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## 5

## American Indians and the American Revolution, 1775-1783

*On the one hand we are forgotten, abandoned; on the other hand we are solicited and at times threatened by the English; in such a situation what can we do, what ought we to do?*

—Indians in the Great Lakes region  
to French emissary Godfrey de Linctot, 1780<sup>1</sup>

*That event was for us the greatest blow that could have been dealt us, unless it had been our total destruction.*

—Indian Leaders to Spanish Governor Cruzat, St. Louis, 1784<sup>2</sup>

Scholars of Indian history have often neglected the impact of the American Revolution on American Indians, preferring to lump the Revolution together with the other wars and calamities of the late eighteenth century and pointing out that replacing King George III with President George Washington meant little to Indian peoples whose struggle to preserve their lands and cultures continued. But the Revolution was a devastating experience for many Indian people and marked the beginning of a new era in their history.

The outbreak of the American Revolution took many Native Americans by surprise. At first, most tried to keep out of it, regarding it as a family quarrel between the king and his children. As each side pressed them to get involved, however, Indians often found that they had to choose sides. In general, most tribes eventually supported the British: The British had more of the trade goods on which they had become dependent, they had an Indian department whose personnel were experienced and well connected among the tribes, and they had demonstrated in the past that they would try to restrain trespass onto Indian lands. The Americans, by contrast, were frequently short of supplies and could do little to stop their backcountry settlers encroaching on Indian lands. In fact, American militia, who apparently regarded all Indians as "savages," murdered influential Indian leaders like White Eyes of the Delawares and Cornstalk of the Shawnees who had been

working for peace, thereby driving their people into the arms of the British.

Not all Indians joined the British cause, however. Indians from Stockbridge, Massachusetts, enlisted as minutemen in the American army; the Oneidas of New York fought for the Americans even though that entailed fighting against relatives in other Iroquois tribes; the Micmacs, Passamaquoddies, and Penobscots of Maine and Nova Scotia supported the Americans, as did the Catawbias of South Carolina. Even in tribes that allied with the British, there were pro-American factions and plenty of people who just wanted to keep out of it. The Revolution split the ancient unity of the Iroquois Confederacy, turning Mohawks, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas against Oneidas and Tuscaroras; the Cherokee Nation divided along generational lines, with older chiefs trying to preserve peace and friendship with the Americans while younger warriors joined the British in an effort to win back their lands. Just as colonial society split into Loyalist and Patriot factions, with perhaps a majority of people trying to remain neutral, so, throughout the length and breadth of Indian country, the Revolution divided tribes and communities.

Indian warriors raided the American frontier in New York, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Georgia, and the Carolinas, sometimes in company with British troops and Loyalist Rangers. Indian raids sapped American resources and diverted American energies, and stories of Indian "massacres," such as at Cherry Valley in New York in 1778, sent terror through American settlements. But the Revolution was also fought in Indian country. The Americans responded to Cherokee attacks in 1776 by dispatching expeditions from Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas to carry fire and sword through Cherokee country.

In 1779, in an effort to cripple the Iroquois war effort by striking at their home base, George Washington ordered invasions of Iroquois country that destroyed forty towns, burned countless crops, and cut down orchards. Homeless and hungry Iroquois fled to the British at Fort Niagara for food and shelter and ever after remembered George Washington as "Town Destroyer." Thomas Jefferson, who was governor of Virginia during the Revolution, urged a war of extermination against the Shawnees in Ohio, and the Shawnees saw their villages burned time and again by Kentucky militia who crossed the Ohio River. Armies and war parties crossed back and forth through Indian country. Individuals and communities were caught up in the fighting, and neutrals sometimes suffered more than others: In 1782, at Gnadenhutten in Ohio, American militia murdered ninety-six Delaware Indians who had converted to the Moravian faith and as pacifists refused to participate in the fighting.

American Indians made great sacrifices and suffered great losses as a

result of the American Revolution. White Americans remember the event as securing their liberty; for Native Americans it represented another step toward the loss of their freedom. At the end of the war, the British and the Americans signed the Peace of Paris, ignoring the Indians who had been their allies and their enemies. Britain handed Indian lands to the United States and left Indian people to confront the renewed American assaults on their land and culture. The Cherokee chief Keniteta, or Rising Fawn, making his peace with the Virginians in 1783, threw a handful of ashes into the air to symbolically cast off his allegiance to the British. "They have been the ruin of my People," he said.<sup>3</sup> Indians who had supported the American cause fared little better. While Mahicans from Stockbridge were away fighting with the American army, their lands continued to slip into the hands of covetous neighbors. By the end of the Revolution, Stockbridge ceased to exist as an Indian town. The Mahicans petitioned their former allies for help, but to no avail. They migrated first to New York and then to new homes in Wisconsin.

The selections in this chapter contain many themes familiar to Indians in colonial times—protests over loss of land, distrust of allies, and anguish at their people's plight. They also show Indian people struggling to come to terms with a new era and new challenges. Although Indian people fought for their freedom, too, in the Revolutionary War, they would enjoy few liberties in the new society born out of that conflict.

### THE ONEIDAS DECLARE NEUTRALITY

The Declaration of Independence implies that all Indians were willing and ruthless allies of a tyrannical king. ("He [the king] . . . has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions.") In fact, most tried to stand apart from what they saw as a "family" quarrel. As the following speech to Governor John Trumbull of Connecticut demonstrates, the Oneidas initially hoped to remain neutral. But the Revolution was a conflict that tolerated no neutrality. Eventually, owing in large measure to the efforts of their Presbyterian missionary Samuel Kirkland, most Oneidas decided to support the Americans. Their action split the Iroquois Confederacy as Oneidas clashed in battle with warriors from other Iroquois tribes, and their allegiance to the Americans caused them tremendous suffering. British and Iroquois war parties burned their villages in retaliation, and many Oneidas sought shelter in squalid refugee camps around Schenectady, New York.

### ONEIDA INDIANS

#### *Speech to Governor Trumbull*

1775

As my younger brothers of the New England Indians, who have settled in our vicinity, are now going down to visit their friends, and to move up parts of their families that were left behind—with this belt by them, I open the road wide, clearing it of all obstacles, that they may visit their friends and return to their settlements here in peace.

We Oneidas are induced to this measure on account of the disagreeable situation of affairs that way; and we hope, by the help of God, they may return in peace. We earnestly recommend them to your charity through their long journey.

Now we more immediately address you, our brother, the Governor, and the chiefs of New England.

Brothers: We have heard of the unhappy differences and great contention between you and Old England. We wonder greatly, and are troubled in our minds.

Brothers: Possess your minds in peace respecting us Indians. We cannot intermeddle in this dispute between two brothers. The quarrel seems to be unnatural. You are *two brothers of one blood*. We are unwilling to join on either side in such a contest, for we bear an equal affection to both you Old and New England. Should the great king of England apply to us for aid, we shall deny him; if the Colonies apply, we shall refuse. The present situation of you two brothers is new and strange to us. We Indians cannot find, nor recollect in the traditions of our ancestors, the like case, or a similar instance.

Brothers: For these reasons possess your minds in peace, and take no umbrage that we Indians refuse joining in the contest. We are for peace.

Brothers: Was it an alien, a foreign nation, who had struck you, we should look into the matter. We hope, through the wise government and good pleasure of God, your distresses may be soon removed and the dark clouds be dispersed.

Brothers: As we have declared for peace, we desire you will not apply to our Indian brethren in New England for their assistance. Let us Indians be all of one mind, and live with one another; and you white people settle your own disputes between yourselves.

*American Archives*, 4th ser., vol. 2, 1116-17.

## THE REVOLUTION THROUGH THE EYES OF A SENECA WOMAN

The life story of Mary Jemison, the white woman who spent most of her life with the Senecas, affords a rare glimpse into the impact of the Revolution on the Indians' home front, as seen through the eyes of a wife and mother (Mary gave birth to a daughter in the first year of the war). Mary Jemison saw the Iroquois delegates return from the German Flats council in 1775 believing they were secure in their neutrality; she observed the shift toward hostilities after the Oswego council in 1777; she saw Seneca warriors return from the bloody battle at Oriskany near Fort Stanwix in 1777; and she saw General John Sullivan's army march through Iroquoia destroying towns and crops in 1779. The American Revolution, celebrated in the nation's history and mythology, meant something different for Indian women who lived and suffered through it.

MARY JEMISON

*A View of the Revolution*

1775–1779

Thus, at peace amongst themselves, and with the neighboring whites, though there were none at that time very near, our Indians lived quietly and peaceably at home, till a little before the breaking out of the revolutionary war, when they were sent for, together with the Chiefs and members of the Six Nations generally, by the people of the States, to go to the German Flats, and there hold a general council, in order that the people of the states might ascertain, in good season, who they should esteem and treat as enemies, and who as friends, in the great war which was then upon the point of breaking out between them and the King of England.

Our Indians obeyed the call, and the council was holden, at which the pipe of peace was smoked, and a treaty made, in which the Six Nations solemnly agreed that if a war should eventually break out, they would not take up

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James Seaver, ed., *The Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison* (1824 and various editions).

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arms on either side; but that they would observe a strict neutrality. With that the people of the states were satisfied, as they had not asked their assistance, nor did not wish it. The Indians returned to their homes well pleased that they could live on neutral ground, surrounded by the din of war, without being engaged in it.

About a year passed off, and we, as usual, were enjoying ourselves in the employments of peaceable times, when a messenger arrived from the British Commissioners, requesting all the Indians of our tribe to attend a general council which was soon to be held at Oswego. The council convened, and being opened, the British Commissioners informed the Chiefs that the object of calling a council of the Six Nations, was, to engage their assistance in subduing the rebels, the people of the states, who had risen up against the good King, their master, and were about to rob him of a great part of his possessions and wealth, and added that they would amply reward them for all their services.

The Chiefs then arose, and informed the Commissioners of the nature and extent of the treaty which they had entered into with the people of the states, the year before, and that they should not violate it by taking up the hatchet against them.

The Commissioners continued their entreaties without success, till they addressed their avarice, by telling our people that the people of the states were few in number, and easily subdued; and that on the account of their disobedience to the King, they justly merited all the punishment that it was possible for white men and Indians to inflict upon them; and added, that the King was rich and powerful, both in money and subjects: That his rum was as plenty as the water in lake Ontario: that his men were as numerous as the sands upon the lake shore:—and that the Indians, if they would assist in the war, and persevere in their friendship to the King, till it was closed, should never want for money or goods. Upon this the Chiefs concluded a treaty with the British Commissioners, in which they agreed to take up arms against the rebels, and continue in the service of his Majesty till they were subdued, in consideration of certain conditions which were stipulated in the treaty to be performed by the British government and its agents.

As soon as the treaty was finished, the Commissioners made a present to each Indian of a suit of clothes, a brass kettle, a gun and tomahawk, a scalping knife, a quantity of powder and lead, a piece of gold, and promised a bounty on every scalp that should be brought in. Thus richly clad and equipped, they returned home, after an absence of about two weeks, full of the fire of war, and anxious to encounter their enemies. Many of the kettles which the Indians received at that time are now in use on the Genesee Flats. . . .

Previous to the battle at Fort Stanwix, the British sent for the Indians to come and see them whip the rebels; and, at the same time stated that they did not wish to have them fight, but wanted to have them just sit down, smoke their pipes, and look on. Our Indians went, to a man; but contrary to their expectation, instead of smoking and looking on, they were obliged to fight for their lives, and in the end of the battle were completely beaten, with a great loss in killed and wounded. Our Indians alone had thirty-six killed, and a great number wounded. Our town exhibited a scene of real sorrow and distress, when our warriors returned and recounted their misfortunes, and stated the real loss they had sustained in the engagement. The mourning was excessive, and was expressed by the most doleful yells, shrieks, and howlings, and by inimitable gesticulations.

During the revolution, my house was the home of Col's Butler<sup>6</sup> and Brandt, whenever they chanced to come into our neighborhood as they passed to and from Fort Niagara, which was the seat of their military operations. Many and many a night I have pounded samp for them from sun-set till sun-rise, and furnished them with necessary provision and clean clothing for their journey. . . .

At that time I had three children who went with me on foot, one who rode on horse back, and one whom I carried on my back.

Our corn was good that year; a part of which we had gathered and secured for winter.

In one or two days after the skirmish at Connessius lake, Sullivan and his army arrived at Genesee river, where they destroyed every article of the food kind that they could lay their hands on. A part of our corn they burnt, and threw the remainder into the river. They burnt our houses, killed what few cattle and horses they could find, destroyed our fruit trees, and left nothing but the bare soil and timber. But the Indians had eloped and were not to be found.

Having crossed and recrossed the river, and finished the work of destruction, the army marched off to the east. Our Indians saw them move off, but suspecting that it was Sullivan's intention to watch our return, and then to take us by surprise, resolved that the main body of our tribe should hunt where we then were, till Sullivan had gone so far that there would be no danger of his returning to molest us.

This being agreed to, we hunted continually till the Indians concluded that there could be no risk in our once more taking possession of our lands. Accordingly we all returned; but what were our feelings when we found that there was not a mouthful of any kind of sustenance left, not even enough to keep a child one day from perishing with hunger.

The weather by this time had become cold and stormy; and as we were destitute of houses and food too, I immediately resolved to take my children and look out for myself, without delay. With this intention I took two of my little ones on my back, bade the other three follow, and the same night arrived on the Gardow flats, where I have ever since resided. . . .

. . . The snow fell about five feet deep, and remained so for a long time, and the weather was extremely cold; so much so indeed, that almost all the game upon which the Indians depended for subsistence, perished, and reduced them almost to a state of starvation through that and three or four succeeding years. When the snow melted in the spring, deer were found dead upon the ground in vast numbers; and other animals, of every description, perished from the cold also, and were found dead, in multitudes. Many of our people barely escaped with their lives, and some actually died of hunger and freezing.

## THE UNITED INDIAN NATIONS ANNOUNCE A NEW POLICY

As the new American nation grew and flexed its muscles, it committed itself to expansion across the area of the Old Northwest, bordered by the Ohio River, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi. Indian people found themselves fighting a desperate holding action as the by now familiar pressures on their lands intensified. At the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1784, American commissioners browbeat Iroquois delegates into ceding large amounts of their territory. When those delegates returned home, they were scorned by their people, who disavowed their actions. At the Treaty of Fort McIntosh in 1785, Delawares, Wyandots (also known as Hurons), Miamis (whom the English and Americans often called Twightwees), and other tribes from the Ohio region were coerced into making similar cessions. The Shawnees, who refused to attend the Fort McIntosh treaty, met the Americans the next year at Fort Finney and received similar treatment.

By 1786, however, the northern tribes were coming to realize what was happening and how they could prevent it. As in colonial times, Indian lands were being lost piecemeal in sales and agreements made by individuals, unauthorized speakers, and single tribes. Only by taking a united stance could the Indians hope to halt the loss of their lands. As the newly independent states tried to form themselves into a new, united nation, so Indian nations strove to present a united front against American expansion. The following message from the united tribes to Congress gave the United States clear warning that the Indians regarded the Ohio River as the boundary between Indian lands and American settlers and that henceforth they would consider no land sales as valid without the unanimous agreement of all the tribes. This united opposition checked American expansion beyond the Ohio River for almost ten years.

## UNITED INDIAN NATIONS

### *Speech at the Confederate Council*

*November 28 and December 18, 1786*

Present:—The Five Nations, the Hurons, Delawares, Shawanese, Ottawas, Chippewas, Powtewattimies, Twichtwees, Cherokees, and the Wabash confederates

To the Congress of the United States of America:

Brethren of the United States of America: It is now more than three years since peace was made between the King of Great Britain and you, but we, the Indians, were disappointed, finding ourselves not included in that peace, according to our expectations: for we thought that its conclusion would have promoted a friendship between the United States and Indians, and that we might enjoy that happiness that formerly subsisted between us and our elder brethren. We have received two very agreeable messages from the thirteen United States. We also received a message from the King, whose war we were engaged in, desiring us to remain quiet, which we accordingly complied with. During the time of this tranquillity, we were deliberating the best method we could to form a lasting reconciliation with the thirteen United States. Pleased at the same time, we thought we were entering upon a reconciliation and friendship with a set of people born on the same continent with ourselves, certain that the quarrel between us was not of our own making. In the course of our councils, we imagined we hit upon an expedient that would promote a lasting peace between us.

Brothers: We still are of the same opinion as to the means which may tend to reconcile us to each other; and we are sorry to find, although we had the best thoughts in our minds, during the beforementioned period, mischief has, nevertheless, happened between you and us. We are still anxious of putting our plan of accommodation into execution, and we shall briefly inform you of the means that seem most probable to us of effecting a firm and lasting peace and reconciliation: the first step towards which should, in our opinion, be, that all treaties carried on with the United States, on our parts, should be with the general voice of the whole confederacy, and carried on in the most open manner, without any restraint on either side; and especially as landed matters are often the subject of our councils with you, a matter of the



greatest importance and of general concern to us, in this case we hold it indispensably necessary that any cession of our lands should be made in the most public manner, and by the united voice of the confederacy; holding all partial treaties as void and of no effect.

Brothers: We think it is owing to you that the tranquillity which, since the peace between us, has not lasted, and that that essential good has been followed by mischief and confusion, having managed every thing respecting us your own way. You kindled your council fires where you thought proper, without consulting us, at which you held separate treaties, and have entirely neglected our plan of having a general conference with the different nations of the confederacy. Had this happened, we have reason to believe every thing would now have been settled between us in a most friendly manner. We did every thing in our power, at the treaty of fort Stanwix, to induce you to follow this plan, as our real intentions were, at that very time, to promote peace and concord between us, and that we might look upon each other as friends, having given you no cause or provocation to be otherwise.

Brothers: Notwithstanding the mischief that has happened, we are still sincere in our wishes to have peace and tranquillity established between us, earnestly hoping to find the same inclination in you. We wish, therefore, you would take it into serious consideration, and let us speak to you in the manner we proposed. Let us have a treaty with you early in the spring; let us pursue reasonable steps; let us meet half ways, for our mutual convenience; we shall then bring [bury] in oblivion the misfortunes that have happened, and meet each other on a footing of friendship.

Brothers: We say let us meet half way, and let us pursue such steps as become upright and honest men. We beg that you will prevent your surveyors and other people from coming upon our side the Ohio river. We have told you before, we wished to pursue just steps, and we are determined they shall appear just and reasonable in the eyes of the world. This is the determination of all the chiefs of our confederacy now assembled here, notwithstanding the accidents that have happened in our villages, even when in council, where several innocent chiefs were killed when absolutely engaged in promoting a peace with you, the thirteen United States.

Although then interrupted, the chiefs here present still wish to meet you in the spring, for the beforementioned good purpose, when we hope to speak to each other without either haughtiness or menaces.

Brothers: We again request of you, in the most earnest manner, to order your surveyors and others, that mark out lands, to cease from crossing the Ohio, until we shall have spoken to you, because the mischief that has recently happened has originated in that quarter; we shall likewise prevent our people from going over until that time.

Brothers: It shall not be our faults if the plans which we have suggested to you should not be carried into execution; in that case the event will be very precarious, and if fresh ruptures ensue, we hope to be able to exculpate ourselves, and shall most assuredly, with our united force, be obliged to defend those rights and privileges which have been transmitted to us by our ancestors; and if we should be thereby reduced to misfortunes, the world will pity us when they think of the amicable proposals we now make to prevent the unnecessary effusion of blood. These are our thoughts and firm resolves, and we earnestly desire that you will transmit to us, as soon as possible, your answer, be it what it may.

Done at our Confederated Council Fire, at the Huron village, near the mouth of the Detroit river, December 18th, 1786.

The Five Nations,  
Hurons, Ottawas, Twichtwees, Shawanese,  
Chippewas, Cherokees, Delawares,  
Powtewatimies, The Wabash Confederates.

## THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

By the time the American colonists had won their independence and created a new nation, the original inhabitants of this country had seen truly revolutionary changes in their own lives. Many Indian people in New England were reduced to petitioning state legislatures for relief from the poverty that now afflicted them. As two Mohegan speakers, Henry Quaquaquid and Robert Ashpo, explain in this petition to the Connecticut State Assembly in May 1789, the forces that had disrupted their world were not only political. The Mohegans may have been playing to their audience by admitting their own responsibility for many of the changes, and nostalgia certainly colored their view of past days as a golden age. Nevertheless, their words convey the bewilderment many Indian people must have felt as their world changed around them.