

BRITISH COLONIAL INDIAN* POLICY AND LAND ACQUISITION

By Courtney M. Giannini

**Walnut Hills High School
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The Native American people discussed are referred to as “Indians”, the name most commonly used in the literature referenced in this work.

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By the second half of the sixteenth century, European expansion into other parts of the world was well underway, sparked by the promise of riches gained from trading in the East for high demand goods such as spices and silk by the Portuguese and the Spanish. The Portuguese gained a monopoly in the slave trade between Africa and the Americas during this time. In the western hemisphere, the Spanish were claiming the vast amounts of precious metals found there, mined by means of the forced labor and slavery of the indigenous inhabitants. The British were anxious to join the quest for riches and empire, and began to establish their own trading ventures in the East (Lord 48). Voyages of discovery by the explorers John Cabot in 1497, John Rut in 1527, Richard Hore in 1536, and finally, the circumnavigation of the world by Francis Drake in 1577-80, opened the door for the British expansion and acquisition of empire in North America, in order to establish trade there. Based on rights of discovery supposedly acquired by British monarchs through such voyages, patents were granted to private companies to establish colonies in North America (Borch 1). While expansion based on trade continued in the East, English domination through settlement was beginning to take shape in the West (Borch 2).

The aim of this essay is to discuss the effect the expansion of the British Empire had on the native people of North America. Attention is given to the perception of the rights of the native people and how the colonial government handled relations with them.

British Colonization and the Question of Land Rights

The Virginia Company established the first permanent settlement in Jamestown in 1607. The Puritans founded Plymouth Colony in 1620. During the establishment of the early settlements, relations with the Indians were generally friendly, and they supplied the British with much needed food supplies. Colonial assemblies set early policy towards the Indians, aimed at not antagonizing them while at the same time protecting the settlement (Lord 53). However, relations changed once the settlers' intention to stay became obvious to the Indians (Borch 3). The Puritan philosophy of land acquisition and use was that it

was their God-given right. British society was based on private land ownership (Nash 163), and they considered it part of their superior culture (Thomas 128). To overcome the moral and legal problem of invading and taking possession of the Indian's land, the Christian settlers claimed they came to share the wilderness and thus help the Indian by contact with a superior culture, and most importantly, the Christian religion (Thomas 123). To leave undeveloped land to a few natives was to oppose the wish of God, who would not have shown Englishmen the way to the New World if He did not intend for them to possess it. Also, if the British did not take North America, Spain would and the Indians would fall victim to Catholicism (Nash 164).

In subsequent years, colonial relations with the Indians came under greater regulation, including rules for the buying of Indian land. However, as their numbers grew and the British settlers became stronger, the rights of the Indians were increasingly ignored by individual colonists (Borch 5). Misunderstandings may have stemmed from differing views concerning land purchases, whether they were perpetual and exclusive, as the Europeans thought, or temporary and shared, as the Indians believed. The idea of land as a personal possession or the control of all land rights by one individual person for perpetuity was incomprehensible to the Indians (Macintosh p. 10). In contrast, colonists believed that all land should be owned and put to its best use. Indians who lived on the land without farming it (in the European style) put their right of ownership in jeopardy (Thomas 129). The Indians' desperation over their decreasing land base led to periodic violence. By 1676, New England was consumed by war, the region's Indians resorted to armed struggle in a hopeless effort to regain their land and sovereignty, including the Pequot War in 1637, and King Philip's War in 1675 (Salisbury 268, Thomas 127, Kawashima 4).

British Indian Policy

The British government's view of Indian land rights were that they had less than full ownership over their "hunting grounds", while the right of occupancy was respected, the Indians were not rendered full legal owners of the land. In general, there was a common pattern of relations with the Indians throughout

the British colonies, beginning with early efforts to avoid offending them yet protecting their settlements, through mounting hostility once their intention to stay became clear, to the phase where the British colonists secured their position through large numbers and were able to dictate the terms with the local Indians. This process was made easier due to the fact that some of the Indian populations had been made weaker by the introduction of disease from the Europeans (Borch 4, Kawashima 20). At the start of the seventeenth century, it is estimated that one hundred thousand native people inhabited southern New England (Salisbury 113). By the middle of the eighteenth century, there were approximately 1 million Britons in North America (Borch 3). The quest for land continued and the colonists began to spread further inland, coming into contact with new tribes and increasing tensions. In the northern colonies, British settlers began to expand across the Alleghenies and Appalachians, causing further strife with the Indian tribes.

Two factors shaped the relationship with the Indians and settlers in North America early on. The first was the fur trade, a profitable business for both parties. The fur trade was a major incentive to the British government for keeping peace with the Indians in the frontier districts, where the encroachment of settlers on Indian lands continually endangered relations. The second factor was the need to maintain friendships with some of the Indian tribes so that they would side with Britain against her perpetual enemy, the French (Borch p. 6).

From the beginning, British relations with the Indians were determined by the colonists' intent to establish large settlements and acquire Indian land. In contrast, French relations were shaped by the fact that their primary goal was to develop trade with the Indians, not the acquisition of their land. The French made claims of sovereignty over the land against the other European nations, but were careful not to make claims against the Indians. Long-standing trading relations between the Indians and the French grew stronger, consequently, the French were seen as a threat to British possessions in North America. However, a series of wars with the French, both on the European continent and in North America through

the end of the eighteenth century, including the French and Indian War in 1755-60, resulted in a significant loss of French presence in North America. The Indians were no longer able to take advantage of the rivalry between the two European powers (Borch 10).

The Royal Proclamation issued in 1763 established the Allegheny Mountains as a boundary between Indians and colonists, all land west of it was reserved for use by the Indians (Borch 39). It was believed that the best means of improving British relations with the Indians would be to prevent settlers' encroachment on Indian land, proving the sincerity and goodwill of the British government. In turn, this would protect their trade with the Indians, and maintain their alliance. However, the colonists' intentions had changed, from establishing trade relations for the benefit of the mother country, to building permanent settlements, and land became the object of desire.

The British policy of limiting expansion to maintain peace was difficult to enforce on the frontier, and colonists persisted in settling on Indian land. Wealthy speculators and land companies managed to get large grants of land by exploiting corrupt officials, and the long distance and limited knowledge of local conditions by the British government. The government was powerless to control the settlers and white settlements continued to expand westward into Indian land (Borch 60). When the War of Independence broke out, the British tried to secure the Indians as allies. The Indians had little to gain from supporting the colonists, knowing that if the colonists won, there would be no stopping white settlement and expansion. There was widespread Indian support for the British, although some Indians chose to fight with the rebels (Borch 63). To the surprise and outrage of the Indians, the 1783 peace Treaty of Paris gave American sovereignty over all the land east of the Mississippi and north to the Great Lakes, land designated as Indian country by the British in the Royal Proclamation of 1763.

Conclusion

Voyages of discovery by early explorers supposedly gave the monarchy sovereignty over the land. The British colonization of North America was based on depriving the original inhabitants of their land, a

gross violation of their rights. Christian settlers claimed it as their God-given right, and that they merely came to share the land with the Indians and bring Christianity to them. British policy from the establishment of the first colony was determined by the issues of land and trade. To protect the lucrative fur trade, the British government also tried to enforce fair treatment of the Indians by the settlers. The establishment of a boundary line by the Royal Proclamation of 1763 also demonstrated the British government's acknowledgement of the Indians' right to their hunting grounds, although they did not acknowledge true land ownership. However, the British were never able to control the unruly and independent-minded colonists and limit western expansion (Borch 69). After the War of Independence the British ceded all the land west of the Alleghenies to the American colonies, thus the Indians lost their land, contrary to the Royal Proclamation of 1763, and were displaced continually westward by the land hungry colonists. In future years, "manifest destiny" would forever rob the native people of their land.

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