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The Oneidas: Our First Allies

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I was informed of this essay contest by my AP US History teacher, Mr. Todd Siler.

The Oneidas: Our First Allies

When the contributions of foreign nations to the American cause in the Revolutionary War are discussed, the aid provided by the French is typically the first to be acknowledged. After that, some attention might be paid to the Spanish or the Dutch. Oftentimes overlooked is the great support and sacrifices of the Oneida Nation. The Oneidas were one of six nations that made up the Haudenosaunee, a powerful confederacy that controlled much of New York and held “personifications of democratic self-government so vivid that some historians... have argued that [they] directly inspired the U.S. Constitution” (Mann 374).¹ Out of the Six Nations, the Oneidas were the only ones to support the patriots in their cause, likely due to geographical proximity, a history of cultural exchange, or perhaps their notions of liberty and democracy. Through their distinguished contributions at the Battle of Oriskany, the Battle of Saratoga, and Valley Forge, the Oneida Nation indispensably aided in the birth of the United States.

Two years of war had passed before the Oneidas could truly prove themselves to the American cause. In the summer of 1777, British General John Burgoyne formulated a plan to cut New England off from the rest of the colonies, essentially crippling the patriots. Burgoyne planned to invade from Canada and rendezvous with Brevet Brigadier General Barry St. Leger in New York (Tiro 48). The British—who still had hopes of wooing the Oneidas—had informed the tribe that St. Leger would march through their lands to get to Fort Stanwix as a part of Burgoyne’s campaign.² With this information, the Oneidas alerted the patriots stationed at Fort Stanwix and the nearby New York Militia of the impending siege (Smith). When St. Leger

1. Haudenosaunee is the endonym (native name) of the Iroquois. The name *Iroquois* was assigned to the Confederacy by its enemies, and therefore the name *Haudenosaunee* is preferred and will be used throughout this essay.

2. Fort Stanwix was renamed Fort Schuyler during the war, but reverted to its original name afterwards. For the purpose of consistency, this essay will refer to it as Fort Stanwix.

arrived on August 2, the Oneidas helped defend the fort alongside patriot militiamen. According to Henry Powless, a son of one such Oneida defender, had the Oneidas “not been there to aid in its defence, the fort might not have been saved” (Tiro 48). However, the conflict was far from over, and the Oneidas would come to the patriots’ aid again in four days.

Upon receiving news of the siege, Brigadier General Nicholas Herkimer set out with roughly 700 men from the Tryon County Militia and sixty Oneida warriors to relieve the fort. On August 6, Herkimer’s troops were ambushed at Oriskany Creek by British forces accompanied by Mohawk and Seneca warriors. The proceeding battle would prove to be one of the bloodiest of the Revolution (Tiro 48-49). Amidst the gore, the Oneida Nation has revered the story of one particular couple to this day. Born in 1724, Han Yerry was a chief warrior of the Oneida Wolf Clan.³ Having been in his fifties at the Battle of Oriskany, his friend Hendrick Smith would later comment that he “was too old for the Service, yet used to go fearlessly into the fights” (Oneida Indian Nation, “Hanyery”). Early in the battle, Han Yerry was shot in his wrist, preventing him from fully operating his gun (“Oneidas”). Refusing to back down, he continued to fight with his tomahawk until his wife, Tyonajanegen, came to his aid (“The Oriskany Battle”; “Hanyery”).⁴ Tyonajanegen repeatedly loaded his gun for him, allowing Han Yerry to continue firing—all while she simultaneously fought the British forces with her pistol. In this fashion, the couple fought side by side for six hours (“Oneidas”). While the number of Oneidas who perished in battle is unknown, they took heavy casualties, and it is estimated that nearly half of those who accompanied the patriots perished. Oriskany was the first violent conflict between the nations of Haudenosaunee during the Revolution and the last, as a general feeling of brotherhood among the Six Nations had persisted even after the Oneidas split away to support the Americans. In later

3. Alternatively referred to as Hanyery or Tewahangarahken.

4. Alternatively referred to as Two Kettles Together.

confrontations, the Oneidas and British-aligned Haudenosaunee would refuse to engage with each other, a testament to the complex situation Native Americans found themselves in throughout the war. The bloodshed at Oriskany was not for nothing, however. As Xavier University history professor Karim Tiro explained, the Battle of Oriskany “sapped the willingness of British-allied Iroquois to persist in St. Leger’s siege. The departure of his Iroquois allies contributed to St. Leger’s decision to return to Canada, rather than rendezvous with Burgoyne. Thus the resistance offered by the Tryon County militia and its Oneida allies contributed to Burgoyne’s subsequent surrender at Saratoga” (49). The Oneidas would again prove themselves essential to the patriot cause at that very battle a month later.

In September, the Oneidas sent at least 150 warriors to join patriot forces led by General Horatio Gates (Tiro 49-50). At the Battle of Saratoga, the Oneidas provided reconnaissance and aid in direct combat, with a veteran stating that “They [were] Brave men and fought Like Bull dogs till [Burgoyne] surrendert.” Gates himself praised the Oneidas for their “great service” in thwarting the British, and even the infamous Prussian drill master Friedrich von Steuben commended the Oneida warriors for their ability to “keep the Enemy Compact, prevent Desertion in our Troops, [and] make us Masters of Intelligence” (50). For their essential service at Saratoga, ten Oneida received commissions at the ranks of captain and lieutenant, a testament to their aid to the American cause (51).

Another testimony to the Oneida Nation’s essential role in the Revolution was their contributions at Valley Forge. Just months after a decisive American victory at Saratoga, the war entered one of its darkest chapters as Washington’s troops starved and froze in the Pennsylvanian winter. Learning of their ally’s distress, a group sent by Oneida Chief Shenendoah traveled hundreds of miles with hundreds of bushels of corn in tow. This corn was of the white variety

rather than the typically consumed yellow type, and it had to be prepared differently to be edible. Polly Cooper, an Oneida woman who had accompanied the group, taught Washington's men how to cook the corn properly and stayed at the encampment even after the rest of her party returned home. After the war, she refused the Continental Army's attempts to pay her for her life-saving aid. Eventually, Martha Washington took Cooper to Philadelphia and bought her a shawl, hat, and bonnet, which Cooper accepted (Tiro 39). Had the Oneidas not come to the Americans' aid, the Valley Forge encampment would likely have been doomed to fail.

For their contributions to the patriots' cause, the Oneida Nation has rightfully earned the title as the United States' first ally. In December of 1777, the Continental Congress expressed their admiration for the Oneidas in an address to them, stating, "We have experienced your love, strong as the oak, and your fidelity, unchangeable as truth.... Like brave men, for glory you despised danger; you stood forth, in the cause of your friends, and ventured your lives in our battles" (United States Continental Congress 996). While the first foreign names that come to mind in the Revolution might be the larger-than-life Lafayette or von Steuben, the selfless support of Han Yerry, Tyonajanegen, Chief Shenendoah, Polly Cooper, and the hundreds of other Oneidas that aided in the fight for liberty must not be forgotten.

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Joel Healy is currently a Junior at Wyoming High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. He has a weighted GPA of 4.11 on a 4.0 scale and scored 760 out of 800 on the reading and writing portion of the Preliminary SAT, a Composite Score of 34 on the Preliminary ACT, and a perfect 5 on the 2024 AP Psychology test. Joel is also a member of the National Honor Society chapter at Wyoming High School.

Joel has participated in his high school's Model United Nations (MUN) delegation since his Sophomore year and is currently the club's Secretary of General Operations. He has attended three college-level conferences and has been awarded Honorable Mention (3rd place) at the University of Notre Dame's NDMUNC I, Outstanding Delegate (2nd place) at Indiana University's IndianaMUNC X, and Best Delegate (1st place) at Washington University's WUMUNS XVII. In addition to attending conferences, Joel staffed the eleventh iteration of Wyoming High School's annual conference, WYOMUN XI. Joel served as Chief of Staff on the Executive Committee and was the point person and crisis director for the committee *Unrest in Ulster: The Troubles*.

Outside of school, Joel is a member of the Teen Upstander Coalition (TUC) at the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. The TUC applies the lessons of the past to today in order to better the greater Cincinnati area and community. Currently, the TUC is focusing on helping those who are experiencing homelessness through providing direct resources and collaborating with local initiatives. Joel also serves as a historian on the TUC's leadership team.

Joel is currently enrolled in AP United States History, AP European History, and a class on Cincinnati history. He hopes to continue to follow his love of the subject in college and would like to pursue a Joint Honours degree in History and Law at Trinity College Dublin.