

A LANCASTER FOOTNOTE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Tracing the historical connexion of early Lancaster to Sir William Johnson of New York, Robert C. Batchelder, rector of St. James's Church, reveals a little-known story centering around the 18th century rector of St. James's.

A sullen and belligerent teen-ager walked the streets of Lancaster in the mid-sixties of the eighteenth century. To him it must have seemed a metropolis, for he was from the wild back country of lower New York State. But by present day standards Lancaster was small, for records indicate it had something over five hundred dwellings, housing a population of a few more than two thousand.

The community, situated in the midst of a surrounding territory of rich farm land, was the last settlement of any size toward the West. It was an important trading center. The main road from Philadelphia to the frontier passed through it. The Susquehanna ferry was close by. From time to time its population would suddenly increase when it had to house terror-stricken families fleeing from actual or threatened raids by Indians who found defenseless and isolated farms beyond the Susquehanna their only means of retaliation for the injustices received from white men.

The many taverns of the community were patronized by rough frontiersmen who in them or on the streets boasted of their exploits in tricking Indians, killing drunken braves, defenseless squaws or suckling babes to secure land or furs for their own enrichment. An influx of German immigrants seeking land or coming to town to trade added to the community's air of activity.

The young stranger from New York State was an unwilling student of the ways of civilization. Because he was half-Indian he objected to the treatment and talk about Indians. He "challenged almost every person he met and boxed half the young Dutchmen (Germans) in town."

He was a young man with a reason for personal pride in a class-conscious age and to be chided, or think he was, for part of his racial heritage was a degrading experience. Before long he decided the place was intolerable, for he was the half-Mohawk son of Sir William Johnson, sent to Lancaster from the feudal frontier estate of Johnson Hall on the Mohawk River, to study and live in the house of the Rev. Thomas Barton, rector of St. James's Church and Church of England missionary representing the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel on the frontier.

The arrival of William of Canajoharie (his Indian name was Tagchenu-to), or "little Will," in the home of an educated clergyman was not the result of chance, but of a plan on the part of his father. His mother had been Johnson's first formal Indian wife, who seems mysteriously to have disappeared, leaving the young child behind. Born about 1750, he had first been sent to Moor's Indian Charity School in Lebanon, Connecticut, where the Rev. Eleazar Wheelock, the headmaster, had been training Indians, and also missionaries to go to them since 1754. His institution moving in 1770 to Hanover, New Hampshire, took there the name of its titled English benefactor, the second Earl of Dartmouth.

At this school, tensions developed between William and the other students of so serious a nature that Wheelock was compelled to ask Johnson to rebuke his son for "pride and violence of temper." Instead of a reprimand, the boy was called home.

But William Johnson, the father, had a theory he would not easily discard. Having had many unhappy experiences with New England Congregational missionaries, he believed the Church of England most worthy of aid as "the support of monarchy" and thus "a force for peace and order" in America. In the effort to strengthen Indian life Johnson revised the plan to replace Church of England missionaries with "Indian teachers, who possessing by inheritance and life the native tradition, would thus be able to graft skillfully new ideas onto the old and primitive culture of the Mohawks." Wheelock's school had been a failure for his child, so in 1767 the solution now seemed to send young William as a boarding pupil to the home of a Church of England clergyman. Johnson would not be defeated in the correctness of his theory.

The Rev. Thomas Barton seemed an ideal preceptor, for he had seen service as a chaplain to British troops in the French and Indian War. For a time he lived and worked at York Springs, where he earned a reputation as a zealous and devoted missionary to Indians and white settlers. Coming to Lancaster in 1759 to be rector of St. James' Church, with two other churches added to his care; a naturalist of reputation; and with a family of eight children, his wife being the sister of the famous scientist, David Rittenhouse of Philadelphia, he seemed to be the ideal person to train the young half-Indian lad for a life of service to the Indian tribes of New York State.

The boy's life in Lancaster was not a happy one, however, in spite of his tutor's ability, and the companionship of his younger playmate, Benjamin Smith Barton, later to become a renowned naturalist. In addition to the hostility which he felt from the townspeople, were added apparently the limitations of his own personality and background. Young William, at first a zealous student, was insulted on the streets; so he confined himself to the parsonage, stopped his studies, and finally insisted on going back to the Mohawk Valley and the more congenial Indian-British life at Johnson Hall.

The work with young William began auspiciously, as this letter indicates, and awakened in the Rev. Mr. Barton visions of Lancaster as a training place for young Indians:

Lancaster, July 22d. 1767-

WORTHY SIR,

I did myself the Favour to address a few Lines to you by Colonel Croghan with Regard to the Lad he mentioned to me — The Lad in a few Days after arriv'd; And I have now the Pleasure to assure you that his Behaviour has given me entire Satisfaction — He is learning Arithmetick, & the Progress he makes is really surprizing. He will soon write a Hand fit for any Business — I cannot say much in Favour of his Genius, or Quickness of Apprehension; but his Application, which is indefatigable, makes up for every Deficiency of this Kind — I have the most favourable Expectations of him, & shall be very happy if I can make him answer yours — No good Offices that I can render him shall be wanting, as I wish, thro' him, to convince you how sincerely I am disposed to serve you — I should be glad the Indians could be prevaild upon to send about a Dozen of their most discreet & ingenious Boys to this Place — I should take Pleasure in the Education of them; And out of that Number I might perhaps be able to pick one to make a Priest of — If they could be obtained, the Society would chearfully bear the Expence of them — I intend in a little Time to send you a Specimen of William's¹ Writing²—

In six months real progress seems to have been made in William's education, for we find Mr. Barton writing as follows:

Lancaster, December 2d. 1767.

WORTHY SIR,

Your friendly & polite Letter of the 5th. Ult., reach'd me at a Time when I laboured under Apprehensions that I had, by some unlucky Accident or other, forfeited the Honour of your Notice & kind Opinion — As you had allowed me the Freedom of writing to you, and indulg'd me with a Correspondence, tho' surrounded by Avocations & Business of the utmost Importance, my Fears began to persuade me, that my not hearing from you for several Months, proceeded from some Cause unfortunate, tho' unknown to me.

The Progress William has made, since he came to Lancaster, surprizes every one; and cannot fail to afford you a high Satisfaction, whenever you have an Opportunity of examining him — He promises fair to write, in a little Time, a Hand fit for any Kind of Business — The enclos'd are Specimens — The Letters were not only wrote but compos'd by himself, except that the Method & Orthography were corrected in the Copies or rough Draughts — I purchas'd for him a large Copper-plate of different Hands, which he takes great Delight in imitating — He has gone through the Common Rules of Arithmetick, & is in that one call'd Simple Interest — He has a Love for reading not common in Persons of his Standing — Every Book that he can lay his Hands on has his Perusal — After saying all this, I must observe to you, that his Genius is rather heavy than sprightly — His Imagination has more of the plodding than the fanciful or lively in it — He is not brought, without much Pains,

to comprehend a Science, but when he has comprehended it, he retains it, being favoured with a happy Memory — In his Disposition, he is naturally obliging, generous & good-natured, tho' he appears to have Something of the sullen, reserved & unsociable in his Temper — He has a Kind of rustick Diffidence or Bashfulness, which is injurious to him, & of which I have not been able to break him, tho' I admit him to my own Table when I have no strange Company, with a Design to rub off some of his Rust — Upon his first coming to Lancaster, he challenged almost every Person he met with; & box'd half the Young Dutch Men in Town. Had he lived at Rome in his Days of Glory, when Wrestling & Boxing were brought upon the Theatre as publick Diversions, he would have been deem'd an Athlethick Champion, & entitled to the prize at every Exhibition; But in these Days of Degeneracy, when these once glorious Exercises claim no Honours or Rewards, & are attended with Nothing besides black Eyes & broken Shins, I have prevail'd upon him to lay them aside, So that he is now as peaceable a Lad as any in the Place. My Children are all exceeding fond of him, & my eldest Son, who is a good Scholar, is constantly instructing him at Night — He has a Thirst for Knowledge that carries him rather into Excess in his Diligence and Application — A Year, from this Time, will qualify him sufficiently to serve you as a Secretary, to transcribe your Papers, copy your Letters &c. or, if this should not be agreeable to serve as an Usher in one of the Indian Schools — I am very glad that the Indian Chief, who pass'd thro' this Place, was pleas'd with William's Situation. — If the old Man has an Inclination to send his Son here, I am very willing to gratify him, & shall do every Thing in my Power to give him Satisfaction in my Treatment of his Son — You are pleas'd to observe that it is probable many Indian Youths would follow the Example, & chuse to come to Lancaster for their Education, & that you will take the first Opportunity to speak to them upon this Subject — Accept, Most worthy Sir, my best Thanks for the very favourable Opinion you are pleas'd to entertain of me — If the Society can be brought to consent to the Establishment of one Indian School at Lancaster, & to grant a sufficient Allowance for its Support, I would most chearfully offer my Services, in Hopes of discharging my Duty in such a Manner to those poor benighted People as to afford Satisfaction to all concern'd — Should you then, Sir, be of Opinion that a small School here would be of any real Advantage to the Indians, & would not interfere With the general Plan which you have already laid before the Society, & which they have, with great Pleasure, adopted of erecting a School at Oneida, or some other Part of the Mohawk Country, I request the Favour of you to mention the Affair, in any Manner you shall think proper, in your first Letter to the Society, who seem determin'd to pay the highest Attention & Regard to every Recommendation from you.³

But in three more months we find William returning to Johnson Hall bearing this letter, which is the Rev. Mr. Barton's effort to placate an influential father, to account for his chagrin as a defeated teacher, and to show his efforts to do for William what was expected of him.

WORTHY SIR,

I acknowledge, with much Gratitude, the Favour of your polite Letter of the 5th. of January, which I did not receive till very lately. I deem myself peculiarly happy in being honoured with your Friendship, & shall make it the Study of my Life to improve the good Opinion you are pleased to entertain of me — Would to God, I had it in my Power to evince, by more than Words, the Sincerity of that Affection & Esteem, which I feel for you! My Prayers & good Wishes are the best Offering I can make you; And this, poor as it is, I have the Pleasure to think, will always be acceptable to a generous Mind.

I am sorry that William should be the Bearer of this Letter — But ever since the turbulent & disordered State of the Back Counties, occasioned by the Murder committed upon several Indians by one Stump, & the Rescue of that Villain, & the lawless insolent Behaviour of some of the Inhabitants, in Consequence thereof, he has relaxed in Application to Study, been uneasy in Mind; and from the most diligent, contented, happy Lad, is become the most dissatisfied, sullen, careless Creature imaginable — He immediately sollicitd Leave to return Home — I used every Argument to prevail with him to remain here for Six Months longer, as he had begun the Elements of Geometry, in Order to learn Surveying, which I thought might be of Advantage to him; & which he would soon have understood — But notwithstanding his Situation in my own Family (which I hope he will do me the Justice to own, was comfortable & easy) I could not succeed with him; And having an Opportunity of consulting with Mr. Croghan, who is here at present, we have judged it prudent to indulge his Caprice, & to let him pay a Visit to his Friends & Native Home — Colonel Croghan thinks he will be glad, after some little Time, to come back — Should that be the Case, he shall again have free Admission into my House, & be welcome to every good Office I can render him^d.

The letter was a success in keeping the Rev. Mr. Barton in Johnson's good graces, for in 1768 he received from him permission to farm the land of the massacred Conestoga Indians known as Indiantown — seven miles from Lancaster — because he lived in a town "where grain of every kind is sold at a most extravagant price."

The years after his return from Lancaster were not very satisfactory ones, either, for William of Canajoharie. He became a drunkard and although there were repeated admonitions from his father to which he replied with "assurances of amendment," these were soon forgotten.

As the long funeral procession followed the coffin of Sir William Johnson after his death July 11, 1774, to the tomb in St. John's Anglican Church in Johnstown, New York, William was among the large number of mourners. When the will of his father was read, with other bequests, was one of a thousand acres of land to William of Canajoharie. Thus was he remembered and acknowledged in spite of the defeated hopes of his father in the destiny he had planned for this son.

Perhaps some of the failure lies also in the intangible heritage he received at his birth. One of the remarkable men in the colonies before the Revolutionary War was William Johnson, his father. Coming to Boston

as a young man from a desperately poor home in Ireland late in 1737 or early in 1738, he had become an agent for his uncle, Vice-Admiral Sir Peter Warren, in developing his land grants in the Mohawk Valley of lower New York State. In doing this he was able to amass a fortune for himself and to live in a feudal manner in the Georgian style mansion he designed and had built on the bank of the Mohawk River. By sheer ability and determination he rose through the years to the position of Indian Commissioner, which meant directing and often originating the English policy for Indian relations from the Canadian border to Virginia through the treaties he negotiated with the "Six Nations" and their allies.

A man of determination and vigor, he lived with the Indians on many marches through the wilderness, going as far west as Detroit, Michigan. He learned the customs and language of the Indians, was adopted as a chief by the Mohawk and Iroquois tribes, and was a leader in opening to settlers the rich agricultural area of the section of New York State along the Mohawk River. After his brilliant military victory over the French in the battle of Lake George, King George II in 1756 created him a baronet.

But there were other factors that would influence his oldest son. William Johnson dominates a period of colonial history as a lusty, brawling, high-handed autocrat. As a statesman, man of wealth, and general, he influenced the development of the British colonies on the Atlantic seaboard. He was the father of many white and half-breed children. The Council Fire burning back of Johnson Hall made it a center where Indians of every kind congregated. Over a complex Indian-English domestic establishment presided a series of Indian and white mistresses. His family life knew no benefit of clergy, and his personal morals were little influenced by the Ten Commandments. He helped to win the French and Indian War for the British by his understanding of Indian ways and wilderness battle strategy. The Wyoming Valley settlers in Pennsylvania felt his influence, and the Quaker proprietors of Pennsylvania used his position and knowledge in their dealings with the Indians.

Such a man was the father of William of Canajoharie. His Mohawk mother's disappearance had thus left this boy to the capricious and uneven direction of a father with little time, inclination, or ability to cope with the needs of his developing half-breed son.

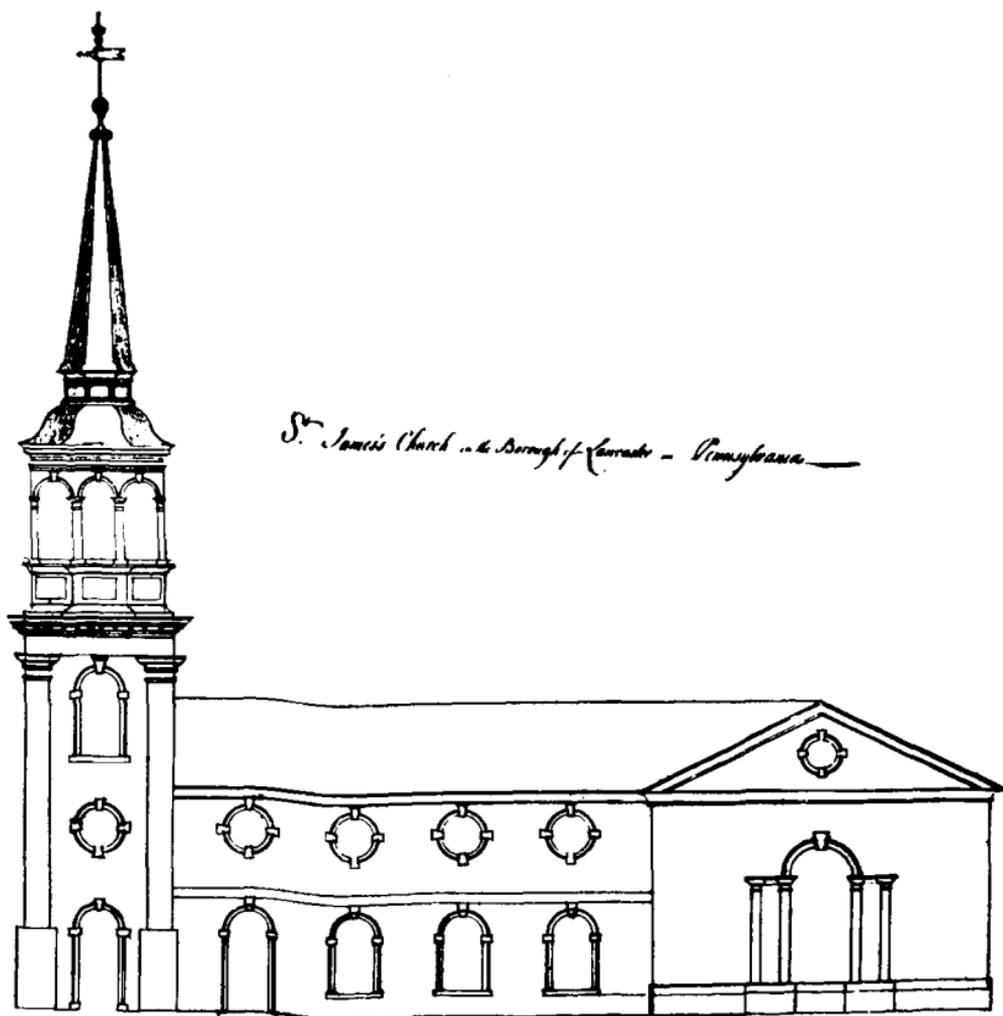
The April 1959 issue of "American Heritage" describes and pictures Sir William Johnson in Francis Russell's article "Father to Six Nations," while "Mohawk Baronet" by James Thomas Flexner (Harper 1959), recently added to the Lancaster County Historical Society's library, presents in fascinating and greater detail the account of this unique man's life and place in American history. To this place William of Canajoharie is but the minor record of a failure, being only a brief footnote to an age dominated by men of ambition and ruthlessness.

Lancaster, Pennsylvania

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NOTES

1. Son of Sir William.
2. *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, The University of the State of New York, Albany, 1927, V, p. 604.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 843-845.
4. *Ibid.*, VI, pp. 170-171.



Architect's drawing of St James's Church as it appeared in 1762.