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Claims of an Eighteenth Century "Indian School" in Pennsylvania: Origins of a Myth

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By Marshall Joseph Becker

Recent exploration of the education of several Lenopi children who traveled from southern New Jersey in the middle 1700s to study at Wheelock's "Indian School" in Connecticut sensitized me to rumors regarding Native American education programs in Philadelphia during roughly the same period (Becker 2020a, 2020b). Those few mentions of such programs in Philadelphia during the eighteenth century were all written at a later period of time (e.g. Vaux 1817) and are invariably associated with the name of Anthony Benezet (1713-1784). Benezet was a French Hueguenot who immigrated to London with his family, and then to Philadelphia in 1731. Anthony married Joyce Marriot in 1736. He became a merchant as did his brother David. David was successful in trade and his daughter Mary had her portrait painted by Charles Wilson Peale (1772). This classic oil on canvas work is now owned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Cat. No. Evans 1968-126-1).

Anthony Benezet failed in trade and turned to education and vegetarianism. About 1755 he had established in Philadelphia a school for white females, possibly in his home at 115 Chestnut Street (Watson 1830: 316-320). This school may have been co-educational. He later became a major supporter of an institution known as the "Africans' School" (sometimes identified as "The Negro School at Philadelphia"). This complex enterprise was part of the Quaker emancipation effort in that city. By 1770 the heroic efforts of a number of Philadelphia's Quakers got the Africans' School started. These Quakers sustained the school through some very difficult times, including the American Revolution. Claims regarding a dearth of records for this school are belied by sources consulted by Woody and others (Minutes n.d.; Woody 1920). Of particular importance are the Africans' School Minute Books (Minutes, n.d.). The very name of the school indicates that the focus was on the education of individuals of African origin, although poor white individuals were often added to the rolls. These days Benezet's vital connection to education is largely overlooked, but his publication of narratives regarding the Middle Passage and slavery are now thought by many (e.g. Brooks 2004) to have been the source of much of Oloudah Equiano's supposedly autobiographical narrative of his youth (Equiano 1789).

The Native American connection with the Africans' School may relate to Benezet's extensive activities and interactions with the Five Nations and other indigenous groups in their periphery. In addition, the *frontis* page to Vaux's biographical study of Benezet displays an image of a 1757 Indian "Peace Medal" that Benezet is supposed to have helped to design (Vaux 1817: 90-91). Benezet had supported efforts to preserve "Indian lands" beyond the Allegheny Mountains, publishing in 1784 "Some Observations on the Situation … Indian Natures …" covering Native contacts during the period from 1763 to his writing in 1784. The "Indians" described in this history were almost all Five Nations Iroquois and their immediate dependents, including Nanticoke (and possibly Conoy or Ganawese) (Becker 2020c). Of some note is that Benezet developed similar plans for racially exclusive areas for African American groups, who were to be relocated to lands set aside for them. Where these segregated were to be found was never made clear. By the 1750s vast trans-Allegheny lands already were being used by several Native tribes. Records and documents of this period provide no indication that any Native Americans attended the Africans' School.

By 1853 William Bache's reference to Benezet identifies him as "the large- hearted founder and supporter of his school for Indians and Freed Negroes" in Philadelphia (Bache 1853: 47). Although "Indians" are given first billing, there is no evidence that any ever attended this school. Thomas Woody's classic review of early Quaker education in Pennsylvania devotes an entire chapter to the "Education of Negroes and Indians" (Woody 1920: 228-265). How or why "Indians" were inserted into this narrative remains unknown. Woody offers more than 30 pages of discussion relating solely to "Negro" education, largely focusing on the enlightened efforts of Anthony Benezet. Woody then inserts a gratuitous section entitled "Attitude Toward the Indians." These few pages briefly mention pre-Revolution political interactions with the Native Americans who were then living on the far western frontier but these activities are unrelated to education. Woody then shifts abruptly to the post-1796 efforts of the Philadelphia Quakers to send young men as missionaries to the Seneca. These young Quakers were sent not to teach basic reading and writing but to instruct the Seneca and other Iroquoians in the various modern technical aspects of a farming economy. Embedded in the few pages of this section of Woody's narrative is a single line indicating that the Tuscarora children were then "taught by an Indian who had been educated in New England" (Woody 1920: 264-265). The name and tribal origin of that "Indian" teacher, and if he had been taught at Wheelock's Indian School (Becker 2020a, 2020b), are not indicated. A lack of a close reading led Merrill to conflate Benezet's concerns for indigenous rights, as indicated in his pamphlet entitled "Indian Charities of the Friendly association for Regaining and Preserving Peace with the Indians by Pacific Measures," with an actual enrollment of indigenous people in his Philadelphia classrooms (Merrill 1946: 112). Benezet's long efforts on behalf of African American education are documented in detail by Woody, but Native Americans were evidently never among the students.

More recently, Hornick states that Benezet's last will provides a vague and unspecific bequest, supposedly to the school at which he himself had taught for many years, "to teach a number of Negro, mulatto, or Indian children to read, write …" etc. (Hornick 1975: 414). Vaux transcribes this passage of the will slightly differently, but it appears that no specific amount is stated as a bequest (Vaux 1817: 150). This is exactly the kind of vague statement that may be interpreted by executors in any way they wish. Vaux says that Benezet left his own library to the Library of the "Friends in Philadelphia" (Vaux 1817: 150). Is this the Library Company of Philadelphia founded by Franklin in 1731? Hornick claims that Benezet left his large personal library to the school. What actally became of this library, and what it contained is not known.

A significant bit of information extracted in this research concerns the kinds of information or instruction that were provided for the two genders in the Philadelphia schools at that time. Education for female students in Philadelphia largely focused on sewing and knitting, both skills essential to basic household activities. Male students were taught reading, writing and arithmetic, but the extent to which the female students were exposed to these subjects is extremely difficult to gauge. The production of "samplers" demonstrating needle skills involved the makers having a knowledge of the alphabet, of brief texts, and numbers. How able these female students were to go beyond these basics depends largely on the type of educational institution attended.

The most important finding of this search is that no Native Americans can be identified among the several hundred students who attended Benezet's Africans' School in Philadelphia. While indigenous slavery and other forms of servitude were increasingly common in the American colonies during this period, and some mulattoes who attended the *(**PHILADELPHIA**, continued on 6)*

PHILADELPHIA *(continued from 5)* school may have had Native American ancestry, the actual presence of Native American students at the Africans' School cannot be verified. That this myth arose from confusion with Wheelock's Indian School in Connecticut should be considered. Those few outstanding Native Americans who attended Wheelock's classes and went on to teach and to preach Christian gospels hold very interesting positions in indigenous culture history of this period. Their stories reveal the difficulties of generating culture change through efforts at education. The unique success of Wheelock with teaching Samson Occum is set off by the failures of so many other examples. The recurrent desire to point out that efforts were made may be interpreted in a variety of ways, for and against such attempts.

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Grant Update

By Jack Cresson

This year the ASNJ Research Committee is entertaining two submissions for C14 analysis.
One from Michael Stewart, seeking a grant to date a fishtail component in association with ceramics from the Siburn site, located in the Upper Delaware just opposite Shawnee Island. The dates previously obtained with fishtail bifaces and ceramics span the earliest in the region, with a range of 1500 to 650 BC. The dating of this specific site component and its association portends a potential earlier introduction of ceramic technology in the region than previously known.

The second submission is from Alan Mounier who is seeking reimbursement for recently dating an Archaic atlatl weight, found in Gloucester County, New Jersey. This find, also referred to as the Iaocona bannerstone, is featured in this issue (see page 1). In conjunction with this, Mounier is also requesting additional support for specialized analysis to identify the wood within the centrum. The atlatl weight was found in an aqueous context with preserved wood filling the "bore" or centrum. The style of the atlatl weight, a "quasi whale tail," seems consistent with the inferred temporal episodes of the Archaic Period. The calibrated date extends to about 4700 years BP.