William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 80, no. 1 (January 2023): 125–54

Strategies of Succession and the 1797 Treaty of Big Tree

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In a 1797 treaty signed at Big Tree, in present-day western New York, Robert Morris purchased Seneca homelands with an unusual form of compensation: investments held in trust with the U.S. federal government. Focusing on the financial outgrowth of the Big Tree negotiations, this article argues that the treaty embodied conflicting strategies of succession, or plans for the conveyance of wealth (and therefore power) to descendants. Both Morris and the Senecas saw the trust funds created by the treaty as potential conduits of wealth for their successors. Morris believed that placing wealth in trust might allow these assets to revert to his estate once the Senecas became, in his word, “extinct.” For their part, the Senecas embraced trusts as a renewable source of wealth that could benefit the nation in the long term. Each Big Tree stakeholder pursued their strategy of succession in the decades after the treaty, but the growing power of the federal government over Indian affairs increasingly governed how the wealth in question descended to its inheritors. Far from an anomaly, Big Tree augured an ascendant regime of federal financial control that would come to define the U.S. territorial empire.