

UNIT 5 BIG IDEA

NATIVE AMERICAN SOLDIERS AND SCOUTS

“The disturbances in America give great trouble to all our Nations.”

– Joseph Brant, March 14, 1776

In 1775, when the Revolutionary War began, more than 250,000 Native Americans lived east of the Mississippi River. They formed more than 80 nations and spoke dozens of languages and dialects. As fighting between British and Revolutionary forces increased in 1776, both sides called on American Indians for support. The stakes for Native Americans were high as they worried about how to best preserve their independence and land in the midst of a war. Various Native communities and nations chose different strategies. Some tried to remain neutral, others actively sided with the British, and a smaller number allied with the Revolutionaries. In doing so, they all hoped to protect their homelands and ways of life.

Choosing Sides

For most Native peoples, an independent United States dedicated to westward expansion seemed to pose a far greater threat than the British, who had placed some limits on colonial encroachment on Native American lands. The British had numerous advantages over the Americans in maintaining tribal allies. With much greater financial resources and control of the sea, British officials could supply the trade goods (like cloth, metal tools, firearms, and ammunition) that Native people had come to rely on. Many nations had come to see the British Crown as a protector and ally on whom they could rely. Most importantly, these nations knew that an American victory would expose their territories to encroachment by soldiers and settlers. However, some Native American nations chose to support the Revolutionaries, who they considered neighbors and friends. These groups of American Indians believed that if the Revolutionaries were victorious, they would allow them to maintain control over their homelands.

Many American Indian nations fought in the Revolutionary War, three of which Don Troiani features in his paintings: the Oneida, Mohawk, and Stockbridge-Mohican. The Oneida and Mohawk were part of the Iroquois Confederacy. Of the six nations that belonged to the Confederacy, four, including the Mohawk, actively sided with the British, while the Oneida and Tuscarora supported the Revolutionaries. Other Native Americans, like the Stockbridge-Mohican, also joined the Revolutionaries. Examining Don Troiani's paintings of these groups can help us imagine what the war was like for Native Americans and how their participation impacted the war for both the British and Continental Armies.

The Oneida and Mohawk Allies turned Enemies

Many centuries before the Revolutionary War, the Oneida, Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations fought each other in what is now upstate New York. But by the eve of the Revolutionary War, these nations lived under the Great Law of Peace and created the Iroquois Confederacy. When the first battle of the Revolutionary War broke out in 1775, Iroquois leaders took a stance that the Six Nations (the Tuscarora joined in 1722) would stand together and remain neutral, believing that unity was their strength. But after the colonists declared independence in 1776, the war threatened their peace. The Iroquois Confederacy became divided. Some nations wished to stay neutral, believing that King George III and the colonists were like a parent and a child and that they should stay out of a family argument. Some wanted to support the British, who promised to protect tribal land if the Native Americans stood with them. And some nations wanted to support the Revolutionaries, viewing the colonists as their neighbors and the British as invaders.

The Oneida

The Oneida (People of the Standing Stone) are today a federally recognized American Indian nation based in Central New York. They maintain **sovereignty** on a portion of their original homelands. During the decades leading up to the Revolutionary War, the Oneida lived in present-day upstate New York, south of Lake Ontario. Unlike the Mohawk nation whose land was being overrun by colonists, the Oneida lived further away from lands claimed by settlers. They were fortunate enough to avoid the land conflicts faced by other Native nations.

In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, the Oneida maintained close trade, business, and personal relations with colonial leaders. A **missionary** named Reverend Samuel Kirkland assisted in further developing close spiritual and material ties between the Oneida and Revolutionaries. Kirkland immersed himself in the Oneida lifestyle, learning their language and customs in order to assist them with farm methods, education, and diplomacy. In addition, Kirkland aligned his religious activities with a Boston group that had strong ties to the political views of the Revolutionaries.

In June 1775, the Oneida Nation gathered in council to discuss their stance on the war and decided to remain neutral with the hopes of keeping the Iroquois Confederacy together. However, tensions grew as both the Revolutionaries and the British pressured the nations in the Iroquois Confederacy to choose a side. Based on their favorable relations and the influence of Samuel Kirkland, the Oneida decided to take up the cause in support of the Revolutionaries.

As America's first allies, the Oneida provided the Continental Army with support and troops throughout the war. Oneida warriors were often used by the Continental Army to help scout the British camps to assess their operations, especially around Fort Stanwix (also known as Fort Schuyler) in New York. The Oneida acted as spies, intercepting British communications and gathering information on troop movements and strategies. The Oneida were also helpful to the Continental Army in foraging for food and harassing British posts.

Most notably, the Oneida assisted the Continental Army at the Battle of Oriskany in New York's Mohawk Valley in August of 1777. During this battle, the Oneida provided 150 men to General Horatio Gates' army. Warriors of the Oneida Nation battled against Seneca, Cayuga, and Mohawk allies of the British. As shown in the painting, *The Oneida at the Battle of Oriskany, August 6, 1777* by Don Troiani, the Oneida war captain Thawengarakwen (also known as Honyery Doxtater) and his wife Tyonajanegen (Two Kettles Together) fought alongside the Continental Army in the thick woods of the Mohawk River Valley. The day-long battle, which also included Loyalist troops and Hessian **Jäger**, ended in a stalemate. Both sides suffered heavy **casualties** and both sides claimed victory. The Battle of Oriskany was only the start of continuous fighting between the six nations of the Iroquois Confederacy during the war.

The Mohawk

Today, Mohawk communities can be found in southeastern Canada and parts of New York State. Alongside the Oneida, the Mohawk Nation was another of the six Native American tribes that made up the Iroquois Confederacy. The Mohawk Nation faced a difficult choice when deciding which side to support. Many Mohawks had successfully adapted European agricultural techniques and raised livestock to feed themselves and trade with local communities who supported both sides of the conflict. However, these activities led to a stronger trading relationship with the British, and ultimately, the Mohawk decided to side with them. In doing so, they hoped that the British would continue to prohibit colonists from settling on Native lands, an increasing problem for the Mohawk. In the eyes of the Mohawk, the best way to keep their sovereignty as a nation and maintain their trade relations and ancestral land was to side with the British.

Mohawk chief Thayendanegea (also known as Joseph Brant) was critical to their decision making. He was able to convince four of the six Iroquois nations, including the Mohawk, to ally with the British. Brant was also instrumental in organizing Loyalists and British-allied Indians to conduct a series of raids on American settlements in both New York and northern Pennsylvania in 1778. These raids targeted areas with Revolutionary sympathies. One of these raids is depicted in Don Troiani's *Raiders of the Mohawk Valley*. In this painting, the settlement known as German Flatts, on the Mohawk River in central New York, is witness to a destructive raid on September 17, 1778. In this image, the Mohawk raiders carry off **plunder** and two women as captives. In

retaliation, the Continental Army launched a campaign to attack and destroy Indian communities and Loyalist strongholds. In the Mohawk Valley and elsewhere, the Revolutionary War was a brutal civil war for Native American communities.

In their alliance with the British, the Mohawk served as scouts, spies, and soldiers. With their extensive knowledge of the local landscape, they supplied necessary information and resources to the British army in upstate New York. Joseph Brant was even made a Captain in the British army and had a battalion of "Indian Raiders" under his command, most of whom were white supporters who painted their faces and dressed like Native Americans. With this fighting force, the Mohawk strategically defended the frontier from the Continental Army, conducted raids on supply lines, attacked colonial settlements, and fought alongside British soldiers in numerous battles throughout the war.

Don Troiani's painting, *The Oneida at the Battle of Oriskany, August 6, 1777* depicts the brutal battle between the Mohawk and their former ally, the Oneida. The British used General Brant's Indian forces to ambush the Americans and block any escape from the area. Native Americans, Oneida and Mohawk, were skilled at one-on-one fighting and quick "offensive hit-and-run tactics" with tomahawks, knives, and muskets. Although the fight ended in a stalemate, the Battle of Oriskany showed both the fierce fighting capabilities of the Native Americans and marked the formal end of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy) alliance.

The Stockbridge-Mohican

The Stockbridge-Mohicans came from a **multiethnic** Native community that included Mohican, Housatonic, and Wappinger peoples. Today, the Mohicans are a federally-recognized nation living in Wisconsin. Before the Revolutionary War, the Mohicans were living in the Hudson Valley and western Massachusetts. When the Massachusetts town of Stockbridge was established by missionaries in the 1730's, the Mohicans living there were renamed the Stockbridge Indians or Stockbridges. The English settlers worked to convert the Stockbridges to Christianity and the tribe also adopted some cultural practices and understandings from the English colonists, blending them with their native traditions.

When the Revolutionary War began, the Stockbridges sided with the Revolutionaries. There were many factors involved in their decision, but their location in Massachusetts was a key one. In the early 1770s, the colony was the center of the protests and boycotts against British policies. The Stockbridge community lived alongside the Sons of Liberty and others who supported the movement against the British. The Stockbridge Indians, as part of the local community, felt pressure to join the growing protest movements and boycotts against the British. They also felt that supporting the Revolutionaries in their community was a way to protect their land and their **sovereignty**.

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, the Stockbridge community met with Revolutionary leadership to cement an alliance. Soon after, they found themselves on the battlefield. When the first shots were fired at Lexington and Concord in 1775, members of the Stockbridge Indians volunteered as **minutemen**. Afterwards, some Stockbridges fought alongside New Englanders at the Battle of Bunker Hill. As a result of their involvement in these early battles, in 1776 the Continental Congress authorized General George Washington to actively recruit Stockbridge Indians. Throughout the war, they served as scouts, helping the Continental Army with knowledge of the land, important in preparing to conduct quick ambushes. The Stockbridge-Mohican also helped with gathering intelligence and were vital to diplomatic communication between the United States and other Native American tribes, acting as their ambassadors.

The largest battle involving the Stockbridges was the Battle of Kingsbridge, on August 31st, 1778. The Stockbridges were on patrol to discover the location of the enemy when they unexpectedly encountered a far superior force of Hessian

DID YOU KNOW?

Don Troiani studied a Hessian officer's 1778 sketch of a Native American soldier as part of his research for the painting Battle of Kingsbridge (Stockbridge Indian Massacre). When Hessian Jäger Captain Johann Ewald saw the blood-stained battlefield at Kingsbridge, New York, in 1778, he took note of the unique clothing worn by the dead and wounded Stockbridge Indians. The Stockbridges' appearance reflected both Native American traditions and the fact that they had received arms and supplies from the Continental Army.

Jägers and Loyalists soldiers and **dragoons**. In his painting, *The Battle of Kingsbridge (Stockbridge Indian Massacre)*, Don Troiani recreates the violence and confusion of that day. The painting shows the Stockbridges engaged in desperate combat as they fire their muskets and swing them like clubs to knock the Loyalists off their horses. Although skilled in using guns and working as a team, the Stockbridges preferred one-on-one combat with clubs or short knives. This tactic was almost pointless against the Loyalist horses and longswords, which were able to attack them from above. The battle left about 17 Stockbridge Indians dead and more seriously wounded.

The Stockbridges continued to support the Revolutionaries throughout the war. They were involved in the 1777 Saratoga campaign in New York, the Battle of Freeman's Farm, and the Continental Army's victory nearby at Bemis Heights, which forced the surrender of British General John Burgoyne's army. Afterwards, the Stockbridges marched south and joined Washington's forces at Valley Forge. In June of 1778, they fought at the Battle of Monmouth and the following summer, Washington personally asked the Stockbridge-Mohicans to assist his armies against the Iroquois Confederacy under the command of Major General John Sullivan.

The war did not end well for the three Native American nations featured in Don Troiani's paintings. After the American victory at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, the war continued violently on the frontier for three more years. Native Americans fought and suffered on both sides. The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783, which ended the war, was made without any input from Native American nations. Since most of the Iroquois Confederacy sided with the British, the Mohawk nation lost nearly all of their land when the British ceded the lands to the new United States as part of the treaty, leaving their people to be swept aside as settlers claimed their lands. Even though they supported the Revolutionaries, both the Oneida and The Stockbridge-Mohican also lost land and were forced to relocate. Despite these setbacks, Native American culture lives on in nations that still exist today.

Though their stories are not often told, Native Americans played major roles in the Revolutionary War. Supporting both armies as scouts, soldiers and diplomats, the contributions of Native Americans were critical to many important events, battles and decisions that shaped the outcome of the war. Using Don Troiani's paintings as a starting point, we can begin to explore and understand the roles people of various Native American nations played in the war and how their cultures and communities were affected by its outcome.