

Reading, PA: Rooted in Peace



Reading Pagoda, photo by Reading RadSport

Conrad Weiser.

The city of Reading, which is the seat of Berks County, Pennsylvania, was founded in 1748, five years after it was initially envisioned and mapped out by William Penn's sons, Thomas and Richard. The city owes much of its early development and history to the diplomatic and peacemaking efforts of a man named Conrad Weiser.

Conrad Weiser (1696-1760) came to the New World in 1710 as teenager, having fled war and pestilence in his native Germany. He, his father and siblings settled in New York's Mohawk Valley where Weiser befriended the Mohawk community of Iroquois, and was soon invited by the Mohawk Chief, Quagnant to live among them, learning their language and customs.

Weiser was married and a father when he came to Pennsylvania in 1725, where he began a farm just outside what is now the city of Reading. During this time he was introduced to Shikellamy, the Oneida Chief. Their friendship led Weiser to act as the sovereign's interpreter to the Pennsylvania colony. While in Pennsylvania, Weiser grew in appreciation of its founder William Penn, who like himself, believed that native land should be bought or traded, and not taken from the original peoples.

Weiser's reputation as a peacemaker led the then governor of the Virginia colony to ask him to make a six-week journey, in the winter of 1737, to broker peace between the Iroquois of the Northeast and the Catawba of Virginia. Ten years later, in 1747, Weiser was called upon again to further the cause of peace, acting as interpreter and representative of the Iroquois, during negotiations between the original inhabitants of the region and the colonies of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia.

After having dedicated much of his life to peace, and working to cultivate friendly relations with local indigenous tribes, after his death in 1760, a representative of the Iroquois

community lamented, “We are at a great loss and sit in darkness...as since his death we cannot so well understand one another.” (Hepler)

Underground Railroads of the Civil War.

Prior to the Civil War and the resultant Proclamation of Emancipation, Berks County had no less than 11 Underground Railroad stops, aiding men, women and children in their quest for freedom from the bondage of slavery. In Reading, the good people of Washington Street Presbyterian Church sheltered and fed fugitive slaves, and outfitted them with less conspicuous northern-style clothing. Moreover, many refugees of slavery were sheltered at Reading’s former Fifth & Washington Streets jailhouse, where they were sheltered and fed at the city’s expense, until they could once again safely continue on their journey.

World War II.

The majority of inhabitants in the Reading area at the time of WWII were of Protestant-German descent. In the years leading up to the war there were conflicting views between Reading’s inhabitants concerning their Jewish neighbors. In a 1927 book review from the Reading Times, author Mr. Francis J. Oppenheimer was described as “a noted authority on Jewish criminality.” In that review of Oppenheimer’s *The New Tyranny*, the Times wrote that the book “strikes a new note in the Jewish issue.” The newspaper also published articles and editorials from local Rabbis, noting that even prior to the US entering the war, public sentiment toward the Jewish community was beginning to change.

In 1936, the Reading Times published the syndicated *Walter Winchell on Broadway* column entitled “My Little Boy.” In it, Winchell wrote about taking his son by the hand in search of a Jewish child who his son and friends had taunted because he was Jewish. Winchell did so, so that his son could apologize. Unable to find the other child, Winchell told his son “I hope you will meet that Jew boy one day, so that you can give him your hand and ask him to forgive you.”

Viet Nam War.

During the Viet Nam War, the young people of Reading, as with much of the country, began to refocus on peace efforts. The city’s focal point and famous landmark was a building called the Pagoda. It was built on Skyline Drive atop Mount Penn in 1908. The residents of the city took great pride in the unique structure of the Pagoda and the surrounding nature it was nestled in. In the summer of 1967 the city discovered a simpler, but decidedly just as important landmark, just below the Pagoda.

A giant thirty-foot, red, white, and blue peace sign had been painted onto the rock face of the mountainside. Once City Hall learned of the painting authorities had it covered over



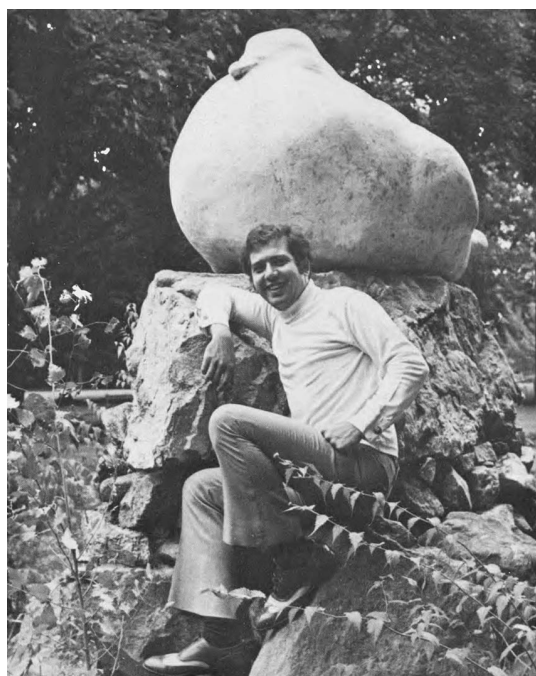
*Mount Penn Peace Rock
(Lenton)*

with black tar. The symbol, now called the Peace Rock, reappeared a few weeks later and has been secretly maintained ever since.

The painter remained a mystery until 2004, when LeRoy G. Levan, a practicing attorney at the time, admitted to Berks Historian George M. Meiser that he and friends on break from college had painted the Peace Rock in protest of the war.

Ramón Lago.

In 1970, Reading was gifted another landmark celebrating peace. Reading's population was increasing because the city was in an economic decline due to a loss of industry, which led to a decreased cost of rent and housing. Many Latin-Americans moved to Reading from costlier places such as New York and Philadelphia. Among those to make Reading their new home was artist, Ramón Lago.



*Renowned Artist and Sculptor,
Ramón Lago (Lenton)*

Lago was born in Cuba in 1947 and emigrated to the United States as a child in his parents' care. He relocated to Reading in 1970 and called it home for the next twenty years. He was so taken with the city's diversity and cultural heritage, that he bequeathed three important pieces of art to the city. First, the *Turtle* Statue in honor of the region's indigenous inhabitants. Second, the *Distelfink* statue to celebrate its Pennsylvania Dutch heritage that came to life in the region. Third, the *Peace Dove* statue that has remained a focal point in Reading's City Park for all to enjoy since 1974. In fact, Lago so loved Reading that even after moving from Reading in 1990, he told his family that, upon his death, he wanted his ashes to be spread in the city. After his death in 2018, friends and family gathered at the city's Gring's Mill Park, where his beloved *Turtle* statue is proudly displayed, and fulfilled his dying wish.

Tyrone Nesby.

More recently, former NBA star Tyrone Nesby, while coaching basketball at Muhlenberg High School, initiated a program called Peaceful Stand. In 2020, he united with Reading Centro Hispánico (Hispanic Center of Reading) and other civic leaders and organizations to bring awareness of implicit bias and discrimination. Peaceful Stand highlighted not only racial discrimination and bias, but also featured speakers with disabilities, as well as representatives of varying



*Student Speaker,
Peaceful Stand, 2020*

backgrounds, from the LGBTQ community to the city's Jewish and Muslim communities.

Challenges.

Today, the city of Reading faces a number of challenges including poverty and crime.

In 2011, Reading was listed as the poorest city in the nation with a poverty rate of 41.3%. That rate has declined over the years to the present rate of 32.7%. However, that current day rate is still nearly three times the national average of 11.4%.

Research shows that crime is linked to poverty. So too is bias and discrimination. In 2021, the FBI released hate crimes statistics for 2020. The report showed that hate crimes in Pennsylvania rose by 80%, and that crimes based on race rose by 96.7%. Data from the Department of Justice show the leading motivators of hate crimes are race and ethnicity, followed by religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Of all the hate crimes reported in Pennsylvania in 2020, 35.8% were against African Americans, 16.05% against other races or ethnicities, 13.8% against Jews, 9.88% against Asian Americans, 4.94% against whites, and another 19.75% attributed to other biases, such as sexual orientation or gender identity.

While these are statewide statistics, a great percentage originate in Reading.

Hate Crime Offenses

Pennsylvania State Police released the following chart regarding hate crimes:

Bias Motivation	2021	2020	% Difference
Race/Ethnicity/Ancestry	190	81	+134.57
Religion	37	16	+131.25
Sexual Orientation	31	11	+181.82
Disability	2	0	
Gender	1	0	
Gender Nonconfirming	4	3	+33.33%
Total	265	111	+138.74%

By way of investigating the cause for the sharp increase in hate crimes in Pennsylvania, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) found that Pennsylvania ranks highest among all 50 states in distribution and dissemination of hate propaganda. The report cites Berks County, in which Reading is situated, as having the highest distribution of hate-filled propaganda and literature. Of the total 67 counties in Pennsylvania, Berks County accounted for 14.48%. The leading distributors of racist



*Patriot Front photo
obtained by Unicorn*

and anti-semitic brochures, stickers, and attire were found to be such groups as The Patriot Front, White Lives Matter, and The Keystone Nationalists. As Andrew Goretsky, Anti Defamation League Regional Director for Philadelphia puts it, “Hate starts with propaganda . . . but it then escalates from there, into more criminal behavior”.

Conclusion.

The vision for Reading, from its founders, activists, and artists, to its residents and immigrants, has been to cultivate a peaceful and unified society. Peaceful dialogue, via nonviolent communication, is necessary to encourage not only tolerance of each other, but also respect and genuine compassion for one another. Building upon Weiser’s foundation of peace, and upon the work of the visionaries who have come before us, we must, and will, work together to create a broader culture of peace that touches the hearts of Reading citizens and beyond. Peaceful dialogue and practical engagement are required to realize the condition of peace. We acknowledge that efforts are best approached as a community, in which needs and liabilities are made known, and solutions sought after and achieved through collaboration and cooperation. This work will involve all sectors of our city - from the arts, business, education, policing, and politics, to health and wellness, social, religious, and spiritual, to name a few. It is only through the co-facilitation of a peaceful way that we will not find ourselves in the midst of yet another moment echoing the Iroquois lamentation that “we cannot so well understand one another.”



Ramón Lago's Peace Dove at Reading's City Park, 2022. Photo by Carmelo LaMantia and Nate Heater

Information included in this paper was derived from the following list of resources.

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