

# War of Nations - Revolutionary Conflict in The Finger Lakes - Part I

By- Leif HerrGesell

Canandaigua Town Historian

**H**istory presents many challenges to us today. Filtering past actions and decisions through our sensibilities is one of the most prevalent, but of course we face a dearth of information on many topics and lonely perspectives as opposed to 360-degree views. In nearly all cases we suffer an incomplete understanding of the forces at work culturally, economically and politically for events prior to the Civil War.

The Sullivan Campaign of the American Revolution is one of the most misunderstood events in New York State history and one which is seminal to the development of the Central and Western portions of the State as well as the eventual dissolution and legal displacement of the Iroquois Confederacy.

The American Revolution was not guaranteed success when hostilities commenced on April 19, 1775 on the Green in Lexington Massachusetts. In fact, while American Separatists, known as Sons of Liberty, had been planning for a conflict for years - putting all of the Colonies on a war footing was a monumental task and resources were not always adequate or willingly shared. Colonies still tended, even after the Declaration a year later, to think in terms of themselves rather than as a united front. Contributions to the "National" forces known as the Continental Line and Continental Navy were begrudgingly given, often of poorer quality and when they were donated to the cause, they were subject to corruption, mismanagement, and bickering.



This applied to supplies of weapons, troops, foodstuffs, equipment, naval stores and livestock, including the horses and oxen necessary for transportation. General George Washington divided his efforts between encouraging the Continental Congress to support the fledgling army and boldly winning important victories in the midst of ever emerging catastrophe. The forces under Washington suffered stunning defeats, rare draws and a few but important critical successes. His most significant victory was simply keeping his army intact and stubbornly refusing to give in despite long odds.

British commanders relied on a strategy of divide and conquer. They sought to sever the north from the south and to cutoff New York from New England. They urged their First Nations allies to harass the frontiers in Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, Virginia and the deep south - hoping that a frontier war would drain off valuable Patriot manpower and resources.

The Mohawk Valley in Central New York was a strategic and relatively new grain growing region in the Northeast, providing important stocks of wheat and corn to the separatist cause. This region was situated between Albany on the east and Rome to the west. It was the traditional land of the Mohawk – Keepers of the “Eastern Door” in the Iroquoian Confederation.

Many Mohawks had grown friendly with their “English” neighbors since the early 1750s. Their support, however, was given to the Americans who remained loyal to King George.

Their Seneca Brothers in our part of New York who had supported the French against the British in the last war, now also allied with the British and the loyal colonists against the colonial separatists. They looked to ally with the power they thought was the strongest and most likely to prevail in any contest of arms. No wise leader chooses to make alliance with those who seem most likely to lose. So too went most of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) nations other than the centrally located Oneida who chose to ally with the Americans.

The Seneca were the preeminent military force in the Confederacy but by the 1770s their population was in a slow decline. The loyal colonists who had themselves recently been residents of the Mohawk Valley, raided the Mohawk Valley from Wolf Island in the St. Lawrence and from Ft. Niagara in the West.



The most successful raids were led by Col. John Butler, Lieutenant Colonel Sir John Johnson and Mohawk Chief Thayendanegea also known as British Captain, Joseph Brant (see image above). All of these men were related thru marriage or were close friends and had been leading citizens in the Mohawk Valley before being driven out for their support of their King. Their lands were seized by torch bearing Sons of Liberty and in some cases the Loyalists were driven into the night with little more than what they could carry into the wilderness as they fled through the trackless forest to Canada. They were filled with a burning desire for vengeance and hoped to punish the Patriots and retrieve their lands by ending the rebellion.

The success of their raids in 1777, 1778, 1779 and 1780 at places like Cherry Valley in New York and on Wyoming Valley, Pennsylvania raised concerns all along the northern frontier, threatened the important supply of grain in places like Fort Plain, Canajoharie and Cherry Valley New York and fueled separatist fears. Raids begat reprisals and reprisals spurred more and bloodier raids.

There was revenge and brutality on both sides in the Mohawk and while often viewed as a side show to the main event battles at places like Long Island, Monmouth Court House, White Plains, Cowpens and others, the New York frontier was the home of England's most valuable ally in the Colonies.

The Seneca and their allies like the Delaware (Lenni Lenape), Shawnee, Cherokee and others provided a body of seasoned irregulars who, though lacking in heavy weapons like cannons and organized troop formations, excelled at hit and run, smash and grab operations.

Civilian casualties during their raids provided ample horror which was quickly used to mobilize American sentiment against the British advisers and native troops up and down the Appalachian chain and as far west as Detroit.

Seneca war parties were no different than Patriot militias in that they were civilian warriors representing the interests of their communities in the titanic struggle to either form a new nation or retain control of traditional lands and British dominance. American ranging companies, a kind of 18<sup>th</sup> century commando force, often committed the exact same brutal attacks against native communities like that at Onoquaga on the northwestern edge of the Catskill region. The raids in 1778 on Cobuskill, German Flats and the village of Cherry Valley just below the Mohawk resulted in significant losses of life and property for Patriot Americans living in the Mohawk. Families loyal to King George were also sometimes mistakenly burned out and killed.

On the international front both Holland and France were especially interested in seeing Britain fail, as a weaker United Kingdom without its North American colonies, would level out international trading- currently dominated by Britain.

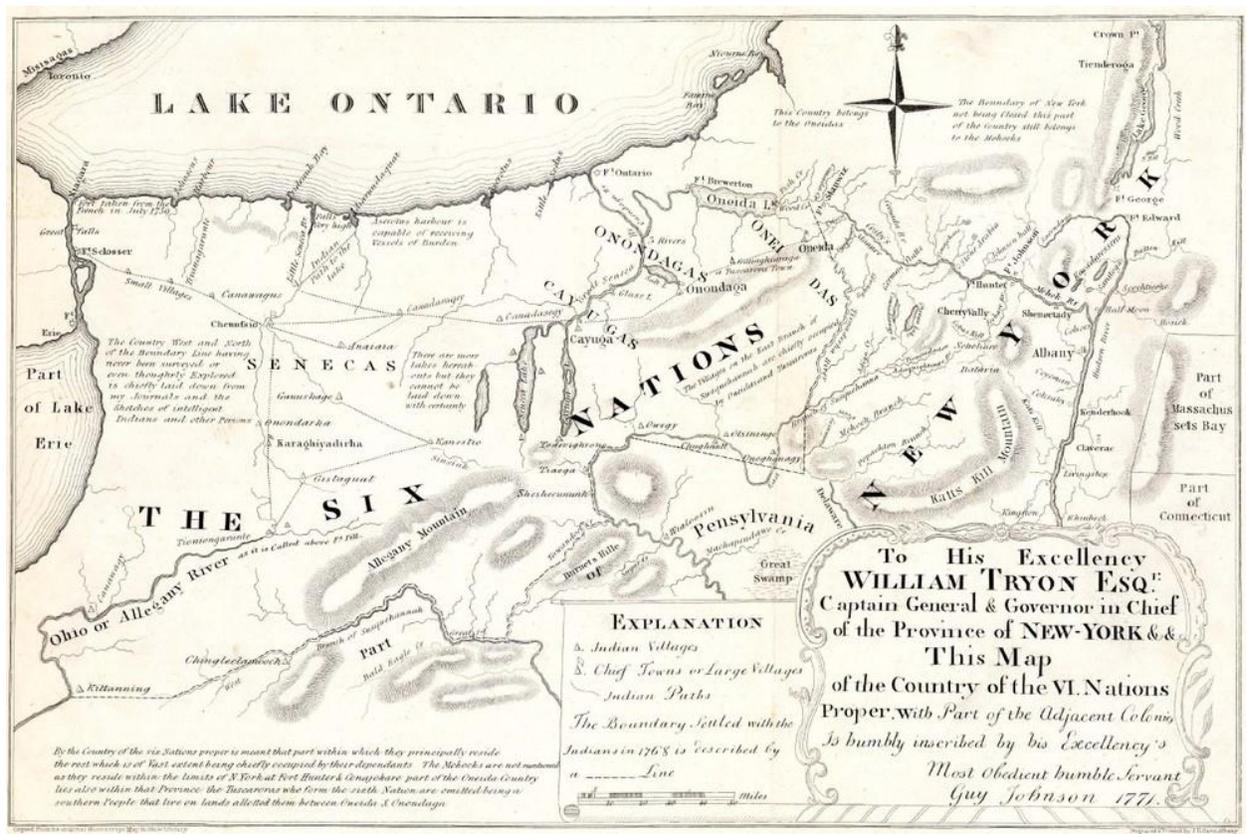
American military success was paramount for Congress to acquire Dutch and French financial and military aid. Washington needed to exhibit battlefield competence and a long-term strategy that would secure their support. Protecting the grain harvests by ousting the British and their Native forces in the Mohawk was crucial. For the continental Europeans this was a proxy war. One might see some similarities to the war in Ukraine visa vie the control of necessary food and denial of strategic food resources to ensure victory.

The Seneca and Loyalist raiding war parties controlled all of the western portion of what is now NYS from the Niagara frontier to the gates of Fort Schuyler (Stanwix) in Rome. This made it simple for their formations to safely pass through the Genesee Region and the Finger Lakes, acquiring additional troops, medical support and supplies. Refuge in Native villages in the southern Finger Lakes often served as forward bases for small contingents of the loyalist troops of Butler's Rangers The King's Royal Rangers and others.

As long as the Seneca remained a viable culture, an important military force and a buffer for the British at Fort Niagara, the raids into the breadbasket Mohawk would continue and ultimately the British could cutoff vital supplies and use the Finger Lakes as a staging area for more and greater operations against the Colonials.

The battle of Oriskany in early August of 1777 and the subsequent failed British siege of Ft. Schuyler (Stanwix) represented a part of the significant British effort to control the Mohawk, sever New York from New England and halt American operations in the region of upper New York by restoring British control to what is now your backyard. Just days after the bloody combat in the gully of Oriskany, John Butler was given orders to form his battalions of rangers to prosecute strategic attacks against the American "Frontier" in New York.

Major General Horatio Gates had won a paramount victory at Saratoga two months later and delivered a staggering blow to the Crown's plans and prestige. While Gates captured the British, the Mohawk raids continued and became more brutal, securing the Loyalists free reign in the Finger Lakes "Wilderness."



Strategically the Appalachian Mountains contained a series of traces or trails that connected the Seneca with their southern allies who, had previously been their enemy - the Cherokee. Eliminating the Seneca as a fighting force which anchored the northern end of the British controlled mountain rampart became essential to the survival of the American Army and the separatist cause. The British and Seneca controlled region was large, hostile to Americans and far from potential Colonial re-supply, but if the Seneca could be nullified it would deny the British the key to controlling the frontier and cease the destruction of the Mohawk Valley settlements and crops. Red coated leadership and diplomacy at Ft. Niagara needed to be thrown into chaos and their raiding parties denied free passage to the Mohawk Valley. Our region was the target of the American operation against the Loyalists and First Peoples.

Ithaca, Geneva, Canandaigua, Geneseo and Batavia are now the key towns in the center of that strategic region. Canandaigua is actually nearest to the geographic center.

Washington and his staff assembled a plan to throw the Seneca and their neighbors into chaos, reduce their war making ability by destroying crops, capture Fort Niagara and presumably end the raids into the Mohawk and essentially secure the agricultural territory between Fort Schuyler and New England. Forts and foodstuffs were the strategic keys to both sides. Without food either army would be forced to surrender.

Choosing Major General John Sullivan who was seconded by General Israel Hand, and a group of seasoned brigade commanders, Washington devised a “chastisement” of the Iroquois and a decisive action against the British at Fort Niagara. The chastisement as it was referred to, was truly a punitive expedition meant to create such chaos that the Seneca in particular, could offer no further assistance to British Crown forces.

General Washington had clear goals and laid out a relentless campaign of total warfare exactly like General Sherman’s Union Army march through Georgia 85 years later and notably similar to the campaign by The Marquis de Denonville against the Seneca in 1687. Scorched earth was the policy laid out by the Commander and Chief. Washington was a semi-professional soldier and likely drew upon the lessons of warfare in the ancient world and like a Roman general he would leave no stone upon stone in the villages of his enemy. The British bastion on Lake Ontario was a different matter as it was a key to controlling the unexplored interior of the continent and the Great Lakes.

The Army would start in what is now northern Pennsylvania and march north into the central Finger Lakes, curve to the west, and strike out for Niagara driving the Seneca back and scattering them as it prepared a siege of the Fort. Washington hoped the Seneca would take refuge in the Fort, which would make it impossible for the Redcoats to feed both the troops and the thousands of refugees - hopefully leading to the surrender of the Fort with little resistance.

*“Should Niagara fall into your hands in the manner I have mentioned—you will do every thing in your power for preserving & maintaining it, by establishing a chain of posts, in such manner as shall appear to you most safe and effectual...”*, Wrote General Washington.