

Jefferson Reports

Hugh Henry Brackenridge: *Western Pennsylvania Founder and Propagandist of Anti-Native Hate*



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At the turn of the 21st century, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* called Hugh Henry Brackenridge western Pennsylvania's "local founding father." Brackenridge played important roles in establishing what became the *Post-Gazette*, the University of Pittsburgh, and Allegheny County. He was best known in his time and is mainly remembered as a writer. Brackenridge's work has been the subject of academic discourse. Most scholars concede, but brush off, his consistent denigration of Indigenous people, who Brackenridge described as "animals, vulgarly called Indians."¹

This essay is an examination of Brackenridge's body of writing about Native Americans. The picture that emerges is ugly. With but one exception, Brackenridge's writing was laced with virulent hatred of and prejudice toward indigenous people. He repeatedly wrote and published propaganda claiming that Native people were sub-human beasts who killed and tortured Euro-Americans for pleasure and did so because of character traits they shared as a race. Over three decades, Brackenridge argued consistently and forcefully that Indigenous people must be "exterminated" or "extirpated" and, if not, driven away from western Pennsylvania with military force.

Brackenridge's anti-Indigenous bigotry was consistent with the biases of most of his Euro-American neighbors in western Pennsylvania, biases that Brackenridge's propaganda reinforced and helped normalize. In the words of one historian, Brackenridge's writing lent "an air of respectability to the greed and racism of western whites."²

In Brackenridge's time, many Euro-Americans opposed his anti-Native positions. He was well aware of those contrary views. In 1792, for example, Brackenridge observed that the "current of opinion" in Congress and in newspapers publishing in the national capital was against the kind of measures against Indigenous people for which he was lobbying, that is, "penetrating the forests where they haunt and extirpating the race." Brackenridge dismissed those opposing views by mocking them, arguing they were the product of naïve thinking by Euro-Americans unable or unwilling to see what he saw: Indigenous people were sub-human beasts who deserved to be exterminated and dispossessed.³

Brackenridge Chronology

The family of then five-year-old Hugh Henry Brackenridge emigrated from Scotland to Pennsylvania in 1753, eventually making their way to a borderlands region called the Barrens, in today's York County. Brackenridge attended the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, and graduated in a small class with a future President, James Madison.⁴

In the east, Brackenridge was many things, including teacher, propagandist for the Patriot cause during the American Revolution, chaplain in General George Washington's army, failed magazine publisher, and accomplished writer. In April 1781, the 33-year-old Brackenridge moved to Pittsburgh, then a borderlands village of a few hundred European-Americans, to start a new career in law and, he hoped, politics.

In the west, Brackenridge became a successful lawyer and a somewhat successful politician. He was elected in 1786 to represent western Pennsylvania in the state assembly but lost the other times he ran for public office. Eventually, Brackenridge was appointed to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. He moved away from Pittsburgh

1 James O'Toole, "Hugh Henry Brackenridge-Our Local Founding Father," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 2, 2000, [Here](#). For Brackenridge quote, see discussion at page __ below and fn.14.

2 Joseph Ellis, *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 90.

3 Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications* (Carlisle, PA: Alexander and Phillips, 1806) 93, 97, 93-107.

4 Claude Newlin, *The Life and Writings of Hugh Henry Brackenridge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932) 1-14; For a chronology see Daniel Marder, *Hugh Henry Brackenridge* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967) 11-13, 18-27; For his time at Princeton see Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *A Hugh Henry Brackenridge Reader*, ed. Daniel Marder (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970) 7-8.

to be closer to his court duties in 1801 and lived in Carlisle, writing and serving on Pennsylvania's highest court until his death in 1816.⁵

Historiography of Brackenridge

There is a fair amount of scholarly discourse on Hugh Henry Brackenridge, most of which focuses on his writing. Brackenridge is the subject of book-length biographies by literary historians Claude Newman and Daniel Marder. He was one of four people accorded full-chapter coverage in Joseph Ellis' examination of American culture in the new republic's first several years. A scholarly work that focuses on Brackenridge's 1780s and early 1790s articles for the *Pittsburgh Gazette* offers insight into his political philosophy.⁶

The most significant recent scholarly commentary on Brackenridge is in historian Peter Silver's *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America*. Silver addresses Pennsylvania's relations with Indigenous people from the mid-1750s until just after the 1783 end of the American Revolution. He illuminates some of the dark corners of Pennsylvania's history and shines a spotlight into the corner occupied by Brackenridge. Silver's discussion is revealing and important because he points to Brackenridge as an effective propagandist for a potent anti-Native narrative.⁷

Relations between Pennsylvania and Indigenous people were always fraught and tenuous, but more or less peaceful from William Penn's 1682 arrival until the mid-1750s. After the catastrophic failure of British General Edward Braddock's 1755 march toward Fort Duquesne early in the Seven Years' War, western Pennsylvania Native groups, especially Delawares and Shawnees, entered the war against Britain and its North American colonies by launching raids on colonial settlements across the borderlands. 1755 was the beginning of a forty-year period of frequent warfare that pitted Native people against, first, Britain and its colonies and, later, the United States. Insofar as Pennsylvania is concerned, the struggle for control of the land in the western end of the state effectively ended with "Mad" Anthony Wayne's 1794 victory over a confederation of Native nations at Fallen Timbers, near today's Toledo, Ohio.⁸

Silver posits that when Native warriors raided borderlands settlements during the early stages of the Seven Years' War, the white settlers' principal reaction was fright, not racial hatred.⁹ A central theme of Silver's work is how the settlers' fear was transformed, in a relatively short time period, into broad-based racial hatred. The transformation was promoted by "provincial leaders and publicists [who] started to experiment with the fear . . . trying to rebottle and employ it for ends of their own." Silver reasons that politicians and propagandists reinforced and exacerbated anti-Native feelings among borderlands settlers using a narrative constructed around "a horror filled rhetoric of victimization." The narrative's unifying principles were that the settlers (mainly squatters) who moved onto land long occupied by Native people were not trespassers or wrongdoers; rather, they were the innocent victims of gratuitous violence inflicted on them by vicious, inhuman creatures who killed and tortured Euro-Americans for pleasure. Silver calls the narrative "the anti-Indian sublime."¹⁰

5 Marder, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, 11-13; Newlin, *Life and Writings*, 25-87, 112-134, 198-287, 292-309.

6 For the book-length works see Newlin, *Life and Writings*; and Marder, Hugh Henry Brackenridge. See also Ellis, *After the Revolution*, 73-110; James Sanderson, "Agrarianism in Hugh Henry Brackenridge's Articles for The Pittsburgh Gazette," *Early American Literature*, 22 No.3 (1987) 306-319.

7 Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

8 See Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Daniel Barr, *A Colony Sprung from Hell: Pittsburgh and the Struggle for Authority on the Western Pennsylvania Frontier, 1744-1794* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2014).

9 Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*, 40-41.

10 Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*, xix-xx.

Brackenridge was not among the first group of propagandists to capitalize on the settlers' fears of Native attack, but Silver points to anti-Indigenous writing by Brackenridge even before his move to Pittsburgh.¹¹ Soon after moving west, Brackenridge wrote and had published a 1783 pamphlet that Silver asserts "greatly assisted in its early stages" what he calls "the new anti-Indianism of the 1780s." This variant of anti-Indigenous bias emphasized dehumanizing Native people by equating them with animals. Silver comments that Brackenridge "summed up for a broad audience the view of all Indians being akin to cruel animals" and presented what "may be two of the greatest atrocity accounts in American literary history."¹²

Detailed Examination of *Narratives of a Late Expedition Against the Indians*.

That 1783 pamphlet is *Narratives of a Late Expedition against the Indians with an Account of the Barbarous Execution of Col. Crawford; and the Wonderful Escape of Dr. Knight and John Slover from Captivity in 1782*. In it, Brackenridge included a narrative written at his request by Dr. Knight and his "taking down by myself" of an oral statement by Mr. Slover. Knight and Slover were survivors of a disastrous 1782 expedition of Pennsylvania militiamen led by Colonel William Crawford.¹³

Brackenridge's August 1782 submission of *Narratives* to his printer, Francis Bailey, included seven pages of personal commentary that began with this unambiguous statement: "Mr. Bailey, with the narratives enclosed, I subjoin some observations with regard to the animals, vulgarly called Indians."¹⁴

In making his "observations," Brackenridge claimed special expertise regarding Native people, contending that he had "an opportunity to know something of the character of this race of men, from the deeds they perpetrate daily around me." The traits Brackenridge saw in Indigenous people were unmistakable: "They have the shapes of men and may be of human species, but certainly in their present state they approach nearer the character of deviles."¹⁵

Brackenridge took his *Narratives* readers directly to the conclusion he obviously wanted them to draw: "In this [a Native man] departs from the laws of nature [and] . . . becomes a murderer who ought to be put to death. On this principle are not the whole Indian nations murderers?" In an effort to close what he might have perceived to be a loophole, Brackenridge argued that Native people who "have not had an opportunity of putting prisoners to death" are equally culpable because "the sentiment which they entertain leads them invariably to do this when they have it in their power or judge it expedient: these principles constitute them murderers, and they ought to be prevented from carrying [those murders] into execution."¹⁶

Taking his propaganda to its next logical step, Brackenridge argued that "the whole brood" of Indigenous people should be exterminated, and implied that God had ordered Euro-Americans to do so:

These nations are so degenerate from the life of man, so devoid of any sentiment of generosity, so prone to every vicious excess of passion, so faithless, and so incapable of all civilization, that it is dangerous to the good order of the world that they should exist in it. . . . It may be said that the Israelites had an order from the Lord to put to death the Canaanites. I think when we see men by their principle of heart carried out to shed blood

11 Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*, 234-237 (Brackenridge's 1777 play, *Death of General Montgomery*).

12 Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*, 282-283.

13 Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*, 282; Hugh Henry Brackenridge, ed., *Narratives of a Late Expedition Against the Indians* (Philadelphia: Francis Bailey, 1783), 3.

14 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 32.

15 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 32, 36.

16 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 36.

privately; it is a sufficient order to exterminate the whole brood. As the Seceder said of Satan, what will you make of them, my beloved, but ill, vile, evil devils?¹⁷

Francis Bailey, Brackenridge's printer, understood what Brackenridge was asking his readers to do: Pressure their state and national governments to "extirpate" Native people. In Bailey's commentary, he wrote: "These narratives may be serviceable to induce our governments to take some effectual steps to chastise and repress [Native people]; as from hence they [governments] will see that the nature of an Indian is fierce and cruel, and that an extirpation of them would be useful to the world, and honorable to those who can effect [sic] it." In 18th century Pennsylvania, "extirpate" carried the same meaning as "exterminate." Both words meant "utter destruction" and have been said by some historians to express the modern concept of genocide.¹⁸

Beyond urging his readers to demand military action to "exterminate the whole brood" of Native people, *Narratives* argued that, at a minimum, the military should drive Indigenous people from land their ancestors and other Native people had occupied for centuries.¹⁹ Brackenridge argued that 1782 was the perfect time to complete the dispossession of the Native people of the Ohio River Valley: "At the termination of the present [Revolutionary] war, when [Native people] are no longer assisted by our enemies it will be easy to drive them beyond the lakes: instead of forming treaties . . . and profaning ourselves by calling them brothers, I would simply let them know that they are no longer to show themselves [here]. . . . After some period they may be reduced to more distant bounds [where] their practices shall be obscured and the tribes gradually abolished."²⁰

Reflecting Brackenridge's training and experience in the law, *Narratives* included a legal argument that purportedly justified Native dispossession. The law upon which Brackenridge relied was murky. His argument was not based on any recognized principle of United States, Pennsylvania, or even English law. Rather, he relied on natural law and revelation.²¹

Brackenridge's legal argument starts with its ultimate conclusion: The claim by Native people to "the extensive countries of America, is wild and inadmissible." He mocked a contention then being made by many Euro-Americans that Indigenous people were entitled to continued occupancy of land on which they had lived, hunted, trapped, farmed, and raised animals for centuries. Brackenridge replied: "On what is their claim founded? – Occupancy. A wild Indian with his skin painted red, and a feather through his nose, has set his foot on the broad continent of North and South America" and, thus, has the right to "the soil"? That proposition, Brackenridge argued, was absurd.²²

A purported principle of law that Native people may possess only the land necessary for subsistence farming and that all other land may be seized by Euro-American settlers was a key element in Brackenridge's argument. In arguing from that "principle," Brackenridge ignored the history of extensive agricultural land use by Native people.²³

Brackenridge's bottom line on the land rights of western Pennsylvania's Indigenous people was very clear. "I am so far from thinking the Indians have a right to the soil, that not having made a better use of it for many hundred

17 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 37.

18 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 3. Jeffrey Ostler, *Surviving Genocide: Native Nations and the United States from the American Revolution to Bleeding Kansas* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 99.

19 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 38.

20 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 38.

21 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 32-38.

22 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 32-33.

23 See Daniel Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3-5. Richter discusses the agricultural history of the Indigenous people of eastern North America.

years, I conceive they have forfeited all pretense to claim, and ought to be driven from it.”²⁴

A careful examination of *Narratives* establishes that in it Brackenridge: (1) Dehumanized Native people by equating them with vicious beasts and devils; (2) Declared that the borderlands settlers who squatted on Native land and even militiamen were the innocent victims of murderous beasts; (3) Asserted that Indigenous people as a race are murderers who deserve to be “exterminated” or “extirpated;” (4) Asserted that Native people should be dispossessed of their land and driven from it using military force; and (5) Argued that Native people do not have any legal right to land they had occupied for centuries.

After *Narratives*, Brackenridge repeated his anti-Indigenous propaganda for decades

Hugh Henry Brackenridge remained active as a writer, lawyer, politician, and jurist almost until his death in 1816, more than thirty years after *Narratives* was published. In his subsequent writing about Indigenous people, Brackenridge’s propaganda changed very little, if at all.

Three pieces that Brackenridge wrote in the early 1790s show his consistency. In 1792, the United States was in the third year of its war against a confederacy of Native nations who lived in or near the Ohio Valley. The war had gone badly for the United States. The military expeditions of Generals Josiah Harmar (1790) and Arthur St. Clair (1791) were disasters. In 1792, General Anthony Wayne was in western Pennsylvania preparing for what was to be yet another expedition against the confederacy. Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s pen exploded with anti-Indigenous hate that year in essays entitled, “Thoughts on the Present Indian War” and “On the Indian Right of Soil,” and in a poem, “Thoughts on Indian Treaties.”²⁵

The 1792 pieces were republished in 1806 in *Gazette Publications*, a volume that collected writing for which Brackenridge wished to be remembered, “the memory of a literary man” as he put it. *Gazette Publications* included some new commentaries. In 1806, Brackenridge said he wrote about Native people in 1792 because, during a visit that year to “the seat of the General Government [Philadelphia],” he found “the current of opinion” in Congressional debates and in the newspapers to “run strong against effective measures with the Indians on our frontiers.” In addition, he said, “These Children of the forest, as they were kindly called by some, appeared to have humane advocates, who seemed to think them an injured people, and that they ought to be suffered to possess their land, or to defend it as they thought proper.” Motivated by such substantial Euro-American opposition to his anti-Indigenous views, Brackenridge spilled his racial hate onto the printed page.²⁶

The 1792 pieces reiterate *Narratives*’ themes, especially that Indigenous people are sub-human beasts who should be “exterminated” or “extirpated.” In “Thoughts on the Present Indian War,” for example, Brackenridge wrote: “An uncivilized Indian is but a little way removed from a beast who, when incensed, can only tear and devour, but the savage applies the ingenuity of man to torture and inflict anguish.” Brackenridge lobbied for the United States to pursue offensive war against Native people because keeping militiamen inside forts was akin to “watching beasts of prey . . . come against our folds.” Offensive war must be conducted, he argued, by “penetrating the forests where they haunt and extirpating the race.”²⁷

In his poem “Thoughts on Indian Treaties,” Brackenridge argued for “Exterminating [the] race at once, For their own happiness and man’s” and he added this blood-curdling verse:

24 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 36.

25 White, *Middle Ground*, 454-468; Ostler, *Surviving Genocide*, 98-104; Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications* (Carlisle, PA: Alexander and Phillips, 1806), 93-107.

26 Brackenridge, *Gazette Publication*, 4 and 93 (1806 notes), 93-107.

27 Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications*, 100, 97.

Were it with me to manage these,
 Instead of ever making peace,
Would kill them every mother's son
 Because the work is then well done.
And there's an end of blood and burning,
 And parents for their offspring mourning,
 The devils gone where they should dwell,
 In some very hottest place of hell.²⁸

As late as 1814, two years before he died, Brackenridge republished another spirited argument that Indigenous people were sub-human beasts of prey. In *Law Miscellanies*, Brackenridge said that in Native societies, “the powers of genius are inactive, the arts and sciences remain unknown, and man continues to be an animal differing in nothing but in shape from the beasts of prey that roam upon the mountain. The life of these therefore is not human; for it is abhorrent from the way of life which God and nature points out as the life of man.”²⁹

Brackenridge modified somewhat his complete extermination position between 1806's *Gazette Publications* and the 1814 publication of *Law Miscellanies*. In the latter volume, Brackenridge eased off on his call to “kill them every mother's son,” provided Native people were permanently dispossessed from land they had long occupied. In western Pennsylvania that dispossession was essentially completed with General Anthony Wayne's 1794 victory at Fallen Timbers and the ensuing Treaty of Greenville. In 1814, twenty years after Wayne's victory, Brackenridge wrote that he was not advocating “waging an unnecessary war against the natives, or the extirpation of them altogether,” given the United States' “encroachment on the territory claimed by [Indigenous people].” Brackenridge reasoned in 1814 that it was a “dictate of humanity to ... [avoid, if unnecessary] the shedding of the blood of those, who though sunk beneath the dignity of human nature, yet bear the name and are seen in the shape of men.”³⁰

In *Gazette Publications* and *Law Miscellanies*, Brackenridge laid out his fully developed legal rationale for Native dispossession, concluding (as he had in *Narratives*) that Indigenous people had no rights to the land they had long occupied. Brackenridge's 1806 and 1814 dispossession arguments were more polished than in *Narratives*, but they were equally dismissive of Native rights. Brackenridge focused on the question: “as between men, and those he can subdue of his own species, what is the law of nature?” He answered that natural law gives men a right to “dominion” over land “in favor of such as cultivate the earth; because it is . . . made more productive, by the skill and labor of such.”³¹

From that premise, Brackenridge's conclusion followed easily: The Indigenous people of western Pennsylvania, whose economies he said relied exclusively on hunting and trapping, did not have any more right to land they had long occupied than the animals of the forest: “But as to savages who do not cultivate the soil, or sustain themselves to much extent, by that means, they are in the same situation as to this evidence of right, with the beasts.”³²

Recognizing that many Euro-Americans were arguing that natural law rights to land exist “in the first occupant” and that “the natives . . . [who] from the earliest times had possessed the country” had the first rights to the land they occupied, Brackenridge vehemently dissented. His argument against the first occupant principle was that it applied only to land used exclusively for subsistence farming. As a result, he argued, no person or society could validly claim land rights for “a greater quantity of soil than is necessary for their own subsistence.” He asked

28 Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications*, 105-106.

29 Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Law Miscellanies* (Philadelphia: P. Byrne, 1814), 124.

30 White, *Middle Ground*, 456-458; Brackenridge, *Law Miscellanies*, 125.

31 Brackenridge, *Law Miscellanies*, 121-122 (emphasis in original).

32 Brackenridge, *Law Miscellanies*, 122.

(rhetorically) whether “a few tribes thinly scattered over an immense continent [may] retain possession of it, while other parts of the globe are overcharged with inhabitants?”³³

Brackenridge also rejected the argument made by many Euro-Americans that Native people, because their economies were based to a large extent on hunting and trapping, had a natural law right to the land necessary for such economies to thrive. “It will be said that their manner of life makes a greater quantity of soil necessary. ... But do the laws of revelation or of nature leave every man at liberty to use what manner of life that he pleases?” No, Brackenridge argued, “The most they can with justice claim, is a right to those spots of ground where their wigwams have been planted and to so much of the soil around them as may be necessary to produce grain.”³⁴

Brackenridge’s theory of land rights was premised on privileging European-style agricultural land use over all others, especially overuse for hunting and trapping. Such a “principle” of natural law, of course, conveniently meshed with Brackenridge’s prejudice against Indigenous people. The economic model Euro-American settlers brought to western Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century focused on agriculture, especially on the farms staked out by Euro-American squatters. For Brackenridge, it followed easily that Euro-Americans, not Native people, were entitled to occupy western Pennsylvania.

Brackenridge pushed for Native dispossession by use of military force, in part for economic reasons

In his propaganda, Brackenridge consistently argued that Native dispossession must be accomplished using military force. He rejected out of hand making treaties with Indigenous groups, least of all treaties that involved paying for land taken. Economics was an underlying rationale for these positions.

When Brackenridge arrived in 1781, many western Pennsylvania Euro-American settlers wanted to establish a new state that would be independent of Pennsylvania. Brackenridge opposed them, arguing in part that secession would curtail receipts from land sales that Pennsylvania desperately needed to repay the Penn family for surrendering the family’s proprietary rights.³⁵

Silver summarized the early post-Revolution economic situation as it pertained to Native-occupied western land: “Many Americans found the new nation’s spectacular debt load quite frightening, having never known anything like it before. In the sale of western lands, the founding generation saw a tantalizing chance to literally pay for the American Revolution on the backs of the few thousand Indians against whom they had spent most of the war fighting.”³⁶

Brackenridge argued there was no money to pay Native people for western land because the United States needed to maximize the proceeds from sales of that land to pay down the Revolutionary War debt. They also needed to make good on land grants to soldiers who fought in the Revolution and against Indigenous people.³⁷

Brackenridge dismissed making treaties with Indigenous people as a waste of time: “But as to treaties with these Indians, under present [1792] circumstances, I can have no confidence in them. – Why? Do not savages observe treaties? No longer than the principle of fear operates ... all treaty with them must be nugatory. ... But with these Indians, treaties cannot be established, or if established, would not be observed.”³⁸

33 Brackenridge, *Law Miscellanies*, 122-126.

34 Brackenridge, *Law Miscellanies*, 123-124.

35 Leland D. Baldwin, *Whiskey Rebels: The Story of a Frontier Uprising* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, rev. ed. 1968),

36 Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*, 288.

37 Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications*, 93-102.

38 Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications*, 95.

In his 1792 poem “Thoughts on Indian Treaties,” Brackenridge plainly argued that exterminating Indigenous people was preferable to making treaties. Beyond his chilling “kill them every mother’s son” line, he argued that “The truth is treaties are in vain. And [it is] only fear that can restrain.”³⁹ Even in *Modern Chivalry*, the satirical novel for which Brackenridge was well known in his time and is best remembered today, he mocked the notion of treaties with Indigenous people.⁴⁰

Dispossession by use of military force became U.S. government policy in the 1790s

Brackenridge consistently argued for the national government to send troops against Indigenous people. That contention is explicit in *Narratives*, which noted that the objective was to “induce our governments to take effective steps.” In *Gazette Publications*, Brackenridge called for the United States to prosecute offensive war by “penetrating the forests [Native people] haunt and extirpating the race.”⁴¹

The steady propaganda of Brackenridge and others for using the military to exterminate and dispossess Indigenous people was reflected in U.S. government policy in the 1780s and 1790s.

In October 1783, a special committee of Congress chaired by James Duane issued a report on “Indian Affairs.” As Silver notes, “Duane’s committee recommended a policy startlingly like the one Brackenridge had just described [in *Narratives*].” Duane urged the U.S. government to eschew negotiations with Indigenous groups and simply draw a line from the Ohio River to Lake Erie at what today is the border between Ohio and Indiana. East of that line was to be declared an area where Native people no longer had any sovereignty and “within which they, the Indians, shall not come.”⁴²

Duane’s recommendations were U.S. government policy toward the Indigenous peoples of the Ohio Valley from 1784 to 1786. But, in the 1780s the government was not able to enforce Duane’s line. Congress stepped back in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, promising it would negotiate land acquisitions and act with “utmost good faith toward the Indians.” Silver calls the Northwest Ordinance “a turning point in American policy toward the western Indians.”⁴³

Historian Jeffrey Ostler, however, argues that the Northwest Ordinance reflected less of a change in American policy than “utmost good faith” suggested because the ordinance also provided that the government would pursue “just and lawful wars” against Native groups. In May 1790, Secretary of War Henry Knox determined that, because Indigenous groups living in the Ohio Valley had refused the United States’ unilateral land cessation demands, they were “banditti.” He ordered Generals Josiah Harmar and Arthur St. Clair to “extirpate, utterly, if possible, the said banditti.” Knox’s order precipitated a war between the United States and a confederation of Ohio Valley area Native nations that lasted until General Anthony Wayne’s victory at Fallen Timbers four years later.⁴⁴

Ostler poses the question whether Knox’s 1790 order can be considered genocidal. He concludes that the

39 Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications*, 104-107

40 Marder, *Hugh Henry Brackenridge Reader*, 172-175. In *Modern Chivalry* Brackenridge wrote of a white Indian treaty-maker” who proposes to turn an uneducated Irish servant into a ”King of the Kickapoos” in nine days and then use him to negotiate a treaty with gullible government officials.

41 Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 3, 32-38; Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications*, 93, 97, 105.

42 Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*, 289; James Duane, *Report on Indian Affairs* (Report to Congress, 1783) (exported from Wiki-source, March 18, 2021).

43 Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*, 288-290. Ordinance of 1787.loc.gov.

44 Ostler, *Surviving Genocide*, 92-95, 98-100; Jeffrey Ostler, “ ‘Just and Lawful war’ as Genocidal War in the (United States) Northwest Ordinance and Northwest Territory, 1787-1832, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Mar. 2016, Vol. 18 Issue 1, 1-20; White, *Middle Ground*, 413-468.

expeditions the United States sent to the Ohio Valley in the early 1790s did not produce genocidal results. Harmar and St. Clair were defeated, and Wayne did not slaughter non-combatants. However, Ostler also opines that Knox and President George Washington acted with genocidal intent in that they were very much “willing to [commit genocide] and ... repeatedly communicated that willingness.”⁴⁵

Brackenridge stepped up his anti-native propaganda during the 1790-1794 war. He openly mocked Washington and Knox for sending emissaries to meet with Native people. Brackenridge directly attacked Knox, for example, by sarcastically noting in verse, “And for this reason wish that cocks, That are at helm and General Knox, Would only stick to war; at least, Until they’re properly repress’d.” Brackenridge harshly criticized Washington and Knox’s prosecution of the war as inept, arguing that U.S. forces were not adequately “penetrating the forests where [Natives] haunt, and extirpating the race.”⁴⁶

Brackenridge’s early 1790s anti-Indigenous propaganda was extreme as compared to “the current of opinion” in Congress and eastern newspapers that he observed in Philadelphia in 1792. It was extreme compared to the war policies of Henry Knox and George Washington. It is true that Brackenridge’s anti-Indigenous positions were consistent with those of most of his western Pennsylvania neighbors. As Daniel Marder observed, Brackenridge “saw the Indian situation in the same light as any other man on the frontier.” But Brackenridge’s anti-Indigenous propaganda reinforced and helped normalize local bigotry. As Marder offers, Brackenridge was “interested in justifying the American conscience in taking land from the Indians.” Joseph Ellis put it more bluntly, saying Brackenridge’s propaganda lent “an air of respectability to the greed and racism of western whites.”⁴⁷

Mitigating Circumstances?

Brackenridge’s prejudice against Indigenous people has been recognized in the scholarly literature. No author denies it. However, Joseph Ellis, Daniel Marder, and Claude Newlin refer to certain circumstances that they suggest might be taken into account in assessing Brackenridge. Notably, all of them published before Silver’s 2008 commentary about Brackenridge and none of them ever disputed that anti-Native prejudice permeated Brackenridge’s writing.

These scholars point to two events in Brackenridge’s life. In 1785, he defended a murder case against an Indigenous man named Mamachataga and later wrote a sympathetic, humanizing article about the defendant. In addition, having grown up in the Pennsylvania borderlands during the Seven Years’ War, it is possible Brackenridge witnessed Native raids.

Only two years after Narratives, Brackenridge served as counsel at the murder trial of Mamachataga, a Native man who admitted stabbing two white men. The defendant said he was drunk at the time. Pennsylvania law, however, did not recognize intoxication as a murder defense. Although Attorney Brackenridge offered no evidence to support any legally recognized defense, the judge sent the case to a jury. They returned a guilty verdict without leaving the courtroom and Mamachataga was hanged a few weeks later.⁴⁸

Brackenridge’s writing about the case is sympathetic and humanizing. Marder says it presented “a real portrait of the Indian character ... perhaps for the first time in American literature” and that, “Through attorney Brackenridge the reader recognizes in the savage some fundamental qualities of civilized individuals, and in the civilized white men, a fundamental savageness.” Ellis posits that Brackenridge’s representation of Mamachataga “reflected a

45 Ostler, *Surviving Genocide*, 120-121.

46 Brackenridge, *Gazette Publications*, 107, 97, 93-107.

47 Marder, *Introduction to Brackenridge Reader*, 10; Marder, *Hugh Henry Brackenridge*, 75; Ellis, *After the Revolution*, 89-90.

48 Brackenridge, “The Trial of Mamachataga,” in *Brackenridge Reader*, 355-364.

stubborn commitment to personal principle that would not be influenced by public opinion.”⁴⁹

What conclusions should be drawn from Brackenridge’s representation of Mamachataga and the sympathetic piece about the Native defendant he later published?

First, Brackenridge’s writing about Mamachataga was a complete outlier from his otherwise uniform anti-Native propaganda. Mamachataga’s case obviously didn’t change Brackenridge’s views. Seven years later, Brackenridge said he would “kill them every mother’s son” in his vile anti-Indigenous screeds of 1792, which were republished in 1806 as part of his self-described “memory of a literary man.” The correct inference to be drawn from Brackenridge’s sympathetic words about Mamachataga’s humanity is that his hateful propaganda is all the more damning. Brackenridge clearly knew better about Native people, yet he continued for almost three decades writing and publishing pieces that called for Indigenous extermination and dispossession.⁵⁰

Second, there is great irony to be found in Marder’s observation that what Brackenridge wrote about Mamachataga forced his readers to see the defendant’s humanity and the fundamental savageness of the all-white jury. It would be disingenuous to credit Brackenridge for criticizing the jurors’ prejudice after he had propagandized that Indigenous people are “by their practice murderers . . . [and] it is sufficient order to exterminate the whole brood.” Marder’s observation in effect lauds Brackenridge for criticizing the jurors for believing exactly what Brackenridge had told them to believe.⁵¹

Third, the suggestion that Brackenridge exposed himself to risk by taking on Mamachataga’s case is overstated. Brackenridge’s writing on the case mentioned pressure he faced to drop it. However, he noted, “the fury of which, when it had a little spent itself, began to subside.” Further, the damage to Brackenridge’s standing in the community, if any, was short-lived. Brackenridge was elected to represent western Pennsylvania in the state assembly a year after the trial, his sole successful run for political office.⁵²

Moving to the point about Brackenridge’s childhood, Marder and Newlin point to the fact that in 1755, when Native warriors began raiding Euro-American settlements across the Pennsylvania borderlands, Brackenridge was a seven-year-old living in York County. The years 1755-1758 were indeed a time during which Pennsylvania’s white settlers lived in fear of attack, if they remained in the borderlands, or they lived as refugees in the east. Newlin, for example, said that from 1755-1758 Pennsylvania borderlands settlers lived “with the constant dread of Indian attack.” Given the widespread fear at that time, it is reasonable to assume that young Brackenridge was adversely impacted.⁵³

The historical record, however, does not take us any further than that assumption. Neither Newlin nor Marder cite any evidence of what Brackenridge and his family did during that period. Nor is there anything in Brackenridge’s surviving writing that fills in the blanks. Brackenridge’s son, Henry Marie Brackenridge, a prolific writer himself, did not discuss that period in the biographical commentaries about his father and his father’s legacy in *Recollections of Persons and Places in the West or History of the Western Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania, Commonly Called the Whiskey Insurrection of 1794*.⁵⁴

49 Marder, introduction to *Brackenridge Reader*, 41-42; Ellis, *After the Revolution*, 91.

50 Brackenridge, *Gazette Publication*, 106, 4.

51 Marder, introduction to *Brackenridge Reader*, 41-41; Brackenridge, *Narratives*, 37.

52 Marder, *Brackenridge Reader*, 359, 355.

53 Newlin, *Life and Writings*, 2.

54 Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Recollections of Persons and Places in the West* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1868); Henry Marie Brackenridge, *History of the Western Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania, Commonly Called the Whiskey Insurrection of 1794* (Pittsburgh: W.S. Haven, 1859).

Concluding thoughts

Hugh Henry Brackenridge was many things during a lifetime that lasted nearly seven decades. He served the Patriot cause in the American Revolution. He was a teacher, chaplain, publisher, lawyer, politician, and jurist. He helped establish western Pennsylvania institutions that have flourished, including those known today as the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the University of Pittsburgh, and Allegheny County. Brackenridge was an accomplished writer whose work remains the subject of scholarly discourse.

Prior to the 2008 publication of Peter Silver's *Our Savage Neighbors* it was difficult to find a scholar who commented much on Brackenridge's well-known bias against Indigenous people. In general, Brackenridge's bigotry was conceded but little was said about it. Silver, however, directly addressed the role Brackenridge played as an early-1780s propagandist for what he calls "the anti-Indian sublime," a powerful narrative that supported and attempted to justify Revolutionary-era dehumanization, extermination, and dispossession of Indigenous people.

The picture that emerges from an examination of Brackenridge's body of writing about Indigenous people is ugly. Throughout his career, with but one exception, Brackenridge's writing is laced with virulent hatred of and prejudice against Native people. That hate speech emanated from Brackenridge's unambiguous view that Indigenous people were sub-human beasts who killed and tortured for pleasure because of character traits inherent in them as a race. Brackenridge argued forcefully that Native people must be "exterminated" or "extirpated" and, if not, driven forever from western Pennsylvania by military force.

Brackenridge's anti-Native bigotry was consistent with the existing biases of his Euro-American neighbors in western Pennsylvania, prejudices that Brackenridge's propaganda reinforced and helped normalize. His propaganda attempted to justify "the American conscience" in taking land from Indigenous people. As Peter Ellis said, Brackenridge's anti-native propaganda lent some "respectability to the greed and racism of western whites."⁵⁵

In Brackenridge's time there was substantial Euro-American opposition to his positions advocating Native extermination and dispossession. He was displeased to find in 1792 that the prevailing opinion in Congress and in the capital's newspapers was "strong" against using the U.S. military to exterminate and dispossess the Native people of the Ohio Valley. Brackenridge acknowledged there were substantial legal arguments that Indigenous people had rights to land that they had possessed for centuries. He dismissed all such opposing views by mocking them, saying in essence that they were the product of naïve thinking by Euro-Americans unable or unwilling to see what he saw.

In the early 1790s, Brackenridge's anti-Indigenous views were more extreme than those of Secretary of War Henry Knox and President George Washington, who historian Jeffrey Ostler argues were then prosecuting a war of genocidal intent against Indigenous people of the Ohio Valley. In his virulent propaganda during that war, Brackenridge openly mocked Knox and Washington as weak and inept, sharply criticizing them for negotiating with Native people and for failing accomplish an extermination.

In today's terminology, the decades-long anti-indigenous propaganda of Hugh Henry Brackenridge might be characterized as having advocated "genocide" or an "ethnic cleansing" of western Pennsylvania. Such terms, however, raise definitional and other issues that are beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, whether those terms are proper descriptions of what Brackenridge sought to accomplish is a question for which an answer is overdue.

⁵⁵ Ellis, *After the Revolution*, 90; Marder, *Hugh Henry Brackenridge*, 75 ("the American conscience").

About the author

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