

# Choosing Sides

The Role of Native Americans  
in the American Revolution

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# Objectives

Students will explore why different Native American Nations chose to ally themselves with the Patriots or the British.

Students will learn about specific Native Americans who participated in the American Revolution.

Students will apply what they have learned by answering several questions to consider.

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# Vocabulary

- **NATIVE AMERICAN-** the indigenous people of North America. Before Europeans began to take over the lands, the population of Native American Nations was estimated to be as high as 18 million.
- **ALLIANCE-** a formal agreement to work together, often between two countries. For example, the 13 colonies had an alliance with France, who sent money, supplies, and soldiers to help the colonists fight the British.

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# Vocabulary

- **PATRIOT-** a person who rebelled against British rule and fought for independence from the British empire to create the United States. A patriot also means a person who supports their country.
- **LOYALIST-** a person who remains loyal to a ruler or government, especially in the case of a political revolt. In the Revolutionary War, those who supported British rule.

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# Native American Lands



Before the European conquest of North America began, the indigenous peoples of this land had their own unique and advanced cultures and governing systems.

This map shows the general distribution of the various Native American nations living in North America before colonization.

Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian.

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# Native American Lands

After the first encounters between Native Americans and Europeans, the population of Native Americans decreased dramatically because of violence, enslavement, and the spread of European diseases to which Native Americans had no immunity.

Unlike earlier colonists from places like France and Spain, who just wanted to become rich in America and return to Europe, the British colonists in North America created longlasting colonies, making it difficult for Native Americans to remain safely on their land.



# The French and Indian War

This was a series of battles in North America as part of a larger war around the world between Great Britain and France between 1754 and 1763.

This war was fought to control the Ohio River Valley. Most Native Americans in the area fought alongside the French to defeat the British.

Great Britain ultimately won the war, but severely damaged their relationships with Native Nations.

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# The Proclamation of 1763

After the French and Indian War almost all of the French colonies in North America—an area known as New France—were surrendered to British control. The British expected the Native Americans within those lands to transfer their loyalty to the them.

However, the Native American Nations who had allied with the French resented not being included in the discussions that ended the French and Indian War, as well as the loss of their French allies.

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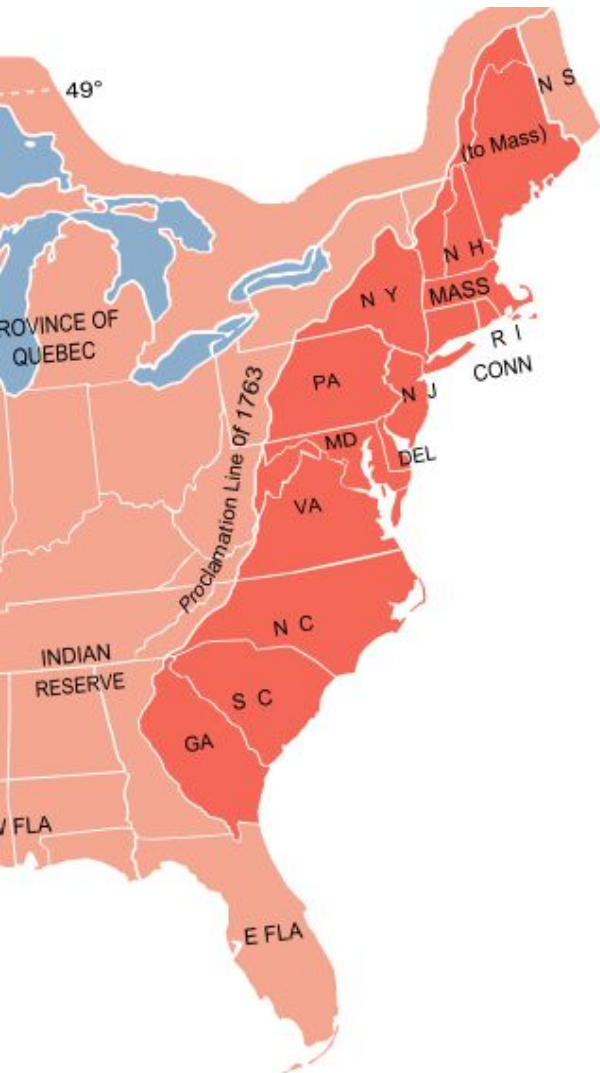


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# The Proclamation of 1763



Many Native Americans were angered by the way the British treated them. Colonists were eager for more land and pushed westward, while the British made laws restricting trade between the colonists and Native Americans. As violence between the groups rose, Britain looked for a way to reconcile with the Native American Nations.

In the Proclamation of 1763, Britain declared that the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River would be off limits to settlers. Many colonists saw this as unfair, and settled on Native land anyway.

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# Native American British Allies



Many Native American Nations chose to side with the British during the American Revolution because they believed that the British would do more to prevent the expansion of colonists further west into the Native American lands.

A few of the Nations that allied with the British include:



**Iroquois Confederacy:** This large and powerful confederation of six nations was split on the issue of the Revolution. The four nations—the **Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas,** and **Mohawks**—who sided with the British did so because of their long-standing alliance.

**Shawnee Nation:** Originally split in loyalty, this Nation supported the British after the Patriots killed Chief Hokolessqua. They continued to fight against the Americans long after the British had surrendered.

**Cherokee Nation:** Chief Dragging Canoe led a number of raids on colonial settlements in Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia after illegal moves into Native land by the colonists. The continued violence between the two groups led them to side with the British.

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# Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant)



*Joseph Brant*  
Gilbert Stuart, 1786

Thayendanegea was born in 1743, a member and future chief of the Mohawk Nation. As a child, he was brought to a Christian school in Connecticut, where he became a translator for the British. At 15, he became involved in the French and Indian War, fighting with the British in multiple battles

While the Iroquois Confederacy wanted to remain neutral in the American Revolution, Brant was eager to ally with the British because he believed this would benefit the Mohawk.

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# Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant)

In 1775, Brant traveled to England, where he met with King George III and secured an agreement that the Mohawk Nation would be given land in Quebec in exchange for supporting the British with 3,000 soldiers. After returning to America, Brant began fighting in the Mohawk Valley. By 1778, Brant was given the British title “Captain of the Northern Confederated Indians.”

Despite British promises, none of the Native American Nations were given their independence or land at the end of the war, and Brant spent the rest of his life fighting for the land rights of his people.

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# Molly Deganwadonti



*Molly Brant*  
Tom Lydon, 1986

Also known as Konwatsi'tsiaienni or Molly Brant, she was born around 1736. She was the daughter of two members of the Wolf Clan of the Mohawk tribe. It is believed she was also educated by the British

Molly started her political career at the age of 18 when she traveled to Philadelphia with a delegation of Mohawk elders to discuss fraudulent land transactions.

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# Molly Deganwadonti

When the American Revolution began, Molly worked to keep the Mohawk Tribe loyal to their British allies. She even spied for the British by gathering information about Patriot troop movements. Molly was forced to flee her home in the Mohawk Valley, and spent most of the Revolution in Fort Niagara.

In November 1783, Molly, along with other Loyalists settled, near Kingston, Ontario. Molly lived here until her death on April 16, 1796.



**Why do you think women like Molly made excellent spies?**

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# Native American Patriot Allies



Most of the Native American Nations who chose to ally with the Patriots did so for their own reasons, rather than any interest in colonial politics.

Some Nations were more familiar with the colonial leaders than with those living in Great Britain, while others hoped that fighting for the Patriots would gain them favor if the Patriots won.

A few of the Nations that allied with the Patriots include:

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**Oneida Nation:** One of the member nations of the Iroquois Confederacy who sided with the Patriots, the Oneida fought during the Saratoga campaign and faced many losses. This caused conflict with other Iroquois Confederacy Nations.

**Stockbridge-Mohican Nation:** This nation hoped to gain favor from the new United States, if the Patriots won. They were reportedly among the militiamen at Lexington and Concord, fought in the Siege of Boston, and spent time camped at Valley Forge with George Washington.

**Lenni-Lenape Nation:** Also known as the Delaware Nation. They believed that the Patriots would give them more land and power in the area. They signed a treaty with the Patriots which promised to give them representation in the new American government.



Can you predict what will happen with this treaty?

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# Polly Cooper

Polly Cooper was a member of the Oneida Nation. During the winter of 1777-78, George Washington and his soldiers were camped out at Valley Forge, facing deadly cold and a lack of supplies that left many men starving. In response to their ally's difficulties, Oneida Chief Skenandoah sent 40 warriors and Polly Cooper to Valley Forge with 600 barrels of corn. To deliver these desperately needed supplies, the members of the expedition traveled over 400 miles on foot in the middle of winter, from central New York to Pennsylvania.



*Allies in War, Partners in Peace,*  
Edward Hvlaka,

Oneida Nation gift to the National  
Museum of the American Indian

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# Polly Cooper

When Polly Cooper arrived at Valley Forge, she decided to remain there to help the Continental Army.

She taught them how to prepare a soup from the hulled white corn, which allowed the most amount of nutrients possible to be absorbed from the corn, and passed on her knowledge of natural medicine. Polly refused to accept payment for her work, stating that it was her duty to help her friends in their time of need.

As a token of gratitude, the wives of the camp gave her a black shawl. The shawl has been treasured as a symbol of the friendship between the United States and the Oneida Nation by generations of her descendants.



Polly Cooper's black shawl,  
Courtesy of the Oneida Indian Nation

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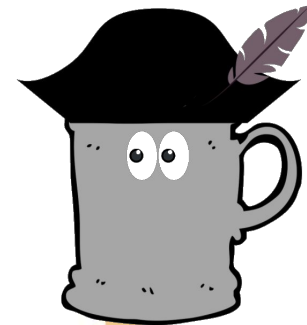
# Nanyehi (Nancy Ward)

Nanyehi was warrior and a diplomat born in 1738.

In 1755, she fought beside her husband, Kingfisher, in the battle of Taliwa. When he died during battle, it is said Nanyehi rallied the Cherokee to victory. For her bravery she was named Ghighua, or “Beloved Woman,” a title that honored women warriors or the wives and mothers of male warriors.

With the title of Beloved Woman came a leadership role in the Cherokee Nation—she sat in the General Council, headed the Women’s Council, and served as negotiator of treaties.

Throughout the Revolution, Nanyehi worked for compromise with the Patriots, while other Cherokee leaders counseled war.



**There are no known portraits of Nanyehi. Why do you think this is?**

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# Nanyehi (Nancy Ward)

At the 1781 negotiations between newly-founded America and the Cherokee that followed a series of battles between Americans and Cherokee people, Nanyehi pleaded for peace between the two societies.

When the terms of the treaty were agreed to, Nanyehi instructed the Americans to take them back to the women of his tribe for ratification, for she said “the women must hear our words.” The Americans were shocked; in their world, women played no role in political diplomatic affairs. Nanyehi was equally appalled—how could a treaty be signed if the American women did not give their consent?

Nanyehi continued to serve as a diplomat for the rest of her life. When she died in 1822, she was one of the most notable Cherokee diplomats of her time.

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# Koquethagechton (White Eyes)

Koquethagechton was a Lenape leader in Ohio. He encouraged his people to form friendly relationships with the white settlers that surrounded them. In 1776, Koquethagechton was sent to the Continental Congress as a representative of Lenape. He agreed that the Lenape would fight with the Patriots if war broke out with the British.

In exchange, the Patriots promised to recognize the Lenape as a sovereign nation, with representation in the new American Congress. Koquethagechton wanted the Lenape to form the 14th state. This was the first treaty signed between the United States and a Native American Nation.

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# Koquethagechton (White Eyes)

Following his death in 1778, the Lenape relationship with the Patriots began to sour. In December of 1779, a delegation of Lenape went to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to discuss their dissatisfaction with the treaty they had signed, but they were ignored. After the war, the new United States government disregarded this treaty entirely.

Because of this unhappiness and the lack of Koquethagechton's influence, the pro-British sentiments among the Lenape began to rise. Many Lenape became neutral, while others decided to fight for the British.

**Now that you know this treaty was ignored, why do you think the American government would break their promises?**



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# Akiatonharónkwen

The son of an Abenaki Native American woman and an African man, Akiatonharónkwen was captured in 1745 by a French-Mohawk raid and adopted by a Mohawk family. While he was raised in the Mohawk culture, Akiatonharónkwen was also educated at a Jesuit school and spoke French and English. He is also known as Joseph Louis Cook.



*Colonel Louis of the Oneida,  
John Trumbull, 1785*

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# Akiatonharónkwen

Although the Mohawk Nation fought with the British, Akiatonharónkwen sided with the Patriots and offered his help to George Washington as early as 1775.

Akiatonharónkwen was devoted to the Patriot cause. He fought at many battles including the Saratoga campaign, camped at Valley Forge, and became a Lieutenant Colonel in the Continental Army. He was the only person of African descent to achieve this rank. He also led a delegation of Native Americans to meet with General Rochambeau.

Akiatonharónkwen and fellow Mohawk leader Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant) became enemies because of their conflicting loyalties. This rivalry continued after the Revolution, causing conflict in the Mohawk Nation.

# After the War

The Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783, ending the War for Independence. The British and the Patriots negotiated for more than a year, but did not ask for input from any of the Native American Nations who fought alongside them.

Following the Patriot victory, Britain abandoned many of the promises made to their Native American allies before the war. The newly-independent Americans immediately began pushing west without considering the needs of the Nations who already lived there.

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# After the War

Many Native American Nations chose to fight back, resulting in a number of small wars and border fights. Unfortunately for the Native Americans, the majority of these efforts to stop the American move westward failed.

Even though the new American government signed treaties to protect and honor Native American territories, the promises were impossible to enforce. The American people would not stop moving west. Any attempt to stop them would have caused a rebellion that could have destroyed the new United States—a risk the government was not willing to take.

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# Questions to Consider

Were you surprised that Native Americans were involved in the American Revolution? Is it surprising that so many Nations fought for the British?

Can you see any similarity between the ways that Native Americans were involved in the American Revolution and the ways that African Americans were involved in the American Revolution?

If you were a member of a Native American Nation, which side would you have wanted to support in the war? Give two reasons to support your choice.

# Go Beyond

Choose one of the Native Americans you learned about earlier. On a separate sheet of paper, summarize their story. Decorate around the summary with images that represent their views on the American Revolution.

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This program is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

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