

# Iroquois Confederacy duality in early Mohawk Valley history

By JEFF GRESSLER

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LITTLE FALLS — Few Little Falls residents grow up without reading and hearing about the role played by local Native Americans during our Colonial Era and the Revolutionary War.

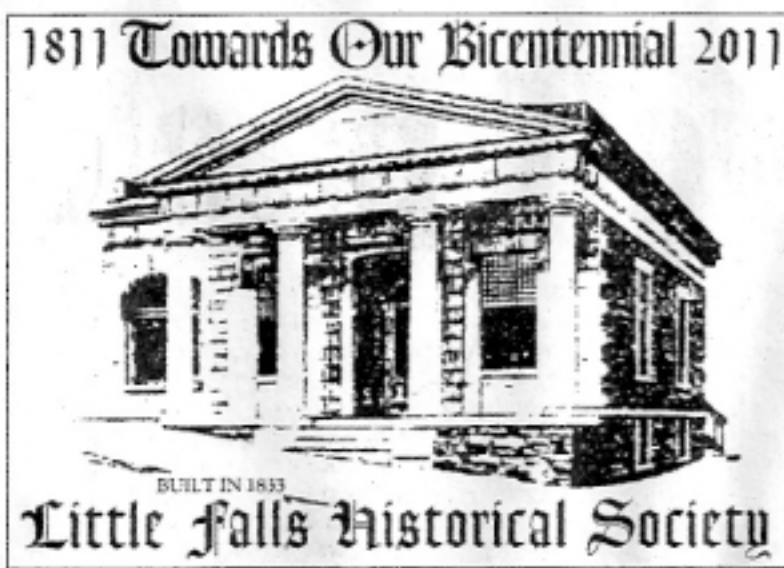
Unfortunately, the stories that we are most familiar with portray local Indians as mere savages, bent on revenge against Mohawk Valley patriots seeking independence from England.

Closer examination reveals a more complex Indian role in early American history. This work will focus on this complexity, with particular emphasis on the contributions made by the Iroquois Confederacy to our democratic process and to environmental awareness.

The Mohawk Indians was one of the five original tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy; they were the "keepers of the eastern door" to Confederacy lands. The Mohawk's ancestral tribal lands included what is now Little Falls and extended north and south 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 Mohawk Indians and our Little Falls area ancestors were neighbors at first and then enemies during the Revolutionary War.

Given that the Mohawks were the easternmost tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy, they were the first to come in contact with Palatine settlers as they moved westward through the Mohawk Valley. The encroaching Palatines were competing with their Indian neighbors over ancestral lands controlled by the Mohawks for generations. This, of course, led to land squabbles and much hard feeling. This was one reason why the Mohawks sided with the English in the Revolutionary War. The Oneidas, by contrast, became America's first military ally when they sided with patriots at the 1777 battle of Oriskany.

The term noble savage was a sort of will-o'-the-wisp dashing romantically through early European and American literature. James Fen-



more Cooper's "Last of the Mohicans" and Walter D. Edmonds' "Drums along the Mohawk" portray Indians as living in harmony with the natural world but also being quite capable of acts of barbaric brutality.

Cooper's fictionalized account of the forced British evacuation of Fort William Henry on Lake George during the French and Indian War portrays Native American savagery. Military and civilian evacuees were descended upon by Indians allied with the French. Cooper wrote "The flow of blood might be likened to the outbreking of a torrent; and, as the natives became heated and maddened by the sight, many of them even kneeled to the earth, and drank freely, exultingly, hellishly, of the crimson tide." The 1990s film 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's Andrustown massacre near today's Jordanville. "Gill saw for the first time the body hanging on the fence. It was old Bell. He was caught with one leg through the rails up to the crotch and both arms over the top rail; his head tilted to one side, against his shoulder. He had been scalped. The top of his head was like a red gape against the sunlight, with a little halo of flies." 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 Gayanashagowa (Great Binding Law).

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 clearly defined Constitutional powers as well as the power to check or limit the powers of the other two branches. An example of this checks and balances occurs when Presidents nominate Supreme Court justices. The nominee has to be confirmed by a majority vote in the U.S. Senate. Thus, the legislative branch can check the power of the executive branch.

The Iroquois had similar democratic separation of government powers in practice centuries before Europeans even came to the New World. They had a three-tiered form of government with sachems (chiefs) serving as an executive branch, lawmaking power was divided between a two part legislature and the Royenah women had powers similar to a judicial branch. The Royenah women also selected the male sachems. Shared power between men and women

centuries before our own 1920 19th Amendment granting women's suffrage; advanced "savages" indeed!

Federalism is another fundamental principle of American government outlined in our Constitution: power is shared between the federal and state governments. Only the federal government can coin and mint money and make treaties with foreign nations. State governments control education and establish marriage and divorce laws. The Iroquois Confederacy was like a federal government and its five tribes (later six) were like our individual states. Haudenosaunee extended family clans resembled our own county and local governments.

Each tribe had particular duties and responsibilities. As mentioned earlier, the Mohawks of our immediate area were the "keepers of the eastern door" and bore the brunt of earliest contact with Europeans. The Oneidas were the "people of the great stone" and were America's first military allies at the battle of Oriskany. The Onondagas were the "keepers of the council fire" and lived on land where the great council of the Iroquois Confederacy met each summer. The Cayugas were the smallest of the five tribes and also sided with the British in the Revolutionary War. Finally, the Senecas were the "keepers of the western door." Acting much like individual American states, each tribe had specific duties that were outlined in their Gayanashagowa. Just as our federal government exercises federal supremacy over the individual states, the Iroquois Confederacy as a body governed the behavior of the individual tribes and clans.

The Iroquois also allowed individual Indians and entire tribes to join their Confederacy. This occurred in the 1600s when the Tuscaroras were allowed to become the sixth Confederacy tribe. Similarly, our Constitution outlines procedures for both immigration proceedings for individuals and for the admission of new states to the Union. Readers wishing to further study the overlaps between the Iroquois Confederacy constitution and the United States Constitution should also examine judicial review, civilian control of the military and individual rights and liberties common to both documents.

The democratic principles of separation of powers with checks and balances and federalism were being practiced by the Iroquois generations before Europeans entertained such political concepts. Europeans were still mired in the world of monarchical government with little recognition of individuals liberties. The Native Americans of our region were truly at the vanguard of democratic practices. They settled disputes between Indian tribes by sending experienced chiefs to conciliate and arbitrate disagreements. Thus, our region was both the birthplace of many mainstay democratic principles as practiced by the Iroquois Confederacy and "ground zero" in the fight for independence from England in the Revolutionary War. Our white ancestors fought for freedom and then established a form of government fashioned in many ways upon the centuries old practices of the Haudenosaunee people. A number of our founding fathers were well acquainted with Iroquois democratic principles when drafting our Constitution at the Constitutional Convention in 1787.

Benjamin Franklin championed the Iroquois as he presented his ideas for our federal union. South Carolina delegate John Rutledge at one point during the Convention read the Great Binding law to the other delegates and offered insights into the wisdom of many of its ideals. Only months before the Constitutional Convention James Madison attended Iroquois Confed-



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eracy great council meetings. The influences would seem apparent.

It is not the purpose of this writing to attempt to convince our readers that the Iroquois were the only source of ideals and principles for our Constitution. 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment thinkers and writers, including Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire and others, were also sources of inspiration. Students of history can also point to the Greeks and Romans as models for many of our democratic practices. However, we do need to take pride in the role played by the Native Americans of our immediate area in the development of many of our democratic principles. Additionally, we also need to better recognize and celebrate the role played by our Little Falls and Mohawk Valley ancestors in our nation's quest for independence.

We can also celebrate the Native American contribution to environmentalism. The Indian life was a partnership between man and nature. As we read the words of the great Iroquois leaders we are awed by their philosophical and spiritual identification with the natural world. Perhaps this environmental awareness can best be identified in the classic Native American principle: "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations." All people and nations could certainly benefit from such long range environmental stewardship.

Webster defines duality as the state of being dual or consisting of two parts. An attempt was made in this writing to bring to light this two part existence of the Iroquois Indians who preceded by centuries the arrival of white Europeans in the

Mohawk Valley. We all grow up with images of Native Americans as violent savages bent on preventing our ancestors from the righteous quest for first 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 complex history of our Native American forbearers. Perhaps consider a visit to the Iroquois Museum in Scholarie as a family educational outing.

Please read and enjoy all of the Little Falls Historical Society's writing series as we build momentum towards our 2011 City of Little Falls bicentennial.

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the 22nd in an ongoing series of articles to draw attention to the 2011 bicentennial of the City of Little Falls. Sponsored by the Little Falls Historical Society, any individual or group wishing to submit pieces of work for consideration of publication as part of the "Towards Our Bicentennial" series should do so by contacting either President Terry Tippin or Vice President Louie Baum at the Little Falls Historical Society at 319 S. Ann St., Little Falls, NY 13365.