

Last week we were introduced to Colonel Louis Cook, or Atiatonharonkwen, the half-black, half-Abenaki "War Chief" whose patriot leanings earned him exile from Kahnawake during the American Revolution. We also met Thomas Williams and William Gray. Like Cook, they were veterans of the patriot forces and became active in Akwesasne politics in the years after the war. In many respects, Colonel Louis (as his contemporaries called him) was the literal alter-ego of Joseph Brant. The historical record reveals that they were personal enemies and most likely met in combat from time to time. Yet while Brant has gone on to lasting fame—complete with television and movie biographies—Cook has become something of a footnote in history. Noted in war for his stealth, the illustrious Atiatonharonkwen and his controversial actions have slipped past the critical eye of even the most meticulous of historians. Until now, that is.

In the following passages we will look at the suspicious "quitclaims" (land surrenders) that have made Cook and Brant the most controversial figures in Mohawk history. Part mystery, part soap opera, their rivalry and intrigues have only helped to obscure the truth of what really went on some two hundred years ago. Nevertheless, the impact of their mysterious actions is still felt today.

To maintain a more or less chronological sequence of events, however, we will deal first with events that had little to do with the loss of Akwesasne land but were significant in the development of the community in general. We will also briefly chart the course of events that helped to shape the political realities of our Haudenosaunee brothers, because these too would have an important effect on Akwesasne in the coming years.

Sir John Johnson Finds Cornwall

Despite the minimal role Akwesasne played in it, the war and its aftermath had a major impact on the community. Driven in defeat from the Mohawk Valley, Sir John Johnson and his loyalist forces were granted land on the northern shore of the St. Lawrence River just opposite Akwesasne by the British government in 1783. This was opposed by the Mohawks, who claimed that Sir John's father, Sir William had recognized their title to that land years before. They used that land for hunting and also allowed white settlers to harvest trees there. The dispute was mediated by Joseph Brant, who urged Johnson to deal equitably with the Mohawks, because he had found them "reasonable enough about the lands." He told Johnson that the Mohawks

"mean to make you a present of the Island facing your lott, (and) they mean to allow you the land you wish to have...But on your part, I hope you will please to get writings for the remainder of the Indian Land."

He then went on to emphasize to Johnson the need

"to use these Indians in an easy manner...about land matters at this present unhappy times for us, for many reasons, in first place, it gives the dam Rebels larger mouths for many things against us and it is very good example for them, to get all our lands from us, if those Saint Rechis Indians was any ways forced about lands." (Senior 1983:16-21)

In the end the Mohawk chiefs agreed to allow the British to settle in townships that were separated by a two and three-quarter mile long tract of land through which they (the Mohawks) would have access to their native trading partners in the Algonquin La Petite Nation to the north. The main British settlement was known first as simply New Town, then Johnstown, and eventually Cornwall. The growth of this settlement brought the relatively isolated Akwesasne into closer proximity to non-native trading partners, but it also drew Mohawks into political and military conflicts between the British and their rivals in the United States and between the British and their French subjects in Quebec.

Joseph Hadfield, who visited Sir John Johnson's home in June of 1785, described an encounter with Akwesasne Mohawks that he found fishing along the river:

"Grand Sault is the most famous rapid on the St. Lawrence, one and a half miles long; bartered for fish with the Indians and found the Maskinonge very fine eating; found the Indians subtle and cunning and hard to barter with. However, a gill of rum went a long way; came upon three men and a squaw dining on fish. They wore very little clothing but were adorned with wampums of

Land Where The Partridge Drums

A History of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation

Treaties of Contention

by Darren Bonaparte

shells; their faces were painted in a fanciful manner red and black. Their ears were cut in shreds, had pendants in noses. One of them boasted that he had tomahawked fifty Bostonese; pitched our tent above Rapid Plat; amused ourselves before going to bed in viewing the Canadians dance; have a good notion of time and measure and are lively in their movements." (Harkness 1946:50)

The Building of the Stone Church

The last decades of the 1700's saw a new development at The Land Where The Partridge Drums. In 1785 a new priest arrived by the name of Father Roderick MacDonell, and it was during his ministry that construction began on the massive stone church that replaced the one made of wood. Tradition holds that much of the work was done by the women of the village. It was completed sometime around 1792, with the bell tower to be added later. (Hough 1853:124)

The wife of John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, gave a brief description of her visit to the Akwesasne area in her diary entry of Monday, June 25, 1792. At a home in Glengarry, she describes a meeting with

"A Catholic priest... who has lived five years among the Iroquois Indians at St. Regis (near Cornwall). They have a church, and he performs divine service in the Iroquois, of which he is a perfect master, and he says their attention to the church service is very great, and the women sing psalms remarkably well...we proceeded a league to Coll. Gray's from whence the Governor went to the Isle of St. Regis, to visit the Indians at their village, where they received him with dancing in a fierce style, as if they wished to inspire the spectators with terror and respect for their ferocious appearance." (Harkness 1946:62)

The Drawing of the Border

As we have seen, the aftermath of the Revolutionary War was in many ways just as divisive to the Haudenosaunee as the war itself. When the British and the Americans signed the Treaty of Paris in 1783, they agreed to a rough border between their territories. A part of the border was drawn through Akwesasne at the 45th parallel, but this was largely ignored by American and British authorities. They allowed the Mohawks to come and go across the border as they pleased. The location of the border was readjusted later on. In 1794 Great Britain and the United States signed the Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation, also known as the Jay Treaty, which affirmed the border-crossing rights of both countries' native allies and respected their political independence from Great Britain and the United States. (Miller 1976:74)

"It is agreed that it shall at all times be free of his Majesty's subjects, and to citizens of the United States, and also to the Indians dwelling on either side of the said boundary line freely to pass and repass by land or inland navigation, into the respective

territories and countries of the two parties, on the continent of America, (the country within the limits of the Hudson's Bay Company also excepted,) and to navigate all the lakes, rivers and waters thereof, and freely carry on trade and commerce with each other...

"...No duty of entry shall ever be levied by either party on peltries brought by land or inland navigation into the said territories, nor shall the Indians passing or repassing with their own proper goods and effects of whatever nature, pay for the same any impost or duty whatever. But goods in bales, or other large packages, unusual among Indians, shall not be considered as goods belonging bona fide to Indians."

Once Canada became an independent country in 1867, however, she chose not to enact legislation which would have ratified the above provisions. As a result, Akwesasne Mohawks "lost" the protection that the Jay Treaty provided. (In modern times, however, a Mohawk leader launched a legal challenge that may begin to resolve this injustice. Other native groups have joined in the struggle as well. This will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters of this work.)

The Six Nations and Tyendinaga Reserves

Following the American Revolution, the pro-British Haudenosaunee under Captain Joseph Brant and Captain John Deserontyon were granted substantial territories on the Grand River west of Lake Ontario—Mississagua territory—and at the Bay of Quinte on that lake's northern shore, where the Peacemaker's village, Kahanayenh, once stood. Brant's group on the Grand River was representative of all the Six Nations, hence the name Six Nations Reserve. Brant himself ultimately chose to live at Burlington Bay where his home (modeled after the Mohawk Valley estate of his mentor, Sir William Johnson) still stands. Deserontyon's settlement would eventually come to be known as Tyendinaga. (Surtees 1985:73-79) With their departure, the only Mohawk community remaining within the borders of the United States was Akwesasne.

Joseph Brant, who considered the Mohawks at Grand River and the Bay of Quinte the only "real" Mohawks, would eventually come into conflict with the Mohawks of Kahnawake and Akwesasne over rights to land remaining in New York. Brant held a particular animosity toward the "Caughnawagas" for their involvement with the Americans in the Revolutionary War. He was deeply suspicious of them for their historic alienation from their Haudenosaunee brothers and denied, as did American authorities at the time, that they were entitled to any of the territory held by the Mohawks in days of old.

The "Central Fire" Moves to Buffalo Creek

The Haudenosaunee who did not follow Brant and Deserontyon found themselves in a crowded state. Many of the Onondagas and Cayugas moved west to Seneca territory to get away from the steady advance of white settlers. They eventually reorganized and relocated the Confederacy wampum and "central fire" to Buffalo

Creek, site of the present-day city of Buffalo. In 1784, the Cayugas, Mohawks, Onondagas, and Senecas—the "hostile" tribes—were coerced by commissioners of the Continental Congress to sign the Treaty of Fort Stanwix. Although this treaty renewed peace between the pro-British nations and the pro-American Oneidas and Tuscaroras, its main effect was a considerable loss of Seneca territory in western New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The Grand Council refused to ratify it, but to little effect.

To the Americans, the treaties signed with the Indian groups to relinquish their lands were mere formalities. They considered these lands already theirs by right of conquest and had debts to pay off to the many soldiers who had won their war. They also found these debauched treaty councils to be an excellent way to foment further divisions within the tattered Confederacy. It was also a chance for the Americans to humiliate the Six Nations by steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the very existence of their ancient league. (Irony fans will remember that it was the Iroquois Confederacy that inspired the American states to unify in the first place!)

Bureaucrats weren't the only parties interested in the fertile Haudenosaunee territories. New York businessmen and corrupt politicians joined forces to secure outrageous deals such as the 1787 Livingston Lease signed by native individuals without authority to do so. This private lease for vast tracts of western Haudenosaunee land would have lasted 999 years had it not been quashed by the New York State Legislature. (Wallace 1969:149-153)

A witness to events of this period was Colonel Louis Cook, who was living among his Oneida friends during this time. Within two years of his witnessing the signing of the Livingston Lease, he would move to Akwesasne where some of the other Kahnawake "patriots" such as Thomas Williams now lived.

Cook and his comrades, who up until this point had been content with a shadowy presence in the New York "Land Rush," suddenly prepared to take center stage in a new set of negotiations and a new set of controversies. Herein lies one of the little-known mysteries of Mohawk history, a tale of deception and subterfuge that has slipped from the history books like a missing page. The historical record seems at first glance quite voluminous on the "Seven Nations of Canada Treaty of 1796" described in these pages. As a researcher, I quickly exhausted that record and found myself wondering where to find more. Perhaps the colonel wanted it that way.

New York Disposes of Northern New York

In 1791 the legislature of the State of New York passed an act granting the Commissioners of the Land Office the powers to dispose of all unappropriated lands in New York. A Detroit fur trader named Alexander Macomb immediately made an offer of eight cents per acre for all of the land between Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence River. This was rejected, but he eventually came away with an area of 3,840,000 acres of land in the north, minus a six mile square tract of land reserved for the Mohawks of Akwesasne and a number of islands in the St. Lawrence River. (Frisch 1971:71-72)

Although a portion of land was set aside for Akwesasne, this did not mean that the Mohawks approved of this sale. New York State had no right to sell Mohawk land. Other Haudenosaunee nations were swindled out of almost all of their original territories, as were countless tribes in other states until the federal government got involved to bring a much-needed respite from this type of treachery.

In 1792 the Congress of the United States passed the Trade and Intercourse Act, which limited the New York's power to make treaties with the Indians and put the states of Massachusetts, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Connecticut in a more competitive position to buy Haudenosaunee land. New York did not respect this law and the United States failed to enforce it, but it remained on the books (and has since become part of the argument behind Haudenosaunee land claims of modern times).

That same year, an unidentified delegation of Kahnawake and Akwesasne Mohawks journeyed to Albany to assert their claims to traditional Mohawk territory. Brushed off, they would return the next year bearing this commission:

"The Chiets at Cak-ne-wa-ge, head of the Seven Nations.

To our brother, Commander and Governor, Ni-haron-ta-go-wa, George Clinton, at the State of New

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