worked in tandem with Johnson’s diplomacy, pushing River Indians out of their homes and into Iroquoia.24

The main destination of the Esopus refugees was Tiononderoge, a Mohawk town often referred to as the “Lower Castle.” Johnson met with a delegation of these Natives on May 22 and six days later was present at a conference where Canadagai, chief of the Lower Castle, welcomed the refugees to his settlement. Several of the Esopus Indians present at this meeting had by then enlisted in the British bateaux service and had families residing in the Fishkill precinct in Dutchess County. How they had ended up there is unclear, but they were obviously under de facto internment among the colonial inhabitants, for when two Native men went to conduct these families from Fishkill to Mohawk country, Johnson sent an interpreter along with instructions to


“speak to the Magestrates & People in power there to give them no Molesta­
tion or hindrance but forward them on their Journey up here, as their
coming to live among the Mohocks will be of great Service to the public.”
These Native families arrived in Mohawk country sometime before July 9;
at that time, the refugees among the Mohawks numbered at least 196
people.25

Johnson at once began to make the refugees “useful” to British purposes.
At the conference on May 22, Johnson told the Esopus refugees that it was
their “duty and Interest to join with your Uncles the Mohawks in aiding His
Majestys arms” against the French, a point he reemphasized at a subsequent
meeting in July. In fact, material assistance depended on the refugees behav­
ing “dutifully” to Britain. Johnson also employed the refugees as symbols of
British benevolence. At a meeting with the Delawares and Shawnees from
Susquehanna country in July, Johnson had some River Indians present as
proof that the rumors that the British had enslaved them were false. His
ceremonial gifts of clothing and munitions to the refugees evidently made a
satisfactory impression on them, but these items also indicated that he
expected the River Indians to make Britain’s war against the French and
their Native allies their own, a consideration that must have become increas­
ingly important as British military fortunes continued to deteriorate; the fall
of Fort Oswego in early August made the German Flats in the Mohawk
Valley Britain’s westernmost stronghold in New York.26

No matter how often Johnson and other officials deplored the murders
and other terror tactics perpetrated by ordinary colonials, they were also
ready to use these atrocities for their own purposes. Through their portrayals
of Native friends-turned-enemies in official proclamations, New York author­
ities helped increase colonial suspicions, and Governor Hardy exploited the
attacks made by Slaughter’s gang to have Esopus Indians interned in colonial
towns. Johnson then used the ongoing refugee crisis to have these people
resettled in Mohawk country, where he could use them as tools to serve

25. Meeting between Mohawks and River Indians, May 28, 1756, and Johnson to
the Magistrates of Fishkill, May 28, 1756, both in JP, 9:463–67 and 2:477–78, respec­
tively. Johnson’s Speech to the River Indians Come to Live at the Lower Mohawk
Castle, May 22, 1756, and Meeting with River Indians, July 9, 1756, both in NYCD,
7:113 and 152–53, respectively.

26. Johnson’s Speech to the River Indians Come to Live at the Lower Mohawk
Castle, May 22, 1756, Meeting with River Indians, July 9, 1756, Meeting with the
Onondagas, June 26, 1756, and Meeting with Delawares, July 11, 1756, all in NYCD,
7:113, 152–53, 138–41, and 155–58, respectively; F. Anderson, Crucible of War,
150–57.
British military and diplomatic purposes. The genocidal impulses from below thus fed the paternalistic program of ethnic cleansing from above. In his proclamation in the wake of the murders in March, Hardy warned white colonials that such atrocities would not only “draw upon us the Resentment of all the Settlement Indians as yet our Friends, of whom it is not doubted there are many, but give great disgust to other nations in Friendship with the English.” This was a sensible observation, but a perverse logic was at work. If local colonials were enraged against all Natives, future killings were likely, which would then make these Natives into true enemies and jeopardize Britain’s relationship with the Iroquois and their other Native allies. The “removal of those settled in this Province and called the River Indians who have lately caused great Jealousys and uneasiness to our Inhabitants,” Hardy observed in his comments on Johnson’s activities, and “the setting them with the Mohawks will be an additional Strength to their castle and may make them a useful people.” Removing the Hudson Valley Natives was the best solution for all parties.  

With the refugees in Iroquois custody, Johnson may have believed he had resolved a troublesome problem, but the displaced River Indians faced several hardships, among them hunger and poverty. As David of Schoharie explained to Johnson on May 21, 1756, the refugees who had recently come both to his community and to Tiononderoge were “naked & destitute,” and the Mohawks requested Johnson to supply them with provisions. Johnson did provide supplies to the refugees at Tiononderoge the following day, but at least some of the refugees remained dissatisfied, and a few days later Johnson complained to Schoharie leader Seth “that the Indians who are lately come from different parts to settle at your Castle, dont act brotherly by the [white] People at Schoharee, but kill their cattle & hogs & behave in a disorderly manner.” By the 1750s, the slaughter of colonial cattle had long served as a form of Native protest against the colonizers, but the refugees may also have done so because they lacked food. Johnson, as ever, turned to the Iroquois to fix the problem and lectured Seth that he expected “that you and your people will interpose your authority and influence to prevent the repetition of any such irregularities.” Impoverished and caught between British appointed officials like Johnson and the Iroquois, the refugees were in an unenviable position. In February 1757 two men from Pachgatgoch reported that “the Indians who

27. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 18, 1756; Hardy to Board of Trade, May 10, 1756, *NYCD*, 7:80
went from New York government to Colonel Johnson the previous year, and have lived there since" wanted to relocate to Stockbridge.28

Impoverished refugees living under Anglo-Iroquois supervision were not in full control of their destinies and were vulnerable to military demands. Johnson stressed that any aid the refugees needed depended on their loyalty to Britain, and the River Indians got the point. In May 1757, River Indians living at Schoharie let Johnson “know by several Strings of Wampum their Poverty & at the same time their readiness to join our Arms, as many as can be spared when called upon.” Johnson promised them provisions, but also admonished them to “hold themselves in readiness to march & join His Majestys Arms whenever called upon & that would give them a Claim to be supplied with further Necessaries.” In a report written toward the end of his life, Johnson acknowledged that many Esopus, Wappinger, and other River peoples had borne arms for the British during the war, and it may be that many had fought willingly. Military service could bring wages and access to equipment, provisions, or plunder; Native warriors also benefited from martial renown and a sense of masculine satisfaction. Still, Johnson’s expense accounts show that in July 1755 he had sent messengers to the Esopus Indians to call them to arms, and the people he later labeled as “useless” surely received this message without enthusiasm. They likely knew that the wages promised to them were not always paid and that colonial soldiers charged with fighting French-allied Natives were perhaps even more likely than colonial civilians to despise them as they despised all Indians. Johnson’s own experiences show as much, as he had to deal with the aftermath of violence against River Indians committed by soldiers and the other way around; in the latter case he called on the Iroquois to control their supposed dependents.29


29. Brian D. Carroll, “The Effect of Military Service on Indian Communities in Southern New England, 1740–1763,” Early American Studies 14, no. 3 (2016): 506–36; Silver, Our Savage Neighbors, 129–33; Johnson to Governor William Tryon, October 22, 1773, Meetings with Mahicans, Shawnees, and Nanticokes, April 19 and 21, 1757, all in NYCD, 8:458, 7:246–49, and 7:249–51, respectively; Meeting with River Indians, May 10, 1757, Account of Indian Expenses, July 27, 1755, Journal of Indian Proceedings, January 24, 1757, Johnson to Hardy, April 21, 1757, Johnson’s Account of Indian Expenses, April 25, 1759, Meetings with Oneidas and River Indians, September 15,
Johnson, at any rate, soon began to ponder the possibility of encouraging the removal of the River Indians even farther afield—to Native towns in the Susquehanna country, especially the multiethnic community of Otsiningo on the Chenango River, near modern-day Binghamton. In April 1757, a delegation of Nanticokes, Shawnees, and “Mohickanders” arrived unexpectedly at Fort Johnson. They were then living at Otsiningo, and during the ensuing conference, these Mahicans (who may have included other River Indians) informed Johnson that in the spring of 1756 the Nanticokes had sent them a belt of wampum inviting them to resettle at their town. These Mahicans were not among the people who had been fleeing the Hudson Valley since the outbreak of anti-Indian violence in early 1756. Instead, they had lived at Wyoming, Pennsylvania, in the Susquehanna country with their chief Abraham, who had settled there sometime before April 1755 because he was “destitute of Land or Habitation.” These Mahicans opposed the Delawares’ attacks on the English, and by April 1756 they and pro-English Shawnees had begun to move to Otsiningo, where they were likely joined by Mahicans from other Susquehanna Valley towns such as Tioga. At Fort Johnson, the Otsiningo Mahicans said that they would send the Nanticoke belt “amongst all our dispersed people,” so that when Johnson saw “any of our scattered people passing up the River, you may [know] that they are removing to Otsiningo.” A Nanticoke leader reinforced this point a few days later, telling Johnson that these Mahicans proposed “to gather all their scattered people & remain under our Wing.”

The initiative to relocate the River Indians to the Susquehanna country thus sprang partly from Native diplomatic relationships, but Johnson also saw a chance to rid colonial settlements of Natives he distrusted and over whom he had little influence. While the meetings with the delegation from Otsiningo were still ongoing, Johnson wrote Lord Loudoun, the British
commander-in-chief in America, that numbers of “Mohikanders” had “for
many years past been dispersed thro this Province and New-jersey, and their
Neighbourhood [and] from some Misunderstandings began to be troublesome,
and dangerous,” but he thought the people at Otsiningo were true
friends of the English. Johnson concluded, “Many of these Mohikanders or
River Indians, are yet scattered about these Provinces, and as they seem now
determined to congregate and fix themselves at Otsiningo,” he wanted his
negotiations with them published, an indication of the importance he placed
on this project. Johnson disliked the “scattered” populations of River Indians,
“troublesome” people who lived outside the Iroquois-based webs of influence
he had woven from his Mohawk Valley seat. The removal of Native people
to a central location in the Susquehanna country would prevent the distrac-
tions caused by conflicts between Natives and colonials in New York and
New Jersey while also allowing Johnson to influence these Native peoples
through diplomacy and patronage. But since Johnson believed that the River
Indians were especially troublesome to their white neighbors, having them
settled with the Mohawks was no long-term solution, for Mohawk country
was a site of constant intercultural interaction; by midcentury there were
more colonists than Natives living in the Mohawk Valley itself. 31

Effecting the removal of River Indians through Native diplomacy also
came with complications. Otsiningo lay under the supervision of the Senecas.
As Johnson knew, these historically mostly pro-French members of the Six
Nations stood fast on the established Iroquois policy of neutrality between
Britain and France, while he was trying to rally the Iroquois to the British
cause. Old enmities between northern and southern peoples were his other
worry. In June 1757, Johnson wrote Edmund Atkins, the southern superin-
tendent of Indian affairs, that the Senecas were encouraging “all the Indians
they can to settle near them; most of the Mohickanders, or River Indians,
who used to be dispersed thro’ this and the Neighbouring Provinces are
removed and removing to Otsaningo . . . near to where the Cayougas &
Senecas live.” That most River Indians had gone to Otsiningo was an exag-
geration, but apart from that, Johnson feared war between the Senecas and
Britain’s Cherokee and Catawba allies. When Abraham of Otsiningo asked
Johnson for aid a week later, he was still supportive, but he also had reasons
to ponder the wisdom of encouraging people to move to the Seneca sphere

31. Johnson to the Earl of Loudoun, April 28, 1757, JR 9:70; Timothy J. Shannon,
Preston, The Texture of Contact, 68–70.
of influence. By September, the threat of war between the southern nations and the Iroquois had passed, but Johnson still feared that the Senecas, Cayugas, and Onondagas might abandon neutrality and support the French. At that point, British military fortunes were approaching their nadir, as Fort William Henry on Lake George had fallen to a Franco-Indian force in early August. Johnson still expressed confidence in the people at Otsiningo, but “as they look upon the Senecas as their Patrons” and lived near Seneca and Cayuga countries, “the Influence those people may have upon them, must be taken into the Account when we calculate our dependance upon them.”

These complications surfaced at a meeting between Johnson, a delegation of Oneida leaders, and a group of displaced River Indians who were in quest of a new home in September 1757. These River Indians had received a wampum belt from Abraham at Otsiningo, as well as an invitation from the Oneida-dominated multiethnic town of Oquaga in the Susquehanna country and a message from the Oneidas calling them to settle “anywhere between Aughquaga & Oneida.” The Oneidas had welcomed other groups of River Indians to Oquaga as early as January 1756, after they called on Mahicans, Shawnees, and other people in the Susquehanna country who were friendly to the English to settle there; there were River Indians living at Oquaga by May 1757. Then the Oneidas again called these River Indians to Oquaga, and despite his past enthusiasm for Otsiningo as their home, Johnson advised them to accept this invitation. Johnson may not have known of these Oneida overtures, and perhaps he did not much care where these Natives went as long as they left the neighborhood of white colonials, but he also had reasons to change his mind. While he distrusted the Senecas, Johnson counted the Oquagas among Britain’s firmest allies; having refugees settled among them thus fit his policy of placing the River Indians with Iroquois communities he deemed reliable. These River Indians replied that they would consult

Abraham at Otsiningo and notify Johnson and the Oneidas of their decision at a later date; where they ended up moving remains unclear.  

A striking facet of the overall effort to remove Indians from the Hudson Valley was how quickly it was abandoned by its backers. References to the desirability of emptying New York of Native people disappear from the records of both Johnson and the government of New York after late 1757. This development was partly the result of the fact that many Native people had by then left their home areas, but it also stemmed from the arrival of relative peace to the mid-Atlantic region after colonial, Delaware, Munsee, and western Wappinger leaders concluded the Treaty of Easton in October 1758. Tensions remained, and reports of renewed tensions occasionally worried colonial authorities; in August 1761 Colden (as acting governor) ordered an Ulster militia regiment to be alert for “the apparently bad disposition of the Indians bordering on the Settlements of Ulster and Orange,” but no hostilities took place.

When Native people began returning to their homelands after hostilities ended, governmental officials did nothing to hinder them, and most ordinary colonials viewed their return migration without evident concern. In August 1760, a group of about a hundred Indians described as Delawares, Tuscaroras, and the “Rest formerly Residents among the Inhabitants on the Western Frontier” met with two Ulster officials at Napanoch. They wanted to renew old treaties of peace and “have Free Liberty to pass and repass from time to time through the Country, and to reside amongst the Inhabitants.” County officials seemed unalarmed at the return of these old neighbors. New York’s executive council recommended that a delegation of magistrates and freeholders confer with the Natives and, if they found them friendly, “admit them to reside in Such part of the County, as they shall think will give least


umbrage to the Inhabitants.” The council’s concern that local colonials might resent the return of the Indians, together with the advice that county officials should caution them not to hunt near colonial settlements or enter houses without permission, suggest that they were skeptical of the possibility of neighborly relations. Still, the council did nothing to oppose the Natives’ return. As previously mentioned, the Esopus Indians Johnson had expected to incorporate among the Mohawks returned home three years later, and their homecoming likewise went unopposed.35

The sudden end of overt efforts to remove Natives from their homelands may be explained by the limited objectives behind these schemes, their disjointed development, and the uncertain context in which they unfolded. The measures that had evolved—from surveillance to internment to removal—were motivated by colonial security concerns and authorities’ need to deal with Native populations whom they distrusted but with whom they were not at war; the lack of open hostilities from local Native groups also shaped the official response. Some Esopus Indians, for instance, may have joined the French and their Native allies in their war against the English—indeed, they appear to have been among the people who still held English captives in late 1761—but no one charged the Esopus people in general with having done so. This meant that New York’s colonial government could not use overt force against them for fear of multiplying the number of Native foes they would face in a dangerous time of war. The colony’s government eagerly exploited acts of violence perpetrated by ordinary colonials to advance its goals, but officials never attempted to round Native people up by force, which would have meant starting a new war in their backyard. Men such as Colden, Hardy, and Johnson may have had other motivations, such as future colonial economic development, in the back of their minds when they moved to remove Natives from their homelands, but this was not a primary motive for their actions. Likewise, when the threat of Native attacks passed, it was safer for them not to oppose Native people’s return migrations, lest doing so provoke renewed hostilities.36

The removal efforts were also tied to the intricacies of Native diplomacy and Britain’s relationship to the Iroquois Six Nations. Colonial leaders had looked to the Iroquois to solve their problems as soon as late 1755, when they

began to suspect Natives in Ulster and Orange Counties of supporting their enemies; in November, Governor Hardy asked Johnson to have the Iroquois bring these Natives to heel. The need for good relations with the Iroquois, however, limited British options. The Six Nations would not look kindly on any overt violence against Indians whom they claimed as their dependents and who were not openly at war. Indeed, the Iroquois would have felt threatened by aggression against Native groups that close to Iroquoia; the British and colonial officials had to move carefully. Johnson negotiated the removal of Esopus Indians to Mohawk country, but his control over this situation was limited. Other Indians (including those who settled at Schoharie) may have gone there on their own initiative (responding, perhaps, to independent Mohawk invitations). This still served Johnson’s purposes, as did the later relocations of the Mahicans and other River Indians to Otsiningo, which he encouraged, but Johnson also ran into the limits of his own influence. He was troubled by the location of Otsiningo within the Seneca sphere of influence, but he had no real control over where Native migrants went, especially since his own influence among Hudson Valley Natives was thin. He also knew little of what interactions these Indians had with the Iroquois or other Natives, so if Indigenous diplomatic networks stopped funneling Indians out of the Hudson River Valley, Johnson had no means of restarting the flow; at best he could encourage people who were inclined to migrate and then prod them in the direction he desired. However, the various Iroquois groups, as the competing Oneida and Seneca invitations to people to resettle at Oquaga and Otsiningo reveal, were inviting prospective Native settlers for their own reasons, not to serve Johnson’s purposes.37

Another scenario took place in New Jersey, as Governor Francis Bernard used the peace negotiations at Easton in 1758 to obtain a quitclaim deed from Munsee and Wappinger leaders to all their lands in what the British and colonials considered northern New Jersey. Some former Wappinger residents in northern New Jersey had joined their Munsee kin in the Susquehanna country in the war against the English and evidently participated in attacks on New Jersey colonials living along the Delaware River in the summer of 1758. Munsee and Wappinger leaders attended the conference at Easton in October, and when these men identified fraudulent land purchases as a primary casus belli, Bernard proposed to purchase a quitclaim to all their

lands in New Jersey; this deed—together with another quitclaim obtained from Delaware leaders in February—extinguished all Native land titles in the province. Although this purchase did not mean the automatic removal of Natives from northern New Jersey, Bernard was thinking in those terms. When the Munsee leader Egohohoun specified that the Natives reserved hunting and fishing rights on the alienated land and expected hospitable treatment whenever they came to visit New Jersey, Bernard demurred that they should “not go into those parts, where they had lately committed hostilities, till the people’s passions were cooled; for he could not be answerable for his people’s behaviour, whilst their losses were still fresh upon their minds.” The reservation of Native hunting and fishing rights made it into the final deed, but once again a government official had used the image of bloodthirsty colonials to restrict the movements of Native people. In a letter to the Board of Trade written shortly after the treaty, Bernard stressed that the newly created Brotherton reservation in Burlington County to the south should be the only distinct Native community in New Jersey; the following June he expressed satisfaction that the Natives in the northern part of the colony “have entirely quitted it & are gone to the Susquehannah, where they live in peace with the English.”

The situation in northern New Jersey differed from that of the western counties of New York for several reasons, and these differences made it possible to attempt removal through a negotiated land session. Bernard was dealing with Wappingers and Munsees, who had been open enemies of the English and could portray the purchase of a quitclaim from them as the colony’s magnanimous concession to former foes. Thus, New Jersey could secure this land without seeming like an aggressor in the eyes of the Six Nations. Indeed, Iroquois diplomat Thomas King took part in the negotiations. It also helped that most of the Indians concerned had already relocated to the Susquehanna country, so Bernard did not have to rely on either diplomacy or force to remove unwanted Native populations. The Iroquois, who

used the Treaty of Easton to reassert power over nations whom they claimed as dependents and who had gone to war against the English against their will, would finally have seen it to their advantage that these people remained in the Susquehanna country within their sphere of influence. Indeed, the point that they were living there by the permission of the Six Nations was highlighted in the quitclaim itself. 39

The postwar seizure of lands in southern Dutchess, and the expulsion of the local Wappinger people, provides another example that sheds light on the incomplete removal of Indians west of the Hudson. Many Wappinger men from this area had served alongside British forces during the war, while their families took refuge among the Mahicans at Stockbridge. After the war, they sought to return home but found that the heirs of the manor lord Adolph Philipse had used a patent from 1697 and a disputed deed from 1702 to claim their country. After unfavorable hearings before New York’s executive council in 1765 and 1767 (the second after a Native delegation to London had convinced the Crown to order the case reexamined), Wappinger sachem Daniel Nimham made a final appeal to Johnson, who refused to assist him. To Philipse’s heirs, the case was a simple legal dispute, but the Wappingers, who feared being “driven from the seat of their Ancestors to seek refuge among other Tribes remote from the English settlements,” saw it as an act of expulsion that forced them from their homeland. The council’s rulings stemmed from economic motives. The council (as a supporter of the Wappingers put it) was dominated by men who were “either Interested in the Lands in Controversy, or in other Lands which lay under Similar Circumstances” and thus had a vested interest in this land grab. Such direct economic motives did not underlie the removal efforts that took place a few years earlier. The Wappinger case took place at a time when the Seven Years’ War was over and Pontiac’s War was winding down; Daniel Nimham’s Wappingers were said to number only 227 persons in 1765 and were no great threat. It may even have been that these Wappingers seemed like harmless and safe targets because they had not fought the English but, on the contrary, supported them. 40


There were also diplomatic reasons why dispossessing and expelling the Wappingers in the 1760s could proceed more directly than previous removal attempts. As Johnson put it in a letter to one of the heirs of Philipse in 1766, he “considered the Claims of Indians so near the Sea, as verry different from the rest,” a way of saying that southern Dutchess was so far from Iroquoia that land grabs there would not upset his primary diplomatic partners. In such cases it was best not to disturb extant English land titles unless the Indian claim was crystal clear and the Wappinger claim was disputed. But when Johnson “found a Just complaint made by a People either by themselves or Connections capable of resenting & who I knew would resent a neglect, I Judged it my Duty to support the same, altho it should disturb y’ property of any Man whatsoever.” The Wappingers, in Johnson’s opinion, had neither enough power nor enough diplomatic clout to make their removal dangerous.41

As the Wappinger case shows, not all Native people who left the Hudson Valley during the Seven Years’ War returned home after the end of hostilities. Wappingers, Esopus Indians, and Mahicans had found new homes in the Susquehanna country, and some of their kin joined them after the war. Johnson had some peripheral involvement in these postwar migrations, but the extant documentation of his role is telling. Rather than reports highlighting the strategic importance of clearing colonial neighborhoods of River Indians, his role is documented in brief journal entries and expense accounts of meetings with unnamed Native delegates without explanation of any larger context. Though Johnson had not completely abandoned his old schemes, he no longer accorded them a great deal of importance either.42

The abandonment of overt ethnic cleansing against River Indians does not acquit either the government of New York or Johnson of callous disregard

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42. Midtrød, The Memory of All Ancient Customs, 195–96; Journal of Indian Affairs, May 5, 1764, and Johnson’s Account of Disbursements to the Indians, February 20–24, 1770, both in JP, 11:188 and 12:802, respectively.
for the welfare of these Natives. These officials had no intention of encouraging the murder of peaceful Native peoples, but their publicly voiced suspicions and efforts at internment contributed to a situation where such atrocities were likely. As Peter Silver argues, much the same happened in Pennsylvania during Pontiac’s War. The Pennsylvania government’s offer of bounties on the scalps of enemy Natives created an atmosphere of intense excitement where officials could appeal to the sentiments of “the enraged populace” to implement their own policies of ethnic cleansing. Authorities in New York and Pennsylvania shared the assumption that the removal of Natives was the solution to the threat of white violence against them. Pennsylvania thus had Moravian Natives and peaceful Munsees from Wyalusing in the Susquehanna country interned in Philadelphia and, during the crisis created by the genocidal massacre of the Conestogas in December 1763, attempted to deport them to New York. Somewhat ironically, Cadwallader Colden refused these Natives admittance to the province by arguing that his inhabitants were too hostile for the scheme to work. Sadly, neither New York nor Pennsylvania officials stand out as especially callous. Similarly, the contemporary removal of the neutral Acadians from Nova Scotia proves that colonial and imperial officials elsewhere were not too squeamish to perpetrate ethnic cleansing on a grand scale. Furthermore, the loss of interest in the ethnic cleansing project once relative peace returned to the Hudson Valley shows that colonial officials in this region were never strongly committed to the idea in the first place. That means, however, that they put these Natives through the harrowing experiences of removal, internment, and dislocation in a calculating and dispassionate manner.43

Still, the ethnic cleansing project did dissolve, and it did so for reasons particular to this time and place. Its fuel was the genocidal impulse—or at least the perception thereof—held by some local colonials. Terrorist actions and attitudes emanating from these people created an atmosphere of crisis in which government agents were motivated and enabled to push and pull River Indians away from their homes. This itself was a limiting factor, for not only did the underlying desire to prevent disorder and violence in the

Hudson Valley prevent colonial officials from expelling Natives by naked force, but when this atmosphere evaporated, the project also lost its raison d’être. Just as important, the attempt at ethnic cleansing was limited by its means. From the moment Johnson entered the scene, it was tied to Native American diplomatic structures, above all the British alliance with the Iroquois. That an alliance with the Iroquois should prevent the removal of other Native groups was not a given—the Walking Purchase of 1737 shows that it sometimes worked against other Native groups’ interests—but in the Hudson Valley in the 1750s it was at least an established limitation. Johnson could exploit Native American diplomatic networks, but he could never fully control them, and if they stopped working to his purposes, there was little he could do to remedy the situation.44