Iroquois Confederacy duality in early Mohawk Valley history

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LITTLE FALLS — Few Little Falls residents grew up without hearing the lore played by local Native Americans stories of 17th- and 18th-century Mohawk, Oneida and Tuscarora. Curiosity remains a driving force in many of us, especially when it comes to understanding our past and its implications for our present and future.

The Mohawks were one of the five original tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy, the "keepers of the eastern doors" to Confederacy lands. The Mohawks' ancestral tribal lands included what is now Little Falls and extended south and north of the Mohawk Valley. During Colonial times, Mohawk Indians and Little Falls area settlers interacted regularly over commerce and land use issues. In essence, the Mohawks and Indians and their Little Falls area ancestors were reading, writing and talking to each other during the Revolutionary War.

Given that the Mohawks were the first tribe in the Mohawk Valley Iroquois Confederacy, they were the first to come in contact with Pakenham settlers as they opened their doorways to the Mohawk Valley. The succeeding Pakenham settlers were in close contact with their Indian neighbors over ancestral lands controlled by the Mohawks. For generations, Pakenham, of course, led to land squabbles and hard feelings. This was exacerbated by the Mohawks' introduction to the English in the Revolutionary War. The result was a conflict that lasted for decades when they sided with patriot leaders.

The term noble savage was a sort of wholly the-wrapping greatly through early European and American literature. James Fenimore Cooper's "Last of the Mohicans" and Walter D. Edmonds' "Drums Along the Mohawk" portray Indian Americans living in harmony with the natural world but also being exploited of their way of life.

Cooper's fictionalized account of the feared British invasion of Fort William Henry on Lake George during the French and Indian War portrays Native American savagery. Military and civilian evacuees were descend upon Indians allied with the French. Cooper wrote "The flow of blood might be likened to the overflowing of a torrent; and, as the natives became heated and incensed by the sight, many of them even knelted to the earth, and, crankily, evilly, belligerently, of the crimson tide."

The Revolutionary War version of Cooper's work provides a similar story line for those not familiar with the book. Edmonds also wrote a fictionalized account of Indian savagery during the Revolutionary War. Massachusetts massacre near today's Concord. "Gill eased for the first time the bow lying on the floor. It was old field. He was caught up by the traffic on the river as the years, and the bow, and the arrow in his hand, and the arrow in his hand."

The top of his hand was like a red rag against the sunlight, with a little crescent moon on it. We get the picture. Native Americans had the capacity for savagery.

We also need to see that Indians in general, and the Iroquois Confederacy (Haudenosaunee) in particular, were main players in the drama that created American democracy. Most of our core Constitutional principles reflect similar concepts found in the Iroquois Confederacy's Great Law of Peace.

Separation of powers and checks and balances are at the very core of our democratic process. We have a president (executive branch), a Congress (legislative branch) and a court system (judicial branch). Each branch has clear defined Constitutional powers as well as the powers to check or limit the powers of the other two branches. An example of this check and balances occurs when Presidents make nominations to Supreme Court justices. The nominee's confirmation by a majority vote in the Senate requires the legislative branch to check the power of the executive branch.

The Iroquois had similar democratic governance of government powers in practice centuries before Europeans even came to the New World. They had a three-tiered form of government with sachems (chieftains) serving an executive branch, Iroquois power was passed down from sachet to sachet and the sachems were elected. The sachems and the sachems had the ability to select the sachems. Stared power between men and women continued on our 19th- and 20th-century American political culture.

Joseph Brant Mohawk Valley. We'll grow up with images of Native Americans as virulent savages bent on preventing our ancestors from the righteous quest for land and then freedom. An appreciation for the more noble part of the "noble savage" has been the purpose of this writing.

Readers are urged to further study the couplet's history of our Native American forebears. Perhaps our visit to the Iroquois Museum in Schenectady is a partially educational outing.

Please read and enjoy all of the Little Falls Historical Society's writing series as we hold month-long events towards our 2010 City of Little Falls bicentennial.}

EDITORS NOTE: This is the final in a series of articles to draw attention to the 2010 bicentennial of the Little Falls Historical Society's founding. The series was sponsored by the Little Falls Historical Society, a private individual or group who desire to support the work for consideration of publication as part of the "Towards Our History" celebration. Contact the editor at (315) 822-7838.