

Sport and Politics: The Infamous Pennsylvania Walking Purchase of 1737

by
JOHN A. LUCAS
Pennsylvania State University

The Quaker saint, William Penn, was a good man and left a legacy of pacific relations with the late seventeenth century Indians in the Philadelphia and Commonwealth regions. No paragon was his son, Thomas—practical politician and nearly bankrupt landowner. For some years the growing white population had forced the indigenous Americans farther west and away from Penn's Colony. Friction grew; complex and frequent meetings resulted in a possible compromise by use of the ancient Indian method of land division. Acting Governor James Logan and Thomas Penn convinced the local tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy that all the ground walked in eighteen hours would belong to the white man, the vast lands beyond, exclusive Indian territory.

The Indians had no way of knowing that Thomas Penn, anticipating such an arrangement, had hired three of the sturdiest and more durable yeomen; for two years (1735-1737) before the walk itself, these farmer-athletes trained in secret through the forests and over an anticipated course lying slightly west and north of Philadelphia. The unwitting Delawares, themselves not always honest in previous land division arrangements, sent representatives to Wrightstown, Bucks County; Penn's boys were there, and the so-called traditional leisurely walk through the woods began at dawn on September 19, 1737.

The three white men, Edward Marshall, James Yeats, and Solomon Jennings, were tremendously well prepared for the task and set a fiercely unremitting pace—hour after hour. This was the ultimate cross-country foot race, and confused, angered, and exhausted the accompanying red men. Heading in the direction of Bethlehem and Allentown, Jennings quit the race about 11 a.m.; he never recovered full health. One by one, the Indians quit the race; Yeates stumbled into a creek, literally blind with fatigue and died three days later. The last Indian fell to the ground, and Marshall grimly hung on alone through the eighteenth hour. His ordeal of nearly seventy-five miles of prime Indian hunting grounds was three-and-one-half times greater than had been anticipated, and thus in an extraordinarily amoral but perfectly legal manner the Pennsylvania Walking Purchase accomplished everything its accomplices had intended—and then some. Historians did not fail to note that the fretful relations between Indian and colonist during the early decades of the century finally degenerated into bloody warfare soon after the year 1737.