



2016

# Book Review: Lenape Country: Delaware Valley Society Before William Penn

Erich M. Huhn  
*Seton Hall University*

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### Recommended Citation

Huhn, Erich M. (2016) "Book Review: Lenape Country: Delaware Valley Society Before William Penn," *Madison Historical Review*: Vol. 13 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol13/iss1/7>

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## *Book Reviews*

*Lenape Country: Delaware Valley Society Before William Penn.*  
By Jean R. Soderlund. (Philadelphia: University of  
Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 264pp. \$24.95).

Jean R. Soderlund's latest publication, *Lenape Country: Delaware Valley Society Before William Penn*, provides exciting new scholarship to the fields of Native American and early colonial studies. Transporting the reader back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Soderlund explores the intricacies of how Native American societies dealt with the newly arrived European settlers. Ultimately charting a course for peace, Soderlund argues that the story of the Lenape Indians of the Delaware Valley is unique among other histories of Native-European relations.

In the present-day Delaware Valley, Soderlund describes a society of peaceful Lenape Natives who historically lived in small localized bands with a total population of between 8,000 and 12,000 people. While the Iroquois of upstate New York have been viewed as the only centralized Native society, Soderlund explains that the Lenape were not simply a group of strangers living in a region but rather a society that had created a "sociopolitical structure [that] was democratic and egalitarian, as sachems held authority only by consulting with a council of elders and following the expectations of their people" (p. 13). Yet by the first decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, European powers rushed to grab lands in the New World as Spain floundered amid the rising costs of empire. The voyages of the Dutch under Cornelis May in 1615 began the period of vacillating relations between native Lenape and Dutch settlers. While the Dutch and Lenape may have had a sometimes tenuous

relationship, later Swedish settlers would come to enjoy a place within Lenape country of “mutual solidarity” with the Natives (p. 102).

As time advanced, Lenape control over the region faltered. Previously, the Lenape used competing European trade partners to play the market for better trade goods, but by the time the English established hegemony over the Mid-Atlantic, the Lenape had been decimated by both European disease and Native political power struggles. Soderlund’s work, however, highlights the unusual case of the Lenape country. Throughout North America, Natives and European settlers clashed over property rights and expansion, rather Soderlund explains that the Delaware Valley was an oasis of peace. Lenape leaders and Dutch (and later Swedish and to some extent English) settlers maintained a peace throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Motivated by the desire to trade, and later by a pragmatic understanding of their situation, Lenape leaders made conscious efforts to keep Native-European violence to a minimum. In this sense, Soderlund’s work deserves recognition in uncovering an otherwise unexpected period of early American history.

With a rich array of sources and abundant primary source references, the narrative is just as much a page turner as it is a valuable contribution to the historiography. Soderlund’s use of diaries and letters gives the reader a window into the lives of early colonial leaders and settlers. However, Soderlund’s work is not without faults. While the use of Native language terms for places and groups helps bring a more honest approach to Native studies, it hampers the otherwise quick reading with a confusing maze of places and names. This obstacle would be easily avoided with the use of more maps and perhaps a chart of groups with their Native and European names. Aside from such trivial issues, Soderlund’s narrative does at times become cumbersome, resulting from the strange course of Native-European relations in the region. One example of this issue is Soderlund’s explanation of Lenape-Swede relations at the time of Governor Johan Risingh’s tenure: Soderlund explains an instance in which the Lenape killed a Swedish settler and yet on the next page recalls how “the Lenape and Nordic communities acted from self-interest as well as

friendship,” with a “common identity” (p. 93). Were the Lenape and Swedes really two communities within Lenape country or were they more pragmatic friends? The random killing of Swedish settlers should be addressed in more detail by Soderlund before making these claims, true or not.

Another point of confusion derives from Soderlund’s narrative of the Dutch takeover of New Sweden. The narrative reads as if the Dutch arrived and besieged the Swedes, but retreated in fear of further Native attacks on New Amsterdam. An understanding of the history shows that the Dutch had actually taken the Swedish colony, albeit creating a tandem government for the “Swedish nation” (p. 98). To what extent did the Dutch conquer New Sweden and what were the implications back in Sweden? None of these issues present any large flaw with the work, but rather highlight the confusing nature of early colonial politics.

While other historians have completed works on the indigenous peoples of the Delaware Valley, Soderlund’s work diverges from the previous historiography and emerges with a fresh look, encouraging a revision of all histories of Native societies. Soderlund refutes many claims made by Bernard Bailyn regarding the power of the Lenape “bands” and reaffirms the earlier view that, “[i]n fact, the size of Lenape towns and their political organizations were consistent with those of many other Native societies of eastern North America” (p. 5). Further rejecting Bailyn, Soderlund explains that the Lenape were not hunter-gatherer people but rather had a society that was complex enough to sustain (albeit localized) agriculture and (basic) land rights. Still, within the regional study of Native societies, Soderlund takes a fresh approach by examining the Lenape in a period before the arrival of William Penn.

Ultimately, Soderlund’s work presents a new look at a topic that has usually been ignored by the larger historical narrative. Readable by both the general public and the academic, Soderlund draws a thorough history that both educates the public and breathes new life into an old scholarly conversation. While the work may include issues of clarity and does diverge from the previous historiography, Soderlund provides a study into how peace was

able to be maintained through a period of massacres and terror that reigned elsewhere. This work highlights the ability of two diverse groups, compelled by necessity and pragmatism, to come together and coexist, a theme that has proven elusive far too often in world history.

Erich Morgan Huhn  
*Seton Hall University*  
*South Orange, New Jersey*