

Onaquaga's Role in the American Revolution

ONAQUAGA became a "hub of the Border Wars" in the years leading up to the American Revolution. On the easternmost border of the 1763 Fort Stanwix Treaty Line separating Iroquois territory from the white settlements of Tryon County, Onaquaga became a place of unrest. Native people were fearful of losing their ancestral land and divided on which side to take in the conflict between the British and Colonists.

By far the most important figure in the Border Wars was Joseph Brant, a Mohawk Chief who would become the unofficial head of the Iroquois Confederacy throughout the Revolution. His Indian name was Thayendanegea. Brant had been schooled early on by missionaries in Connecticut and returned to his own people as an interpreter for the Rev. Charles Smith at the Onaquaga Mission in 1763. Soon after he joined the Iroquois Contingent aiding the British against the Delaware Indian, but he still remained connected to Onaquaga by marrying into the family of a chief there. Though his established home was at Canajoharie, Onaquaga was his second home. In reminiscing later in his life, he said "At Oghwaga, I owned another farm with a comfortable house of squared logs, a flourishing orchard of apple, pear and peach trees, fifty acres of cleared land and fifteen to twenty head of live stock. Also I owned a small island in the river on which improvements were begun."

Brant rose in power receiving commissions from the British and in 1779 was elected to "Colonel of Indians". A transformation was occurring at Onaquaga during these years as more Mohawks displaced by the Treaty of Ft. Stanwix were gathering at the settlement and more neutrality-minded Oneidas and Tuscaroras were leaving it. At the onset of the American Revolution, Onaquaga had gone from being a trading post to a mission station to a military outpost and recruiting station for Indians and Loyalists. Joseph Brant was its commander.

In September 1778, little more than two years after the Colonies declared independence from England, Governor George Clinton made it clear that there would be "no peace on the frontier until Achquago was destroyed" it being "the principal Place of Rendezvous for the Enemy". He wrote of his concerns to General George Washington in mid-October, unaware at the time that Col. William Butler stationed at Schoharie and the 4th Pennsylvania Regiment had already undertaken the expedition against Onaquaga. In Butler's own words, he and his men "took Possession of the Town about 11 o'Clock at Night without interruption; the Enemy having that day left in the greatest Confusion. It was the finest Indian Town I ever saw; on both sides of the River; there was about 40 good houses, Square logs, Shingles and stone Chimneys, good Floors, glass windows etc." The entire settlement was burned to the ground.

The Clinton Sullivan Expedition of August 1779 was the final blow as American troops completely destroyed every Iroquois village from the Susquehanna River westward to Seneca Lake. Caught up in the war between England and America and the struggle to keep their ancestral lands, the Iroquois were ultimately defeated. The Oneidas sold the State of New York the present counties of Broome and Chenango in 1785 for \$11,500. Most of the Onaquagas were driven from their lands north to Canada. Good Peter (Agwrondongwas), longtime Oneida Chief at Onaquaga and devout Christian, took part in the meeting that year to settle the fate of the valley. In the end, they lost it all.

First White Settlers Arrive in the Valley

THE ONAQUAGA VALLEY was already witnessing the arrival of New Englanders in 1785. Windsor's first settler was John Doolittle who came from Connecticut with his wife and three children in 1786. That same year, his son David became the first white child born in Broome County. In 1788, surveyor James Cockburn and others arrived in the valley to pace off land boundaries on a 14,720 acre tract in present-day North Windsor and South Colesville known as the Hammond Patent.

In 1786, a man named Robert Harpur secured a tract of some 60,000 acres of land in the northern part of Windsor. Known as the Warren Patent, much of this land would be set off from Windsor to form the Town of Colesville in 1821. Scottish born, Harpur came to this country in 1761 and rose in stature to be a delegate to the convention which drafted the first constitution of New York State. Harpur College, the forerunner of Binghamton University, was named after Robert Harpur, as was Harpursville—Windsor's neighbor to the north.

By 1791, there were some 300 settlers living near the site of Old Onaquaga. Some had fought in the war, and some no doubt had heard of the beautiful valley of the Upper Susquehanna from missionaries living here only a decade or so before. The first settlers began making their homes on lands that had been cleared of forests by the Onaquagas. On Major Josiah Stow's plot on the west side of the river there were a great number of ancient apple trees which were of great size bearing large apples of excellent quality.

Early pioneer life in the valley was hard on the settlers. Here is a story of their spirit and perseverance:

"In about the year 1794, there was what was called the pumpkin freshet, in the month of August; the Susquehanna rising much above its usual height, and sweeping down in its tide the productions of the fields' corn, pumpkins, potatoes, &c. A great scarcity was the natural consequence. During this scarcity, Maj. Stow shouldered a bushel of wheat, in which the whole neighborhood had a share, and started for Wattle's ferry to mill, a distance of more than forty miles, carrying his grist the whole distance on foot. He got his wheat ground, and returned in the same treading manner. During his journey he purchased one quarter of a pound of tea—at that time a rare article with the settlers—to help out the repast, which he anticipated at his return. Upon his arrival home, the neighbors, who held an interest in the grist of wheat—and most probably others also—collected at the major's house, to hold a sort of thanksgiving; which was to be celebrated by preparing and partaking of as sumptuous a feast as their stores would admit. Out of the flour they made short-cake; but having no hog's lard, they would have come short of this luxury; had not the Major bethought himself of some bear's grease, which he had in the house, and which answered as a substitute. Their tea was quite a new article to them, for which they were not prepared. They had no teakettle, no teapot, no teacups. Instead of the first, a small kettle was furnished to boil the water in; they put the tea into the same to steep it; and instead of cups and saucers, they used a wooden bowl, which they passed around from one to the other. Still they made a merry cheer of it; felt the glow of sociability; and told each his best anecdote. These early inhabitants, when they became old, would tell the story to their children and more recent inhabitants, with moistened eyes; but said, it was then a heart-felt thanksgiving."



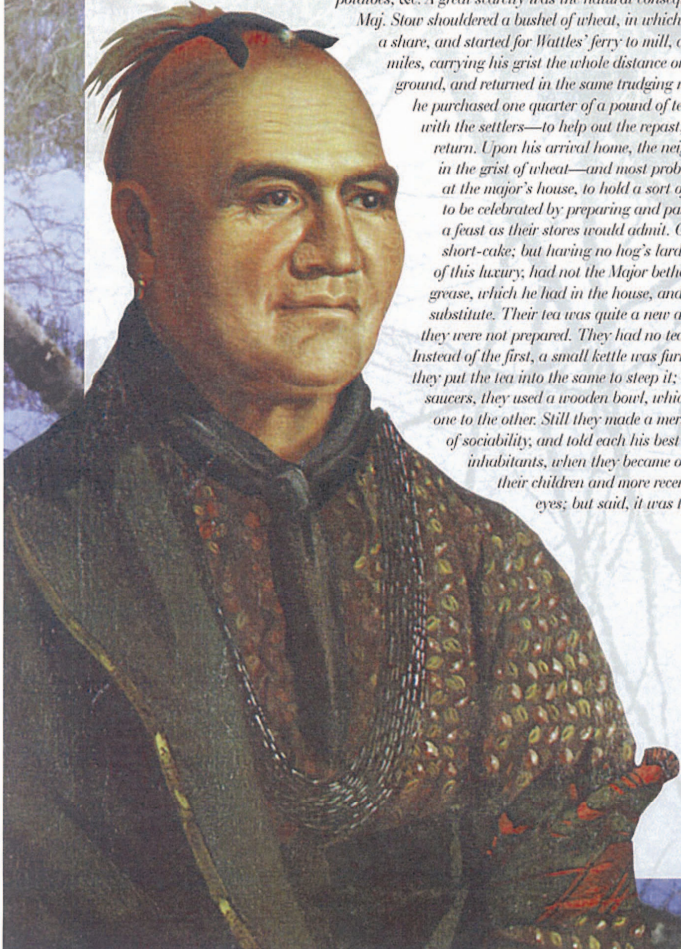
Good Peter (Peter Agwrondongwas)

Portrait by John Trumbull of Good Peter (Peter Agwrondongwas), 18th Century Chief of the Oneida Indians at Onaquaga. —Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery



David Doolittle

Photo of David Doolittle, son of John Doolittle, born in North Windsor in December 1786. He is certified to be the first White child born in Broome County.



Portrait by Ezra Ames of Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea), Mohawk leader who married the daughter of an Onaquaga chief and had a farm there. Brant used Onaquaga as a military base during the American Revolution. —Courtesy of the New York State Historical Association