ISSUE 3

Was Conflict Between Europeans and Native Americans Inevitable?

YES: **Kevin Kenny,** from *Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn's Holy Experiment* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

NO: **Cynthia J. Van Zandt,** from *Brothers Among Nations: The Pursuit of Intercultural Alliances in Early America, 1580–1660* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

Learning Outcomes

After reading this issue, you should be able to:

- Understand the variety of responses between European colonists to the New World and Native Americans.
- Summarize William Penn's vision of Pennsylvania.
- Describe the differing world views held by Europeans and Native Americans regarding the concept of property.
- Identify the goals of the Paxton Boys.
- Discuss the nature of trade alliances in the colonial Chesapeake.
- Explain the ultimate reason for the failure of colonial trade alliances between Europeans and various Native American tribes.

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Kevin Kenny argues that European colonists' demands for privately owned land condemned William Penn's vision of amicable relations with local Native Americans to failure and guaranteed hostilities that ultimately destroyed Indian culture and produced the extermination of even the most peaceful tribes in Pennsylvania.

NO: Cynthia J. Van Zandt claims that trade alliances between English colonists and Native Americans continued even despite military hostilities between the two groups and fell victim not to racial or cultural differences, but rather from conflicts among the various European nations vying for hegemony in the New World.

Relations between Native Americans and Europeans were marred by the difficulties that arose from people of very different cultures encountering each other for the first time. These encounters led to inaccurate perceptions, misunderstandings, and failed expectations. While at first the American Indians deified the explorers, experience soon taught them to do otherwise. European opinion ran the gamut from admiration to contempt; for example, some European poets and painters who expressed admiration for the Noble Savage while other Europeans accepted as a rationalization for genocide the sentiment that "the only good savage is a dead one."

Spanish, French, Dutch, and English treatment of Native Americans differed and was based to a considerable extent on each nation's hopes about the New World and how it could be subordinated to the Old. The Spanish exploited the Indians most directly, taking their gold and silver, transforming their government, religion, and society, and even occasionally enslaving them. The French were less of a menace than the others because there were fewer of them and because many French immigrants were itinerant trappers and priests rather than settlers. The Dutch presence in North America was relatively short-lived. In the long run, the emigration from the British Isles was the most threatening of all. Entire families came from England, and they were determined to establish a permanent home in the wilderness.

The juxtaposition of Native American and English from the Atlantic to the Appalachians resulted sometimes in coexistence, other times in enmity. William Bradford's account of the Pilgrims' arrival at Cape Cod describes the insecurity the new migrants felt as they disembarked on American soil. "[T]hey had now no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weather beaten bodies; no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succor. . . . Besides, what could they see but a hideous and deserted wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men. . . . If they looked behind them there was the mighty ocean which they had passed and was now a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world." Historical hindsight, however, suggests that if anyone should have expressed fears about the unfolding encounter in the Western Hemisphere, it should have been the Native Americans because their numbers declined by as much as 95 percent in the first century following Columbus's arrival. Although some of this decline can be attributed to violent encounters with Europeans, there seems to have been a more hostile (and far less visible) force at work. As historian William McNeill has suggested, the main weapon that overwhelmed indigenous peoples in the Americas was the Europeans' breath which transmitted disease germs for which most American Indians had no immunities.

Upon arrival, English settlers depended on the Indians' generosity in sharing the techniques of wilderness survival. Puritan clergymen tried to save their neighbors' souls, going so far as to translate the Bible into dialects, but they were not as successful at conversion as the French Jesuits and Spanish Franciscans. Attempts at coexistence did not smooth over the tension between the English and the Indians. They did not see eye to eye, for example, about the uses of the environment. Indian agriculture, in the eyes of English settlers,

was neither intense nor efficient. Native Americans observed that white settlers consumed larger amounts of food per person and cultivated not only for themselves but also for towns and villages that bought the surplus. Subsistence farming collided with the market economy.

Large-scale violence erupted in Virginia in the 1620s, the 1640s, and the 1670s. In the latter decade, frontiersmen in the Virginia piedmont led by Nathaniel Bacon attacked tribes living in the Appalachian foothills. In New England, from the 1630s through the 1670s, Pequots, Wampanoags, Narragansetts, Mohegans, Podunks, and Nipmunks united to stop the encroachments into their woodlands and hunting grounds. King Philip's War lasted from June 1675 to September 1676, with isolated raids stretching on until 1678. Casualties rose into the hundreds, and Anglo-Indian relations deteriorated.

In the next century Spain, France, and England disputed each other's North American claims, and Native Americans joined sides, usually as the allies of France against England. These great wars of the eighteenth century ended in 1763 with England's victory, but disputes over territorial expansion continued. Colonial officials objected to the Proclamation of 1763 by which King George III's imperial government forbade his subjects from settling west of the Appalachian watershed. The area from those mountains to the Mississippi River, acquired from France at the recently negotiated Peace of Paris, was designated as an Indian reservation. From 1763 to 1783, as Anglo-colonial relations moved from disagreement to combat to independence, the London government consistently sided with the Native Americans.

The full range of experiences of Europeans encountering Native Americans in the New World does not lend itself to easy, unalterable conclusions regarding the nature of those contacts. The consequences of these interactions depended upon when and where they took place and which particular groups were involved, and there was rarely any constant or consistent pattern of behavior. One tribe might experience cordial relations with European colonists at one point in time but not another. A particular tribe would get along well with the French but not the English or Dutch; in another generation, the same tribe might enter into an alliance with its former enemies. A case in point is the history of Indian–white relations in early Virginia. The colonists participating in the Jamestown expedition, for example, were attacked by a group of Indians almost as soon as they set foot on American soil. A few months later, however, Powhatan, the dominant chief in the region, provided essential food supplies to the Jamestown residents who were suffering from disease and hunger. By the latter part of 1608, however, the colonists, under the leadership of John Smith, had begun to take an antagonistic stance toward Powhatan and his people. Smith attempted to extort food supplies from the Indians by threatening to burn their villages and canoes. These hostilities continued long after Smith's departure from Virginia and did not end until the 1640s, when colonial leaders signed a formal treaty with the Powhatan Confederacy.

Was conflict inevitable? Some scholars clearly believe that differences in worldview, race, or culture placed European settlers on a crash course with the Native Americans they encountered. David E. Stannard, for example, in *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (Oxford University Press, 1992), examines conflicts between native Americans and colonists in Virginia and New England over the course of the first century of colonization in British North America and concludes that the English settlers followed a conscious, concerted effort to exterminate the indigenous peoples who stood in their way. On the other hand, Richard Johnson's essay "The Search for a Usable Indian: An Aspect of the Defense of Colonial New England," *Journal of American History* (December 1977) recognizes the sporadic clashes that occurred between Indians and colonists but demonstrates that some Native Americans adopted the white man's religion and provided military support to colonists that engendered lasting friendships and bonds of loyalty.

In the YES and NO selections, Kevin Kenny and Cynthia Van Zandt both recognize that amicable relations could be fleeting. Kenny examines the colony of Pennsylvania where founder William Penn attempted a "holy experiment" whereby Indians and colonists would live together in harmony. This utopian vision, however, fell apart against the backdrop of fraud, intimidation, and land lust and culminated in an armed assault by a group of frontier militiamen, the Paxton Boys, who annihilated a small community of harmless Conestoga Indians in 1763.

Cynthia Van Zandt's essay focuses upon a trade alliance established by William Claiborne with the Susquehannocks in Virginia in the 1630s. This alliance showcases English understanding of the benefits that could be derived from allying with powerful Indian nations in the early years of European settlement and challenges the notion that cultural differences made such agreements impossible to maintain. According to Van Zandt, not even military hostilities destroyed the desire by Europeans to form alliances with native peoples.