

When Does a Settler Become an Ancient Settler?

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The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the historical category of settler in relation to the field of settler colonial studies (SCS). Such reflection also requires considering the category of native as its counterpart and nominal antagonist, of course. As the Ugandan scholar of colonialism Mahmood Mamdani writes, “Settlers and natives belong together. You cannot have one without the other, for it is the relationship between them that makes one a settler and the other a native.” Within the broader field of colonial studies, including SCS, these binary categories of settler and native are often applied to historical (and contemporary) populations in a matter-of-fact way. Yet as Mamdani and his later interlocutors have pointed out, making such distinctions can be far from straightforward in practice (Mamdani 1998, Mamdani 2020).

Indeed, as Yuval Evri and Hagar Kotef argue in a recent essay responding to Mamdani, such complications of the settler-native binary raise difficult questions about concepts and claims that are central to SCS. If the key distinction between settler and native isn’t “strictly racial,” but rather “a geographical binary, between those who were in the land and those who came to it from outside (invaded),” how does one make sense of the various histories and genealogies of being in the land (and being invaded) alongside the historical mutability of the statuses of insider and outsider? What does it mean if “a group of people can hold, at different historical moments (and sometimes simultaneously), the positions of both settler and native”? (Evri and Kotef, 2022).

Here I would like to consider the example of a category of settlers in British America who came to be known variously as “ancient settlers,” “ancient planters,” and “old settlers.” These overlapping sets of terms all referred to a class of settlers who had some claim to precedence within a particular colony or settlement because they (or their direct ancestors) belonged to the first, original, and/or founding population of settlers in that place. “Ancient” in this respect might be read to mean merely “(very) old,” but it could also suggest a kind of originary and special status that derived from its “antique” character, so to speak. In a sense, these settlers were akin to being “native” colonizers, and their descendants, natives of and to the colony, often inherited or claimed this status, as well. The modifier ancient also points to the significance time and memory had in colonizing populations’ conceptions of themselves. Patrick Wolfe may have been right that settler colonialism is “a structure[,] not an event,” but these actors understood colonization as a persistent historical “structure” operating through time as well as the product of a specific originary “event” situated in the time of the past (Wolfe 2006, 388). Even so, the explicit link to the (distant) past also suggested a sense of archaism. To be



“ancient” implied that these first settlers had been succeeded not only by their own native-born descendants but also by latecomers who were somehow distinct from them. There was a suggestion that these later arrivals, whatever their origins, ought to show some deference if not gratitude to this cohort of hardy pioneers who established the foundation for the more stable and successful settlement that followed.

This distinction between generations of settlers is something that often seems to be missing in my (admittedly selective) readings in SCS. There, as in much other theorization about colonies, settler colonies are often presumed to originate at a single moment from a single transplanted national group and develop in a linear, organic fashion from that point. In Wolfe’s formulation of SCS, the particular conditions at the founding “event” of a colony are explicitly considered to be less significant than the systematic processes of elimination and replacement that form the general “structure” of settler colonialism thereafter. Establishing the basic oppositional categories of settler and native appears to be more fundamental to understanding the colonial process than is specifying who those settlers and natives actually were or how they came to acquire those statuses in the first place.

By contrast, the mainstream historiography of colonial North America typically places great emphasis on the importance of founding eras and populations and on the subsequent development of distinctive creole colonial cultures and settler societies over time. In particular, one of the key concepts for characterizing colonial cultural formation is that of the “charter group” (or, relatedly, “charter generation”), which refers to the first group of migrants to a new colony and their ability to determine the norms and institutions to which later groups must adapt themselves (Porter 1965; Higham 1968; Breen 1985; Berlin 1996). This is a useful concept in certain respects, but (like SCS) it tends to assume a linear and singular process of cultural transfer and development beginning with an influential original group of settlers who were sharply distinguished from native populations as well as from later “immigrants.” Yet, empirically speaking (and imperially speaking), many colonial societies had complex, plural origins in which categorizations of settler and native were not always so simple or so straightforward.

Consider, for example, the descendants of the Finns and Swedes who addressed Pennsylvania’s provincial assembly in 1709. In their petition they complained about the way the leading proprietary official in the colony, James Logan, had “fraudulently” taken away their patents and forced them to pay higher quitrents. They identified themselves as “we the Sweeds, antient Setlers (sic?) and first inhabitants of this Province,” emphasizing the fact that their settlement of the Delaware Valley preceded the founding of Pennsylvania itself (1681). The petitioners traced their ancestry back over half a century to the colony of New Sweden (1638-1655), which had been established before William Penn was born. Their presence along the river also antedated the previous English colonial regime that had governed



the European settlers along the river (New York: 1664-1673; 1674-1681) and was contemporaneous to the rival Dutch colonial regime based at Manhattan that eventually conquered them in 1655 (New Netherland: ca. 1624-1654; 1655-1664; 1673-74). By contrast, the mostly British-descended members of the Pennsylvania Assembly who considered their petition were either relative or actual newcomers to the region, even if they may have belonged to that initial privileged group of settler-investors in Pennsylvania known as the “First Adventurers” (Thompson 2013; Thompson 2022).

To be an “ancient settler” in this case was to belong to a class of settlers who possessed land titles that predated those that had been issued and authorized by the current colonial regime. A related term, “ancient planter,” was much more common during the seventeenth century. (Indeed, in Anglophone writing the term planter would remain far more popular than settler during the eighteenth century. The term settler in the sense of “colonist” was used either rarely or not at all until the 1680s, and through the end of the eighteenth century usually referred to people who were in the act of settling “new” lands.) In Virginia, for example, the aggrieved first generation of settlers were already calling themselves “ancient planters” by the mid-1620s, less than twenty years after the colony’s founding (Briefe Declaration 1624). Meanwhile, in 1684, a group of “ancient Swedes” in Pennsylvania prepared an affidavit on William Penn’s behalf to counter Lord Baltimore’s claims along the west side of the Delaware River. There they referred to themselves as the “ancient Planters ... of the Swedish Nation.” Testifying in defense of Penn’s claims as proprietor of Pennsylvania, they asserted that they “did anciently purchase of the Natives the Lands” along the western shore that Lord Baltimore was claiming under his charter for Maryland (Dunlap and Weslager 1967). Indeed, it was their status as “first purchasers” of (ancient) native lands that cemented their status as ancient settlers on this land. Among the later signers of the 1709 petition were these men’s children, who also claimed this status for themselves.

Later, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term “ancient settler” would also be used in the United States to refer to already established settler populations who had held property within “foreign” (colonial) territories that were later incorporated into the USA (such as Louisiana, Illinois, and California). British Canadians also referred to French inhabitants within Canada as “ancient settlers” well into the nineteenth century. In each case, a long-established population possessed some local influence and recognition but did not necessarily (or usually) possess much power. In fact, the claim to “ancient settler” status often seemed to be conditioned by a general state of weakness. These settlers were articulating a rhetorical claim to be a privileged charter group exactly because they had lost the actual capacity to assert that claim against another, more powerful chartered group.

But to claim “ancient settler” status was also to assert that one was not native (and not a Native). These “old settlers” did not want to be overwhelmed by the new settler regime; indeed, they wanted to



be recognized as its original founders even if they had lost whatever claims they may have had to have been its rulers. In order to gain this recognition, they often made exaggerated claims about dominating the people they sometimes called the “ancient inhabitants” of the region, namely the Indians. For example, at the very start of the Finns’ and Swedes’ petition in 1709, they wrote that they had originally settled the province “with great difficulty hazard and loss of severall of our lives” and only later “obtained peace and quietnes with the Indians.” Since then, they had lived under “divers sorts of governments . . . peaceably and quietly unmolested, enjoying our lands and estates, which we first settled under our own government.” In similar appeals before and after, “the Swedes” would emphasize not only that they had first settled the region but that they had also first pacified the Indians, too. They made such claims despite the fact—or because of the fact—that after a half century of relations with the Lenape of the Delaware River, they were seen as “half Indians, when the English arrived in the year 1682,” as Finnish-Swedish naturalist Pehr Kalm wrote in the mid-1700s (Kalm 1770-1771). (The claim may not have been merely rhetorical—historian Jean Soderlund has speculated that there may have been undocumented intermarriage between Finnish and Swedish men and Lenape women dating back to the seventeenth century (Soderlund 2015, 68).) Moreover, as the affidavit from 1683 made clear, these settlers and their descendants often traced their land titles to purchases they had made directly from the “original owners,” the Lenapes. For generations afterwards, they would claim special “Indian rights” to lands across the region that they traced back to these “ancient” purchases (Thompson 2022).

These colonists made a claim to being the ancient settlers but not the ancient inhabitants of the province. But they also set themselves apart from the British Quakers and other European settlers who were already in the process of overwhelming, assimilating, and (culturally) eliminating them. After initially assisting Penn’s officers in the early years of the new colony, many embittered “ancient Swedes” also turned against the proprietary government that they blamed for their troubles. In order to resist and survive—the key tools of the native in the binary native-settler structure—they had to open up and claim a special space for themselves within the settler category in order to make clear which side of the line they fell.

Here it may be useful to return to Mamdani, who argues in his book *Neither Settler nor Native* (2020), that in both the United States and South Africa, settlers were not defined by “the color of their skin” or “by language, culture, religion, gender, or socioeconomic status . . . nor by the length of residency, immigration status, or even citizenship status.” Rather, what “defined the settler was the law to which she was subject”—the “civil law” of settlers versus the “customary law” of natives (Mamdani 2020, 145-46). The claim to be an “ancient settler” could mean many things, but in practice it was a dual claim to law and land. In an Anglo-American legal system based on precedence as well as precedents, to be recognized as the first rightful possessors of (native) land under Mamdani’s so-called



“civil law” was an important status to have. They may have lacked the power to assert their claims, but they could claim the authority to have the state recognize those claims and to treat them with the respect—and give them the justice—that they were due under the law. To the extent that they were successful it was because, of course, that the law and the state that they were appealing to also depended on those originary acts of dispossession in order to justify themselves. “Native” claimants, by contrast, often had to depend on treaty negotiations, not the courts—international law instead of civil law—and frequently found themselves (and still find themselves) systematically dispossessed as a result.



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