



Land Where The Partridge Drums

A History of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation

Akwesasne and the American Revolution

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As we have seen in the first part of this work, the influences of the French and English in the colonial period proved too divisive to the Mohawk Nation; for reasons that were both economic and religious, many of our people migrated to villages at the northeast frontier of our territory, Kahnawake (or Caughnawaga), Kanesatake (Lake of Two Mountains), and later Akwesasne (St. Regis). Although many non-native historians believe that these "praying Indians" severed their ties to their Mohawk Valley relatives, this was usually only during times of war; there is ample evidence that the northern Mohawk maintained close relations with their southern kin and shared in their hunting territory, the Adirondack Mountains of eastern New York. The oral tradition maintains that Mohawks from the Mohawk Valley joined the Kahnawake Mohawks when a permanent village was established in the hunting territory of Akwesasne sometime around 1755.

It will also be remembered that within years of this convergence, Great Britain achieved victory over her long-time rival France and assumed control over her territory in Canada by conquering her St. Lawrence settlements of Montreal and Quebec City. To encourage their "neutrality" in the final days of this conflict, France's native allies in the Seven Nations of Canada were promised by the British that they had nothing to fear from their new "father" and that our lands and territories would be respected. Another result of the French and Indian War, or the Great War For Empire, was the arrival in Akwesasne of refugees from other Seven Nations such as the Abenaki of Odanak (St. Francis) and the Oneida, Onondaga, and Cayuga of Oswegatchie (La Presentation). With the dissolution of Oswegatchie, Akwesasne assumed her "nation fire" in the Seven Nations of Canada and inherited the Oswegatchie territory.

Within decades of these important changes, however, the distant rumbling of war altered the political landscape once again. The American colonies rebelled against the British Empire and unleashed the Revolutionary War. Taking inspiration from the League of the Iroquois, the American rebels joined forces to rid themselves of the tyranny of the Crown and to establish a democratic republic. Like the other conflicts that took place in our part of North America, our people were drawn into this one as well. The following part of this work will chronicle our involvement in that war and the tragic results of that participation.

The American Revolution

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy's involvement in the American Revolution is well-known. The central figure of this drama was Mohawk Joseph Brant, the young Mohawk we encountered previously in the account of the Battle of Lake George. Of all the personalities in Mohawk history, Brant stands out as the most illustrious, since his actions on behalf of the British had dire consequences for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Yet few people know he had a pro-American counterpart in the war, a man by the name of Louis Cook. This man's actions have somehow escaped the scrutiny of historians, the reasons for which we will explore in this work. Before we meet this man, however, we will see how Brant became involved in the American Revolution.

Joseph Brant

With Sir William Johnson as his mentor, Joseph Brant was educated by the English and became the Crown's biggest advocate among the Haudenosaunee. Prior to Sir William's death he served as his interpreter in many of the conferences the British held with the Confederacy. He was entertained by the British King in London and returned home to urge his people to support the Crown when the land-hungry Americans began to speak of revolution. Brant led war parties into battle himself, brazenly defying the neutrality that the Haudenosaunee chiefs sought to maintain, and his exploits earned him the nickname "the Monster Brant" by American settlers that were the target of his raids.

Brant's efforts eventually broke the unity of the ancient league, left their villages open to military conquest in the infamous Sullivan Campaign, and led to the eventual dispersion of some of the pro-British Haudenosaunee to Canada following the war. (Graymont 1988:87-89)

Akwesasne's Role in the War

Most of the Mohawks from the Christian missions at Kahnawake, Akwesasne, and Kanesatake chose to remain neutral in the conflict. However, a number of Mohawks from Kahnawake acted on their own and met with General George Washington in 1776. (Hough 1853:187-191) These men volunteered to fight with the American rebels against Britain for ideological reasons, stemming perhaps from their anti-English stance in the previous war. Some Mohawks of the Mohawk Valley served as scouts for the Americans, and Oneidas and Tuscaroras fed George Washington's starving army at Valley Forge. (Fadden 1948:15-16)

Although the Revolutionary War was a turning point in the history of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Akwesasne's involvement was not quite as prominent. One historian, writing in 1853, claims that a considerable force from Akwesasne fought for the British while others chose to support the American rebels. The only direct involvement appears to be an instance where Akwesasne Mohawks gave provisions to Sir John Johnson and his party during their escape to Montreal in 1776. (Hough 1853:122-123) They made their way northward via the Raquette River, which empties into the St. Lawrence in Akwesasne.

Colonel Louis Cook

One of the "Mohawks" who spied and fought for the Americans was Louis Cook, also known by his Indian name of Atiatonharonkwen (translated in one source as "He Pulls The People Down.") He was born at the original Saratoga (now Schuylerville, New York) to a black father and an Abenaki mother sometime around 1740. He and his mother were captured by Kahnawake warriors during a French attack on that settlement in 1745. Both of them were taken to Kahnawake and Louis was raised from then on as a Mohawk. He fought on the side of the French during the French and Indian War, as did many of the Kahnawake Mohawks, and saw battle at Ticonderoga, where he was wounded in a battle with Roger's Rangers, at Ohio, where he helped the French defeat the English General Braddock, and at Oswego where he helped to conquer the British fort. He was

also present when the French were defeated at Quebec.

Cook's anti-British sentiments may have motivated him and a small faction of Kahnawake Mohawks to join the American side on the eve of the Revolution. He earned a commission as lieutenant-colonel in the rebel forces, the highest rank of any "native" involved in the conflict. He is mentioned in the papers of George Washington, who is said to have given Cook a silver pipe during a meeting with him.

The following is taken from Sparks' *Washington's Life and Writings*, Vol. III, p. 53, as cited by Franklin B. Hough in *A History of St. Lawrence and Franklin Counties* (1853), pp. 184-185:

"On the first instant, a chief of the Caughnawaga tribe, who lives about six miles from Montreal, came in here, accompanied by a Colonel Bayley, of Coos. His accounts of the temper and disposition of the Indians are very favorable. He says, they have been strongly solicited, by Governor Carlton, to engage against us, but his nation is totally averse: that threats as well as entreaties have been used, without effect; that the Canadians are well disposed to the English colonies, and if any expedition is meditated against Canada, the Indians in that quarter will give all their assistance. I have endeavored to cherish that favorable disposition, and have recommended him to cultivate them in return. What I have said, I have enforced with a present, which I understood would be agreeable to him; and he is represented as being a man of weight and consequence in his own tribe. I flatter myself, his visit will have a good effect. His account of General Carlton's force and situation of St. Johns, correspond with what we have had from that quarter."

During the Revolutionary War Cook led a small outfit of Oneidas into battle at Schenectady, and acted as a courier and scout throughout the conflict. It is interesting to note that Louis Cook was a contemporary of Joseph Brant, both being born (according to some sources) in 1740, and they shared a number of things in common. Both saw action at a young age (albeit on different sides of the same conflict) and continued their adversarial relationship through the American Revolution and beyond. Both were technically ineligible to be chiefs but were recognized as such by non-native (and sometimes native) authorities. Although Brant has been the most famous of the two by far, Cook's role in the Akwesasne saga is just as critical.

With the defeat of the British, Colonel Cook was unable to return to Kahnawake because of his patriot leanings. He lived in Oneida for a while and moved to Akwesasne in 1789, settling on a tract of land along the Niconsiaga River (present-day Grass River) in Massena, New York, which he claimed to have owned prior to the Revolutionary War. This land was granted to him by an act of the New York State Legislature that same year. It is said that he was unable to live closer to the village of St. Regis because the pro-British Mohawks posed a danger to him. Despite this, he eventually had a major influence in the politics of the community. (Hough

1853:182-197)

An account from the 1850's describes the man as his survivors knew him:

"Colonel Louis was tall and athletic, broad shouldered and strongly built, with a very dark complexion, and somewhat curly hair, which in old age became gray.

He was very reserved in speech, and by most people would be called taciturn. He seldom spoke without having something to say, and what he said, was received with deference, for it always had a meaning, and in all his deportment he strongly evinced possession of prudence, discretion and sense, and when once enlisted in any pursuit, he followed it with a constancy and perseverance seldom equalled in the Indian character. He was prompt and generally correct in arriving at conclusions, and his judgement was relied upon, and his opinions sought by the officers of the army, with whom he was associated, with much confidence, and he possessed in a high degree the control of the affairs of his tribe, by whom he was beloved, respected, and obeyed."

Thomas Williams

Thomas Williams, or Tehorakwaneken, was another controversial figure from this era who was closely associated with Cook. He was the grandson of Eunice Williams, the "unredeemed captive" from Deerfield. He was born in Kahnawake sometime around 1758 or 1759. One account of his life states that he became a chief at Kahnawake in 1777, then joined the American forces under General Burgoyne, seeing action at Ticonderoga, New York and Royalton, Vermont, among others. He and his family frequently visited his relatives in Massachusetts and Vermont after the war and spent a great deal of time hunting in the Lake George area where he had a hunting camp. (Hough 1853:200-203)

William Gray

Another man closely associated with Cook was a white man named William Gray, who was born around 1760 in Cambridge, New York. As a teenager he joined the American forces during the Revolutionary War; he was taken prisoner by the British and held in Quebec for the rest of the conflict. When he was released he moved to Kahnawake for a time, then relocated to Akwesasne where he married a Mohawk woman and raised a family. He learned the language so well that he became the interpreter for the chiefs. He eventually convinced his parents and other family members back in Cambridge to move with him to Akwesasne, where he established a saw mill and general store in what is now Hogansburg. (Hough 1853:198-200) His influence on Akwesasne politics, like that of Cook and Williams, grew stronger with his involvement in negotiations with officials from New York State in the last decade of the 1700's. These men, along with Joseph Brant, are considered the most controversial figures in Akwesasne history because of these negotiations.

Next Week

Treaties of Contention:
The Quitclaims of Cook and Brant