

## WORKING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES



### Definitions:

*Primary source:* first-hand source of historical information

*Decipher:* to de-code or make clear

*Biographer:* one who writes the history of a person's life

*Transcription:* the deciphered, or translated, wording of an original handwritten document

### Background

Historians work with original documents, including letters, diaries, journals, drawings, government records, etc. to better understand events and people from the past. These *primary sources* are the most important sources of information about the past because it comes from people closest to the event. One early Conrad Weiser biographer, Paul A.W. Wallace, made full use of the hundreds of letters written by Conrad Weiser to provide a detailed account of Weiser's interesting life. We also learn a great deal about early relations between the Pennsylvania colonists and the Indians from these primary sources.

The first step toward understanding these written accounts is to decipher, or correctly read, the handwriting from the past-- no easy feat when looking at the cursive writing used two hundred years ago. The following pages contain several original handwritten documents, **often with misspelled words**, together with transcriptions of the documents. There is also a complete typed account of a treaty, transcribed from the Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania. Use the questions below for discussion and a transcribing activity.

1. Letter to "Honoured Sir," February 20, 1750

- a. Decipher the words in this letter, then compare to the corrected transcription.
- b. Where was Weiser going, and where did he stop?
- c. As a judge, what complaint did he look into? What did Weiser suspect Robert Hunter, the father, really want to do?

Honored Sir

In my last Journey to Cumberland I was stopt at paxton in lancaster County, because for a-  
Complaint made to me /as to a magistrate/ against one John Toby a Nonticook Indian. for ravaging or  
attempted to ravage a girl of about Eight years of age. the narative of my proceedings are hereby sent. also  
a Copy of a letter I send to the Nonticook Indians at Wayomock & wereabout with a streng of Wampum, I  
have ben under great Concern about the affair. I had sent for Mr. Foster the next Magistrate but the Roads  
being so bad he Could not Come till most night. after I had Comitted the Indian. I omitted in my narative.  
that after the Indian was Comitted Mrs. Armstrong the wife of Mr. James Armstrong Came to John Harris at  
my request to her and to the mother of the child and to Elisabeth Bethy I gave it in Charge upon their oath to  
Examine the Child, and to make report unto me in what Condition the Child was in, and whether or no they  
thought that the Indian had the Carnal Knowledge of the Childs Body. they made joint report that the Child  
was like to do well, and that they were assured the Indian had not the Carnal Knowledge of the Childs Body.  
Whether in this Case or in the rest of my proceedings I did right or wrong I humble submit to your Honors  
Judgement being well assured that I acted to the best of my Knowledge I must also Inform your Honor that  
Robert Hunter the father of the Child would not be bound to prosecute the said Indian for his Crim, pleading  
he was a very poor man and could not aford to go to Courts. and in truth he is a very poor man, in my  
opinion he seamed rather inclined to do himself Justice in taking revange on the Indian

I am

Heidleberg in Lancaster  
County February the 20  
1750

Honoured Sir  
your very obedient and  
humble Servant  
Conrad Weiser

2. Letter to Governor William Denny, November 24, 1756, addressed “Honoured Sir.”

Definitions:

commission: a certificate granting military rank and authority. [“The soldier was honored to received his lieutenant’s commission from the governor.”]

- a. Decipher the words in this letter, and compare to the corrected transcription.
- b. In this letter, Conrad Weiser describes his feelings about a recent meeting he has held with the Indians. What are those feelings?
- c. Weiser also makes a request in the letter. Can you figure out what he is requesting that the governor and his commissioners (governmental leaders) do?

Honoured Sir

last night I arrived here Much fatigued both in mind and body, these Irregular people I had to deal with have tired me Sufficiently I wish I Could be quite free from any Busness relating Indian affairs, I have inclosed, Send your Honour a Copy of my proceedings of which I hope you will approve , and If judged proper to lay it before the Comissioners that they may be the reason why I bought the Horse and gun Lieutenant Engel is not at all inclinable to know throw up his Comission, he got an English Clerk to write a petition for him to your Honour and by mistake or otherways the words were chanced, I must beg that your Honour will Continue him, he is a good officer in my Judgement. I hurried my Son Samuel down to get pay for myself and my Company from the gentlemen the Comissioners, before all the money is Expended again I pray that your Honor will see the field officers Salary now Setled and paid.

I am

Reading Novbr the  
24. 1756

Honoured Sir

your very obedient & hbl Servant  
Conrad Weiser

(on cover)

24 November 1756  
Conrad Weiser  
Escorting Teedyuscung

To  
the Honourable  
William Denny Esquire  
Governour of the Province of Pennsylvania  
in  
Philadelphia

3. Letter from Conrad Weiser addressed to “Sir”, March the 18th
- Decipher the words in this letter, and compare to the corrected transcription.
  - The letter is written during the French and Indian war, when Indians fighting for the French were attacking many of the British forts and villages. What is Weiser reporting on? (Use a dictionary to look up any unfamiliar military terms, like garrison and bateaux.)

March the 18 at two of the  
Clock in the afternoon 1760

Sir

A man from tulpehockin named Jacob Gruninger just now left me. haveing Informed me that last night news was brought to Valatine Herokleroad’s now Isacc Meyers house from paxton, that the Indians had Surprised and attacked our Battoe men, between fort augusta and Hunters Mill but no further particulars were told-the same news bringer also Said that the Indians had Surprized and taken a fort between Rayston and loyalHanin. and Carried off the Garrison prisoners I cant account for the truth of this news, but by what I heard before and Samy told me the Indian are tumultious and not at all pleased with fort augusta, and I hear paxton people carris up a great deal of Rum and sell it to the Indians privatly. I thought fit to acquaint with this news, all tho you perhaps Know more of it then I. you may Inform the Governor of this. I did not care to trouble his Honor with news that Comes to me, where no foundation is contained in

I am

Sir  
yours to Serve  
Conrad Weiser

Richard Peters Esquire

(on the cover)

March 1760  
Conrad Weiser  
rised by Sammy 22d

To

Richard Peters Esquire  
Secretary of the Government  
in Philadelphia

Per favor of Mr. Benjamen Lightfoot

Teacher Notes

1. The first letter is Weiser’s initial report of his investigation of a possible attack of a young girl by an Indian at Paxton, near Harrisburg. This kind of work by Weiser was essential to preventing vigilante

“justice” or race riots from occurring on the frontier, where there were few sheriffs and no police or military for protection.

2. The second letter describes Conrad Weiser’s tiring with Indian affairs, and then makes a request that Lieutenant Engel, a soldier of whom Weiser thinks very highly, be kept on as a lieutenant.

3. The third letter is a report written shortly after a messenger arrived at Conrad Weiser’s. The report described a recent attack by French-backed Indians on a contingent of English soldiers in boats (bateaux are flat bottomed boats, possibly positioned strategically along the Susquehanna River) in the area near Paxton (now Harrisburg area). It also provides information from Weiser’s son Sammy about the increasing hostility of the Indians, and reports on colonists who are supplying Indians in the area with rum.

[corrected transcription]

March the 18 at two of the  
Clock in the afternoon 1760

Sir

A man from Tulpehocken named Jacob Gruninger just now left me, having informed me that last night news was brought to Valentine Heroklelroad's [sic], now Isaac Meyer's house, from Paxton, that the Indians had surprised and attacked our bateaux men between Fort Augusta and Hunter's Mill, but no further particulars were told. The same news-bringer also said that the Indians had surprised and taken a fort between Rayston and Loyal Hanin [sic] and carried off the garrison prisoners. I can't account for the truth of this news, but by what I heard before and Sammy told me, the Indians are tumultuous and not at all pleased with Fort Augusta, and I hear Paxton people carry a great deal of rum and sell it to the Indians privately. I thought fit to acquaint [you] with this news, although you perhaps know more of it than I. You may inform the governor of this. I did not care to trouble His Honor with news that comes to me, where no foundation is contained in.

I am

Sir  
yours to Serve,  
Conrad Weier

[written to Richard Peters, Esq., Secretary of the Government in Philadelphia]

[corrected transcription]

Honored Sir

In my last Journey to Cumberland I was stopped at Paxton in Lancaster County, because for a - complaint made to me, as to a magistrate [judge], against one John Toby a Nanticoke Indian for ravaging or attempting to ravage a girl of about eight years of age. The narrative of my proceedings are hereby sent. Also a copy of a letter I am sending to the Nanticoke Indians at Wyoming & whereabouts with a string of wampum. I have been under great concern about the affair. I had sent for Mr. Foster the next magistrate but the roads being so bad he could not come till almost night, after I had committed [jailed] the Indian. I omitted

in my narrative that after the Indian was committed, Mrs. Armstrong the wife of Mr. James Armstrong came to John Harris at my request to her and to the mother of the child and to Elisabeth Bethy. I gave it in charge upon their oath to examine the child, and to make [a] report unto me in what condition the child was in, and whether or not they thought that the Indian had the carnal knowledge of the child's body. They made a joint report that the child was like to do well, and that they were assured the Indian had not the carnal knowledge of the child's body. Whether in this case or in the rest of my proceedings I did right or wrong, I humble submit to your Honor's judgement, being well assured that I acted to the best of my knowledge. I must also Inform your Honor that Robert Hunter, the father of the child, would not be bound to prosecute the said Indian for his crime, pleading he was a very poor man and could not afford to go to courts. And in truth he is a very poor man, [but] in my opinion he seemed rather inclined to do himself justice in taking revenge on the Indian.

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Honoured Sir  
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Conrad Weiser

[corrected transcription]

Honoured Sir

Last night I arrived here much fatigued both in mind and body. These irregular people I had to deal with have tired me sufficiently. I wish I could be quite free from any business relating [to] Indian affairs. I have enclosed, send your Honour a copy of my proceedings of which I hope you will approve, and if judged proper to lay it before the commissioners that they may be the reason why I bought the horse and gun. Lieutenant Engel is not at all inclinable to know throw up his commission, [as] he got an English clerk to write a petition for him to your Honour, and by mistake or otherwise, the words were chanced. I must beg that your Honour will continue him, he is a good officer in my judgment. I hurried my son Samuel down to get pay for myself and my company [of soldiers] from the gentlemen the commissioners, before all the money is expended again. I pray that your Honor will see the field officers salary now settled and paid.

I am

Reading, November the  
24. 1756

Honoured Sir  
your very obedient & humble Servant  
Conrad Weiser

(on cover)

24 November 1756

