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AN EXPLANATION FOR THE ONEIDA-COLONIST ALLIANCE IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION¹

by

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ABSTRACT

During the American Revolution the Oneida Indians, unlike the majority of their Iroquois confederates, supported and aided the Colonists. This Oneida-Colonist alliance is usually viewed as the result of the influence of the Reverend Samuel Kirkland on the Oneida. It is argued here that this interpretation is an oversimplification. In its place, a new theory of the Oneida-Colonist alliance is suggested and tested. The new theory suggests that the alliance was the result of a series of factors, the most important being the gradual Europeanization of the Oneida, a strengthening of ties between the Oneida and their Colonist neighbors, and a gradual weakening of ties between the Oneida and their Iroquois confederates.

Introduction

From 1775 until 1782 the Oneida Indians, unlike the majority of their Iroquois confederates, supported and aided the Colonists in their struggle with the British. This Oneida-Colonist alliance was a significant event in both American colonial history and Iroquoian history. As regards American colonial history, the Oneida-Colonist alliance was an important, if not a crucial factor in preventing an early Colonist defeat in New York State, and, hence, an early defeat in the War. The importance of the Oneida-Colonist alliance in Iroquoian history was two-fold. First, the alliance signified, and, in part, precipitated the collapse of Iroquoian political and military power in New York State. Second, because of their allegiance to the Colonists the Oneida suffered greatly, and were never again able to achieve the degree of prosperity and independence they enjoyed prior to the War. Writers have attributed the Oneida-Colonist alliance to the influence of the Reverend Samuel Kirkland, a dissenting Congregationalist minister who lived among the Oneida and exerted a great deal of leverage over them. An examination of the

relevant historical materials suggests that, while Kirland's influence was an important factor, its significance has been overemphasized. The underlying factor that enabled the Oneida-Colonist alliance to occur was a basic transformation of Oneida society in the years preceding the American Revolution. For a number of years the Oneida had been forging important new economic, political, and friendship ties with European settlers residing on land adjacent to the Oneida's territory, a group who were strong and active supporters of colonial independence. Simultaneously, there had been a gradual weakening of the relationships the Oneida held with the other Iroquois nations. In addition to the formation of new relationships and the weakening of old ones, there were other predisposing factors which encouraged Oneida-Colonist cooperation, still other factors, such as Kirkland's influence, that motivated the Oneida to aid the Colonists, and, finally, a series of events, such as military assistance from the French, that helped maintain cooperation once the alliance was formed.

The purpose of this paper is to present this theory of Oneida-Colonist alliance and then test it through confrontation with the ethnographic and historical record. This paper is divided into three major sections. The first is a brief description of the Oneida at the time of the American Revolution; the second is an account of the role of the Oneida in the Revolutionary War and an evaluation of the effect of their participation on the outcome. In the final section the theory is presented and tested.

Before moving on to a description of the Oneida, it is necessary to devote a few words to the Papers of Samuel Kirkland, a primary source I have relied on heavily in this research. The Kirkland Papers are a collection of the journals, diaries, semi-annual reports, letters, and notes of Samuel Kirkland written during his stay with the Oneida from 1766 until his death in 1808. In addition to Kirkland's own writings, the Papers include speeches and letters composed by the Oneida and letters to Kirkland and the Oneida from Philip Schuyler, George Washington, Horatio Gates, and others. In short, these documents provide a rich and detailed historical and ethnographic record of the Oneida for the last third of the 18th century.

When one uses ethnographic reports the most important question is not how much descriptive material the report contains, but, rather, how accurate the material is, that is, can we trust what the ethnographer or missionary has reported about the people they studied? Recent studies have empirically demonstrated that length of stay in the field, familiarity with the native language, systematic checks on informants' statements, time focus (whether the ethnographer is describing the culture as it was when he was there, or whether he is describing it as it was in the past), and the number of citations to earlier works on the same people are characteristics of the research process that are related to systematic errors in field reports on pre-literate societies

(Naroll 1962, 1970; Rohner 1975; Schaefer 1973). That Kirkland spent over forty years among the Oneida, spoke the Oneida dialect of the Northern Iroquoian language, recorded what he observed soon after he observed it, and took systematic censuses of the Oneida, leads me to conclude that the Kirkland Papers are a reasonably accurate record of the Oneida culture and changes in that culture for a period of over forty years. Certainly they are the best record we have of the Oneida for that period of time. The Oneida themselves, in a letter written to James Sullivan and Harvard College in the early 1800's, commented about Kirkland as follows: "His knowledge of Indians, their dispositions, tempers, manners, customs, and *language*; his love to them and their love to him, no other man could easily acquire, for it is almost *forty years* since we have lived together" (Kirkland Papers). Presently, both the original documents and the typescripts are housed at the Hamilton and Kirkland College Library in Clinton, New York.

The Oneida

Sometime prior to the 15th century, the Oneida, Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga nations joined together to form the Iroquois Confederation, or, as it was more commonly known in the 1700's, the Six Nations – Six Nations, because in 1722 the Tuscarora moved north from North Carolina and settled on land offered to them by the Oneida (Fenton 1971:133, 148). In accordance with the treaty of Ft. Stanwix (1768) the Iroquois were sole owners of all land in present day New York State west of the Ft. Stanwix Treaty Line as well as a sizable section of northern Pennsylvania (see Map 1). In 1773, Sir William Johnson, the English Superintendent of Indian Affairs, reported the population of the Iroquois to be "... at least Ten Thousand Souls, ... the Senecas alone are one-Half of that number" (O'Callaghan 1856-1887:VIII:458). The Oneida ranked second in population with 1,500, followed by the Cayuga, Onondaga, Mohawk, and Tuscarora (O'Callaghan 1856-1887:VIII:458). Of these ten thousand Iroquois, Johnson estimated that about 2,000 were warriors. On the eve of the American Revolution the Iroquois were probably the most formidable military organization in New York State, and it is no wonder that both the British and the Colonists actively sought their support, for whoever won their allegiance was assured of controlling New York State at the start of the War.

The territory of the Oneida extended from the Unadilla River on the east to the Chenango River on the west, from the St. Lawrence River on the north to the town of Tuscarora on the south. Prior to the creation of the Ft. Stanwix Treaty Line in 1768 the Oneida controlled most of the land in Oneida and Herkimer counties, but by 1773 all of it was under English

control and inhabited by European settlers. The Oneida's neighbors to the south were the Tuscarora, to the west the Onondaga, to the north a number of Canadian Indian nations, and to the east the Mohawk and the settlers of German ancestry who settled near the towns of German Flats and Ft. Stanwix. As regards intra-Confederation relationships, the Oneida's strongest ties were with the Onondaga through intermarriage, and with the Tuscarora who occupied land given to them by the Oneida and generally followed policies advocated by the Oneida. In the years prior to 1776 the Oneida had become involved in important trade and political networks with the white settlers and had formed friendship ties with the Stockbridge Indians, a number of whom were living with the Oneida at the start of the Revolution (Wallace 1969:126).

The territory north of Oneida Lake served as hunting grounds for both the Oneida and Mohawk, while the more important Oneida villages were located at Oneida Castle, Onoquaga, Oriska, and Ft. Stanwix (the Oneida Carrying Place). In 1769, Richard Smith, a traveler from New Jersey, entered the following description of the town of Onoquaga in his journal of June third (Smith and Halsey 1906:64-67):

At 5 oCloc we entered Ahquhaga an Oneida Town of 15 or 16 big Houses on the East side and some on the West side of the Susquehanna. . . . The Habitations here are placed stragglng without any order on the Banks. They are composed of clumsy hewn Timbers and hewn Boards or Planks. You first enter an enclosed Shed or Portus which serves as a Wood house or Ketchin and then the body of the Edifice consisting of an Entry thro upon the Ground of about 8 Feet wide on each side whereof is a Row of Stalls or Births resembling those of Horse Stables, raised a Foot from the Earth, 3 or 4 on either side according to the Size of the House, Floored and inclosed round, except the Front, and covered on the Top. At Ahquhaga each house possesses a paltry Garden wherein they plant Corn, Beans, Water Melons, Potatoes, Cucumbers, Muskmelons, Cabbage, French Turneps, some Apple Trees, Sallad, Parsnips, and other Plants. There are now Two Plows in the Town together with cows, Hogs, Fowls and Horses which they sell cheap but they never had any Sheep, and it is but of late that they have provided Hay for their Winter stock.

Like the other Iroquois nations, the Oneida were a matrilocal-matrilineal society composed of a number of clans; in the Oneida case these were the Wolf Clan, the Bear Clan, and the Turtle Clan (Bloomfield 1907:30). Matters affecting the Oneida were discussed at a meeting of the sachems and principal warriors that was usually held at Oneida Castle. Civil and religious affairs affecting the entire Iroquois Confederation were debated by the major sachems and warriors of each nation at councils held at the traditional meeting house in Onondaga Castle. Warfare was an important element of the Iroquoian culture, and skill and bravery in battle were desirable traits for all

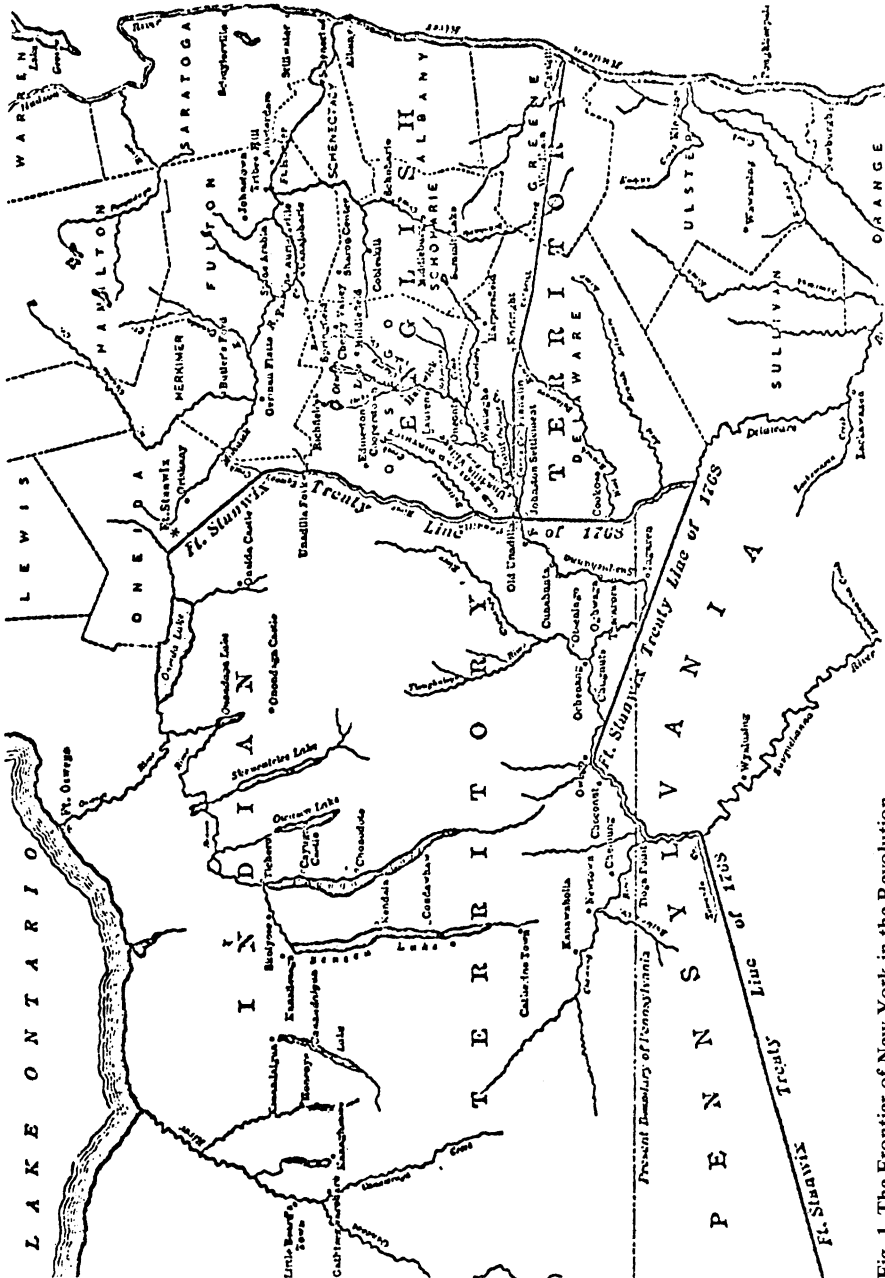


Fig. 1 The Frontier of New York in the Revolution. (Halsey 1901)

males. Iroquoian history is rich with accounts of Iroquois victories over a number of Indian adversaries as well as less successful ventures against the Dutch, French, and English.

Oneida Participation in the American Revolution

Throughout the Revolutionary War the Oneida served the Colonists as messengers, diplomatic representatives, guides, interpreters, informers, spies, and warriors. They participated in two major battles (Oriskany and Saratoga), two minor battles (Barren Hill and Klock's Field), one siege (Ft. Stanwix), one campaign (Sullivan's of 1779), and a number of raids and skirmishes. In addition, a number of Oneida sachems acted as diplomatic representatives for the pro-British Iroquois, although with little success. Oneida involvement in the above engagements is discussed below.

It is impossible to accurately determine the total number of Oneida warriors who aided the Colonists, although it seems clear that support for the Americans was never unanimous, as most of the Oneida living at Onoquaga probably supported the British. Prior to 1780 an estimate of between 175 and 225 Oneida warriors allied with the Americans seems reasonable, while after 1780 when the Oneida were homeless, there were probably no more than 100 warriors still aiding the Colonists. The others had joined the pro-British Iroquois at Ft. Niagara, although their participation appears to have been limited to one raid against the remains of their own villages and settlements in the Mohawk Valley (Graymont 1972:236). On April 3, 1779, the Continental Congress set aside twelve commissions for Oneida and Tuscarora warriors. The highest ranking Indian officer on the American side was Lieutenant Colonel Louis Atayataronghta, a Caughnawaga who often led Oneida warriors. There is no evidence that Oneida officers ever commanded American troops in the field, although they certainly advised a number of American commanders.

The Oneida first learned of trouble between the British and the Colonists in the winter of 1774 when Kirkland, "interpreted to the Indians the doings of the Continental Congress . . .," and, no doubt, presented the Colonist's position in a very favorable manner (Force 1837-1853:II:1380). Within a few months the Oneida and their Iroquois confederates found themselves to be the objects of an intense diplomatic struggle between the British and the Colonists. At first, both sides sought only to keep the Iroquois neutral, but within a short period of time they were actively soliciting Iroquois allegiance. The British entered the diplomatic struggle for Iroquois support with a number of distinct advantages including, among others, a

well-established network of Indian agents, a record of battlefield success, and the proven ability to deliver goods and services to the Iroquois (Mohr 1933:40). Furthermore, the British argued that the Colonists had little chance of defeating them, and, if the Colonists did happen to win, they would quickly seize the Iroquois land (Force 1837-1853:VII:867-868). The Colonists' efforts at gaining Iroquois support were characterized by indecision, confusion, and lack of coordination between the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and the Provincial Congresses. The Colonists argued that they were capable of defeating the British, especially since the French would assist them, that Iroquois autonomy and independence were largely dependent on colonial independence, and, in order to gain Iroquois support, financed Kirkland's mission, promised to supply goods and services, and attempted to resolve Iroquois grievances directed against European settlers (Burnett 1921-1928:I:180; Force 1837-1853:I:1350, II:1070, 1924:IV:1656, 1662; Secret Journals 1821:II:22). Evidently, no great effort was needed to align the Oneida on the side of independence, for on June 28, 1775, the Oneida issued the following declaration of neutrality, the first such declaration issued in the American Revolution (Kirkland Papers):

These may certify all whom it may concern. That we the Chiefs, head men, councilors, warriors, and youngmen of the Oneida nation, this day assembled together considering of affairs of importance, we say these may certify all whom it may concern that we are altogether for Peace, and not only we of the Oneida nation.

During that same week the Oneida conferred with the Committee of Safety of Tryon County and agreed “. . . to communicate to us the Committee of Safety all the Remarkable News and Intelligence they can get in Regard to these present Troubles, and desired the same of us reciprocally” (Kirkland Papers). Thus, even though they were negotiating a declaration of neutrality, the Oneida consented to serve the Colonists as informants and from that point on were a continual source of information on British efforts to enlist Indian support, decisions by other Indian nations to aid the British, and the size and location of British and Indian combat units (Force 1837-1853:II:1746-1747, IV:1131, V:769, VII:867-868).

At this point a word needs to be said about the use of the word *neutral* to describe the stance of the Oneida in 1775 and 1776. There does appear to be some confusion in the literature regarding the question of Oneida neutrality during these years. Obviously, the Oneida were neutral in the sense that they did not actively aid one side or the other in combat – they couldn't have since combat in western New York State did not begin until 1777. However, it is clear that in 1775 and 1776 the Oneida aided the Colonists in many non-combat ways, and, furthermore, there is no evidence that any

sizable number of Oneida aided the British before 1780. Therefore, we need to say that in 1775 and 1776 the Oneida were neutral but in favor of the Colonists, just as the Mohawk were neutral but in favor of the British. In addition to supplying the Colonists with information, the Oneida regularly defended the Colonists' position at meetings with other Indian nations, encouraged other Indians to attend councils called by the Colonists, and, somewhat hypocritically, reprimanded the pro-British Mohawk for not maintaining neutrality (Force 1837-1853:IV:1131, V:769, 772-773, VI:819, VII:867-868; O'Callaghan 1856-1887:VIII:606-622). On May 22, 1776, the majority of the other Iroquois nations pledged their allegiance to the British while the Oneida, although under considerable pressure from their Iroquois confederates to also support the British, commented, "Brother, we dread the consequences" (Force 1837-1853:V:772-773, 1100-1104, VII:867-868). In response, the Oneida, Tuscarora, Ochgugue, and Caughnawaga, "entered into a defensive league to support each other against the other nations; being resolved that, if the others join the King's party, they would die with the Americans in contest" (Force 1837-1853:VI:763). Thus, by the summer of 1776, the majority of the Mohawk, Seneca, and Cayuga nations were aligned with the British, the Onondaga were attempting to remain neutral, and the majority of the Oneida and Tuscarora nations supported the Colonists.

The year 1777 was particularly significant for the Oneida for two reasons: 1) the Iroquois Confederation ceased to be a viable force in New York State, and 2) for the first time, the Oneida joined the Colonists in battle against the British and their Iroquois allies. In January, 1777, the council fire at Onondaga Castle was covered for what turned out to be the final time. Seaver (1824:114) claims that a council was convened to discuss what role, if any, the Iroquois, as a unified body, should take in the war between the British and the Colonists, and, when the Oneida and Tuscarora refused to join the others in supporting the British, the council fire was extinguished and each nation was permitted to choose its own course. As an alternative explanation, Wallace (1969:132) and Graymont (1972) suggest that an epidemic which took ninety lives was what prevented the council from convening, as decisions had to be postponed until representatives of the Six Nations could gather for the condolence ritual, an arduous task in the cold and snowy winter months. Whatever the reason, when the council fire was extinguished at Onondaga Castle, the Iroquois political and military influence became a thing of the past, although individual nations made their military presence known throughout the War. The Oneida's refusal to support the British was more important, so far as the Americans were concerned, because it prevented the British from controlling all of the territory west of the Hudson River. If the Oneida had joined the British, Ft. Stanwix would have had to have been abandoned, the Mohawk River would have been rendered useless as a transportation route, and the British and their Iroquois allies

would have been free to invade eastern New York State. Hence, the Oneida's loyalty to the Colonists at the start of the American Revolution helped prevent an early British victory in New York State.

It was in August, 1777, when at Oriskany the Oneida first fought alongside their American allies in combat against the British and their Iroquois supporters (mostly Mohawk and Seneca) (Davis 1888:630). In all likelihood, the Oneida would have entered the fray at an earlier date, but refrained from doing so at the urging of Major General Philip Schuyler, who advocated a policy of Indian neutrality rather than Indian participation (Stone 1970:165). At Oriskany, about 50 Oneida warriors fought with the local militia under the command of General Herkimer against Lieutenant Colonel Barry St. Leger's force of about 1400 British regulars, Hessians, Canadians, Loyalists, and Iroquois warriors (Graymont 1972:129-134). Since historical accounts tend to ignore the role of the Oneida at Oriskany, it is difficult to determine the impact of their participation on the battle. However, based on the subsequent behavior of the pro-British Iroquois, it seems reasonable to infer that the Oneida at least made their presence felt. Following St. Leger's withdrawal to Oswego, a body of Mohawk and Seneca warriors avenged the Oneida's actions at Oriskany by attacking the village of Oriska where they set houses on fire, destroyed crops, and carried away cattle (Graymont 1972:142; O'Callaghan 1856-1887:VIII:725). The Oneida retaliated by driving about 100 Mohawk women and children, including Mary Brant, the sister of Mohawk war chief Joseph Brant, from their homes in the Upper and Lower Mohawk villages (O'Callaghan 1856-1887:VIII:725).

The Oneida also played a role in breaking St. Leger's siege of Ft. Stanwix. As the story goes, a local Loyalist, Han-Yost Schuyler, was captured by Benedict Arnold's force near Albany and sentenced to death. Schuyler's family interceded on his behalf and convinced Arnold to free Schuyler on the condition that Schuyler would infiltrate St. Leger's camp and induce the Indians to flee by announcing that a large American force was on its way to Ft. Stanwix (Stone 1970:213-214). Han-Yost recruited an Oneida to help him, who, in turn, recruited two or three other Indians (most likely Oneida) and they entered the British camp announcing that Arnold was only 24 hours away with a force of 2,000 men and that he was not interested in harming the Indians. The Mohawk and Seneca warriors, already much chagrined over the substantial losses they suffered at Oriskany, quickly broke camp, taunted and looted St. Leger's troops, and fled into the woods. St. Leger, with his force cut in half, was forced to withdraw to Oswego. Thus, the siege of Ft. Stanwix was broken and St. Leger's force was prevented from joining Burgoyne's army at Saratoga.

In September a force of 300 Indians, mostly Oneida and Tuscarora with a few Onondaga and Mohawk, accepted a war belt from Philip Schuyler at Albany and 150 of them joined the American army at Saratoga (Papers of the

Continental Congress 153:III:252). Schuyler reported to the Continental Congress that in their first day of action, “. . . they had already taken about thirty prisoners and Intercepted some dispatches from Gen. Burgoyne to General Powell Commanding at Ticonderoga” (Papers of the Continental Congress 153:III:252). What other roles the Oneida played at Saratoga are unclear, but following the American victory, Gates sent a message to the Oneida chiefs informing them of the British defeat and requesting that they send 30 to 40 of their best warriors to Albany for further instructions (Kirkland Papers). In addition, as payment for their aid at Saratoga, he ordered that the Oneida and Tuscarora be supplied with, “small quantities of provisions, powder, and as their pressing Occasions may require” (Paterson 1941:172). The Oneida responded as follows: “Brother we rejoice greatly in your success. It revives our minds. Two of our head warriors are abroad. Upon their return you shall immediately hear from us” (Kirkland Papers). In regard to the Oneida-Colonist alliance, the major result of the American victory at Saratoga and the credible performance at Oriskany was a renewal of Oneida confidence in the American army, and, consequently, a strengthening of Oneida support for the American cause.

Throughout the remainder of 1777 and early 1778 the Oneida continued to supply the Americans with information about British and pro-British Iroquois troop movements, and by June the Colonists were aware that the Oneida were their only ally among the Indian nations (The Sullivan-Clinton Campaign in 1779 1929:19). It was not until May, 1778, when the Oneida again joined the Americans in combat, this time at the Battle of Barren Hill in Pennsylvania where a group of fifty or so Oneida fought with LaFayette (Graymont 1972:165). While the Oneida maintained an essentially non-combat stance, the other Iroquois nations were successfully raiding and destroying Colonist villages and farms throughout western New York. In September, 1778, a party of 152 Indians and 310 Loyalists under the command of Joseph Brant destroyed 63 houses, 57 barns, 4 mills, and stole 235 horses, 229 head of cattle, 269 sheep, and 93 oxen (Halsey 1901:226-227). Almost immediately, the Oneida retaliated by burning the towns of Unadilla and Butternuts and by taking ten prisoners, one of whom was adopted into the Oneida nation (Halsey 1901:226-227).

Disturbed by the Iroquois raids on frontier settlements, the Americans embarked on an organized campaign against the pro-British Iroquois which opened in April, 1779, with the almost complete destruction of the villages of the Onondaga, the one nation that had maintained neutrality. This raid on the Onondaga was an unfortunate event for a number of reasons. First, it drove a number of Onondaga to join the British. Second, the Oneida were burdened with the responsibility of housing and feeding the displaced

Onondaga (Almon 1780:26). Third, and most importantly, it angered the Oneida and resulted in a number of their warriors seriously considering messages from the Seneca and Cayuga which suggested that the Oneida join the British force at Ft. Niagara (The Sullivan-Clinton Campaign in 1779 1929:101). The major thrust against the Iroquois occurred in the late summer and early autumn of 1779 when two armies of about 2,500 and 1,500 soldiers under the command of Generals Sullivan and Clinton moved across New York State systematically destroying Iroquois villages, crops, and orchards (Cook 1887). Sullivan was interested in utilizing as many Oneida warriors as possible in both his and Clinton's expeditions, but in the end no more than a half-dozen or so actually participated, chiefly as scouts and guides. The Oneida explained their lack of assistance by claiming that they had to remain at home to protect their villages from a threatened British attack, and, that when 100 warriors set out to join Sullivan's army, they were told their services were no longer required, so they returned home (Cook 1887:99, 236; Stone 1838:10). It seems reasonable to infer that another reason for the Oneida's reluctance to assist Sullivan was their anger over the raids on the Onondaga villages earlier in the year. As far as the Oneida were concerned, the major, immediate consequence of Sullivan's expedition was the death of one of their chiefs, Hanyost (also spelled Hanjost, Honyose, or Honniöse), who was killed in an ambush near Geneseo.

Despite the destruction of their villages and crops, the pro-British Iroquois continued to raid Colonist settlements in New York State. Sometime during the winter of 1779-1780 a fairly large force of Mohawks and Loyalists attacked and destroyed what remained of the Oneida villages, forcing about 400 Oneida men, women, and children to flee to Schenectady and to remain there under the protection of the Americans until the end of the War (Beauchamp 1905:369; Mohr 1933:195). As Wallace (1969:144) points out, of the 30 or so Iroquois villages that existed prior to the War, only two were still standing in 1780.

There is some evidence that in the summer and autumn of 1779 a number of Oneida deserted the Americans and joined the British at Ft. Niagara. For example, Colonel Guy Johnson reported in July, 1779, that 300 Oneida had joined him and 70 warriors were with his raiding party (Beauchamp 1905:369). However, while it is clear that a number of Oneida did join the British, there is some question as to whether they did so willingly or were under pressure from the British and other Iroquois to do so.²

Later in 1780 we find the Oneida fighting, for the first time, as an organized combat unit alongside American troops in the open field. Prior to this time, the Oneida had generally employed their traditional tactics of organized raids and surprise attacks. Under the command of Lieutenant

Colonel Atayataronghta, almost 100 Oneida warriors aided American regulars in routing a force of British regulars, Loyalists, Indians, and German Jagers at the Battle of Klock's Field (Cruikshank 1893:85; Stone 1846:121).

The Oneida's final combat role was in October, 1781, when a body of about 60 Oneida warriors pursued a British raiding party north to the West Canada Creek. One member of the British party was Captain Walter Butler, the son of Colonel John Butler, both of whom were infamous among the Americans for the supposed cruelty and treachery that characterized their roles in the War. While fording West Canada Creek, Butler was first shot, and then scalped by an Oneida warrior (Beauchamp 1905:370; Halsey 1901:307). While Butler's death was of little military significance, it, no doubt, did have an important psychological effect on the Colonist settlers in western New York.

As we have seen, with the exception of Klock's Field and possibly Oriskany as well, the Oneida military presence on the battlefield contributed little to the American victory. The evaluation of the Oneida role by Andrew Davis (1888:659) seems to be essentially correct:

These Indians were probably of greater service as neutrals [in favor of the Americans] who in that character were able to penetrate the enemy's country and report what was going on – than they would have been had they taken up the hatchet on the American side at the outset.

To this we need only reiterate the point made earlier, namely, that the Oneida, by siding with the Colonists, prevented the British from gaining control of New York State and allowed the Colonists to maintain a base of operations in western New York.

What benefits did the Oneida reap from their allegiance to the victorious Americans? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is *absolutely none*. The War had been particularly cruel to the Oneida – their villages, crops, and orchards lay in ruins, and they were a divided people, with one group living in horrid conditions near Schenectady and the others living at Ft. Niagara. Drunkenness, which had not been a problem among the Oneida for almost twenty years, was now commonplace; there was a severe shortage of meat, and the Oneida were housed in make-shift huts (Chase 1929:214; Durant 1878:366; Kirkland Papers). The situation was so dreadful that Kirkland wrote his wife in September, 1785, that the Oneida had become, "filthy, dirty, nasty creatures – a few families excepted" (Kirkland Papers). This already intolerable situation was aggravated by the arrival of almost 2,000 displaced Stockbridge, Narragansett, Mohican, Niantic, Delaware, Onondaga, and Cayuga Indians, all of whom were allowed by the Oneida to settle on Oneida land (Chase 1929:194; Kirkland Papers). Although the warring nations reconciled after the War, the Iroquois

Confederation, abandoned by the British and not recognized by the Americans, was shattered.

Following the War, treaties between the Americans and the Six Nations were negotiated in 1784, 1789, and 1794 (Kappler 1973). In each treaty the Oneida and Tuscarora were able to keep their lands as a reward for aiding the Colonists. However, in 1784 the Americans began a systematic process of buying up the Oneida's land, and by 1789 the Oneida were in possession of only one small reservation which was sold at an auction in August, 1797 (Durant 1878:580). In the treaty of 1794 the Americans agreed to pay the Oneida \$5000 for past losses and services, to build saw and grist mills, and to provide \$1000 for the construction of a church (Kappler 1973:38). Again, however, the promises were not kept. In the early 1800's the Oneida complained that Kirkland's situation was, ". . . for many years wretched and distressing," and there were neither mills nor a church (Kirkland Papers). As early as 1785 a group of Oneida left New York and settled on the Grand River Reservation in Ontario, Canada. In the 1820's the Oneida made their final exodus from New York when they followed their minister, Flazar Williams, to Wisconsin. Presently, the majority of Oneida live on the Oneida Reservation near Green Bay, Wisconsin, and on another reservation in southern Ontario. The only Oneida remaining in New York State are a community of about 500 living on non-reservation, tax-exempt land near Syracuse.³

An Explanation for the Oneida-Colonist Alliance in the American Revolution

How can we explain why the Oneida, despite considerable pressure from their Iroquois confederates and the British, supported and aided the Colonists? Traditionally, historians and others have answered this question by citing the influence of Samuel Kirkland, a Congregationalist minister who actively encouraged the Oneida to support the Colonists, as the only or the most important reason for the Oneida-Colonist alliance. For example, Davis (1888:659) tells us that, "Their [the Oneida] attitude was largely due to the Rev. Samuel Kirkland, the Missionary." Walter Mohr, in his *Federal Indian Relations, 1774-1778*, comments as follows:

This left the affairs of the Six Nations in the hands of John Butler, to whom Carleton gave instructions that he should preserve their good will and retain them as neutrals. This was rather difficult, due to the influence of such men as Kirkland, Deane, and Crosby, and also because the American armies had been generally successful during the fall of 1775 in so far as Canada was concerned.

Likewise, Beauchamp (1905:348), in clear reference to Kirkland's role in influencing the Oneida to aid the Colonists, notes that, "After leaving the Senecas, Kirkland for a time alternated between Oquaga and the Mohawk Valley. At a later date his public services were of inestimable value." Van Tyne (1929:401) also puts great emphasis on Kirkland's influence when he states, "A great aid to Congress handicapped in this way, was the Reverend Samuel Kirkland, who had great success in keeping the Indians friendly and neutral." Similarly, Halsey (1901), Graymont (1972:Chapters 2 and 3), Stone (1938; 1946:Chapter 2), and Bloomfield (1907:95) place considerable emphasis on Kirkland's role in influencing the Oneida to support the Americans.

There are three major problems with the Kirkland hypothesis. First, it ignores a number of other factors that may well have had a role in encouraging the Oneida to support the Colonists. Second, it raises more questions than it answers. For example, why did Kirkland, who was an outsider, have such great influence over the Oneida while their Iroquois confederates of hundreds of years seemed to have had no influence? Third, the Kirkland hypothesis seems to have never been tested in any formal manner – it has simply become something of a historical tradition to cite Samuel Kirkland as the major cause of the Oneida-Colonist alliance. My purpose is neither to discredit Kirkland nor to disprove the Kirkland hypothesis, but rather to place his role, which certainly was important, in historical and causal perspective.

The hypothesis I am proposing here as an alternative to the Kirkland hypothesis is outlined in Figure 1. Both the historical and causal sequence of events flow from left to right.

Underlying Causes

By underlying causes I mean factors or variables that lead to the predisposing causes, but are not directly related to the effect. After the French settled Montreal and the Dutch built Ft. Orange in the early 17th century, the Iroquois found themselves in almost continual contact with Dutch, French, and English traders, settlers, missionaries, soldiers, and government officials. While contact with Europeans affected all of the Iroquois nations, it was the two nations furthest east, the Mohawk and Oneida, who were influenced most. As far as the Oneida-Colonist alliance is concerned, the significance of Oneida-European contact was the gradual formation of bonds between the Oneida and European settlers, missionaries, and traders. Exactly how and why these patterns of Oneida affiliation developed will be discussed in the following section.

Also, under the rubric of underlying causes, I have listed geographic proximity. This simply refers to the fact that the settlers with whom the

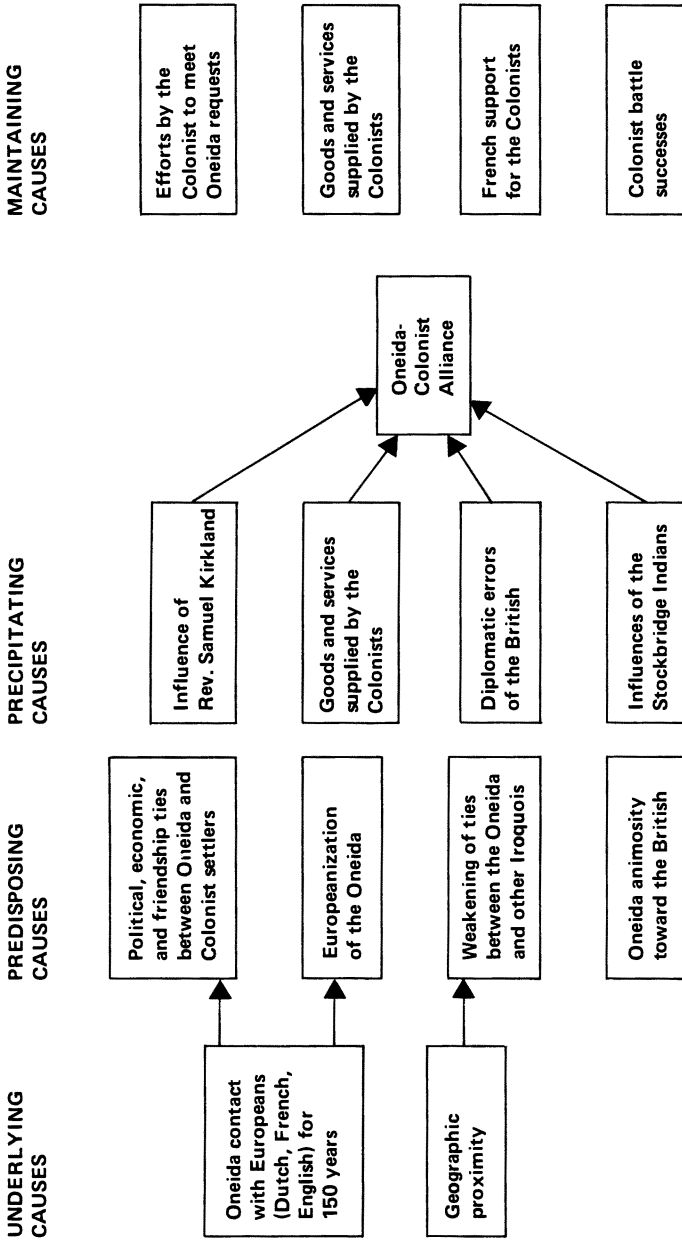


Fig. 1 An Explanation for the Oneida-Colonist Alliance in the American Revolution.

Oneida were in contact were supporters of colonial independence. This is an important point because it means that when the Revolution began, the Oneida were receiving their information from the Colonists.

Predisposing Causes

Predisposing causes enhance the probability that another variable will occur, although they are not the immediate active agents. The basic causes of the Oneida-Colonist alliance were the following three factors which worked in combination to encourage cooperation between the Oneida and the settlers: (1) the formation of political, economic, and friendship ties between the Oneida and Colonist settlers; (2) the Europeanization of the Oneida; and (3) a weakening of ties between the Oneida and their Iroquois confederates. Thus, the Oneida-Colonist alliance in the American Revolution can be viewed as one more example of the pattern of cooperation that characterized the Oneida-Colonist relations in the years prior to the War. The evidence for this point of view is substantial and can be found in the Kirkland Papers, in the histories of communities located on or adjacent to Oneida land, and in traveler's journals.

The changes that took place in Oneida society in the 18th century are truly astounding. In the early 1700's the Oneida were a non-Christian, pre-literate, hunting and agricultural society whose primary interactions were with other Iroquois nations. By 1776 many Oneida were Christians, some were literate both in English and in the Iroquoian language, a number of children were attending school, trade with Europeans was an important economic activity, and the Oneida were skilled carpenters and farmers (Wallace 1969; Halsey 1901:68-78; Kirkland Papers). The changes in the economic and interaction patterns were due largely to the steady stream of Europeans who established settlements near the Oneida villages. Religious and educational changes were the result of missionary activity which commenced in an organized manner among the Oneida in 1712, although the Jesuits had made short-lived and unsuccessful ventures earlier (Halsey 1901:49).

Certainly, the most important change was the decline in hunting and small-scale farming as primary economic activities. With implements supplied by missionaries and traders, such as hoes, scythes, plow tackling, and oxen, the Oneida were relying more and more on a combination of farming, animal husbandry, and trade with settlers near Ft. Stanwix for necessary supplies (Kirkland Papers). The trade pattern was one of the Oneida supplying furs and meat to the settlers for carpentry tools, farm implements, cookwear, guns, medicine, coffee, tea, bread, flour, and a variety of other items that had become commonplace in Oneida villages (Kirkland Papers; Durant 1878:365; Fenton 1971:156). A clear example of the degree to which the Oneida had been assimilated into the European economic system is found in the

proceedings of a meeting between Sir William Johnson and the Iroquois to set a boundary line in 1768, as follows (O'Callaghan 1856-1887:124-125):

The Oneidas returned to Sir Williams Quarters, and told him that their people positively refused to agree to any other Line than they had proposed the last night, & that as Game began to grow scarce in their neighborhood, they had come to a Resolution to keep the carrying Place to the Canada Creek in their hands, as by Keeping Horses and Carriages there as they proposed to do for the future to carry over the Traders Goods, they might earn somewhat for the support of their families.

The significance of the formation of these trade relations was that the Oneida were now dependent on the settlers and traders for many products that were essential to the economic stability of the Oneida villages. Furthermore, the Oneida began to form closer friendship and political ties with the settlers because political matters that affected the settlers, such as British taxation policies, affected the flow of goods to the Oneida. As regards friendship with the settlers, the Oneida were unwilling to part with any more of their land, but, nevertheless, were concerned about the well-being of their European neighbors. For example, when St. Leger was advancing upon Ft. Stanwix in 1777, the Oneida sent word to settlers around the fort to evacuate their farms (Durant 1878:365; Kirkland Papers).

Contributing to their affiliation with the Colonists was the gradual Europeanization of the Oneida which was largely the result of missionary activity. The Oneida were visited and influenced, in varying degrees, by three different missionary groups – the Jesuits, the Anglicans, and the non-conformists (Congregationalists and Presbyterians).

The Jesuit effort was the earliest and least effective. Two Jesuit missionaries, Peter Millet and Jacques Bruyer, worked among the Oneida in the 1600's, but their efforts produced few, if any, lasting results. Missionary efforts among the Oneida began in earnest in 1712 with the arrival of the Anglican minister, William Andrews, at Oghwaga (Halsey 1901:49). Andrews managed to build a church and a school and to convert thirty-eight Indians to Christianity. However, he regularly complained that “nothing he did seemed to last” (Halsey 1901:49). Evidently, his greatest problem was to persuade males, who were often off hunting, to attend church services. A second major American effort was made by the Reverend Jacob Oel in 1750. Oel baptised a number of Oneida, but was soon replaced by Presbyterian missionaries from New England.

The Presbyterian missionary effort was two-pronged. The major effort involved stationing missionaries in Iroquois villages. A secondary effort involved sending Iroquois adults and children to mission schools in New England. In 1748 the Reverend Elihu Spencer set up a church at Oghwaga

and converted a number of Oneida (Halsey 1901:54). His most important convert was Peter Agworondouwas, an Oneida chief. “Good Peter,” as he was subsequently known, remained an important religious leader in the Oneida community. By 1749, the effort to educate Indians at mission schools was well established, with 218 students in residence at the school in Stockbridge. Undoubtedly, some of these were Oneida along with Mohawk and Stockbridge. Spencer’s efforts were carried on by Gideon Hawley and Timothy Woodbridge who arrived at Oghwaga in 1753. They were successful in establishing a mission, but their effort was ended by the French and Indian War in 1756. But, in their absence, “Good Peter” carried on their work at Oghwaga and other Oneida villages (Halsey 1901:68). In 1759 “Good Peter” was joined by another Indian preacher, Samson Occum, who had been trained at the mission school in Stockbridge. Occum’s efforts were aimed primarily at the Oneida, although he dealt with other groups as well. The major missionary effort prior to Kirkland’s arrival in 1766 was made by Eli Forbes and Asaph Rice in 1762 and 1763. They established a church, set up two schools, and encouraged “Good Peter” to continue his work.

So, prior to Kirkland’s arrival in 1766, we find considerable missionary activity already having taken place and a number of key changes in Oneida society that resulted from this activity. Kirkland’s predecessors initiated four major changes: (1) they made the presence of missionaries in Oneida villages a normal event; (2) they converted a number of Oneida to Christianity, for example, the Reverend Elezar Wheelock wrote in 1762 that, “The Indians are in some measure civilized, . . . some of them baptised, a number of them, in a judgement of charity, real Christians” (Halsey 1901:71); (3) they enlisted the support of key Indian leaders, such as Samson Occum and “Good Peter”; (4) they established schools – by 1765 there were 127 Oneida and Mohawk children attending school (Halsey 1901:78).

The Reverend Samuel Kirkland, more than any other missionary, was as interested in educating and teaching the Oneida new skills, such as farming and carpentry, as he was interested in converting and baptizing them. For example, in February of 1771 he reported the following census for schools under his jurisdiction:

1st, at Kanonwarohare, 56 scholars. 2d, old Onoide – 10 scholars. 3d, at Skawasreah – 8 Tuscarores. 4th, at Kandesko – 14 Tuscarores.

In the summer of 1773 he reported that, “There are now upward of forty that can read tolerably well in their own language” (Kirkland Papers).

Still, though, religion and converting the Oneida to Christianity were the most important considerations. As early as November, 1770, only four years after Kirkland’s arrival, hundreds of Oneida and Tuscarora were traveling from a number of villages to attend Kirkland’s services and prayer meetings (Kirkland Papers). In addition, church services were often per-

formed by Oneida ministers in the Oneida dialect (Halsey 1901:81; Smith and Halsey 1906:68). In June, 1773, the Oneida built a substantial church which was described by Kirkland as follows:

June third – raised a meeting house for the public worship – to the great joy of the Indians. – The dimensions are, 36 by 28 ft. 18 feet post – planned for a gallery at one end – five windows 24 lights each 8 by 10 – four windows of 15 lights each 7 by 9. – two doors – The frame is strong & well put together – as the town stands in a bleak place – the house is more than usually timbered –

Because the Oneida could speak English they could communicate with the settlers more easily, and because they spoke English and attended church, the settlers seemed to view them in a more favorable manner. For example, about sixty Iroquois were present at the ordination of the Reverend Aaron Crosby in July, 1773, in Cherry Valley, and Kirkland noted in his journal that, “The Indians conducted with great decency to the surprise of the white people, and appeared much affected with the solemn transactions of the day.”

There is considerable evidence pointing to a weakening in the ties between the Oneida and the other Iroquois nations in the years preceding the War. *The Minute Book of the Committee of Safety* of Tyron County shows that during the spring and summer of 1775 the Oneida were in frequent contact with the Colonist settlers. For example, in May they passed along a letter from the Mohawks, urging the Oneida not to aid the Colonists. Graymont (1972:86) points to other signs of strain in the Oneida-Iroquois relationship. Evidently, because of their close ties to the Colonists, the Oneida lost the trust of their Iroquois confederates – information was now purposefully withheld from them for fear that they would pass it along to the Colonists. And, in 1775 the Cayuga and Onondaga accused the Oneida of being closer to the government at Albany than to the “ancient Council Fire at Onondaga” (Graymont 1972:86).

Before moving on to the precipitating causes, one other predisposing cause needs to be discussed – Oneida animosity toward the British. There is some evidence that in the years immediately preceding the American Revolution the Oneida were less than pleased with the treatment afforded them by the British. The Oneida displeasure can be traced back to the Treaty of Ft. Stanwix in 1768 which established the Ft. Stanwix Treaty Line (see Map 1). The British insisted that the boundary line be placed west of the Oneida Carrying Place at Ft. Stanwix while the Oneida, as noted above, wanted to maintain control of the Carrying Place, for it seemed to have great potential as a source of future income (O’Callaghan 1856-1887:122-125). For two days the Oneida deliberated among themselves and consulted with Sir William Johnson on the matter, and finally, under considerable pressure from Johnson, and with little support from their Iroquois confederates, acceded to Johnson’s wishes on the condition that, “they were allowed an equal use of

the Carrying Place with the English and to be paid Six Hundred Dollars to the Tribes over and above the several fees which were given in private” (O’Callaghan 1856-1887:125). The loss of the Carrying Place was a serious economic and political defeat for the Oneida, and neither the British desire to take it nor their behavior towards the Oneida at the negotiations enhanced their position with the Oneida sachems. Again, in 1770 the Oneida fared poorly in dealing with the British. They asked Sir William Johnson to supply them with a blacksmith for one year or less and the necessary tools, while they would build a house for the blacksmith and would supply the coal. Johnson refused their request on the grounds that, “It is not in my power to grant you this assistance” (Kirkland Papers).

In summary, because of their participation in trade networks with the Colonists, and also, because of their increased ability to function in Colonial society, the Oneida were more closely tied to the interests of the Colonists on the eve of the American Revolution than to the interests of the British or the other Iroquois nations. As a result, when the Revolution began, the Colonists needed only to convince the Oneida to fight with them against the British.

Precipitating Causes

Precipitating causes are the immediate active agents, although in many cases, as is the situation here, the precipitating factors would have little effect without the influence of the predisposing factors.

Without doubt, the most important precipitating cause of the Oneida-Colonist alliance was the influence of Samuel Kirkland. At the time of the Revolution, Kirkland had been with the Oneida for about ten years and was quite influential in the Oneida nation. He was the religious leader, supervised the educational activities, set societal rules (it was he who abolished the consumption of alcoholic beverages), counseled the sachems and warriors, settled arguments, supplied the poor with food, clothing, and shelter, and, when required, served as an interpreter. To a similar extent, his wife, Jerusha, also enjoyed considerable respect and political power, particularly with the Oneida women. Exactly how and why Kirkland gained and maintained such a high degree of respect and influence is not altogether clear. Evidently, a number of factors were at work. For one, Kirkland aligned himself politically with the war chiefs rather than with the sachems. As it turned out, at the time of the Revolution it was the war chiefs who held the real power in the Oneida nation and who were recognized as the leaders by the Colonists. Second, as an interpreter and supplier of food and tools, Kirkland maintained some economic leverage over the Oneida communities. And third, both Kirkland and his wife seemed to gain the respect of the Oneida through hard work and residing in near-poverty-level housing.

Throughout the Revolution Kirkland was in the pay of the Continental Congress, and in 1779 he served as a chaplain in Sullivan's army (Cook 1887:385). Kirkland's first action on behalf of the Colonists was in the winter of 1774 when he read the proceedings of the Continental Congress to the Oneida, supposedly at their insistence (Kirkland Papers). In April the Massachusetts Provincial Congress asked that, "you use your influence with them to join with us in the defence of our rights" (Kirkland Papers). Kirkland did everything possible to encourage the Iroquois to support the Colonists, but was successful only with a majority of the Oneida and Tuscarora nations. He was also important in his role as advisor to the Continental Congress on Indian Affairs, and it was on his advice that the three Departments of Indian Affairs were created and councils with the Indians were called (Burnett 1921-1928:180). For his efforts, Kirkland was paid a modest salary and in 1787 was granted a two square mile tract of land, which he donated to the Hamilton-Oneida Academy in 1793 (Cook 1887:385).

In addition to Kirkland, there were a number of other Colonists who also influenced the Oneida and Tuscarora to aid the Americans. Of these the interpreter, James Dean, and another missionary, Aaron Crosby, were the two most important.

Because of Kirkland's presence among the Oneida, the British committed a number of serious diplomatic errors in 1775 which served to strengthen the Oneida's allegiance to the Colonists. The British were well aware that Kirkland's political sentiments were with the Colonists and that he was influential with the Oneida, and, therefore, they sought to remove him from among the Oneida. On February 14, 1775, Kirkland received a letter from Colonel Guy Johnson noting that certain Oneida sachems had charged Kirkland with, "meddling in matters of political nature, . . ." burning a letter addressed to Johnson, and allowing Indians to die without being baptised (Kirkland Papers). Kirkland responded by calling a general meeting of the Oneida, informing them of the charges against him, and confronting Conoghquieson, the sachem who proffered the charges, in public. Conoghquieson admitted, "that he was advised by Joseph Brant, to affirm several things concerning the Minister and his doctrines for the sole reason, 'that it would be agreeable to Col. Johnson'" (Kirkland Papers). Both Kirkland and the Oneida responded to the charges by letter with the Oneida noting that, "Such reports as these . . . that our minister meddles with political affairs, . . . we Indians think to be without foundation and utterly false" (Kirkland Papers). In a letter written later in the year Kirkland commented that Johnson's behavior, "instead of injuring me has established my character — and very much wounded his own" (Kirkland Papers). But the British were still fearful of Kirkland's influence, and later in the year on

orders from General Gage, he was incarcerated and forbidden to return to the Oneida. The English attempted to conceal this action from the Oneida, but they soon found out and Kirkland was with them again in a few months (Kirkland Papers).

Wallace (1969:126) has suggested that the Stockbridge Indians, who were sent by the Colonists to enlist Iroquois support, were another factor that at least encouraged the Oneida to remain neutral at the beginning of the War. The Oneida and Stockbridge were on friendly terms, and since a number of Stockbridge were living with the Oneida at this time, it seems likely that their efforts supplemented those of Kirkland.

One final factor that may have helped precipitate the Oneida-Colonist alliance was the effort made by the Colonists to supply the Oneida with goods and services. The Continental Congress in November, 1775 ordered that (Force 1837-1853:III:1924):

Trade with the Indians to be encouraged, and Indian goods to be procured.

The Commissioners are desired to provide entertainment, etc., for sachems and other Indians who come to Albany; and \$750 is provided for this purpose.

The Commissioners will employ two blacksmiths, for reasonable salaries, to reside among the Six Nations and work for them.

Similarly, at each council with the Iroquois, the Colonists promised goods and services, and attempted to resolve any problems presented by the Indians. In some cases, particularly in reference to the Oneida, the Colonists were able to make good on their promises.

In regard to the relative importance of these precipitating causes, Kirkland's influence was certainly the most important, with the other factors supplementing his accomplishments.

Maintaining Factors

Once Oneida allegiance was secure, the Colonists made a strong effort to insure their continued support. Early in the War it was apparent that the Oneida placed less than full confidence in the Colonist's military ability as demonstrated by the following message sent by the Oneida to the commander of Ft. Stanwix at the time of St. Leger's invasion from Oswego: "The chiefs desire the commanding officers at Ft. Schuyler not to make a Ticonderoga of it; but they hope you will be courageous" (Stone 1970:150). In order to combat this lack of faith, the Americans made it their policy to inform the Oneida of each American victory over the British and to remind the Oneida that the French supported the Americans (Secret Journals 1821:50). In accordance with this policy, Philip Schuyler informed the Oneida of

American victories at Boston and Trenton and noted that the French were supplying the Colonists with clothing, ammunition, guns, soldiers, and ships (Kirkland Papers). For some unknown reason the Oneida were quite impressed with the French, and, in order to please them, in August, 1780, thirteen Oneida were awarded medals by the French in Rhode Island, and inspected the French fleet that was docked in Boston (Beauchamp 1905:369; Mohr 1933:133).

The Colonists also continued their policy of promising the Oneida a variety of goods and services and then providing only some of the promised items. If nothing else, the Colonists were always able to supply the Indians with substantial quantities of rum (Force 1837-1853:IV:1656-1657; Kirkland Papers).

The Oneida were not silent, passive partners in their alliance with the Americans, and were quite willing and capable of presenting reasonable requests and grievances to American officials. In most cases, these complaints, often centering around mistreatment by American soldiers, were carefully considered and acted upon by the Americans (Force 1837-1853:VI:977-999, VIII:1030-1031).

These efforts by the Americans certainly played a role in keeping most of the Oneida loyal to them, at least until 1780 when the Oneida were without shelter and food, and the Americans could or would do little to help them.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to present and test a theory that adequately explains the Oneida-Colonist alliance in the American Revolution. Such an explanation is important because, as we have already seen, the Oneida-Colonist alliance was an important event in both American colonial history and Iroquois history. For the Americans, the alliance helped prevent an early defeat in the War, while for the Iroquois, it signaled the end of the Iroquois Confederation as a powerful force in New York State.

The importance of Samuel Kirkland's influence as a cause of the alliance seems to have been overemphasized. An examination of the historical and ethnographic record, and in particular, Kirkland's own papers, indicates that both Kirkland's influence with the Oneida and the Oneida-Colonist alliance can be attributed to changes in the Oneida culture that resulted in the Oneida developing close ties with European settlers, while their bonds to the other Iroquois nations weakened.

NOTES

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2. Most of the evidence for this point can be found in the Canadian Archives, The Haldimand Collection B.
3. Presently, the Oneida have a case pending in court through which they are trying to regain 40 acres of land in the Oneida-Oneida Castle section of New York State.

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