

Kathryn Turnbull

Dr. Mary Cain

HIS-325

Fall 2019

**The Violent Expansionism of the American Revolution:  
Indigenous Responses to the “Contest for Indian Land”**

For white colonists, the American Revolution was, in part, a war for Indigenous land. The war provided an excuse to continue displacing and destroying Native Americans in the name of national expansion and freedom. Through military campaigns, deceitful treaties, and violent removal, Indigenous people throughout the newly declared American states and territories suffered at the hands of white colonists. Assuming native land was an essential tactic of the revolution that won two battles for the American colonists. First, destroying Native nations ensured that they would not and could not ally themselves with the British against the revolutionary forces. Secondly, winning geographic territory from Indigenous groups secured opportunity for colonists anxious to expand and create individual economic success. This dual-purpose has often been simplified and covered with broad strokes, explaining that “Savage Tribe[s]”<sup>1</sup> were necessarily met with violence to defend colonized land and ensure Indigenous submission to the revolutionary cause.

---

<sup>1</sup> Raphael, Ray. *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence*. New York: New Press, 2001. p. 214.

In the eyes of many white patriots, however, occupying native land created necessary space, both physical and psychological, for the new nation of the United States and her citizens. The ancestral ownership and Indigenous claim of this land was ignored by white settlers, ravenous for land to cultivate and accustomed to demeaning rhetoric about Native Americans. Forcing Native Americans to flee their homes and communities generated a new and extremely dangerous narrative of “disappearing” Indigenous people and allowed white Americans to move into previously-occupied lands and expand their new nation.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, early American expansionism during the revolutionary era was met with resistance from all Native nations. Generally speaking, Native American leaders did not understand the root conflict of the war. To them, Tories, Rebels, and Englishmen were all the same; they spoke the same language, looked the same, observed the same cultural practices. Indigenous communities accepted that the Americans had little regard for preserving their values, cultures, and land. Chief Kayashuta warned the Seneca people that they “must be Fools indeed to imagine that they regard us our Interest who want to bring us into an unnecessary War.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, leaders understood the consequences of a potential American victory. As noted by James Calloway, the prolific professor of Native American history at Dartmouth, “[Indigenous people] recognized that the war was a contest for Indian land as well as for American independence, [...] aggressive Americans posed a greater threat than did a distant king

---

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Andrea. “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing.” *Color of Violence: the INCITE! Anthology*, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Duke University Press (July 2016). <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373445-007>. p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*. Boston [etc.] : Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012. p. 223.

to their land, their liberty, and their way of life.”<sup>4</sup> Others advocated for neutrality and patience, including Cornplanter, the uncle of the notable Seneca warrior Blacksnake, who reminded young men that “war is war, Death is Death”.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, engaging in battles proved detrimental for many Indigenous nations and alliances. The Battle of Oriskany in 1777 became a civil war for the Iroquois<sup>6</sup>, as Senecas and Mohawks sided with the Loyalist forces and Oneidas fought with the Americans.<sup>7</sup> The battle marked a lasting divide among the Haudenosaunee as oppositional alliances emerged among the League of Six Nations. In 1784, after the war had ended, war-weary and divided Iroquois leaders signed away their independence and land rights with little resistance at the Treaty of Fort Stanwix; according to the Americans, the Haudenosaunee had been defeated, and were “in no position to claim independence or dictate terms.”<sup>8</sup>

Treaties made on North American soil were developed through longstanding traditions of negotiation and peacemaking, centuries prior to the arrival of Europeans. Borders between Indigenous nation-states were determined, trade and travel routes approved, and alliances in times of war forged across the lands that would eventually become British colonies.<sup>9</sup> Native American diplomacy marked negotiations with wampum belts and calumet pipes of peace, a custom which became abused by deceptive Europeans, eager for Indigenous lands.<sup>10</sup> Because of

---

<sup>4</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 223.

<sup>5</sup> Raphael, 198.

<sup>6</sup> Calloway, Collin G. “American Indians and the American Revolution.” *National Park Service, Stories from the American Revolution*, (n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 224.

<sup>8</sup> Raphael, 206.

<sup>9</sup> Calloway, Colin G. *Pen and Ink Witchcraft : Treaties and Treaty Making in American Indian History*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 13-14.

<sup>10</sup> Calloway, Colin G. *Pen and Ink Witchcraft : Treaties and Treaty Making in American Indian*

the inherent language barriers, all peace deals and treaties required interpreters and translators. Many Americans who filled these quintessential roles were, unsurprisingly, unprepared for the cross-cultural diplomacy they were facilitating. Interpreters often misled delegates through abbreviated terms and simplified metaphor, fostering miscommunication. At times, this confusion created an open door for white settlers to push aggressive land cessions without worrying about tone or specific language regarding acreage or mileage. In turn, this tendency prioritized colonial interests time and time again, as most interpreters at the time of the Revolution were colonists themselves.<sup>11</sup>

The frontiers of Southern states were no less contested. The relentless pressure from colonists encroaching on the backcountry proved to be too much for Cherokee towns throughout Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. Cherokee chiefs tried to buy time for their communities to no avail, as the more land they ceded to white settlers, the more land settlers desired.<sup>12</sup> During the decade leading up to the Revolution, the pace at which treaty after treaty ‘whittled away’ remaining Cherokee territory quickened.<sup>13</sup> Between 1768 and 1772, the Treaty of Fort Stanwix, the Treaty of Hard Harbor, the Treaty of Lochaber, and the Virginia cessions had vastly reduced Cherokee land rights across the Southeast, prompting young Cherokee men to anger with their fathers and leaders. In 1775, Richard Henderson and a group of other American speculators disavowed the Proclamation Line of 1763

---

*History*, 25-26.

<sup>11</sup> Calloway, Colin G. *Pen and Ink Witchcraft : Treaties and Treaty Making in American Indian History*, 40-43.

<sup>12</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 249-250.

<sup>13</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 249.

when they purchased 27,000 square miles from Attakullakulla, Oconostota, and Savunkah, three prominent Cherokee chiefs. Only after white colonists began settling the land they had ceded did the chiefs realize that they had been deceived by Henderson, tricked into signing terms they did not fully understand.<sup>14</sup>

Attakullakulla's son, Dragging Canoe, and other young warriors protested the failures to protect Cherokee land through traditional diplomacy, culminating in a generational coup at Chota in 1776, modern-day Tennessee. Shawnee, Delaware, and Mohawk delegations met Cherokee leaders at the Cherokee capital, urging the Cherokee to fight back against white colonists and reclaim their ancestral lands. When Cherokee elders refused the proposition, Dragging Canoe and other young Cherokees took the war belt offered by the Northern nations, "seized authority from the chiefs and reversed their policies of appeasement", attacking American settlements almost immediately.<sup>15</sup> Young Cherokee men were willing to uproot the power of their fathers and turn to violence to end the cessions of land, a radical decision that reinvigorated settler conquest for Cherokee land in the decade to come. White colonists used the newfound, aggressive hostility to claim over five million acres as compensation after the war had come to an end.<sup>16</sup>

As war-time treaties and land cessions repeatedly favored colonial claims, generational divides emerged, power structures altered, and a dramatic loss of life and home rattled and destabilized Indigenous nations. When the war came to an official end at the Peace of Paris, despite being residents of the very territory in question, there were no Native American

---

<sup>14</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 249.

<sup>15</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 251.

<sup>16</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 251.

representatives. In the preliminary treaty ratified by Congress in 1783, there is no mention of Indigenous people, despite contested negotiations over the Northwest Territory and the Mississippi River.<sup>17</sup> The perspectives and interests of Native American nations were not only ignored, but erased from the legal documentation and agreements that accorded Indigenous ancestral land to the white settlers of North America. Representatives from Great Britain were silent and failed to raise any voice to advocate for the preservation of Indigenous land ownership. At the end of the war, despite having made promises of protection to the Native American nations who fought alongside Loyalists and English forces against the American colonists, there was no loyalty or friendship offered by the British for the defeated and subdued Native Americans.

Indigenous leaders, including Mohawk chiefs Joseph Bryant and Kanonraron, were shocked by Britain's betrayal. Their people had fought alongside the British soldiers, negotiated with their generals, and provided them with supplies and resources. In response, their communities had suffered tremendously at the hands of radical American patriots, with little

---

<sup>17</sup> Great Britain, Elias Boudinot, David C Claypoole, United States Continental Congress, and Continental Congress Broadside Collection. The United States in Congress assembled, to all who shall these presents greeting: Whereas in and by our commission, dated at Philadelphia, the fifteenth day of June, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-one, the Honorable John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, Henry Laurens, and Thomas Jefferson ... with Richard Oswald ... did conclude and sign on the part of the United States of America and the crown of Great-Britain, articles in the words following ... Now know ye, that we the United States in Congress assembled, have ratified and confirmed ... the said articles. [Philadelphia: Printed by David C. Claypoole, 1783] Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/90898287/>.

support from the “distant king” who they had given their allegiance to. In Kanonraron’s words, the betrayal “was an act of Cruelty and injustice that Christians *only* were capable of doing.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet the British were hardly the only white government to betray alliances made with Native Americans. In 1775, American Revolutionaries had met with Iroquois leaders at Albany, explaining the coming war as a “family quarrel” with “Old England”, and requesting that the Iroquois “remain at home, and not join on either side.”<sup>19</sup> Other New England warriors openly joined the Revolutionary cause, fighting with Washington’s Continental Army in Boston in 1775, only to have their lands seized by opportunistic Americans in their absence.<sup>20</sup> The British land treaties made with various Indigenous nations throughout the decades leading up to the war had not been wholly respected by American settlers on the frontier, but proto-American foreign policy regarding Indigenous borders was still interested in peace. Skirmishes between white settlers and Iroquois before the Revolution were, by and large, prompted by American aggravation who disregarded treaties made by the British.<sup>21</sup>

Just four years after calling for peace between the Iroquois and white settlers, the Sullivan Expedition of 1779 targeted Iroquois communities throughout the Northeast, with “the immediate object” of the campaign being “their total destruction and devastation.”<sup>22</sup> The expedition has been understood and interpreted through the lens of genocide by a cohort of historians who have analyzed and quantified the violence and devastation of the expedition. Also

---

<sup>18</sup> Raphael, 216.

<sup>19</sup> Raphael, 195.

<sup>20</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 224.

<sup>21</sup> Raphael, 194.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, Sherman. "THE ORGANIZATION OF SULLIVAN'S EXPEDITION." *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association* 6 (1906): 29-36. [www.jstor.org/stable/42889887](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42889887). p. 30.

known as the Sullivan-Clinton Campaign, the genocide was ordered by none other than General George Washington, who communicated these hostile objectives to Major General John Sullivan:

“After you have very thoroughly completed the destruction of their settlements; if the Indians should show a disposition for peace, I would have you to encourage it, on condition that they will give some decisive evidence of their sincerity [...] But you will not by any means listen to any overture of peace before the total ruin of their settlements is effected. [...] Our future security will be in their inability to injure us the distance to which they are driven and in the terror with which the severity of the chastisement they receive will inspire them.”<sup>23</sup>

There was no underlying remorse or sympathy in Washington’s letter to Sullivan, and Sullivan gave none. Records indicate that at least 621 houses and forts were destroyed throughout Mohawk, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and Tuscarora territory between April and September, 1779.<sup>24</sup> A conservative estimate calculates that at least 33 towns were burned to the ground between August and September of the same year, through at the end of the

---

<sup>23</sup>“From George Washington to Major General John Sullivan, 31 May 1779,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 29, 2019,

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-20-02-0661>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 20, 8 April–31 May 1779, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010, pp. 716–719.]

<sup>24</sup> Koehler, Rhiannon. “Hostile Nations: Quantifying the Destruction of the Sullivan-Clinton Genocide of 1779.” *American Indian Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 427–53. doi:10.5250/amerindiquar.42.4.0427. p. 422.



expedition, Sullivan bragged to Congress that “there is not a single town left in the country of the Five nations” with the exception of one in modern-day northern Pennsylvania.<sup>25</sup> Hundreds of thousands of acres of cropland, orchard, and timber were pillaged and burned as well.<sup>26</sup> As put by Rhiannon Koehler, “By both destroying existing crops and preventing the land in question from yielding further sustenance, Washington aimed to eliminate the Indian presence in the Northeast altogether. [...] The long game, therefore, was to first establish conditions ensuring Haudenosaunee starvation and then to directly physically threaten the surviving Iroquois.”<sup>27</sup> The Sullivan-Clinton Campaign was a strong step towards the fate which white Americans imagined for Native Americans; complete submission and compliance. This goal would allow the establishment of a *white* government, for *white* citizens, on *white* land.

Andrea Smith, a Cherokee organizer, uses a useful framework for analyzing the nation-building priorities of American-sponsored genocide:

“[...] Indigenous peoples must disappear. In fact, they must always be disappearing, in order to allow non-Indigenous people the rightful claim over this land. [...] genocide serves as the anchor for colonialism - it is what allows people to feel they can rightfully own Indigenous peoples’ land. It is okay to take land from Indigenous peoples because Indigenous peoples have disappeared.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Raphael, 203.

<sup>26</sup> Raphael, 203.

<sup>27</sup> Koehler, 433.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, 2.

Into this pervasive narrative fits a woman known as Madam Sacho. She was an old, and frail woman, believed to be either Tuscarora or Cayuga, and she appeared to be the last person remaining in her anonymous town. Sullivan and his party discovered her in September of 1779 as they continued through the countryside which they had burned and pillaged for months. Though he had been given orders to take hostages of all ages and genders, Sullivan made a surprising choice and took pity on her, providing her with food and shelter, believing that this frail old “sqaw”. Sacho provided intimate details about her community’s struggles and her people’s whereabouts to Sullivan and his men, but when they went off in search of these hidden people, they found no one. Instead of the submissive, meek, and passive representation of the Iroquois that Sacho provided for Sullivan and his men, historian and scholar Sarah Pearsall has argued that we might understand Madam Sacho as a hero, a clever diversion to aid her community’s escape ahead of Sullivan’s destruction. Pearsall’s observations align with Smith’s analysis:

“There was a terrible way in which the evacuation of the Haudenosaunee from these lands, seemingly leaving behind only an old woman, allowed Americans to imagine a fuller “disappearance” all too easily. [...] There was power in emphasizing that someone was the last Indian left. [...] Rehearsing an American takeover of the land, with the easily vanquished Sacho the only indian left, allowed Anglo-Americans to actually take it over.”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Pearsall, Sarah. “Recentering Indian Women in the American Revolution.” in Susan Sleeper-Smith, et al, eds. *Why You Can’t Teach American History without Indians*. Chapel Hill, University of North Caroline Press, 2015. p. 65-66.

Combining Pearsall's narrative of Madam Sacho, Koehler's quantitative research, and Smith's colonial framework illuminates the essential purpose of Native American removal and genocide during the American Revolution. Historians agree that the policy of taking Indigenous land had always been inevitable in the eyes of white colonists. The survival of the republic depended on the transformation of native land into public American land, capable of being bought and sold, owned and regulated by settlers on the frontiers as Jefferson's "empire of liberty" continued to expand. The very notion that the new nation must expand to be successful was dependent on extracting space from indigenous communities by using any means necessary. Genocide was one method, while territorial treaties forced at the threat of violence was another. When Indigenous groups cooperated and managed to establish a fragile peace with revolutionary leaders, visitors became hostages and dead men.

For Leni Lenape (also called the Delaware) and Shawnee people, living in peace was not a sustainable option. Despite promoting pacifism and respect among white colonists, four Shawnee at Fort Randolph pursuing diplomatic relations were murdered in cold blood in 1777: Redhawk, Petella, Cornstalk, and Elinipsico were the victims of revenge for an attack by Mingo warriors, not Shawnee, across the river. The murder of Cornstalk, a prominent Shawnee chief, was particularly poignant, as he had been a powerful proponent of peace among the Shawnee. American officials failed to hold the hostile colonists to justice and instead engaged in open warfare with Shawnee warriors. Two years later, a Leni Lenape chief named White Eyes was killed under similarly dubious circumstances. Again, peace negotiations failed because of

American hostility and misidentification of Indigenous groups.<sup>30</sup> The concentrated efforts of Shawnee and Leni Lenape leaders to maintain peace, neutrality, and Indigenous land were initially destroyed by the actions of rash and violent Americans. The retaliation by Shawnee and Leni Lenape warriors provided an excuse for American settlers to push for the absorption of native land, not unlike the backlash to the Cherokee coup at Chota, or the organized genocide against defensive Iroquois.

The overarching and repeating theme is apparent; the Revolutionary War served, in part, as a “contest for Indian land” just as much as it served as a revolution against the oppressive government Great Britain.<sup>31</sup> Americans provoked Indigenous people to violence, and then used that violence as a means to steal land in payment for damages. Native Americans faced mass violence for simply existing on land which was desirable to white settlers. Indigenous territory was just beginning to feel the pressure of an expanding settler-colonial nation, pressing up against Indian towns and societies. When simply stealing land was not an option, white Americans at the highest levels of government approved of genocidal campaigns that removed all traces of Indigenous people and cleared a path for white land ownership. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, two of the new nation’s Founding Fathers, believed wholeheartedly that the destruction of Indigenous people and the theft of their land were vital to the survival of the American Experiment.

---

<sup>30</sup> Raphael, 213-217.

<sup>31</sup> Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 223.

Works Cited:

Adamiak, Stanley J. "The 1779 Sullivan Campaign: A Little-Known Offensive Strategic To The War Breaks The Indian Nations' Power." Archiving Early America. Varsity Tutors.

Accessed October 22, 2019.

<https://www.varsitytutors.com/earlyamerica/early-america-review/volume-3/1779-sullivan-campaign>

Bishop, Morris. "The End of the Iriquois." *American Heritage*, October 1969.

<https://www.americanheritage.com/end-iroquois#>.

Calloway, Collin G. "American Indians and the American Revolution." *National Park Service*, Stories from the American Revolution, (n.d.).

Calloway, Collin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*. Boston [etc.] : Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012.

Calloway, Colin G. *Pen and Ink Witchcraft : Treaties and Treaty Making in American Indian History*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=572678&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Calloway, Colin. G. "The Indian World of George Washington." *American Heritage*, Fall 2019.

<https://www.americanheritage.com/indian-world-george-washington>.

"CONTINUATION OF NATHANIEL WEBB'S JOURNAL: As Published in the Elmira Republican of Sept. 11th and 12th, 1855." *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association* 6 (1906): 87-93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42889891>.

"Extracts from a Journal Kept by Doctor Ebenezer Elmer during General Sullivan's Expedition." *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society (Edison, NJ)* 2, no. 1 (January 2, 1846): 43-50.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=h9j&AN=63298770&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

"From George Washington to Major General John Sullivan, 31 May 1779," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-20-02-0661>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 20, 8 April-31 May 1779, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010, pp. 716-719.]

Great Britain, Elias Boudinot, David C Claypoole, United States Continental Congress, and Continental Congress Broadside Collection. The United States in Congress assembled, to all who shall these presents greeting: Whereas in and by our commission, dated at Philadelphia, the fifteenth day of June, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-one, the Honorable John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, Henry Laurens, and Thomas Jefferson ... with Richard Oswald ... did conclude and sign on the part of the United States of America and the crown of Great-Britain, articles in the words

following ... Now know ye, that we the United States in Congress assembled, have ratified and confirmed ... the said articles. [Philadelphia: Printed by David C. Claypoole, 1783] Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/90898287/>.

Koehler, Rhiannon. "Hostile Nations: Quantifying the Destruction of the Sullivan-Clinton Genocide of 1779." *American Indian Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 427–53. doi:10.5250/amerindiquar.42.4.0427.

Pearsall, Sarah. "Recentring Indian Women in the American Revolution." in Susan Sleeper-Smith, et al, eds. *Why You Can't Teach American History without Indians*. Chapel Hill, University of North Caroline Press, 2015.

Nash, Gary B., Julie Roy Jeffrey, John R. Howe, Peter J. Frederick, Allen F. Davis, and Allan M. Winkler. *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*. 6th ed. New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2004.

Raphael, Ray. *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence*. New York: New Press, 2001.

Schmidt, Ethan. *Native Americans and the American Revolution: How the War Divided, Devastated, and Transformed the Early American Indian World*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, ABC-CLIO, LLC., 2014.

Smith, Andrea. "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women

of Color Organizing." *Color of Violence: the INCITE! Anthology*, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Duke University Press (July 2016).

<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373445-007>

Williams, Sherman. "THE ORGANIZATION OF SULLIVAN'S EXPEDITION." *Proceedings*  
*of*

*the New York State Historical Association* 6 (1906): 29-36.

[www.jstor.org/stable/42889887](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42889887). 30.