

Chapter Four -- The Sullivan Campaign of 1779

Much of the fighting in the American Revolutionary War took place in New York. What seldom is adequately understood, however, is that a key military action took place in our own county—namely the Sullivan Campaign of 1779. The success of the Sullivan Campaign contributed greatly to the ability of the colonial forces under George Washington to hold on until the British forces surrendered and recognized the legal independence of the United States.

Before the Revolutionary War, the area now comprising Seneca County was the home of the Cayuga and Seneca Indians. These were two of the five nations (Seneca, Oneida, Mohawk, Cayuga, and Onondaga) of the Iroquois Confederacy (also known as the Haudenosaunee). The Seneca Nation, with territory from central Seneca County to the Genesee River, was named “Keeper of the Western Door” and was expected to defend the Confederacy from attacks from the west. The Cayuga nation held territory along the east and west sides of Cayuga Lake, although one Cayuga village—Skoi-Yase—was located at what is now Waterloo. For several centuries the Iroquois thrived, reaching a population estimated at 9,000 in 1775 just before the outbreak of the American Revolution.

The American Revolution led to a major change in the status of the Iroquois. Although at first “neutral” towards both the British and the Americans, most of the Iroquois tribes in 1777 decided to side with the British. to protect their homelands. The assumption of these Iroquois tribes was that if the colonists succeeded in gaining their independence, it would be difficult for the Iroquois tribes to maintain their tribal lands. The Seneca, Cayuga, Mohawk, and Onondaga tribes, therefore, together with Loyalists forces, ravaged colonial settlements on the Pennsylvania and New York frontiers.

By the summer of 1779, the American Congress and General Washington had decided to send a force—what was to become known as the Sullivan Campaign --to subdue the Indians and reduce the chance of Indian attacks. It was believed that this gamble of a quick strike into the Iroquois’ homelands in central New York could eliminate a key British ally without significantly weakening Washington’s forces outside of New York. It was also believed that if this expedition against the Iroquois were successful in destroying the Iroquois’ food supplies, it would force the British to provide food support the next winter, thus creating an additional burden on the British in fighting the Revolutionary War.

General John Sullivan was sent along with General James Clinton and about 4,400 Continental troops to crush the Indian nation and to burn Indian villages and crops. Washington’s specific instructions to Sullivan described the mission objective as “total destruction and devastation” of the Iroquois villages.. The villages were to be burned, the crops destroyed, and as many prisoners as possible taken as hostages so as to guarantee any later peace settlement. Washington also included a warning not to accept any offer of peace before “the total ruin of their settlement was effected.”

Following a victory at Newtown (Elmira) in late August 1779, Sullivan’s expedition was generally unopposed, for the backbone of Indian resistance had been crushed. From Newtown, Sullivan’s forces headed for Canadasaga (Geneva), north along the east side of Seneca Lake,

entering what is today Seneca County on September 3, 1779. On the way, General Sullivan met with a group of Oneida Indians, an openly pro-American tribe within the Iroquois Confederation. These Oneidas asked that Sullivan spare their Cayuga brothers. Mindful of the warning from Washington, Sullivan refused this request. Sullivan told the Oneidas that the Cayugas had participated in frontier attacks, and that any attempt now at friendship was too late; the Cayugas would not be spared. After taking a day to recuperate, the Sullivan army continued its march along the shore of Seneca Lakes towards the town of Kendaia. In this route the Sullivan army destroyed several small houses and in one small village the soldiers found that the Indians “had just left and left their kettles on the fire boiling of corn and beans” which the soldiers then ate. Kendaia was taken without a fight on September 5. At Kendaia the soldiers found a white captive who reported there was a force of nearly one thousand Indian warriors at Canadasaga, at the head of Seneca Lake. When they actually crossed the outlet to Seneca Lake and approached Canadasaga, however, they found the village empty.

Completing their plans of destruction of buildings and fruit orchards at Canadasaga, Sullivan’s forces were divided. Some forces marched westward, destroying Indian villages and crops at what are today Canandaigua and Honeoye. Colonel Peter Ganessvoort and about one hundred men would continue marching eastward from Canadasaga to the Mohawk Valley, destroying dwellings and crops along the way. Colonel Henry Dearborn and seven hundred men marched down the western shore of Cayuga Lake, while Colonel Walter Butler and five hundred men traveled down its eastern shore. Forces under Colonel William Smith would sweep along the west shore of Seneca Lake while forces under Sullivan would march along the eastern shore of Seneca Lake.

Altogether, 40 towns were razed and the foodstuffs of these villages were destroyed. This destruction of food and shelter, coupled with the harsh winter of 1779 which left 5 feet of snow on the ground and brought privation and disease, contributed to a reduction of the Indian population from the estimated 1775 total of 9,000 to only 4,000 by 1794. Sullivan’s expedition not only served its military purposes but brought an end to Indian habitation in the Finger Lakes area, opening the way after the war for white homesteading and settlement of the area. Now the British forces would have to get their supplies from some other source than these Iroquois tribes.

The first in-depth historical data on the area can be found in the journals of the men of the Sullivan-Clinton Expedition. They told of the rich agricultural potential of the area—fruit orchards, growing corn and other vegetables, etc. They also wrote about the Seneca River and possible uses for its water power. This kind of information would soon help attract white settlers into the area. Some of these early settlers were “veterans” of the 1779 Sullivan Campaign, seizing upon their first-hand knowledge of the beauty and economic potential of the area.

Because this historical event was so significant to the white settlement of this area, it is not surprising that the centennial anniversary of the Sullivan Campaign would be commemorated. The September 3, 1879 festivities were one of the biggest days of celebration in Waterloo in the 19th century. Events were planned by the Waterloo Library and Historical Society which put together a written record in a book. Yet today that book is one of the most authentic records in existence of the early history of the several towns of the county. There were

the usual displays of banners on buildings, many speakers, and a big parade, but there was much more. A highlight of the day's events was the dedication of the Sullivan Monument in the center of LaFayette Park. The monument inscription on the north side reads:

Erected September 1879,
To Commemorate the Destruction of the
Indian Village, SKOI-YASE,
By Col. John Harper, under Orders of
Maj. Gen John Sullivan
September 8, 1779

The monument inscription on the south side reads:

Skoi-Yase
He-o-weh-gno-gek

This Indian language wording translates into "once a home, now a memory." At the fair grounds a log cabin was erected. It was a copy of the primitive cabins of the early pioneer settlers in the county. This monument stands yet today to remind us of the profound impact the Sullivan Campaign had upon the outcome of the American Revolution, as well as the future white settlement of western central New York.

[Note: This unabridged version formed the basis of one in a series of monthly articles on the history of Seneca County published in the weekly newspapers serving Seneca County as part of the celebration of Seneca County's bicentennial year in 2004. These articles were written by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian.]