

Cornplanter and the Kennedys
by Dan Guzy

Cornplanter was a famous Seneca Indian chief who died in 1836. Although he fought against American colonists in the Revolutionary War, his later peacemaking efforts to keep the Iroquois neutral during the Northwest Indian Wars and the War of 1812 led the U. S. government to grant him and his heirs the Cornplanter Tract in northwest Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania legislature erected a monument in his honor at this tract in 1866.

None of his general biographies mention Cornplanter being in what is now Franklin County, but local histories often connect him in different ways to the Kennedy family who settled at the confluence Conococheague Creek's branch in the early eighteenth century. Local tradition says a Seneca village was there when the Kennedys settled. Both the 1878 second edition of McCauley's *Historical Sketch of Franklin County* and the 1887 *History of Franklin County* tell of Cornplanter's interactions with the Kennedys. These two local history books continue to influence local researchers and writers although the Kennedy-Cornplanter stories have long been questioned. Most recently, the October 2020 Allison Antrim newsletter said the following about John Kennedy: "He owned 700 acres, patent dated 1739. He was 'neighbor' to Cornplanter."

McCauley's *Historical Sketch* and the *History of Franklin County* have narratives that seemingly came from Lazarus Kennedy, John Kennedy's grandson. These narratives are not completely consistent. Both claim that John Kennedy settled his Conococheague tract in 1731 or 1732. The *History of Franklin County* said John obtained his tract from Cornplanter, who was his neighbor and remained his friend for "a quarter of a century." It also said that Cornplanter chased after the Indians who had massacred Enoch Brown and his students and then wounded John Kennedy in 1764. McCauley said instead that "about 1750" a band of Indians led by Cornplanter (who apologized later) mistakenly attacked and wounded John.

Others disputed such tales. Writers in 1897 editions of the *Public Weekly Opinion* dismissed the Kennedy-Cornplanter tradition as the "Antrim controversy" and the "Cornplanter myth." A 1900 article in that newspaper about the history of Chambersburg said: "That the Senecas under Cornplanter were seated at the confluence of the Conococheague is another absurdity." Nevertheless, some bought into the Seneca village tale, including Charles Ives in his 1901 paper, "The Indians of the Valley."

Calvin Bricker's 1998 history of Antrim township tracts along the Conococheague passed along the Seneca village story, but he believed it was more like a winter hunting camp than a permanent village. Bricker corrected earlier statements that John Kennedy was the first settler on this tract. John was born in 1736, after the 1731 or 1732 settlement date cited before. Instead, Bricker asserted that David Kennedy, John's father, first came to the Conococheague confluence in the 1730s. Bricker found that the earliest Kennedy land documents were surveys and patents for David Kennedy's tract made in 1740 and 1741. David Kennedy died in 1768 and his land at the Conococheague confluence passed on to his oldest son John in 1770, after John bought out the shares of his siblings.

The Family Search website has a publicly available family tree of Lazarus Kennedy (1805-1897). This shows Lazarus's father David Kennedy (1764-1818), his grandfather John Kennedy (1736-1805), his great grandfather David Kennedy (1705-1768) and his nameless great grandmother—suspiciously known only as "Mrs. Seneca Indian Maiden" (born 1717). Indian maidens are the stuff of folklore (e.g., lovers' leap tales), legends (e.g., the Pocahontas-John Smith romance), and family traditions.

Most historians agreed that Cornplanter was born and raised in western New York, but his birthdate is unclear. Some early writers believed that he was about 100 years old when he died in 1836 and others thought he was born in the 1840s. However, Thomas S. Abler's 2007 biography presents a detailed study of the birthdate evidence and concludes Cornplanter was born between 1851 and 1853. In any case, he was born too late to have befriended and sold land to the Kennedys when they settled on the Conococheague, and very unlikely to have attacked anyone "about 1850."

Could there have been a Seneca village on the Kennedy tract during the 1730s and 1740s? When I asked Dr. Joe Stahlman, director of the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum in Salamanca, NY, about this he said it was “very doubtful.” A broader question is whether there were *any* natives at Conococheague Creek’s confluence during the time of European settlement. The answer is there is no physical evidence implying there was. Archeologists have found hundreds of prehistoric native sites in Conococheague’s drainage area, but they could date only one to the Contact Period. Only the Ebbert Spring site had European trade goods comingled with Indian artifacts.

So, the Kennedy-Seneca-Cornplanter stories have serious flaws. But like fake news, fake history under the guise of family tradition can become indelible once printed.

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