

# Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

February 2026, Issue 342

Garth Bryant—Iroquois Confederation

After Garth's August 2024 about the Iroquois, I wrote my summary for the newsletter. However, I begged Garth to write his own when time allowed. The time has come. Thank you, Garth, for the improved version!

## The Iroquois

*This narrative is a story told to give interested people a cursory understanding of Iroquois history. It is not a scholarly work nor should it be considered one. I first told it in a Power Point presentation to the Greenville History Group.*

*Much of the information I learned when I was researching this presentation was previously completely unknown to me. The extent of the Iroquois empire as well as the horrors suffered by the communities to our west during the Revolution had somehow been mostly absent in my education.*

*Even more telling, I managed to live almost 70 years in Greenville without ever being*

*aware that both Round Top and Rensselaerville had been attacked during the Revolution. How is that possible? Anyway, I hope you all find this interesting and enjoyable. As the author I have no desire to either make judgement or assign blame to the events described.*

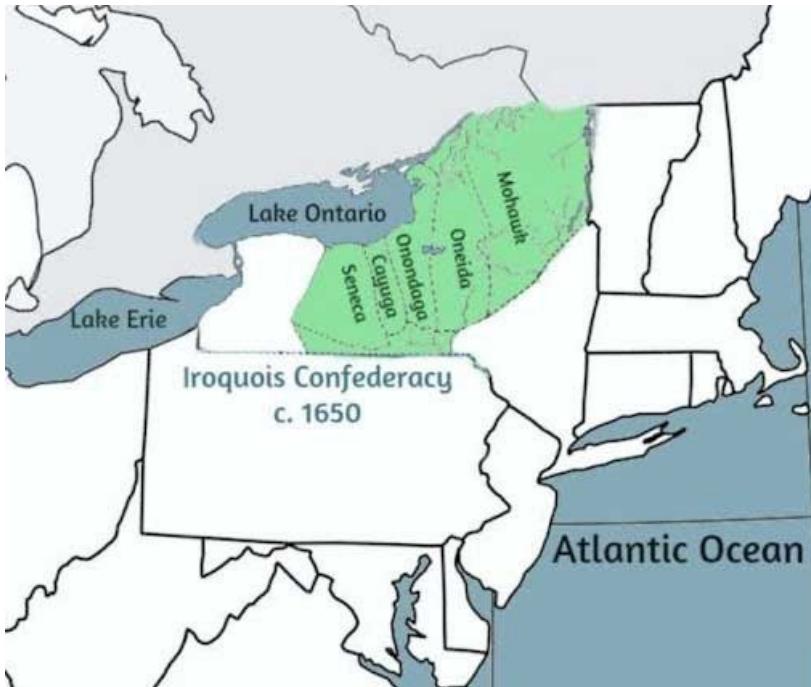
*I will close with one final observation. The Iroquois Confederation endured and even thrived during the first 250 years of their interaction with the Europeans. Once their nation shattered and they started to fight among themselves, they would last only six more years. Food for thought. Thank you for reading.*

When Europeans first came to upstate New York, they found it inhabited by a powerful Confederation of five tribes. These tribes were the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca. These tribes identified themselves as the Haudenosaunee, the people of the long house. The Europeans would call them the Iroquois.

Iroquois, however, was not the name of their Confederation but of the common language they shared. Almost all Native American tribes living on the eastern half of North America spoke either Iroquois or Algonquin. A shared language did not indicate an alliance. Some of the Iroquois' fiercest enemies, like the Hurons, shared the Iroquois language.

The Iroquois formed their Confederation sometime between 1150 and 1400. They controlled a territory bordered on the north by Lake Ontario and the Saint Lawrence River, on the east by Lake Champlain, on the west by the Genesee River, and on the south by the future NY-PA border. They used their combined power to defend this land and to make war on neighboring tribes.

In addition to hunting and gathering they were an agrarian culture growing a large number of crops to feed themselves. Their three main crops, known as the three sisters, were corn, beans and squash.



The first Europeans the Iroquois met were the French. In 1534 Jacques Cartier sailed up the St. Lawrence River and established the colony of New France. His first encounter with Native Americans was with a group of Iroquois fishing near the mouth of the river.

The French would have a difficult time getting large numbers of Colonists to come to the New World. First, the extreme northern climate limited the growing season. Secondly, the ongoing raids between the Iroquois and Algonquin tribes made it a dangerous place to live. The idea of Colonies was to make the mother country and its leading citizens rich. If no one could be convinced to move to New France, no one was going to make any money.

This could cause France to fall behind the other European countries in wealth and power. In 1609 a Frenchman named Samuel de Champlain came to the Americas to solve this problem. There was nothing he could do about the weather but he was determined to solve the Iroquois problem. In his own words, "I had come with no other intention than to make war." Champlain, with a combined force of Frenchmen and Canadian Indians, paddled south down the lake that in the future would bear his name.

On the southern end of the lake near present day Fort Ticonderoga he met a group of Mohawks in battle. The French were armed with guns which the Iroquois had never before seen. The Mohawks were defeated and a number of tribal leaders were killed setting off an animosity between the Iroquois and the French that would last the next 200 years.

The more pressing immediate problem was that for the first time the Iroquois were unable to defend their homeland. If this problem couldn't be solved the very future of the Iroquois Confederation was at risk.

Then in 1624 a solution to this problem presented itself to the Iroquois. The Dutch who had claimed the Hudson River Valley opened a trading post near the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk rivers. They called it Fort Orange and it would grow into present day Albany. Holland was a much smaller nation in population than England, France, and Spain who were the other European nations competing for control of the New World.

The Dutch interest was in wealth through trade, not colonization. While New Amsterdam (New York City) was established and some Dutch citizens did come to the Hudson River Valley and establish farms, the Dutch simply didn't have enough excess citizens to populate a world-wide system of colonies. They were here to acquire wealth through trade. In upstate New York the single most valuable trade commodity was beaver pelts.

In order to both hunt beaver and defend their hunting lands from the Canadian tribes allied to the French, the Iroquois needed guns, powder, and bullets. These the Dutch were willing to supply. With this agreement the so-called Beaver Wars started.

Before this trade could be established there was one issue that needed to be dealt with. The Iroquois didn't live on the land around Fort Orange. The land adjacent to the river in the upper Hudson Valley was the home of the Mohican people. One of their villages was located in Greenville on the Freehold Flats. This tribe, made famous in James Fenimore Cooper's novel "The Last of the Mohicans", lived for the most part peacefully with their much more powerful Iroquois neighbors.



The Iroquois had no intention in letting the Mohicans serve as a middle man in the beaver trade. They attacked and quickly defeated the Mohicans. The last battle was said to have been fought on an island in the Hudson River. The Mohican survivors fled to the east side of the lower Hudson and into Connecticut where their descendants would open the Mohegan Sun Casino 350 years later.

These events started the continuing cycle of the beaver wars. Every Iroquois male wanted and needed a gun. No Indian tribe ever learned how to produce one. Every year they had to trade for bullets and powder as well as acquire more guns. The only thing the Dutch would take in trade were furs.

Beavers are an incredibly easy animal to hunt. They don't hide in the forest. You walk up any watershed and you can find their dams and lodges. You knock a hole in their dam and they are instinctually driven to come and repair it. When they do that, they are easy to kill. In 1626, the first year of the trade, the Iroquois supplied 7,250 pelts. By 1628 the number exceeded 10,000. The Iroquois were quickly wiping out the beaver in their lands.

In 1638, unable to resupply themselves with the beaver on their own lands, they attacked and defeated the Wenro and Petun tribes expanding their hunting lands to the Niagara frontier. This expansion would continue for the next 40 years.

In 1649 they would attack their ancient enemy, the Huron, in their land between Lake Ontario and Lake Huron. Of the estimated 30,000 Huron people living there only around 3,000 survived and fled to Montreal. Two years later in 1651 the Iroquois destroyed the Neutral nation at the west end of Lake Ontario. In 1656 they destroyed the Erie nation and drove the Shawnee and Miami people out of Ohio. At this point the Iroquois controlled all the northern waterways and therefore the entire western beaver trade.

1664 would bring tremendous change to the Iroquois people. The Dutch surrendered their New Netherland colony to the British without a shot being fired. New Amsterdam became New York City and Fort Orange became Albany. Britain was interested in empire, not just trade. A small country with a large population, there was no way for the poor to acquire land in England.

In addition, in England the land holdings were inherited by the oldest son. Second and third sons were expected to join the military or a large company and go abroad in the empire to make their fortune. In America, land not beaver pelts became the pathway to wealth. These young aristocrats did service for the King in exchange for land grants. They could then sell or rent them to England's poor who willingly came to the New World looking to acquire farmland of their own.

The British were much less willing to trade guns to the Iroquois. After all, they had intentions of acquiring large parts of their lands. The Iroquois, left with no other choice, signed a treaty with their long time enemy, the French.

With this treaty guaranteeing the safety of their homeland, the Iroquois accelerated their conquest of neighboring tribes. By 1670 the Potawatomi, Chippewa, and Ottawa were driven out of Michigan. A travelling French missionary reported that the entire area of the Great Lakes and Ohio River Valley had been depopulated by Iroquois warfare.

In 1672 they took over the rich hunting grounds of Kentucky. Next in 1677 they wiped out the Susquehannock people in eastern Pennsylvania. In 1679 they attacked and destroyed the Mannahoac nation which would disappear from history. 1680 would see them finish their conquest all the way to the Mississippi River forcing the Fox, Sauk, Miami, and Shawnee to flee west of the river.

During this period, they would also cross Lake Ontario and establish seven villages on the north shore. They were at the height of their power. They controlled everything from the Hudson to the Mississippi east and west and everything from the north shore of the Great Lakes to the North Carolina border north to south.

How had they managed this?

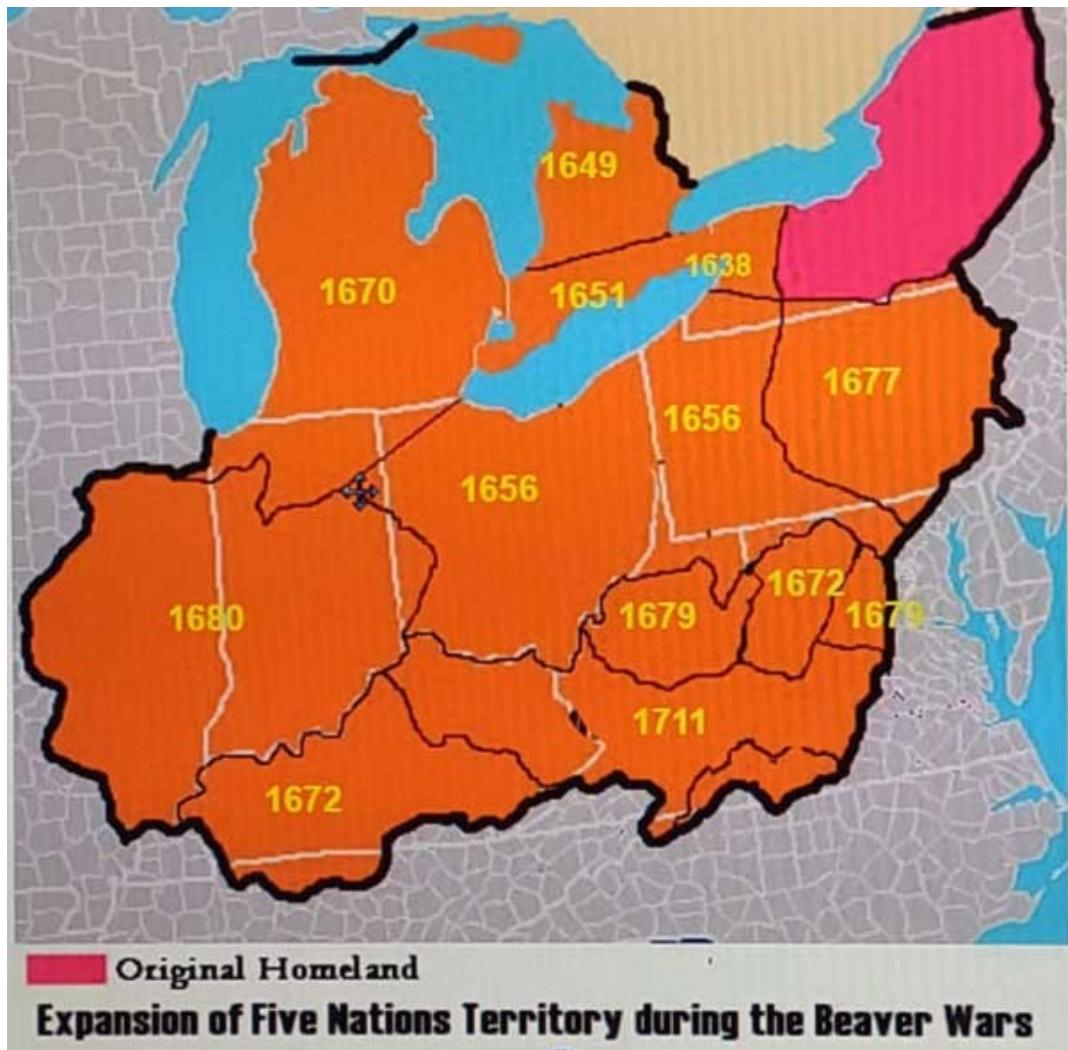
They used the same tactics in all these wars. First attacks by overwhelming force on isolated villages. The villages were destroyed and the inhabitants were either killed or captured. The goods and food were taken as spoils of war and the villages burned to the ground so they couldn't be reoccupied.

In a couple of years, once enough villages of a tribe had been destroyed, the remaining few either fled or agreed to be adopted into the various Iroquois tribes. The Iroquois used the concept described as 'mourning wars' to replenish their population. Defeated tribes were offered a place within the longhouse structure essentially making them part of the nation. Captured individuals, often women and children, were often ritually adopted, given new names and incorporated into families and clans. These policies ensured that even though they were almost constantly at war the numbers in their confederation continued to grow.

In 1688, their 22 years of peace with the French came to an end. The French and English went to war in Europe. These wars spilled over to North America. The two countries would fight four separate wars lasting 33 years during the next 75-year period.

The French were tremendously outnumbered by the British in North America. They needed Native American allies to fight these wars. The Iroquois, always suspicious of the French, were reluctant to fight the British who they lived in close proximity to. They certainly weren't going to fight each other.

Needing allies, the French decided to support the tribes displaced by the Iroquois' march westward. They were almost all past allies and trading partners. The French decided to attack Iroquois villages in their traditional homeland. This caused the Iroquois to aban-



don much of their western territory and return home to defend their villages.

It also drove the Iroquois back into the welcoming arms of the British who now needed them in their wars with France. The western tribes quickly reoccupied their now abandoned homelands and joined the French in its wars with England.

In 1763, after 75 years of on again off again fighting, the British finally defeated the French. The French colony of New France including the cities of Quebec and Montreal became British territory. The French were expelled from all territory east of the Mississippi River.

While the western tribes continued to resist the British occupation of the Great Lakes re-

gion, the Iroquois were at peace. After 150 years of warfare the Iroquois were on the winning side. The peace would last just 12 years.

With the French defeated, the British could get back to their original purpose of getting wealthy selling land in North America. These sales followed a common plan. First, find some Native American who was willing to sign over a section of land. Then pay him some trivial amount and declare that the land was legally bought and paid for.

The truth of the matter was almost none of these individuals had any right to sell off their tribe's land. In addition, much of the land sold was not in the possession of the tribe or individual that sold it.

An example of this is the early Hudson River land purchases by the Dutch and later the English. Almost all were signed by Mohicans. This tribe had been defeated and expelled by the Iroquois the first year the Dutch had arrived in Fort Orange. Nonetheless, recorded sales by random members of this tribe over many years following this expulsion are the original legal basis for almost all land on the west bank of the upper Hudson River Valley to this day. This practice would be repeated time and again as Europeans spread across North America.

With the French and Indian wars over, speculators immediately moved over the Appalachian Mountains and began acquiring and selling land in these newly acquired British territories. This of course caused trouble with the Native American tribes. In order to stop this practice, the British Parliament passed The Great Proclamation of 1763.

This well-intentioned law outlawed land purchases and sales west of the Appalachians by anyone other than British officials. Like many well intended laws this one led to disaster.

First of all, the colonists resented this law as it cut them out of the profitable land business. This was one of the early grievances that led to the Revolution. Secondly, the line on the map was open to interpretation especially in the North. British officials used the monopoly granted to them to personally acquire millions of acres of land.

One of the biggest beneficiaries was Sir William Johnson, superintendent of Indian affairs in the northern district. Johnstown, NY still bears his name and his home still stands there. Johnson's deputy was George Croghan. Croghan was the father-in-law of Greenville's very own Major Augustine Prevost.

Between the French and Indian War and the Revolution all three were deeply involved in

land speculation. Johnson was married to and had three children with a women named Catherine Weisenberg. During his time as Indian Superintendent he also conceived and had eight children with a women named Molly Brant who was living with him in Johnstown. She was a full-blooded Mohawk Indian.

During those years as Johnson was getting rich selling off Iroquois land, it seems that on a number of occasions he deferred to Molly to protect Mohawk land interests at the expense of other Iroquois tribes. The Iroquois tribe that suffered disproportionately from these decisions would seem to be the neighboring Oneida. These hard feelings would sow the seeds of discontent that would lead to the ending of the Iroquois Confederation.

In 1775 tensions boiled over and America revolted against England. This conflict put the Iroquois in a difficult position. The Iroquois had long supported the British. However, large-scale land sales by people like Johnson had moved large numbers of Americans onto the New York frontier where they lived in peace with the Iroquois.

These Americans were also divided between those loyal to the crown and those calling for liberty. Johnson had just recently died and no one had filled that void. The Iroquois could not come to an agreement. The Onondaga called for neutrality.

The Mohawk, Cayuga, and Seneca supported the British believing that an American defeat would expel all the settlers from their homeland. The Oneida believing they had been mistreated by the British supported the American cause. Most of the Tuscarora who had been admitted to the Iroquois Confederation in 1722 sided with the Oneida. In a central Onondaga village, the great council fire which had burned as a symbol of the Iroquois Confederation for hundreds of years was extinguished.

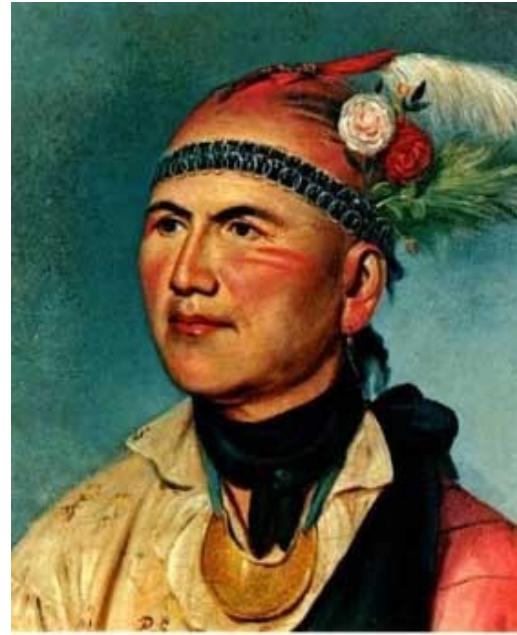
The supporters for liberty on the New York frontier outnumbered the Loyalists and quickly prevailed politically in the early stages of the war. The Tories either had to downplay their loyalties or move west or north to British controlled areas. The most eastern of the Iroquois, the Mohawks, found their villages indefensible and moved west and southwest.

These two groups along with the Seneca and Cayuga would join with the British forces in trying to put down the rebellion. Two of the leading actors in this effort were an oddly joined pair. The first was Sir John Johnson. He was the son of William Johnson and Catherine Weisenberg. He would take a leading role as a general in a Tory militia unit called the King's Royal Regiment.

The second was Chief Joseph Brant. He was the brother of Molly Brant. Molly of course was the mother to John Johnson's eight half brothers and sisters. These two would lead the fight against American independence on the New York frontier. No two had more to lose. Johnson was fighting to protect the millions of acres his father had secured in his numerous land deals. Brant was fighting for both his nation's homeland and his sister's fortune.

In the early stages of the war no one really thought the Americans could win. Britain had the most powerful military in the world. It was thought by most that the rebellion would soon be put down. People on the New York frontier assumed that they would shortly be back living together and the hostility was kept to a minimum. All this would end with the events of 1777.

In 1777 the British designed a plan to put an end to the revolt. They realized that New England was the focal point of the Revolution. It was their plan to sever New England from the rest of the colonies so it could be isolated and destroyed. It was a really good plan. It would fail because of a combination



## Joseph Brant

of British hubris and the bravery of the Americans and their Oneida allies.

The plan called for a three-pronged attack. General Howe would attack north out of New York City. General Burgoyne would attack south from Montreal down the Champlain Valley. General St. Leger would attack eastward from Fort Oswego. He was to capture Fort Stanwix, march down the Mohawk Valley destroying the Patriot settlements that were vital in providing food to the American army as he went. They would all meet in Albany effectively cutting the colonies in half.

The plan went off the rails almost immediately. Howe, who was senior to Burgoyne, decided he had a better plan. Without bothering to tell Burgoyne he decided to embark his troops on the ships of the Royal Navy and sail south to Philadelphia rather than marching north and supporting the other British forces. He believed that if he captured the American capitol the rebellion would be over and he would be the hero that made it happen. He did indeed capture Philadelphia but this tactical victory instead of ending the re-

bellion would lead to America winning the war.

The western prong of the attack would be the next to fail. St. Leger's army failed to capture Fort Stanwix. He decided to lay siege to this vital post. When word of this reached Albany the New York Militia aided by their Oneida allies rushed westward to relieve the siege. They were ambushed at the Battle of Oriskany. Even though they suffered heavy casualties, they fought bravely. Instead of retreating they stayed and fought it out. As this lengthy battle raged the defenders of Fort Stanwix showing great initiative, sallied out of the fort, and captured or destroyed all of St Leger's supplies. When the battle ended St Leger, unable to feed his army, was forced to retreat to Fort Oswego.

This left Burgoyne totally unsupported, marching around northern New York. He was forced into a number of engagements near Saratoga. Due to the excellent leadership of officers like Benedict Arnold and the superb marksmanship of Daniel Morgan's riflemen, Burgoyne was defeated and forced to surrender his whole army. This surrender was the turning point of the war as it convinced the French to enter the war on the American side.

With the British army defeated in northern New York, Britain changed its strategy. Howe was replaced as commander of British forces in North America by Henry Clinton. He moved the majority of British military strength to the southern colonies. The southern colonies held a higher percentage of Loyalists.

This new strategy called for using these loyalists to help knock the southern colonies out of the war. For the first time the Iroquois and the New York Loyalists had to face the very real prospect that the Americans could win. Faced with the possibility that they could lose everything, they joined with the remaining British troops stationed in the Great Lakes to launch a scorched earth campaign against the settlements on the New York frontier.

Their aim was to depopulate these communities so they couldn't supply food stores to the Continental army. The Schoharie Valley alone was producing 80,000 bushels of grain a year. These attacks would follow the Iroquois' long-time strategy of attacking isolated communities with overwhelming strength.

They first killed or took prisoner the residents, then stole everything they could carry and burned the rest to the ground. This, of course, led to great slaughter including many women and children. Prisoners were either taken back to Iroquois villages and ritually tortured or marched all the way to Detroit or Fort Niagara and sold to the British. It was made all the worse by the participation of the Loyalists who were these people's former friends and neighbors.

The first attack came against Fairfield near Little Falls on March 17, 1778. It was followed by an attack on neighboring Manheim two weeks later. Further east the town of Ephratha was attacked on April 30th. One month later on May 30th, Cobleskill was attacked and 22 people were killed and five others taken captive. A week later on June 6th the small community of Springfield on the north end of Lake Otsego was burned to the ground. The few survivors fled. No one was left to count the dead.

The attacks then shifted south and on July 3rd the Wyoming Valley in northern Pennsylvania was attacked and 361 were slaughtered. Back north on July 18th, Andrus Town south of Herkimer was attacked and destroyed. German Flats was next. It was attacked and burned on September 17th, three were killed and 719 were left homeless. On November 11th in the last attack of 1778 before winter set, Cherry Valley was attacked. There 44 were killed and 41 captured.

It must be remembered that these settlements were tiny. Cobleskill at that time had around 15 families. In addition to these recorded attacks, numerous isolated farms were attacked

where no one survived to record the event. These losses were catastrophic and could not be sustained. The savagery of these attacks was breathtaking.

Even though the British Army and the Loyalist militia led these attacks, they allowed their Iroquois allies to both torture the captives and mutilate the dead. The infuriated Americans responded with their own acts of barbarism and no quarter was offered by either side.

The next spring started no better. In May 1779 Cobleskill was attacked for the second time. The town was destroyed and the survivors fled. The frontier was in flames. Governor Clinton of New York reported to Washington that unless something was done the frontier of New York would be pushed back to the Hudson Valley.

Washington responded with a brilliant strategy. France's entry into the war had forced the British to abandon Philadelphia. They couldn't risk having their fleet blockaded in Delaware Bay by the French Fleet. The British re-embarked their Army and returned to New York City.

Rather than chase the British back to New York, Washington gave a third of his army to General Sullivan and ordered him to attack up the Susquehanna Valley and destroy the Iroquois homeland. The New York militia would join the campaign and attack from the east. At the same time General Van Schaick would attack west out of Fort Stanwix and destroy the Onondaga villages. By this time, the Onondaga's supposed neutrality meant nothing to the Americans.

Surprisingly, Sullivan met very limited opposition. Many of the Iroquois fighting age men had already left their villages to begin their attacks on New York's settlements. After one minor battle, he marched against mostly light and scattered resistance all the way to the Genesee River. He would lose only around forty men in total. He destroyed more than forty villages. He captured or destroyed 160,000 bushels of corn

and huge amounts of other food stores. He cut down the orchards of fruit trees the Iroquois had planted and burned the growing crops. He destroyed everything else he couldn't carry away.

By destroying their villages, he severely diminished the power of the Iroquois. The Iroquois fled westward to Fort Niagara where they were forced to beg the British for food to survive the winter.

In the two years following Sullivan's campaign, Johnson and Brant tried to reignite the frontier war. The destruction of the closest Iroquois villages made these raids harder to carry out. Although much reduced in number, the raids were bloody.

On April 24, 1780, Cherry Valley was attacked again. Thirty were killed and 71 wounded or captured. On May 21 Johnson led an attack on his prewar home of Johnstown. He allowed his Indian allies to slaughter his boyhood friends and neighbors. On August 2nd, Fort Plains was attacked. Forty-five were killed and 100 homes were burned.

Next, the Strope Farm in Round Top, NY was raided. Two were killed and one was taken prisoner. On October 17, 1780, in one of the biggest raids of the war, Johnson attacked the Schoharie Valley with 1,200 men. The entire year's harvest was destroyed and approximately 40 were killed. It was only through the resolute defense of Timothy Murphy and the other militiamen that a huge slaughter was avoided.

The following summer the attacks resumed. On July 9, 1781, Sharon Springs was attacked with 40 casualties. Next would be the September 1st attack at the Dietz Farm in Rensselaerville. There, eight were killed and three taken prisoner. On October 25th, it was Johnstown's turn again. A further 12 were killed and 29 wounded or captured.

As was now common practice at this stage of the war, the New York militia and their Oneida allies rushed west to fight off this raid. As the

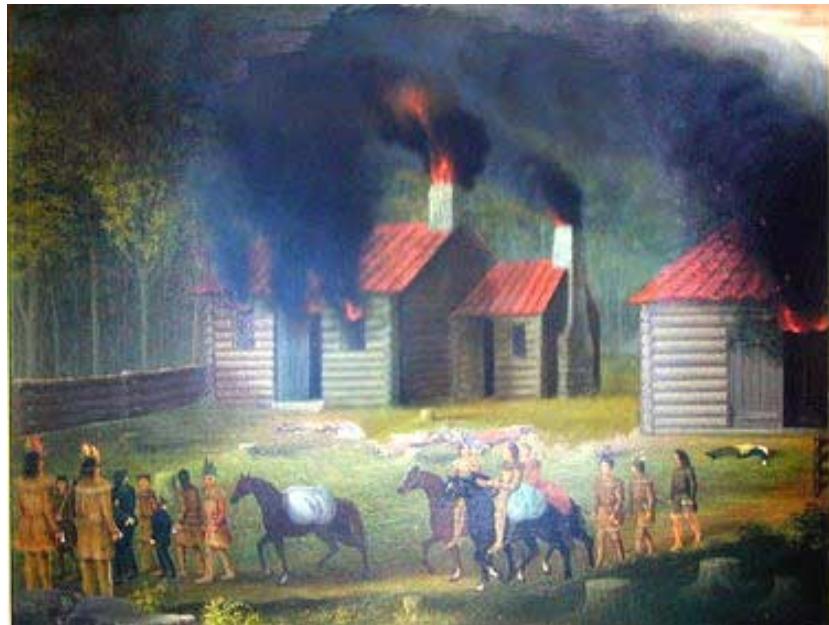
British, Tories, and Iroquois retreated northward, notorious Tory Walter Butler was shot and killed by an Oneida Warrior.

Butler's wartime acts of savagery would later be immortalized in director John Ford's 1939 classic, "Drums Along the Mohawk." In this movie, starring Henry Fonda, Butler served as the inspiration for the evil Tory character named Caldwell. Perhaps as much as any other incident, the American-born Butler attacking American settlements while fighting for the British being killed by a native-born Iroquois defending these settlements while fighting for the Americans demonstrated the convoluted alliances spawned by the Revolution.

Unbeknownst to the participants, days before this second Johnstown raid, a seminal moment in the war had occurred. On October 19, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered to Washington at Yorktown. This effectively ended the war although the peace treaty wouldn't be signed for two more years.

On the frontier, life began to return to normal. With the peace treaty being negotiated the Tories and Iroquois realized they had backed the losing side and were going to lose everything. In an act of spite, 300 of them decided to seek revenge. The British Army refused to participate in this senseless act. In June 1782, eight months after the Yorktown battle effectively ended the war, the Tories and Iroquois attacked a mill in Little Falls, New York where twenty people were working.

The attackers set the mill on fire and killed or captured the workers as they fled the burning building. The dead were scalped and some of the captives were tortured to death on the spot. Two workers survived by hiding in the tail race under the water wheel as the mill burned. This was the last raid of the war.



Dietz Farm —Knox, Rensselaerville

On September 3, 1783, the Treaty of Paris was signed officially ending the Revolution. No provision at all was made for the treatment of the Indian tribes that fought in the war. The savagery of the wartime fighting on the New York frontier ensured that the Iroquois would not be allowed to stay in their homeland in New York.

A few Seneca remained in extreme western NY and Pennsylvania. The majority of the Iroquois were allowed to migrate to Canada by the British. Joseph and Molly Brant joined this migration. Most would settle in lands north and west of Toronto. Ironically this was the historic homeland of the Huron, a tribe the Iroquois had annihilated 135 years earlier.

Only the Oneida and their Tuscarora allies were allowed to stay. In reward for their support of the American cause they were given a portion of the Oneida's traditional homeland on the east end of Oneida Lake. Almost immediately, unscrupulous land developers started to whittle away at this land. Finally, the New York Legislature stepped in and put an end to this. The Oneida, like all Native Americans, wouldn't achieve full US citizenship until the passing of the Indian Citizen Act in 1924.