

# THE 18TH CENTURY INVOLVEMENTS OF IROQUOIS INDIANS WITH BRITISH AND FRENCH COLONISTS

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Iroquois is a well-known name, but like the names of many tribes, it was given to them by their enemies. The Algonquin called them the Iroqu (Irinakhoiw), meaning "rattlesnakes". After the French added the suffix "-ois" to this insult, the name became Iroquois. The Iroquois call themselves Haudenosaunee, meaning "people of the long house".

The original homeland of the Iroquois was in upstate New York between the Adirondack Mountains and Niagara Falls. Through conquest and migration, they gained control of most of the northeastern United States and eastern Canada. At its height in 1680, their empire extended westward from the north shore of Chesapeake Bay through Kentucky to the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers; then north following the Illinois River to the south end of Lake Michigan; east across all of lower Michigan, southern Ontario and adjacent parts of southwestern Quebec; and, finally, south through northern New England west of the Connecticut River through the Hudson and upper Delaware Valleys across Pennsylvania and back to the Chesapeake.

Early explorers and colonists found the Iroquois well-established, as they had been for many generations: with a democratic government; with a form of religion that acknowledged a creator in heaven; with a strong sense of family which was based on, and controlled by, their women.

The political unity of the Iroquois was the source of their power. With considerable effort, tribes which had fought one another were persuaded to join together in a league. The Iroquois League, also known as The Five Nation Confederacy, dates from as early as about 1450 A.D. The founder of the confederacy of the Five Nations is generally acknowledged to be Dekanawida. During his travels, he associated himself with a Mohawk named Hiawatha. Hiawatha left his family and friends to join Dekanawida, becoming his spokesman. Together they traveled through the lands on the south shores of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, as well as along the river to the sea, now known as the St. Lawrence. These were the homelands of tribes with a common heritage, but who had been warring with each another for many years. Dekanawida united them into a League of Nations, called the Iroquois League, which was one of the most famous Native American governments on the continent.

Dekanawida also brought the message the Haudenosaunee refer to as the Great Law. Under the Great Law of Peace, the nations became of one blood – addressing

one another as family members, and not killing one another. Chiefs of the nations became members of the Confederacy's deliberative assembly.

Sometimes the Iroquois Confederacy is referred to as the "Six" Nations. In 1722<sup>1</sup>, the Tuscarora Nation moved up from North Carolina to avoid warfare with the invading white settlers, and were adopted into the Confederacy. At this point in time, the Iroquois controlled many parts of the eastern states from their homelands in what is now New York state. The original Five Nations were:

- Mohawk: People Possessing the Flint
- Onondaga: People on the Hills
- Seneca: Great Hill People
- Oneida: Granite People
- Cayuga: People at the Mucky Land
- Tuscarora: Shirt Wearing People, which became the Sixth Nation.

The original League included 50 permanent offices that were filled with members from each of the five member tribes. The Onondaga contributed fourteen; the Cayuga ten; the Mohawk and Oneida each nine; and the Seneca eight. These representatives have been called sachems. Among the Iroquois the sachem was called the Counselor of the People. The sachems collectively formed the Council of the League, which had legislative, executive, and judicial authority over the combined tribes. Decisions in the name of the League were made by consensus. The 50 great chiefs met together in a grand council at the principal Onondaga town, in the center of the alliance territory. League meetings were called to deal with internal and external affairs, to invest new sachems, or to carry out religious obligations.

The Iroquois League was structured to handle only civil, not military affairs. If a sachem planned to participate in warfare, he was first obliged to resign from his office temporarily. When the League as a whole declared war against an enemy tribe, hostilities were coordinated by the sachem war chiefs.

The effect of the League was also to secure a large tract of fertile land which allowed for more extensive farming and could support large expeditionary forces. With the Longhouse of the League, the five allied nations exercised in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a power unprecedented in the Northeast. This power challenged the Eastern Algonkians and the Hurons over control of the European trade.

Since the Iroquois League was formed prior to any contact, it owed nothing to European influence. Rather than learning political sophistication from Europeans, Europeans learned from the Iroquois, and the League, with its elaborate system of checks and balances and supreme law, is said to have influenced the American Articles of Confederation and the Constitution.

The first half of the eighteenth century was marked by shifting alliances and rivalries among Indian nations and European empires in pursuit of power and influence. Beneath these fluctuations, however, there were two distinct tendencies. On the one hand, English and French power was gradually being extended over the eastern half of the continent, and only the most successful Indian groups were able to reconcile their need for European trade with the attempt to avoid involvement in

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<sup>1</sup> Wendel H. Oswald and Sharlotte Neely, *This Land Was Theirs. A Study of Native Americans*, Toronto: Mayfield Publishing Company 1999, p. 420.

Europe's conflicts. What made such neutrality possible was the relative balance of power between England and France. On the other hand, England had some advantages over the French in supplying trade goods and populating their colonies, thus threatening to erode this balance.

For hundreds of years Britain and France had fought each other in Europe. After they established outposts in North America, the continuing warfare enveloped their colonial possessions as well. Inhabitants of the colonies found themselves involved in the struggles that had begun in Europe over issues of little importance to Americans. Because the colonists cared which nation controlled the chief portion of their continent, though, they fought willingly on England's side. In the colonies, the War of the League of Augsburg (1689–1697) was called King William's War, the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–1713) was Queen Ann's War, and the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748) was King George's War.

If the disputes that started the three wars seemed irrelevant to white colonists, they were even less meaningful to American Indians. But the tribes reaped many advantages from the whites' quarrels. Above all, the Indians of the interior wanted to protect their territory from white settlement. Most of the tribes concluded that their goals could best be achieved by maintaining outward neutrality and playing off the European powers against one another. However, the wars were fought on their homeland, thus making involvement unavoidable for the tribes. The Five Nations generally fought with the English.<sup>2</sup>

Queen Ann's War was part of a larger conflict, The War of Spanish Succession. This war involved a power struggle between the European powers. England, Austria, the Netherlands, and Portugal joined forces in an attempt to prevent France from becoming too powerful. The war in the New World between France and England was called Queen Ann's War.

During this war, the Iroquois as 'a' whole remained neutral because their interests were divided. However, in 1704 the Mohawk who settled at St. Louis, or Caughnawaga, accompanied a French-led party to Deerfield, Massachusetts. When Queen Ann's War ended, the League was recognized as 'a' British ally. In the 1710s, British traders expanded into Ohio under the protection of their Iroquois allies and continued moving westward.

While Queen Ann's War served to extend the enterprises of English merchants to Indians throughout the southeastern interior, abuses of trade and an influx of settlers created tensions with the natives. Growing colonial pressures on the Tuscaroras in North Carolina drew Iroquois attention southward. By the turn of the century, settlers were occupying lands of some Tuscarora allies, and a series of incidents led to tensions between the Tuscaroras and traders in Virginia.

The outbreak of imperial warfare in 1744, after three decades of formal peace, was felt most immediately in the Ohio Valley. In this war between Britain and France, known as the King George's War, only the Mohawk, due to the influence of the British agent William Johnson, supported the British in a disastrous attempt to attack Montreal. The League itself chose to remain neutral. When the war ended, an English mission was founded among the Mohawk. Missionaries complained about

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<sup>2</sup> Wendel H. Oswald, Charlotte Neely, *This Land Was Theirs. A Study of Native Americans*, op. cit., p. 258.

the Iroquois passion for the alcohol they were getting from white traders. They were successful in inducing more Mohawk to move to Canada.

After the war, the French were searching for an Indian alliance, reasserting French power and demanding that the Indians expel all English traders. By 1754, the French had driven all English traders from the Ohio Valley and begun erecting military forts, including Fort Duquesne.

The conditions that allowed the tribes to preserve the balance of power in the American interior ended forever with the close of the conflict known in Europe as the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) and in America as the French and Indian War. What distinguished this war from its three predecessors was the fact that for the first time a war spread to Europe from America rather than vice versa. Specifically, the war arose from the clash between England and France over which nation would dominate the land west of the Appalachian Mountains. Because this land was the home of the interior tribes, they necessarily became involved in the struggle.

In 1753 the French sought to dominate the Lake Erie and Lake Ontario regions. This led to the Albany Conference in 1754 between representatives of the British colonies and Iroquois League. The colonists wanted to persuade the confederated Indian nations to ally themselves with the British against the French. The Albany Congress failed to convince the Iroquois tribes to abandon their neutrality. However, this proved impossible. It was in the best interests of some Mohawk to support the English, whereas the Seneca aided the French.

In 1756 a formal war, the French and Indian War, was declared between England and France. In 1755<sup>3</sup> General Edward Braddock suffered a disastrous defeat near Fort Duquesne. For the next three years, the French were consistently victorious. The French and their allies, now including many Iroquois, quickly followed the victory over Braddock with the seizure of the British forts Oswego in 1756 and William Henry in 1757 and the massacre of many of their occupants.

As the French advantage increased, many Iroquois and Ohio Indians saw the need to restore balance between the two European powers and resumed their support for the English. Finally, under the leadership of William Pitt, the British mounted the effort that won them the war in North America. Most Ohio Indians abandoned Fort Duquesne, leaving the French unable to maintain it against the British. Other French forts on the Ohio and Great Lakes soon followed. They captured the fortress at Louisbourg in 1758, Quebec in 1759, and Montreal in 1760. At the famous battle for Quebec on the Plains of Abraham, the French force was nearly destroyed. This led to the end of French colonial power in Canada. They were forced to surrender their principal holdings in North America. In 1760<sup>4</sup> the war in America was over, but it continued elsewhere for three more years.

France's military disintegration was confirmed in 1763 with the Treaty of Paris. This treaty awarded Canada to France, Spanish Florida, and Louisiana east of the Mississippi to Britain, and Louisiana west of the Mississippi to Spain. With the Eng-

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, Volume I, Part I, USA: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 444.

<sup>4</sup> Mary B. Norton, *A People and A Nation. A History of the United States*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1984, p. 53.

lish victory the political power of the Iroquois diminished, because the English no longer needed them in conflicts with the French.

Pontiac, the Ottawa chief who realized the meaning of the British victory, had been a loyal ally of the French. During the spring and summer of 1763 he organized an uprising and attacked the British forts. At the high point of the uprising the tribes raided the Virginia and Pennsylvania frontiers, killing at least 2000 whites. A combined Indian force was defeated at Bushy Run, Pennsylvania. The white frontiersmen from Paxton Township, Pennsylvania sought revenge and raided the Indian village, killing 20 people. The same year hundreds of frontier dwellers known as the Paxton Boys marched on Philadelphia to demand military protection against future Indian attacks.

Pontiac's uprising and the march of the Paxton Boys convinced Great Britain of the need to assert control over the interior, to prevent clashes between Indians and colonists. In 1763 the ministry issued a proclamation which declared the headwaters of the rivers flowing into Atlantic from the Appalachian Mountains to be the temporary western boundary for colonial settlement. Land west of the so-called "Proclamation Line" remained in Native hands and could only be alienated with Crown approval, while sales of Indian land to the east were to be regulated by colonial governments. A system of licensed traders was established and British officials were to keep criminals and fugitives off Indian land. However, this policy was doomed to failure since many whites had already established farms west of the proclamation line.

The American Revolution posed a dilemma for the Iroquois. The British expected their traditional allies the Six Nations to aid them but the League refused to officially sponsor the war. They decided that as long as both the British and the rebels respected Iroquois sovereignty over the Six Nations homeland and the Ohio-region protectorate, the Iroquois would remain neutral. Their conditions for neutrality were soon violated. In 1777, the majority of the Iroquois agreed to fight with the British. Only some Oneida, with Tuscarora, fought on the rebel side. Iroquois action against the American rebels concentrated on driving the colonists back toward the seaboard. After 'a' successful attack by forces under the Iroquois leaders Joseph Brant and Walter Butler to the south of the Mohawk River, the Americans organized an army against these Iroquois. In 1779 the troops of General John Sullivan destroyed Iroquois communities. Iroquois loyalty to the British spurred Washington to start wasting the Indian lands campaign.

During the hundred years preceding the American Revolution, wars with French-allied Algonquin and British colonial settlement forced them back within their original boundaries once again. Their decision to side with the British during the Revolutionary War was a disaster for the Iroquois. The American invasion of their homeland in 1779 drove many Iroquois into southern Ontario, where they have remained.

The Peace of Paris in 1783 ended the American Revolution and formalized England's recognition of the independence of the United States. It was a political conclusion to a military confrontation that began in April 1775 in Massachusetts and ended in October 1781 in Virginia. The years of war left large areas scarred, thousand dead, and affected the lives of millions more. The Indians of eastern North America figured importantly in the conflict, and many groups faced massive problems of postwar recovery and reconstruction. The nations of the Iroquois were di-

vided by the revolution. While the Oneidas and Tuscaroras allied with the United States, the Mohawks remained attached to the King. The Onondagas, the Cayugas, and the Senecas mostly supported the royal cause as well. The once powerful Confederacy was split and rendered dysfunctional.

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