

## **Contributions to the Ethno-History of the Delaware Indians on the Brandywine**

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SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY records make clear that the most important Delaware Indian village on the Brandywine was situated, not along the lower reaches of the stream, but in the big bend near the present Delaware-Pennsylvania boundary.<sup>1</sup> Although archeological research has produced evidence of major Indian occupation at various sites along the river banks, that part of the city of Wilmington bordering the Brandywine has been more or less *terra incognita* to the archeologist. This is due principally to the fact that buildings and streets have covered or obliterated any evidence of native occupation that might have existed. Thus the two documents printed for the first time below, which deal with Indian activity within the present limits of Wilmington, take on unusual significance for both the archeologist and the ethno-historian.

The manuscripts, written by a member of the family<sup>2</sup> whose forebear, Jacob Van der Veer, was granted land here as early as 1662,<sup>3</sup> are now in the possession of Miss Mary E. Heindle, 612 West 20th Street, Wilmington, who has given us permission to, publish and annotate them.<sup>4</sup>

The first account which follows describes an annual fish festival held on Vandever land in the spring. The Indians came, after planting their corn, to remain at this summer encampment for five or six weeks. This phase of the native food-gathering cycle is reminiscent of a similar practice among the Indians of the southern stretches of the Delmarva Peninsula, who had a temporary fishing encampment at Rehoboth Beach.<sup>5</sup> The festival itself probably had socio-religious connotations, and, in keeping with Delaware pantheism, was doubtless characterized by ceremonial as well as social dances.<sup>6</sup> In this account, the site of the festival is referred to as an "old encampment," a phrase which suggests that the Indians had been there many times before. If the archeologist were able to locate and explore the encampment mentioned, it is probable that the occupational layer would be similar to that at the nearby Crane Hook site, which, the investigators concluded, was not a permanent village, but a temporary station visited for economic reasons at certain times of the year.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Fish Festival of the Indians**

The annual fish festival of the Indians of the Brandywine and neighboring streams was held on the Vandever lands for many years on the ground now occupied by the Brandywine Village. Their encampment may be said to have had a general course or range of

north west and south east from nearly opposite the present lower dam down to the shipyard and within an average distance of one hundred yards of the creek.

The Indian therefore never failed to indulge his habit in coming down to "fish and turtle" after planting his corn, beans, and other vegetables.

This spring festival was to him and his family a joyous occasion, and almost every year he was to be found to the number of some two or three hundred at the dear old encampment.

The compiler's father, belonging to the family owning the ground and when a child playing with the little Indians and noticing the habits of all, learned the language and spoke it fluently and seemingly regretted their absence in after years. The business of the morning was opened by the Indians getting together in groups of five or six and leaving for the great estuary and its streams connecting it with the Delaware. In the afternoon they would be seen usually returning to their encampment laden down with fish and loggerheads,<sup>8</sup> and upon their arrival [they] would always find a large blazing fire prepared for cooking their fish, the squaws and children having made it up in their absence round a rock or fallen tree. The coals were usually glowingly red and to the depth of six or seven inches surrounded by small pieces of stone to keep them together. Things thus arranged, the several groups of returned fishermen would go to their respective campfires, throwing in their fish and placing the great loggerhead in the midst of the coals on his back, keeping him down with stones and watching him until his death struggle was over, and when [he was] done, carefully taking [him] out [and] preserving the lower shell<sup>9</sup> for a bowl. These festivals generally terminated in five or six weeks, or until they thought their truck should be attended to, when they broke up their camp and returned home. On one occasion an Indian of some standing got jealous of his squaw and committed suicide by drowning himself - of which an account may be hereafter forthcoming, including an account of his funeral in accordance with the Indian ritual.

The second account deals with suicide and attendant burial practices, and is perhaps ethnically the more important of the two. It relates how an Indian, jealous of his wife for unstated reasons, took his life by drowning. His body was later recovered and interred. The interment, taking place at a time when strong European influences were being felt, reflected acculturation in the use of a wooden coffin,<sup>10</sup> the presence of a Swedish clergyman,<sup>11</sup> and the burial in a Christian cemetery. Conversely, native customs persisted in the use of fire on the grave, the burial with face down,<sup>12</sup> the summoning of the mourners,<sup>13</sup> and the presence of six mourners who ran around the grave singing.<sup>14</sup>

So far as the writers are aware, the reference below to Indian suicide is the first to be found in Delaware Valley literature, although suicide elsewhere among the Delaware Indians was recorded. For example, John Heckewelder, writing in the 1770's, tells how two Delaware Indian braves, disappointed in love, committed suicide by eating the root of the May apple, and of a married man who similarly took his life because his squaw had turned her attention to another.<sup>15</sup> In her analysis of Algonkian culture, Regina Flannery stated that among the coastal Algonkian peoples suicide had been recorded only for the Delawares, and suggested that this was a result of Iroquois influence.<sup>16</sup> In an extremely comprehensive account of Iroquois suicide, William N. Fenton noted one instance of death by drowning, as well as several unsuccessful attempts.<sup>17</sup>

The account of the suicide and burial, which is untitled, follows:

In June 173- at one of the Indian spring fish festivals an Indian of some celebrity belonging to the "fish camp" annually held on the Vandever land, where the Village of Brandywine was afterwards located, became jealous of his squaw and drowned himself. As he had been suspected of such a purpose an old squaw set to watch him that night had fallen asleep and only wakened in time enough to run to the creek opposite the little stone island at the ferry to hear him jump into the water and cry out Ugh! She also found his blanket-covering on the shore.

The camp being alarmed next morning, measures were taken to recover the body; [from] amongst them runners were dispatched up the streams for divers, who came promptly and commenced diving for the body, exhibiting remarkable physical properties for the purpose, but without success, and it was not till after the lapse of some ten days, when he had swollen and floated on the island below, that his body was obtained - and upon which, arrangements were immediately made for his funeral: a coffin [was] prepared and a time and place appointed for his interment. Accordingly many of the camp Indians and some of the "Red Brethren" from up the streams were found in attendance. And the place of the grave [was] within the limits of the Wilmington and Brandywine cemetery as located upon Delaware Avenue.

The presence of the Swedish clergyman and Tom Freeman,<sup>18</sup> an educated young Indian who had become a classical scholar, seemed to be proper, and although last mentioned, [they] were not among the least distinguished personages assembled. These arrangements thus perfected, the grave dug, [and] the body upon the ground, the ceremony according to the Indian ritual commenced. Three Indian men and three squaws were appointed to run round the grave, two sticks having been placed across it upon which the coffin was placed containing the body, when those named began to run one after another round it, singing a doleful song until nearly out of breath, when suddenly they broke away from the place - running down the hill

towards Brandywine - and in a short time returned each with a little bundle of dry fagots, during which time however several Indians were busily engaged in rubbing sticks together to make fire, and some of them succeeded.

Tom Freeman on the part of the Red Brethren told the man in charge of the coffin to draw the sticks away from under it and lower the body into the grave with the face down, which was accordingly done. And then those with the fagots began to run and sing around the grave during the time it was filling up, and which when done they all threw their fagots on it, others setting fire to them [and] making quite a blaze some two or three feet high.<sup>19</sup> This accomplished, the clergyman asked Freeman what his face was put down for. Tom said the deceased was as they believed a bad man, and as we Indians believe may have the power of coming back and may be still mischievously inclined, and persons passing this way might be scared by him, but that with his face down the more he would struggle the deeper he would go, and should he by any possibility turn his face up the fire would meet him on the grave and burn him so that he would be glad to go back and his purpose either way be defeated.

1. C. A. Weslager, *Red Men on the Brandywine* (Wilmington, 1953).
2. Possibly Jacob B. Vandever (1792-1868).
3. *Duke of York Record* (Wilmington, 1903), p. 16; see also confirmation of an island in 1669, *ibid.*, p. 156.
4. These manuscripts were brought to our attention by Professor John A. Munroe, Department of History, University of Delaware. Both manuscripts are in faded ink, in the same handwriting, on both sides of separate sheets of paper cut from an old ledger.
5. Francis Jordan, "Remains of an Aboriginal Encampment at Rehoboth, Delaware" (ms. copy, in the Wilmington Institute Five Library, of it paper read in Philadelphia, before the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society, in 1880).
6. For a description of similar ceremonies see Frank G. Speck, *Oklahoma Delaware Ceremonies, Feasts, and Dances* (Philadelphia, 1937).
7. John Swientochowski and C. A. Weslager, "Excavations at the Crane Hook Site, Wilmington, Delaware," BASD 3:5, May, 1942, pp. 2-17.
8. Large marine turtles.
9. This means the shell in contact with the fire, actually the carapace or upper shell.
10. David Zeisberger, writing in 1779-1780, observed that the Indians "have learned to make proper coffins." See his *History of the Northern American Indians*, ed. A. B. Hulbert and W. N. Schwarze, Columbia, Ohio, 1910. p. 89.
11. The Swedish pastor Andreas Hesselius was present at two Indian funerals during his sojourn in Delaware and Pennsylvania. The first, in 1716, saw the dead Indian (his face painted) placed in a coffin and buried in a Christian's orchard. The "pall bearers" divided the dead man's property among them. At the second interment, in 1722, no coffin was used, but the body was covered with straw and the grave covered with boards and earth. The "pall bearers" divided the dead man's

property. See "The journal of Andreas Hesselius, 1711-1724," ed. Amandus Johnson, *Delaware History*, 2:2, September, 1947, pp. 63-118.

12. Hesselius (*ibid.*) notes that the normal Delaware Indian burial posture was with the face "turned toward the west, for he must, they say, follow the sun when he arises." Dr. William A. Ritchie, New York State Archeologist, in a personal letter to one of the authors dated March 31, 1958, stated that the discovery of occasional skeletons in a prone position is not unusual in his experience. The text below explains why this particular Indian was buried with his face down.

13. Peter Lindstrom wrote that when an Indian died a messenger was sent around the country "crying, calling and lamenting, who runs around everywhere and makes this known to the good friends of the dead savage." See his *Geographia Americae*, tr. Amandus Johnson, Philadelphia, 1925. p. 249.

14. Hesselius ( *op . cit.*) said that the widow and three other Indian, ran and jumped twice over the corpse.

15. An Account of the *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations*, Philadelphia, 1881, P. 258.

16. An Analysis of *Coastal Algonquin Culture*, Washington, D. C., 1939, pp. 132, 181.

17 "Iroquois Suicide: A Study in the Stability of a Culture Pattern," Anthropological Paper no. 14 in *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* no. 128, Washington, 1941, pp. 79-137.

18. "Freeman" was the English surname of several Indians in the Brandywine area, the best known of whom was "Indian Hannah," reputedly the last of the Delaware Indians in Chester County, Pennsylvania (Weslager, *Red Men*, p. I ff.). For mention of it Thomas Freeman-possibly the same one-in a document dated 1740, see *ibid.*, p. 92.

19. The absence of any reference to distributing the dead man's possessions is probably further evidence of acculturation. Zeisberger, *loc. cit.*, said: "Formerly it was the custom to place the pouch, tobacco pipe, knife, fire material, kettle, and hatchet in the grave, but this is no longer done."