

American Indians fighting in the Revolutionary War

The American Indians, and the Iroquois in particular, despite initial leanings toward neutrality, got involved in the Revolutionary War and towards its close suffered devastating attacks by American forces as a result.

The American Revolution (1775-83) began the following year with fighting at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts just as the first Kentucky settlements were established at Harrodstown and Boonesborough. The Quebec Act of 1774 had made the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes part of Canada and brought Virginia and Pennsylvania to the point of revolution. With the outbreak of war, the British ceased being a bystander and began urging the Shawnee and Mingo to attack the Americans. Some tribes chose neutrality, but by arguing the Americans intended to take their land, the British succeeded with the Detroit tribes, Potawatomi, and Ojibwe. They also got an alliance between the Shawnee and Cherokee (Chickamauga) war factions. In July, 1776 the Chickamauga attacked two forts in the Carolinas provoking American retaliation against all Cherokee. Meanwhile, Chickamauga and Shawnee war parties roamed through Kentucky attacking Americans.

With the outbreak of war, both the British and Americans tried to win the support of the Iroquois. The League listened respectfully to both arguments, but although they recognized the new United States in 1776, their decision was to remain neutral. They even ordered the Shawnee to stop attacking Americans in Kentucky. Nothing stopped, but by this time the League had gotten used to its orders being ignored. If the League had been able to remain neutral, it probably would have survived the war. However, this was not to be. The "Great Peace" ended in 1777, and the Iroquois League was destroyed two years later. The Caughnawaga and the other members of the Seven Nations of Canada also intended to remain neutral in the beginning but were drawn into the war during which its members fought on both sides.

Joseph Brant, an Iroquois leader, accepted a captain's commission in the British army. He visited England in 1775 and returned in time to participate in the Battle of Long Island in 1776. Brant defied the Iroquois council and led his warriors north to stop the American attempt to capture Canada during the winter of 1776-77. Opposing Brant on the council were the Oneida and Tuscarora who, because of the missionary Samuel Kirkland, favored the Americans. The crisis came with a British effort in 1777 to cut New England off from the other colonies by seizing the Hudson Valley. This effort failed miserably, as the British lost several thousand soldiers, and the Americans achieved their first major victory of the war, in what is known as the Battle of Saratoga.

The plan (for Saratoga) called for three British armies to meet at Albany. General William Howe was to come north from New York City, while General John Burgoyne marched south from Montreal and Colonel Barry St. Leger moved east through the Mohawk Valley. St. Leger's role in the campaign which provoked a crisis on the League council since he would need their permission to move through the Iroquois homeland. Unfortunately, a recent epidemic had deprived the council of several important sachems. Still opposed by the Oneida and their sachem Skenandoah, Brant was able to win over the

Seneca and Cayuga. Unable to resolve the differences between the members, the Onondaga extinguished the council fire and joined the majority going to the British. The Iroquois League had come to an end, with each tribe free to go its own way. The "Great Peace" which had prevailed among the Iroquois for centuries ended shortly afterwards at Oriskany.

Joined by Iroquois and other native allies, St. Leger moved down the Mohawk valley towards Fort Stanwix (Fort Schuyler to the Americans). On August 6th, 1777 American and British forces met at the Battle of Oriskany. Oneida warriors with the Americans and Mohawk and Seneca warriors with the British fought and killed each other. St. Leger's defeat at Oriskany and his failure to take Fort Stanwix forced him to abandon his part in the offensive and return to Canada. In October the Oneida served as scouts in the American victory over Burgoyne at Saratoga - the turning point of the Revolutionary War. The British plan to unite three armies dissolved when one of them was diverted in a plan to occupy Philadelphia. The American forces surrounded and attacked the other English forces, while the British army down in Pennsylvania was too far out of reach to help.

The Oneida rendered further service that winter by bringing food to Washington's starving army at Valley Forge and in May, 1778 participated in the Battle of Barren Hill under the command of Lafayette. Despite the setbacks at Saratoga and Oriskany, the British and Iroquois launched a series of raids against the frontier that put the Americans on the defensive in New York and Pennsylvania during the summer and fall of 1778.

In July Brant's Mohawk attacked the Cherry Valley on the upper Susquehanna in New York. He followed this with a raid on the settlement at Minisink Island on the Delaware River between Pennsylvania and New Jersey which left several farms in flames. The real damage, however, was done during his retreat when only 30 of the 150 militia pursuing escaped an ambush. At the same time, McDonald's Tories (American settlers who favored the British cause) and native warriors hit settlements in Northampton County and the Susquehanna Valley in Pennsylvania. In September Brant struck again - this time at German Flats in the Mohawk Valley. Forewarned, the Americans rushed to Forts Dayton and Herkimer where they sat helplessly inside while smoke rose from their burning homes. Two weeks later the Americans destroyed Brant's villages at Unadilla and Oquaga on the Susquehanna. Brant joined forces with Tory Rangers commanded by Walter Butler and attacked the Cherry Valley for a second time in November. Known as the Cherry Valley Massacre, the attack took the Americans by surprise. Homes were burned, 30 settlers killed, and 71 prisoners taken. An assault on the American fort killed 16 soldiers, but the British and Mohawk withdrew the following day when reinforcements arrived.

Brant became known as "Monster Brant," but his reputation was undeserved. Most of the killing at Cherry Valley was done by Walter Butler's men who Brant later stated were far more "savage" than any of his Mohawk. The tendency towards brutality seemed to run in the Butler family. It was Walter's father, John Butler, who orchestrated what was by far the worst massacre in the Wyoming Valley that July. Brant and his Mohawk were not

present at Wyoming, and Butler's men returned to Fort Niagara with 267 scalps. This much death and destruction on the frontier could not be tolerated, and during the summer of 1779, George Washington sent three converging armies to destroy the Iroquois homeland: from the south General John Sullivan proceeded up the Susquehanna with 4,000 troops; General James Clinton moved west through the Mohawk Valley; and Colonel Daniel Brodhead pushed up the Allegheny River from Fort Pitt.

Guided by Oneida scouts, the Americans brushed aside Brant's 500 warriors and John Butler's 200 Tories at the second Battle of Oriskany and in September captured the League's capital at the Onondaga village of Kanadaseagea. Destroying everything, the Americans burned over 40 towns earning George Washington his Iroquois name of Caunotaucarius "town destroyer." The Iroquois never recovered from this disaster. Their homes and crops destroyed, the survivors spent a cold and hungry winter as refugees in the vicinity of the British fort at Niagara. Brant, however, enlisted a large war party that winter to punish the Oneida and attacked their villages. Hundreds were killed in this Iroquois civil war, and the Oneida fled to the Americans at Schenectady. They spent the rest of the war in brutal poverty and misery but continued to serve as American scouts.

At the end of the war, Joseph Brant crossed into Canada with almost 2,000 followers - mostly Mohawk and Cayuga but including parts of all six members of Iroquois League as well as a few Delaware, Munsee, Saponi, Nanticoke, and Tutelo. A second group of Iroquois settled at Tyendenaga on the north shore of Lake Ontario just west of Kingston, Ontario. Brant settled along the Grand River in southern Ontario on 675,000 acres given by Governor Frederick Haldimand of Canada as compensation for the lands the Iroquois had lost in New York. Unfortunately, Haldimand's term of office ended before he could provide legal title. Brant went to England in 1785 to correct this, but the problem has persisted ever since. Totally destitute after the war, Brant ultimately had to sell 300,000 acres to feed his people (only 45,000 acres remain). From a pre-war population of 8,000, fewer than 5,000 Iroquois survived the war, 2,000 of whom had moved to Canada.

Ohio River Valley

The war in the Ohio Valley was almost a separate conflict from the one east of the Appalachians and continued, despite the Treaty of Paris in 1763, with few interruptions until 1795. Shortly after the start of the war, the British began supplying arms and paying bounties for American scalps. The Chickamauga (Cherokee) and Shawnee launched the first attacks, but indiscriminate retaliation by Americans drew the other tribes into the fighting. By the time the Iroquois entered the war in the east in 1777, the Mingo had joined the Shawnee and would remain a part of the alliance fighting the Americans until 1794. Many of the raids against Kentucky during this period originated from Pluggy's Town, a Mingo village located near present-day Delaware, Ohio. In September, 1777 Fort Henry (Wheeling) was attacked by 400 Shawnee, Mingo and Wyandot. Half of the 42-man garrison was killed, and the war party burned the nearby settlement before withdrawing. After the Americans built Fort Laurens in eastern Ohio in 1778, Mingo and Wyandot warriors surrounded it and kept it under siege until abandoned as indefensible in August, 1779. A Mingo war party also burned Hannastown, Pennsylvania in 1782. Raids and counter-raids continued until 1783 with the Mingo and other British allies moving their villages into northwest Ohio to distance them from the Americans along the Ohio River.

On the Six Nations Reserve at Grand River, Brant rekindled the League's council fire which had been extinguished in 1777. At the same time back in New York, a second council fire was started at Buffalo Creek leading to a question of which represented the original confederacy with its claim to the Ohio Valley. George Rogers Clark's capture of the Illinois country in 1778 had extended the boundary of the new United States to the Mississippi, and the Americans had no doubts about which one counted. They informed the Iroquois in New York that they were now a "conquered people" and forced them to sign another treaty at Fort Stanwix in 1784 ceding much of their homeland and confirming the earlier cession of Ohio made to the British in 1768. Brant's Mohawk and the Canadian Iroquois were conspicuous by their absence at the signing of this treaty, and the Iroquois League had split into two parts. The Canadian and American branches gradually grew farther apart, until by 1803 the Canadian Iroquois were no longer included in meetings of the American portion of the League.

After the Treaty of Paris, the British asked the Ohio tribes to stop their attacks on Americans. In truth, neither they nor the American frontiersmen considered the question of Ohio had been decided. As early as 1782, the British agent at Detroit, Simon De Peyster, had urged the tribes to form an alliance to keep the Americans out of Ohio. To this end, he brought Joseph Brant west in 1783 as a representative of the Six Nations (Canadian) to attend a meeting of the Ohio tribes at Sandusky. The British did not attend themselves, but Brant's influence was important in the formation of the western alliance. Its first council fire was at the Shawnee village of Waketomica. After Waketomica was burned by the Americans in 1786, it moved to Brownstown, a Wyandot village south of Detroit.

Susquehannock against the Iroquois

The Susquehannock Indians (in western Pennsylvania) fight a losing battle against the Iroquois, and are forced to leave their land, which the Iroquois use to settle other allied tribes.

For as far into the past as can be determined, the Susquehannock were friends of the Huron and enemies of the Iroquois. Susquehannock alliances and trade also extended to the Erie and Neutrals, with the result that the Iroquois were surrounded by hostile tribes. Having exhausted the beaver in their homeland, the Iroquois were running out of the fur they needed to trade for Dutch firearms. Otherwise, with European epidemics decimating their villages, it was only a matter of time before they were annihilated. Their enemies, of course, were well-aware of this problem and refused permission for Iroquois hunters to pass through their territories. Faced with a blockade, the Iroquois were forced into a war where they needed to either conquer or be destroyed. They concentrated their attacks on the Huron after 1640, and by 1645 had succeeded in isolating them from the Algonkin, Montagnais, and French in the east. There was a two-year lull in the fighting following a truce that year, but in 1647 the Iroquois launched massive attacks into the Huron homeland and destroyed the Arendaronon villages.

Sensing that the situation was becoming serious, Susquehannock warriors fought as Huron allies, while their ambassadors sent to the Iroquois council flatly demanded a halt to the war. For some inexplicable reason the Huron refused further offers of help from the Susquehannock and were overrun by the Iroquois during the winter of 1648-49. The [Tionontati](#) met a similar fate a year later, and as the Iroquois absorbed 1000s of captured warriors into their ranks, the Susquehannock were in grave danger. In 1650 the western Iroquois (Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga) attacked the Neutrals, and the Susquehannock entered the war against the Iroquois. Whatever help they could have given the Neutrals was cut short when the Mohawk attacked the Susquehannock villages in 1651. With the Susquehannock unable, and the Erie unwilling to help, the Neutrals were quickly defeated. The Mohawk, however, found the well-armed Susquehannock a dangerous and stubborn foe. The war dragged on until 1656 with the Mohawk (at great cost to themselves) slowly pushing the Susquehannock down the eastern branch of the Susquehanna River.

The Susquehannock were suddenly alone. The French were powerless after Iroquois victories over the Huron and Neutrals, and the Erie soon had their own war of survival against the western Iroquois (1653-56). Hard pressed by the Mohawk, the Susquehannock tried to strengthen their ties to the Dutch in 1651 by selling them some land on the Delaware River, but the Dutch remained neutral. The Swedes continued to supply them with anything they wanted, but the Susquehannock had become involved in fighting with Virginia Puritans that had settled in northern Maryland in 1649. Not able to fight two wars at the same time, the Susquehannock in 1652 signed a treaty with Maryland ceding much of the lower Susquehanna Valley to secure peace and trade with English. Smallpox hit their villages during 1654, but this affected the Mohawk as much

as the Susquehannock and slowed the fighting. For the Susquehannock, the major blow came in September, 1655 when the Dutch seized the Swedish colonies. Without their primary supplier, the Susquehannock were forced to ask the Mohawk for peace. Equally exhausted, the Mohawk agreed in 1656.

The Mohawk and their Oneida allies never fought the Susquehannock again, but peace with them did not extend to the rest of the Iroquois League. After finishing with the Erie, the western Iroquois turned their attention to their only remaining Iroquian-speaking enemy. Besides the fact the Susquehannock had aided the Neutrals, there was continuing aggravation since the Susquehannock had given refuge to small groups of Neutrals and Erie that had eluded them. This simmered and finally erupted into open warfare in 1658. Badly outnumbered, the Susquehannock drew their Shawnee trading partners into the fighting and enlisted the support of their tributary Algonquin and Siouan tribes (Delaware, Nanticoke, Conoy, Saponi, and Tutelo). The Iroquois first attacked the Susquehannock's allies: dispersing the Shawnee and scattering them to Illinois, Tennessee, and South Carolina. Then they struck the Delaware throughout the Delaware Valley during the 1660s and effectively took them out of the war. For the Susquehannock, the worst blow was a smallpox epidemic in 1661 that devastated their population to a point from which it never recovered.

Still they managed to hold on. A treaty signed with Maryland ended the lingering hostility with the English. The agreement provided firearms and ammunition, since the Maryland colonists were well-aware of the value of the Susquehannock as a buffer against the Dutch-allied Iroquois. With English help, the Susquehannock were able to turn back a major Iroquois invasion in 1663. The following year the English took New York from the Dutch, and shortly afterwards formed their own alliance with the Iroquois. Maryland, however, did not feel entirely assured by this and in 1666 renewed its treaty with the Susquehannock. Coinciding with another outbreak of smallpox in 1667, the Iroquois made peace with the French and their native allies and this allowed them to concentrate on their war with the Susquehannock. With the support of Maryland, the Susquehannock fought on in an increasing bitter struggle, but by the fall of 1669, they were down to only 300 warriors and were forced to ask the Iroquois for peace. The Iroquois response to their offer was to torture and kill the Susquehannock ambassador who brought it.

It took the Iroquois until 1675 to defeat the Susquehannock. Driven from Pennsylvania, the survivors settled on the upper Potomac River at the invitation of the Maryland's governor. Actually there was no refuge for them. The location may have been acceptable to a royal governor, but it was deeply resented by the local colonists. After several depredations (probably Iroquois), a 1,000 man army (actually an armed mob) assembled under Colonel John Washington (great-grandfather of George). In direct defiance of the orders of Virginia's governor, Washington's militia besieged the Susquehannock in an old fort on the Potomac which they had occupied to defend themselves against the Iroquois. Eventually the Susquehannock were able to assure the colonists they were peaceful and even offered six of their sachems as hostages as proof. Satisfied, the English took the

hostages and left, but on the way home, they learned of other attacks in the area and killed the hostages.

The Susquehannock abandoned the fort, but launched a series of retaliatory raids on the Virginia and Maryland frontier. Most of the blame for these raids fell on the Virginians' Pamunkey and Occaneechee allies and led to their near annihilation by the colonists during Bacon's Rebellion the following year. Afterwards, the Susquehannock moved north but were attacked by Maryland militia near Columbia, Maryland where many were killed. Some managed to reach safety with the Meherrin in North Carolina, but the remaining Susquehannock had little choice but to surrender to the Iroquois in 1676. Under the circumstances, they were treated well. Under the terms of the peace agreed to, the Susquehannock were settled among the Mohawk and Oneida, became members of the Iroquois "covenant chain," and their dominion over the Delaware and other former allies was also surrendered to the League. During the years following, several Susquehannock rose to leadership as Iroquois war chiefs.

Although treated with respect, the Susquehannock were not free. In 1683 William Penn attempted to sign a treaty with them only to learn that the Susquehannock (like the Delaware) first needed Iroquois approval to sign. Subsequent dealings by the Pennsylvania government concentrated on the Iroquois and ignored the subservient tribes. By 1706 the Iroquois had relented somewhat and allowed 300 Susquehannock to return to the Susquehanna Valley in Pennsylvania. No longer a powerful people, they became known as the Conestoga (from the name of their village). The Iroquois kept a watchful eye on them and used their homeland as a kind of supervised reservation for the displaced Algonquin and Siouan tribes (Delaware, Munsee, Nanticoke, Conoy, Tutelo, Saponi, Mahican, Shawnee, and New England Algonquin) who were allowed to settle there as members of the "covenant chain."

Quaker missionaries arrived and made many conversions among the Susquehannock. As Conestoga became a Christian village, the more traditional Susquehannock left - either returning to the Oneida in New York, or moving west to Ohio to join the Mingo. By 1763 there were only 20 members (all Christians) of this last identifiable group of the Susquehannock. They were totally peaceful, but atrocities committed by others during the Pontiac Uprising of that year outraged the white settlers in the vicinity who just wanted to kill Indians - any Indians - in revenge. Feeling this way they could have grabbed a rifle and taken to the woods to find the hostiles, but there was an easier target closer at hand. As feelings rose, fourteen Conestoga were arrested and placed in the jail at Lancaster for their own protection. A mob formed (known as the Paxton boys). They proceeded to the village at Conestoga, killed the six Susquehanna they found there, and burned the houses. Then they went to the jail, broke in, took the last fourteen Susquehannock the world would ever see ...and beat them to death!