

Cynthia J. Van Zandt



## Brothers Among Nations: The Pursuit of Intercultural Alliances in Early America, 1580–1660

### Captain Claiborne's Alliance

Before tobacco, the fur trade not only gave Virginia its first major export product but also shaped many intercultural relations for the first thirty years of the colony's history, peaking in the 1630s. Indeed, throughout eastern North America, the 1630s witnessed a great increase in the fur trade. Native Americans and Europeans increasingly looked for additional or new trading partners as networks spread over greater distances and in new directions. Every trade relationship was evaluated according to its benefits to individual traders and its impacts on political and cultural affairs. In seventeenth-century North America, the fur trade at times provided the nexus for remarkable kinds of intercultural cooperation. In the end the promise of these alliances seldom lasted, but the short-lived nature of many of them was not necessarily apparent to anyone in the early seventeenth century.

The shifting web of alliances spanning eastern North America made it difficult for anyone at the time to foresee which ones would have the greatest staying power. What they were able to see was only that each new partnership had the potential to affect an entire sequence of other relationships. As it turned out, the fact that European settlements changed so dramatically in the 1630s meant that European power dynamics often interfered in otherwise flourishing intercultural connections.

The cultural and political landscape of eastern North America began to alter dramatically in the 1630s with alliance-changing shifts in several regions. The new colonies of Massachusetts Bay, New Haven, Maryland, and New Sweden appeared on the scene, and colonial populations increased and spread out. Any alteration in the network also invariably threatened a change in political power dynamics, and people became particularly alert to the impact of shifting relations as the movement of peoples accelerated and the fur trade expanded. In other words, intercultural relationships had to survive not only the constant challenge of cultural misunderstanding, but also the aggressions of other parties threatened by the new alliance. . . .

From *Brothers Among Nations: The Pursuit of Intercultural Alliances in Early America* by Cynthia J. Van Zandt, (Oxford University Press, 2008). Copyright © 2008 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press (USA).

In the 1630s the Chesapeake became the center of an extraordinary intercultural alliance organized around the fur trade. The Susquehannocks had long been looking for a reliable European trading ally and found one in an English colonist named William Claiborne. . . .

The Susquehannock–Claiborne alliance was extraordinarily influential, and its impact had both geographical and temporal dimensions. Geographically, the Susquehannock–Claiborne connection and its demise affected people and events from the Chesapeake to Iroquoia. Temporally, its effects lingered throughout the first half of the century.

The strategies that both parties used to create the alliance demonstrate the ways in which power and advantage shifted fluidly between Indians and Europeans in the 1630s. Moreover, the Susquehannock–Claiborne association had far-reaching consequences for other peoples from the Chesapeake to Iroquoia, and its disruption by Maryland at the end of the decade transferred the Susquehannocks' attention more fully to the mid-Atlantic and the people who lived there. . . .

In the early 1630s, however, the Susquehannocks looked with considerable interest at the English settlements in the Chesapeake, and William Claiborne helped to persuade them that they had finally found a willing and reliable European ally. To understand why such a collaborative effort seemed so beneficial to each side, we need to understand several events that took place in the 1610s and 1620s; indeed, the Susquehannocks' willingness to ally with Claiborne had everything to do with their relationship with the Five Nations or Haudenosaunee. Part of the Susquehannocks' Haudenosaunee strategy was to develop several other alliance configurations in the years before they agreed to one with Claiborne.

Moreover, Claiborne's willingness to ally with the Susquehannocks and the readiness of the Virginia governor and his council to allow it had much to do with the collapse of the Powhatan–English alliance. And in the midst of these shifting Susquehannock and English alignments, Dutch and Swedish colonizing activities helped to create the circumstances that shaped the beginning and the end of the Susquehannock–Claiborne alliance.

In some ways, the Englishman who had played a crucial role in establishing the earlier Powhatan–English alliance also helped to lay the groundwork for a partnership between Virginia colonists and the Susquehannocks. Indeed, before Pocahontas came to call Captain John Smith "father," Smith had spent considerable time exploring the area to the north of Jamestown. . . .

Smith first met a group of Susquehannocks in the summer of 1608, and he reported that they were quite willing to establish a coalition with the Jamestown English. Although much has been made of the report that Smith was awestruck by the Susquehannocks' powerful stature—indeed, he portrayed them as giants—and of his claim that they were in awe of and tried to worship him, ultimately the key information he conveyed was that the Susquehannocks were a powerful nation and were willing to ally with the Jamestown English.

However, the English settlers at Jamestown never really followed through on Smith's early contacts with the Susquehannocks, in part because of the

great stresses of Jamestown's early years and in part because of their careful monitoring of their connection with the powerful Powhatans. But over the years English colonists remembered the Susquehannocks and kept an eye on other Europeans' relations with them. In the twenty years after the first Smith-Susquehannock meeting, the English had few recorded dealings with them. Instead, the Susquehannocks made intermittent contact with French and Dutch colonists priests and traders and chose to pursue alliances alternately with New France and New Netherland.

The Susquehannocks' comparatively widespread contact with Europeans of different ethnicities resulted from their geographical position, which was almost in the center of the array of European colonial settlements on the east coast from the Chesapeake to the Saint Lawrence. It also resulted from two other factors. The first was the Susquehannock nation's size and strength. They were an Iroquoian speaking people and, like the members of the Huron and Haudenosaunee Five Nations confederacies, were more populous and militarily more powerful than most of the Algonquian peoples living near European settlements. The second, which helps to explain why the Susquehannocks had wide-ranging contacts with Europeans, was the fact that their network of alliances and enemies coincided in the early seventeenth century with the spread of European colonial settlement. For instance the Susquehannocks' ongoing enmity with members of the Five Nations Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee especially the Mohawks and the Senecas, was directly responsible for the Susquehannocks' choices in their dealings with French, Dutch, Swedish, and English colonists and traders. Furthermore, the changing nature of the Susquehannock-Five Nations rivalries also affected the Susquehannocks' relations with Algonquian peoples throughout the eastern seaboard. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the Susquehannocks played a crucial role, culturally, politically, and geographically, between Algonquians, Iroquoians, and Europeans. . . .

Because they were within relatively easy reach of Dutch and French colonial settlements, the Susquehannocks turned their attention first to them. In the summer of 1615 Samuel de Champlain first learned that the Susquehannocks could be impressive allies. That August, Champlain and Huron warriors were gathering their resources in order to attack the Onondagas. While they were still engaged in preparations, the Hurons received news from their allies, the Susquehannocks, who sent word that they would provide five hundred men to fight with the Hurons and Champlain against the Onondagas and that they desired friendship and an alliance with the French. The Susquehannocks also explained to the French that the Five Nations made war on them periodically and received assistance from the Dutch.

For the Susquehannocks to join in the upcoming strike against the Onondagas would satisfy two important requirements of alliance. First, it would fulfill their obligations to their existing Huron allies. Second, it would enable the Susquehannocks to extend their alliance networks to include Samuel de Champlain and the French newcomers. Champlain and his men must have seemed ideal new allies to the Susquehannocks because they already had sided with the Hurons against the Five Nations Iroquois and could

provide both significant military assistance and new trade goods. In the end, the Susquehannocks apparently did not arrive in time for the attack on the Onondagas, but their offer is revealing of how Native American alliance and information networks functioned in the early colonial era and demonstrates that the Susquehannocks were well aware of colonial developments from Iroquoia to the Chesapeake Bay. . . .

Claiborne came to Virginia about five years after the Susquehannocks offered to fight with the Hurons and Champlain's forces against the Onondagas. When he arrived in the colony in 1621, he came with an appointment from James I as the colony's surveyor. Significantly, he came with good connections in the Virginia Company and at court and would use them both in the colony and in England in order to set up an extraordinary intercultural trade venture. It is also noteworthy that Claiborne arrived in Virginia on the eve of the final collapse of the Powhatan-English alliance. This too would bring important consequences for Claiborne's trading activities only a few years later.

In the period leading up to the 1622 Powhatan attack, English colonial policy increasingly attempted to undermine the Powhatan paramount chiefdom. Colonial officials sought every means they could to drive a wedge between the Powhatans and their allied nations. Recognizing that Wahunsunacock and his successor, Opechancanough, had the strongest hold on member nations that were geographically closest to the Powhatans, English colonial leaders focused on luring the more distant member nations away from the Powhatan alliance altogether. Although English efforts before 1622 were never completely successful at breaking up the Powhatan paramount chiefdom, the policy had the effect of increasing the degree of attention English colonial leaders paid to the areas farther from the James River.

The Powhatans' 1622 surprise attack did not succeed in destroying the colony of Virginia. However, it did stop English colonial expansion to the west for the foreseeable future, with the additional consequence of prompting English colonists working in intercultural trade to look to the northeast and the Chesapeake Bay as the best route for expansion. They discovered a flourishing exchange there. Indeed, John Pory reported that nearly a hundred European traders were active in the Chesapeake Bay intercultural commerce in the early 1620, William Claiborne was one of those who quickly saw the promise of joining the English traders' push to the north.

Having survived the 1622 Powhatan attack, Claiborne found his personal circumstances in the colony steadily improving in several ways. In the aftermath of the attack James I rescinded the Virginia Company's charter and made Virginia the first English royal colony in North America. The new imperial structure meant changes in Jamestown, and Claiborne was appointed a member of the new Governor's Council and received additional land grants as partial payment for his new office. These land grants were in addition to the two hundred acres he had received in partial payment of his services as colony surveyor; his first grants were for lands on the eastern shore.

Moreover, Claiborne also had land on the western shore at Kecoughtan, which, by the early 1630s, he was able to use as an auxiliary base for his trading

enterprise. Before then, however, his trade path toward the Susquehannocks was cleared as he obtained greater public power in Virginia and another colonial office. In 1625 he became secretary of the colony and received trading licenses as a result of his new office. William Claiborne was well positioned to move into the fur trade.

The following year Claiborne began making tangible moves toward developing trade contacts to the north, and the Susquehannocks began to focus their alliance-seeking efforts farther south than in previous years. Thus, they began to move toward each other in search of new intercultural allies. Armed with his new trading licenses, Claiborne set out on an exploratory trip to the Chesapeake Bay. He stopped to check on his property at Accomack on the way, where he discovered that squatters had taken up residence. Instead of having them either arrested or evicted, Claiborne realized that they might offer him just the additional assistance he would need in developing a thriving trade on the Chesapeake Bay if he were able to find suitable Native American trading partners. Thus Claiborne allowed the squatters to stay at Accomack. Within five years they would move to form a new community and provide crucial support for the Virginia side of the Claiborne-Susquehannock trade relationship.

Also in 1626, very near the time that Claiborne was exploring the possibilities for a trade on the Chesapeake Bay, a delegation of Susquehannocks explored the possibilities for a trade alliance with the colonists at the new Dutch West India Company colony of New Netherland. Although Dutch traders and explorers had been active in North America since the first decade of the seventeenth century, it was not until the 1620s that a Dutch colony was attempted under the sponsorship of the West India Company. . . .

In the end, the Dutch-Susquehannock alliance did not flourish in 1626 or 1627. The timing was not right for New Netherland's colonial officials. Little did they know it, but they needed to act quickly to secure a place as the Susquehannocks' premier European ally. They had lost a valuable opportunity, one with ramifications beyond a single trading season. Soon the Susquehannocks found themselves entertaining a proposition from a different European ally. The following year William Claiborne received a trading license from Virginia. He was just in time.

Claiborne pursued his hopes of moving further into the fur trade again the next year, in 1628, when he sailed to the Chesapeake on an exploratory voyage. He saw real opportunities for finding a niche in the intercultural fur exchange in Virginia's northern reaches because New Netherland abandoned Fort Nassau on the Delaware in 1628, choosing for the moment to concentrate its resources on building up the colony's Manhattan center. As the Dutch pulled back to the Hudson, Claiborne began lining up the necessary colonial approvals to press outward.

On January 31, 1629/1630, Virginia's governor and council granted Claiborne a commission to trade with the Susquehannocks until April 1. This was quite a limited trading license, though not an unusual one. The fur trading season would eventually stretch from March to June each year. In the Chesapeake Bay region, early English accounts reported that most Indian nations

there were not yet accustomed to trading furs each year, and so the "trading season" was not yet a standard intercultural market period. Claiborne's 1629 license may also have been intentionally brief, intended to give him only enough time to prove whether such a venture was likely to succeed.

Having secured a trading license from Virginia and faced with the news that the Dutch settlement on the Delaware was no longer a competitor, William Claiborne established his first base in the Chesapeake region. He selected a small island in the north of the bay, near the mouth of the Susquehanna River, and called it Palmer's Island. This was an ideal preliminary meeting place for Claiborne's initial negotiations with the Susquehannocks. Ultimately, it was not large enough to support a full-time settlement, with all of the necessary supplies for trade and defense, but it was a strategic, neutral meeting ground, and Claiborne made sure he secured Palmer's Island from the outset.

Later the same year, several events affected intercultural alliances in the Chesapeake. The first was the threat of a new colony. After New Netherland pulled away from its settlement on the Delaware (at least temporarily), another English venturer appeared on the scene. Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore, stopped in Jamestown after having visited Newfoundland, where he had originally intended to establish a haven for English Catholics. Lord Baltimore found the Chesapeake more inviting, and his visit threw the Virginia colonists into an uproar.

Panicking at the thought that Baltimore might try to move in on their colony, Virginia's leaders quickly sent William Claiborne to England to intervene on the colony's behalf and prevent Baltimore from creating another English Chesapeake plantation. Having survived a catastrophic Powhatan attack, epidemic disease, and years of malnutrition and economic failure, Virginia was finally operating on steadier footing. Yet it now appeared endangered from an entirely new direction: It was under threat from an English lord and a Roman Catholic, one with long-standing connections at court.

If William Claiborne seemed to Virginia's leaders to be an ideal choice to plead their case back home in England, the mission provided him with the perfect opportunity to put the financial elements of his trading plan into place. In this, Claiborne was remarkably like Isaac Allerton, who at nearly the same time was working to secure a new patent for Plymouth Colony while expanding his own trade contacts and arranging for additional financing for his growing ventures. Claiborne did much the same thing in 1629. He argued against Baltimore's plans and put forward Virginia's primacy to the region. However, while in England on behalf of the Virginia Colony, he also laid the foundations for his own expansion plan.

With an eye toward cornering the best market on the eastern seaboard south of the Saint Lawrence, Claiborne approached a firm of English investors with experience in speculating in North American trade. He established a partnership with William Cloberry and partners. Cloberry had already invested in the North American fur trade and had connections with the Kirk brothers, who seized Quebec from New France and held it as an English colony for two years. Accordingly, Cloberry knew how lucrative the North American fur trade could be; he needed only to be persuaded that the Chesapeake could offer

a reliable source of high-quality furs. In addition, he evidently had already begun exploring that option because he had financed a trading mission in the Chesapeake under the leadership of Henry Fleet.

Claiborne, however, proposed a larger and longer-term venture and suggested using Kent Island as the group's main trading base. Kent Island was further south than Palmer's Island, but it was larger and more easily defended and would allow for easy access of trade boats and supplies. Using both islands would give Claiborne and his partners ready access to one of the eastern seaboard's most widely used routes into the interior, where the best furs were found. Furthermore, this area was far enough from New France to enable English traders to deal directly with Native American traders, especially if Claiborne could establish a lasting alliance with the Susquehannocks. Cloberry and his partners were swayed, and Claiborne secured the financing he needed. In typical seventeenth-century English entrepreneurial fashion, he ventured his person in the scheme, and Cloberry and the other England-based partners would open their purses.

Meanwhile, back in the colony of Virginia, relations with Algonquians near English settlements continued to worsen. In October the House of Burgesses called for regular military expeditions against the Pamunkeys and other Algonquians who were hostile to the colony and declared that the settlement would organize three strikes against them every year, one in November, one in March, and one in July. The relentless pace of these infrequent but regular attacks was designed to break the Indians once and for all, but it did not signal the end of Virginia's willingness to form alliances with native peoples.

While the new policy showed the hardening attitudes of Virginia's colonists toward many of the Algonquians who lived closest to them (and certainly toward any who had participated in the 1622 attack), it also reinforced the colony's shift in geographical emphasis. Intercultural alliances, particularly for trading purposes, were still of interest to Virginia's leaders, but only with native peoples who lived well beyond the limits of English settlement. As William Claiborne would soon show, the Susquehannocks would fit that bill.

Claiborne finally put all of the elements of his plan together in 1631, and for the next five years he based an interracial trading community on two islands in the Chesapeake Bay and developed a flourishing alliance with the powerful Susquehannocks, whose capital town lay just to the north of the bay on the Susquehanna River. Having persuaded his new English partners that Kent Island was an ideal location for an ongoing fur-trading enterprise in the Chesapeake Bay region, Claiborne returned to the Chesapeake in 1631 and settled Kent Island.

By October the Kent Island settlement had the rough outlines of a defensible colonial town, with a large, timber-framed house and several thatched-roof huts, all surrounded by palisades and four mounted guns. Claiborne's design was typical of early colonial settlements, especially their forts and trading posts. He had buildings in which to store his merchandise and to house and support his colonists, and he considered the importance of defending the community from the outset. Although Claiborne was probably not thinking in these terms, his Kent Island settlement would have looked familiar to the

Susquehannocks, whose reputation as a fearsome, powerful nation stemmed not only from their fighting expertise but also from the security of their well-defended and palisaded town.

From 1631 until 1638 Kent Island was the center of Claiborne's enterprise and was closely associated with him and his allies, the Susquehannocks. In 1631 he moved quickly to secure his position in the trade because he soon learned that Dutch traders were back in the region and had established a new settlement in the Delaware River valley in April. The new trading post was called Swaanendael, and Claiborne seems to have decided to neutralize Dutch competition by accommodating it.

In 1631 he received a commission from Virginia governor John Harvey to trade with the Dutch. In the end, Swaanendael did not last; conflict over a stolen tin coat of arms escalated in the chasm of intercultural misunderstanding, and neighboring Indians destroyed the settlement in retaliation for Dutch handling of the incident. Nevertheless, Claiborne knew that Dutch interest in the area and its native peoples would not end with Swaanendael's destruction; his best strategy to overcome this competition was to move quickly and claim a location where he could stay in regular contact with his native allies.

Thus in August the first ship supplied by Cloberry and Company, the *Africa*, arrived in the Chesapeake for Claiborne to use. After stopping first at Claiborne's plantation at Kecoughtan, the *Africa* sailed on into the Chesapeake Bay, and Claiborne and his crew went on to the Susquehannocks to trade. For the next several years, Claiborne's Kent Island crew maintained a successful alliance with the Susquehannocks, one that was quite lucrative for Claiborne but also appealed to Susquehannock interests. Moreover, the Susquehannocks' understanding of their alliance with Claiborne included a broad array of obligations. After Claiborne's community came under threat from Baltimore's new English colony in 1635, the Susquehannocks continued to fulfill their obligations to Claiborne's men for many years, long after Claiborne himself had moved back south of the Chesapeake Bay. But that came later. In the interim, the Susquehannock-Claiborne association had consequences for other Indian nations in the region.

When the Susquehannocks eventually formed their alliance with William Claiborne, various Indian nations around the Chesapeake felt the direct results of the shift in the Susquehannocks' attention. Claiborne and other English traders working with him established Kent Island and Palmer's Island in the Chesapeake Bay as fur-trading centers, which were well within reach of the Susquehannocks' major town at the mouth of the Susquehannock River, where it emptied into the bay. However, Claiborne's development of the trading centers at Kent and Palmer's islands had severe consequences for Indian nations on the upper eastern shore because these hubs encouraged the Susquehannocks to move farther south. Algonquians on the upper eastern shore found themselves largely unable to slow the advancing Susquehannocks.

The much more powerful Susquehannocks pushed the upper Eastern Shore Algonquians south from their early-seventeenth-century homelands into the Nanticokes' territory. They also cultivated a client relationship with the Algonquian Tockwogs in the early seventeenth century, in which

the Tockwogs were subordinate to the Susquehannocks. In addition, the Susquehannocks and the Piscataways developed a strong rivalry, and Susquehannockwarriors raided Piscataway communities.

In much the same way that European colonies were gradually expanding along the Atlantic seaboard during the first three decades of the seventeenth century, so too were several Indian nations. Native peoples, such as the Susquehannocks, who were not devastated by disease epidemics often responded to the changing circumstances by expanding their power base and sometimes by moving into new territories. In other words, the Susquehannocks' movements and their alliance with William Claiborne reshaped native, European, and intercultural politics throughout the region. As we have seen, they were by no means the only Indian nation to expand in this way, nor were they the only one to have such a wide-ranging impact both culturally and geographically. But they were one of the most important players on the North American Atlantic seaboard during the first half of the seventeenth century, and their significance has often been underestimated, both at the time and by later generations of historians.

In the seventeenth century Lord Baltimore and his colonial officials were among those Europeans who failed to understand the strength and range of the Susquehannocks' influence. At first Baltimore truly did not comprehend the value of Claiborne's alliance with the Susquehannocks. Perhaps he believed that it was a relatively unimportant arrangement through which Claiborne and his London partners acquired North American furs.

Although there is little surviving evidence to tell us exactly what Calvert thought about Claiborne's affiliation with the Susquehannocks, the actions of Maryland Colony officials can explain a great deal because, regardless of how Calvert perceived the relationship, the actions of his colonists and colonial officials clearly indicate that they did not understand the larger North American context of alliances into which they had just stumbled.

Maryland's insistence that the Calverts claimed the entire region of the new colony, including Claiborne's island trading bases, failed to give credit to Claiborne's reasonable claims to the area even under English standards. Even more important, it failed to recognize the webs of alliances that already crisscrossed the area and paid no heed at all to the American conventions of diplomacy that governed them. Maryland's response to the Susquehannock-Claiborne alliance is a clear example of the fact that it took actual North American experience and knowledge for Europeans to fully understand the necessity of allying with powerful Indian nations or at least to gain a more realistic appreciation of which Indian nations were the most powerful. This was true despite the fact that many colonial promoters expected some degree of alliance formation. It was one thing to advocate the need to understand and make alliances with native peoples; it was quite another to recognize the real thing when faced with Indian peoples themselves.

The reality was often more extensive and more essential than even the Europeans' theories of colonization and trade asserted. In the case of the Susquehannock-Claiborne alliance of the 1630s, Lord Baltimore also obviously failed to understand that his actions against Claiborne would have

consequences that would extend well beyond European control. Instead, Baltimore based his determination more on a sense of his power in England and in relation to colonists in Virginia. Nevertheless, it was a bad decision. As a result, his colony faced war with the Susquehannocks for nearly two more decades, and the legacy of those early years of conflict would reverberate throughout the 1670s.

The experiment at Kent Island did not fail because English alliances with native peoples collapsed. They did not. The Susquehannock-Claiborne alliance ended after fewer than ten years because of intra-English competition for favored status with the Susquehannocks. In the end, Kent Island could not survive the failure of competing English colonial interests to set aside their opposing claims. It was not an intercultural breakdown.

On the contrary, the Susquehannock-Claiborne alliance was extraordinarily successful. In the early seventeenth century, rivalries between Europeans, even those from the same general culture, played as important a role in shaping North America as rivalries between cultures did. In the context of early seventeenth-century North America the offer of alliance could come from any direction, and any new collaborative effort could be immediately challenged by Europeans or Native Americans who were threatened by the new alignment of interests.

The Susquehannocks' search for a reliable European ally and trading partner in the 1620s and 1630s was twice thwarted by internal European power struggles. First, the proposed Susquehannock-Dutch alliance was prevented from becoming more firmly established in 1626, a fact that enabled Claiborne to push himself as the Susquehannocks' primary European ally. Ten years later, intra-European conflict impeded the Susquehannocks again when Lord Baltimore forced Claiborne to abandon his Kent and Palmer's islands trading posts.

In both instances, these power struggles rather than any cultural differences between Indians and European allies were the reason intercultural alliances failed. Yet, to a significant degree, they were unintended consequences of Europeans' preoccupations with their own rivalries and interests. When Europeans focused their attention on mapping other European rivals without paying adequate notice to the webs of Native American connections, the effects could be extremely disruptive for Indians and European colonists alike. . . .

