Native Mail Carriers in Early America

by Marshall Joseph Becker

Introduction

A review of documents mentioning Native carriers of mail, within and among the American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, strongly indicates that members of the Lenape tribe, of all those resident in the lower Delaware valley, were considered to be the most reliable and trusted. At later dates the Lenape were recognized as dependable in their skills as guides and explorers, a characteristic noted into the twentieth century.

The efforts of Native letter carriers, who did their tasks on foot, also provide us with a broad perspective on the realities of indigenous life and how these peoples integrated European activities into their own separate systems for making a living. Popular images of the European impact on the many different native cultures generally describe them as if they were a single entity; all as passive victims of imperialistic invaders. Recent scholarship demonstrates this to be a deeply flawed view. Through detailed studies of the 300 years of interaction between each individual and distinct Native culture, and a surprisingly diverse array of distinct immigrant peoples, the realities of each Native tribe’s responses are being delineated.1 Some modern scholars are even recognizing what I have long noted; that class differences within each colonial group (Dutch, Swedish, English) provided the basis for very different interactions with each specific tribe.

Mail Service for the Pelt Trade

The pelt trade, developing and expanding throughout the first half of the sixteenth century was controlled by the Iroquois Confederacy (Great Lakes and across present New York) and the Susquehannock Confederacy (Northern Plains and up the Ohio to the Susquehanna and Potomac Rivers).

Although the “harvesting” of anadromous fish supported Lenape lifeways and their cultural traditions, they were also interested in the goods that were abundantly available to the tribes that brokered the pelt trade with the various colonial outposts. Initially, the primary interest of all these Natives was in woolen cloth, but they were also interested in an extraordinary range of other imported goods. These items, including many basics besides cloth (metal, guns and related items) became available to the Lenape through the development of a very wide range of enterprises used to secure the items on a long list of goods, including the provision of special messengers.

Figure 1: Lenape Family, by the Swedish cartographer Per Lidestöm (after 1654). Colored pencils on paper. [By permission, De la Gardiegymnasiet, Lidköping, Sweden.]
Lenape Mail Service Unifies North and South River Dutch

The overland route from Dutch fortified locations on the lower Delaware (South) River to Fort Amsterdam on Manhattan Island was a “path” well known to colonists, perhaps as early as 1622. The route now taken by I-95 across New Jersey largely follows this trail.

Isaack de Rasière was sent in 1626 to Fort Amsterdam as Opper Koopman (chief trading agent) for the Dutch West India Company to secure trade between the Dutch and those tribes controlling the flow of peltry; the Susquehannock Confederacy of central Pennsylvania and the Five Nations across central New York. His brief stay has provided us with some important documents, filled with good insights into Native cultures and affairs. After 1622 the Lenape were afraid to “hunt in winter, being constantly harassed by war with the Minquaes [Susquehannock] ….” In 1626 the Lenape identified as “Isaacq” had offered to show de Rasière where the Susquehannock lived and had houses full of peltry. De Rasière wrote home from “Manhattes” to describe a visit that had been paid by a Susquehannock delegation. Since the 1622 Powhatan uprising upset their trade with the Virginia colony the Susquehannock had been bringing peltry overland to the Dutch on the Delaware River, near the [Trenton] falls. In 1628, the Dutch agent in New Amsterdam wrote to his counterpart on the Delaware River, probably on Burlington Island:

Figure 2: Map of the lower Delaware Valley region, identifying the aboriginal locations of the Lenape, Lenopi, Sekonese, and Susquehannock. The people identified as “Munsee,” resident in the New Jersey highlands area after 1700, represent relocated members of the Esopus and Wappinger tribes. These were the peoples who had occupied Staten and Manhattan Islands and the western side of the Hudson River. Now territory shared by five states: Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, this outline emphasizes the riverine nature of the territory and how natural was a trail leading from the upper reaches of the Chesapeake, northeast towards the Hudson.
I have not been able to learn the exact distance; so that when we wish to send letters overland, they (the natives) take their way across the bay and have the letters carried forward by others, unless one amongst them may happen to be on friendly terms, and who might venture to go there.\(^3\)

After a more substantial fort had been constructed there, and staffed year round, a reliable messenger service was continued to co-ordinate activities.

**Lenape Serve Dutch Consolidation**

By 1630, the Dutch had a trading post on Burlington Island, a few miles below the falls, and a whaling station at the mouth of the bay. In 1638 the Swedes interposed their Fortress Christina at Wilmington. The Dutch followed with theirs, Fort Casimir at New Amstel (Newcastle), downstream of the Swedish fort.

The Dutch agent at Fort Casimir reported the arrivals of Swedish ships to his counterpart at New Amsterdam by Lenape runners,\(^4\) who were also employed by the Swedes in their exchange of letters with the Dutch agencies. In July 1643 the Swedish settlement employed a Lenape runner to call the Susquehannock to confer about the pelt trade.

This consolidation of western watersheds by the Native Americans excited animosities among the colonial companies – the Dutch, on both the Hudson and Delaware, the Swedes on the Delaware, and the English on the Potomac debouching into Chesapeake Bay. For their part, in 1647, the Dutch moved their trading station on the Delaware River from Burlington Island to the west banks nearer the falls, and, in 1649, established Fort Beversrede, a stronghold upriver upon the Schuykill [Philadelphia].

On May 28, 1654 Peter Jochim traveled up to Manhattan with a Lenape called Taques. Jochim appears to have remained at Fort Amsterdam, but on June 25, Taques returned to Fort Beversrede with a letter regarding Dutch merchants who wanted to provide goods to the Swedes.\(^5\) The Swedes were then growing significant amounts of tobacco, but were having difficulty placing it on ships to Europe. The Dutch could provide them with the needed transport service as well as scarce foreign made goods, but local Dutch traders were becoming increasingly annoyed by Swedish activities that interfered with their trade.

Reflecting European aggressions, the Swedish colony on the Delaware overwhelmed the Dutch Fort Casimer in 1654. The next year a small Dutch fleet set sail from Fort Amsterdam to regain Fort Casimir, and then to besiege the Swedish Fort Christina (which was a small and feeble work, and lay upon low ground, and could be commanded from the surrounding heights, see figure 3). During the siege the Dutch sent a letter, by an Indian, demanding surrender, who returned with a written reply (it was noted that “en Indian” carried more than one message to the Swedes during the siege). During this period the Swedes “labored with all our might, by night and by day, in strengthening the ramparts, and filling gabions” at Fortress Christina while the Dutch pillaged the countryside. The Swedes sent a letter of protest to the Dutch on September 7, but then capitulated; Fortress Christina became Fort Altena. The entire area of “New Sweden” became identified as New Amstel. The Lenape continued to be the principal carriers on and from the Delaware (South) River.

The Dutch captured “New Sweden” and then turned to defend against an inevitable English takeover. Native raiding parties added the possibility of death to the basic physical difficulty of carrying the mail. Costs rose, and sometimes carriers were not to be found. News of the first Esopus War, begun in September of 1659, soon reached the South River,
where the Dutch agent, having heard of Indian attacks on Staten Island, sent two letters to Fort Amsterdam, both carried by Lenape, on September 9 and 12. The first letter arrived only 9 days later on September 18. A colonial also traveled with the runner bearing the letter of the 12th, but when they reached the area of the falls the local Indians advised them both to turn back. [Dutch documents commonly identify a Native carrier as a “wilde,” a term usually translated as “savage” in the nineteenth century. More recently the term “native” has been used.]

On September 4, 1660 the Dutch at Altena sent a message to New Amsterdam “By a savage” in which was the note, “My Lord, this goes with the letter of Peter Mayer (who dispatched this Indian)…” Thereafter, from the South River, New Amsterdam received messages: October 8, 1660 noting “by this Indian sent express” and including the common request “that you will transmit [an answer] by this [same] Indian, as soon as possible;” December 25, 1660 “By a savage” … “Sir, the bearer hereof has nothing to demand at the Manhattans. He has to receive his remuneration here upon his return.” To which New Amsterdam replied on December 30, 1660, reaching Altena by a different
carrier on January 12, 1661. The second carrier, also a Lenape, brought the information that the original bearer of the letter sent north on December 25, was still at Passyunk (near Philadelphia). Apparently he had taken ill during the return trip, and took shelter among the Finns who lived near the Lenape summer station at Passyunk. There he transferred the return letter to a kinsman who completed the task. Two days later, on January 14, 1661 another letter to New Amsterdam was posted via a Native, and yet another on February 15, that bore news of the killing of an Englishman on the South River.

**Strategic Alliance; English Colonial Postal Initiative**

On May 4, 1661, as the Marylanders and the Susquehannock were negotiating a treaty, some “River Indians” were said to have killed four Europeans in the southern parts of Dutch territory; three English and a Dutchman. The murderers were ultimately determined to be of the Lenopi tribe, but both the Lenape and their neighbors were lying low.

On May 16, 1661 the Maryland colony signed “Articles of peace and amity concluded” with “the Sasquesahannough Indians” as represented by elders of the confederated tribes in central Pennsylvania. This document describes the arrangements made to build a European style palisaded fortification for the Susquehannock very different from their traditional circular enclosures (see figures 4 to 7). Article six, of the nine articles of peace, instructs the Indians: “That there shall be six Indians appointed by the Sasquesahannoughs to be ready to carry letters between the Cap'of the English at the forte, and Collonell Utyes howse, and from thence to the forte againe, to which End two of them shall always be vpon Palmers Iland[.]”

![Figures 4 & 5: Pomeiock, a traditional palisaded enclosure in Virginia. (John White drawing, 1585-6, British Museum; engraving by Johann Theodorus de Bry, 1590, John Carter Library, Brown University.)](image)

![Figure 6: Detail of a traditional palisade and a more European-influenced design, from 1635 Willem Janszoon Blaeu Geographicus: Nova Belgicae Anglia Nova. Library of Congress.](image)

![Figure 7: Detail of 1656 Nicolaes Visscher Novi Belgii Novaque Angliae, copying Blaeu.](image)
These Indian carriers were to maintain a line of communication between the Maryland colony and the Native fortification recently erected in central Pennsylvania. These six were appointed specifically to carry messages between Capt. Odber at the new Susquehannock fort and Colonel Utye’s house on Palmers Island, at the northern aspect of the Maryland colony at that time. Odber and 50 Marylanders under his command were permanently stationed at the Susquehannock fort. Two of the six Native messengers were to be at Palmers Island at all times. Whether any of these six carriers were Lenape, we do not know, but probably not.

Complications among Settler & Native Groups

One of the problems in 1661 was the conflict between the English (Marylanders) and the Lenape. The Lenape then were resident under Dutch hegemony and were their de facto allies, leading the English to oppose them.

The 9th article of the treaty: “That the English haueing now declared that they will Demand satisfaccion of the Passagonke Indians, for the death of John Nordon, and his Companion slayne by the aforesaid Indians and upon refusal to prosecute, a warre with them the Susquesahannoughs shall upon further notice giuen be ready to assist in the said warre with necessary force[.]” The suspects were members of the Schuylkill River band of Lenape, then resident at their warm weather fishing station at Passyunk. As a consequence, whether the Lenape did not wish to co-operate in matters relating to their own people, or whether they were responding to the general climate of violence is not evident. On May 20, 1661 a letter was dispatched from New Amstel, carried by “Indians” but to whom it was sent is not certain. On the 27th, nine days after word of the killing, New Amstel found a carrier to go to New Amsterdam with a letter stating that the Indians had been hiding from the Dutch for 14 days. A letter from the Governor of Maryland had been received on May 26 at New Amsterdam, carried by a Minquas who declined to wait for a reply, subscribed: “I have promised the bearer, that he will receive from your Honble Worships a piece of cloth and a pair of socks, provided he brings over this letter in 4 or 5 days at the utmost.”

The Indian bearer of May 27 was almost certainly a Lenape. The extended period of time for a one way delivery reflects the regional hostilities that could easily delay this journey. The Dutch problems with local native groups and their fear of an English invasion of the South River area was emphasized in a report of May 31, 1661 regarding the native response to the recent killings. “The Indians here are very fearful of the coming of the English. For some days they met near Passajongh …”, where the several bands were collecting seawan (wampum) to present to the Minquas (Susquehannock) to ask them to mediate the payment of wergild for the killings. Also, during that spring Augustine Herrman wrote from Fort Altena to New Amstel, regarding his own fears of an English (Maryland) invasion to avenge the murder of four “English” and the release of the suspects. On June 10, 1661 the Dutch again reported that “[t]hese River Chiefs do not trust the English; …” These concerns made it difficult for the Dutch to send letters “because we could not hire an Indian.” Although the collective term “River Chiefs” is sometimes used by the Dutch for leaders on both sides of the river, they clearly could distinguish between the Lenape, on the west side of the river, and the Lenopi on the east.

On September 21, 1661, New Amstel wished to communicate with New Amsterdam, but since: “no Indian [is] to be found here at Altena, I have then [sent] this [letter] up with Peter Kock, one [of] our magistrates, in order to hire an Indian from there.
Figure 8: Detail of the Nicholaes Visscher 1656 map, reflecting the knowledge gained by the Dutch since Blaeu of 1635, particularly of the Indian settlements.

Sites marked by black triangles, reading southwest to northeast

1. Potomac River, debouching into Chesapeake Bay & leading to the Maryland Colony
2. Swanendael, location of the tract bought from the Sekonese by the Dutch for a whaling station at the mouth of the Delaware (South) River
3. Fort Casimir, under the Dutch the area around it was called New Amstel; under the English, New Castle
4. Fortress Christina, now Wilmington
5. Philadelphia, site of Fort Beversrede; Passyunk is the area south of city center, defined by the Schuylkill River on the west and Delaware River on the east. Passyunk Avenue now traces a diagonal across Penn’s city grid - lasting evidence of a Native trail.
6. Fort Nassau, on Burlington Island, dismantled in 1651
7. The falls of the Delaware River, now Trenton
8. Staten Island
9. New Amsterdam, now New York City, on the Hudson (North) River
[Nevesinck, NJ?]. I advised him to promise receipt of payment upon returning so that the trip would be expedited.” This message, which had “By an Indian” written on the sheet, probably had made the rounds of the Lenape resident in the Passajongh area, but on September 30 this document was returned because no Native could be found to carry it. The mail problem continued for a month. West India Company yachts also could be used to make a trip up to Fort Amsterdam, but they were not as fast or as reliable as a Lenape runner, especially when weather conditions impeded a voyage. Engaging a yacht for a special messenger would also have been expensive. On October 26 an available boat was, perhaps in desperation, used to send letters to New Amsterdam, as a letter of that date included the earlier one, with the note “My Lords, the enclosed was returned on the 30th of September because we could not hire an Indian.”

Reliable Ocean Service

In June of 1662 letters were sent by boat in only four days. By December a service by sea seems to have been initiated. The Dutch also noted that the “Wilde” were off to do their winter hunting, and that they did not expect overland messengers to be available until they returned. Winter hunting had not been a problem for the mail service in previous years because there was always some able Lenape available to make the journey. But by 1660 many Lenape were permanently locating their territory of activity to the west. By allying with the Susquehannock, many Lenape gained access to the lucrative pelt trade. Through that activity they could secure considerable quantities of European goods without running the risks of travel through highly contested territory or the chores associated with the maize trade. Although Five Nations raiding into the region of the Susquehannock Confederacy was problematical for the Lenape, the rewards to be had from peltry were much greater. And the Five Nations focused their raiding on Susquehannock villages, and bypassed (or missed) Lenape encampments.

The transfer of political power on the Delaware River was fairly orderly, with the English capturing the South River after a brief skirmish. On October 13, 1664 Sir Robert Carr wrote from the “Dellawarr Fort” to inform Col. Nicholls that he had taken charge. Included in this communication is the statement that his notification had been delayed because of “the falling of ye Indians from theire former civility, they abuseing messengers that travell by land, since our arrival here, …” Those messengers were Lenape, and the uncivil Indians were the Lenopi of southern New Jersey. Sir Robert wrote that: “80 of them came from ye other side, where they inhabit … [and where] noe Christian yet dare venture to plant on that side, wch belongs to ye Duke of Yorke.” New Jersey was then part of the holdings of the Duke of York, and the Indians occupying the southern part were the Lenopi. Sir Robert’s message makes very clear that these obstructionist Indians were resident on the east side of the Delaware River. This letter also asked for help in dealing with the “Synekees at ye Fort Ferrania, and ye Huskchanoes here.” Sir Robert was well aware that these Indians, the Senecas [Five Nations] and Susquehannock often did considerable damage while passing through, and left the local Indians to be blamed.

Conclusion

The role of Indians in carrying the mail may be best documented for the Lenape of southeastern Pennsylvania. My many years of study of the Lenape of the colonial period have enabled me to identify many references to this “profession” but it is not simply the numbers of references that identify the Lenape as preferred carriers. These
documents reveal that many of these colonists indicated a preference for Lenape runners, and recommend them to other colonists. There also exist a number of geographical and ecological factors that account for the early colonists requiring special messengers that provided the Lenape with the opportunity to demonstrate their skill and reliability in this enterprise. The extent of Dutch hegemony, extending on either side of present New Jersey, created a need for communication between the lower parts of the Delaware Valley and Manhattan Island. The length of the sea route, with an extensive ocean passage, created a demand for a more reliable and cheaper connection for simple letter communications. This could be well served by able runners willing to travel through the territories of two or more tribes that were generally, but not always, at peace. By 1640 Lenape runners became the mainstay of this service.

By 1800 the Lenape generally had become identified as “Delaware.” They became Native scouts during the Plains Wars, and military adjuncts during the Civil War. Carrying letters through hostile territory may have been even more dangerous than conducting reconnaissance.

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Endnotes


Editors’ Afterword

Wesley Rich remarked that Indians were often employed as special messengers. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, “they seem to have been much in favor with the settlers on account of their faithfulness, their endurance, and their familiarity with the country.”¹

When Marshall Becker, Professor Anthropology Emeritus at West Chester University, offered us his manuscript, concentrating upon the Lenape, I was struck by his assertion of a Native presence as special messengers, emphasizing what historians have known about their importance, but heretofore largely from the archives of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Becker emphasizes trade relations as a domain where the Natives held sway, facilitating not only their tribal relations but also mediating the intercolonial rivalries. Whereas students of postal history have mostly ignored the Indian except, as Harry Konwiser so aptly had it: “There was … no national point of view … in the colonial era – except the general idea that the opposition to the native Indians was everyone’s concern.”²

As for intercolonial mail, Reverend Kendall’s survey of Maryland would have us to understand that “there was no need for a postal system within the colony nor for a postal arrangement between Maryland and the other American colonies … the main interests and ties Marylanders cherished were with their friends and relatives in Europe.”³ Becker’s account certainly corrects that impression – Indian runners furnished critical intelligence in a 1661 military campaign, as well as carried more commercial messages. His description of arrangements between the Maryland Colony and the Susquehannock Indians paralleled the first legislation for handling official letters within the colony … a house-to-house relay system that, in any case, soon broke down.

Barry Hobbs, in seconding Robson Lowe’s homily about postal historians being ‘students of humanity’ (philatelists being merely ‘students of science’), lamented that “it is unusual for us to know anything about the humble postal clerks who traveled those routes or applied those rates that have been so extensively studied.”⁴ Becker’s Lenape study gives us a glimpse of the ‘humanity’ that carried mail on such early trails.

Robson Lowe himself summarized the early Colonial posts: “The King directed Governor Lovelace of New York [Dutch New Amsterdam before 1664, name changed 1672] to establish regular postal communication between the Colonies. Lovelace arranged for a monthly courier service between New York and Boston. The first post rider made the trip from New York to Boston on 22nd January, 1672/3. This service continued for a few months only, as New York was again captured by the Dutch. It was restored to the English in 1674, but communications were not resumed.”⁵ The identity of this first postal rider is not

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³ The search for Native mail carriers went on throughout the year. Jaap Jacobs (pers com. May 2010) believed that the sea route was more common, using yachts of the Dutch West India Company, except when the rivers froze. This may apply to the routes from Fort Amsterdam to coastal locations and Fort Orange, but our data on the months when Native carriers operated along the South River reveals the limits of his this assumption.
⁵ The identity of this first postal rider is not
mentioned. Otherwise, Lowe does remark: “apart from the postal riders, independent riders flourished and it is difficult to know which riders were working for the government.”

It now seems possible that Lovelace’s rider, as well as several of those independents, was a Native. In 1900, the social historian Alice Morse Earle observed that, contemporary with Lovelace: “In 1672 ‘Indian posts’ carried the Albany winter mail.” Becker’s search for evidence reminded us of a mention by Eric Jaffe, in his study of the Boston Post Road, of a 1649 letter sent from Boston to John Winthrop in Pequod, informing him of the death of his father. The writers were keen that he have the opportunity to be present at a memorial service, and so “they have sent Nahawton, whom they did esteeme a Trustie & swift messenger, to give you notice hereof.” Becker notes that some references to this letter edit out the name of the messenger, a Christianized Wampanoag who had sold the settlers his land of Wessagussett (Weymouth) and who fought on the side of the colonials in King Philip’s War of 1675-6. He also locates a 1638 letter from Roger Williams in Providence to John Winthrop that suggests that Native carriers were not always a first choice: “Tis true I may hire an Indian : yet not always, nor sure, for these 2 things I haue found in them: sometimes long keeping of a letter: 2ndly if a feare take them that the letter concernes themselues they suppresse it, as they did with one of special informacion which I sent to Mr. Vane.”

Postal Historian, Timothy O’Connor, shared with Becker his discovery of letters endorsed on their address leaves “by Indian mail” in the Collections of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City, as well as his intention to do more research in such collections on this topic. At the end of his study of the Lovelace Post, O’Connor avers: “More research remains to be done, since we’ve not yet unearthed any mention of rates, charges or fees for the Lovelace Post And it’s a major disappointment not to have learned the name of the “stout, indefatigable” postman who carried these first intercolonial mails.”

Professor Becker’s manuscript has been greatly reduced to fit this issue. Of interest to those who would enjoy more detail on the Lenape is his bibliographical list which appears on the Society web site: www.postalhistorysociety.org. He would also welcome commentary on his work: Becker Marshall (Retired) <MBecker@wcupa.edu>

**Endnotes to Afterword**