A War From Within: An Analysis Of The Factors That Caused The Collapse Of The Iroquois Confederacy

Jessica Howe
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making

Part of the Indigenous Studies Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol13/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.
A War From Within: An Analysis Of The Factors That Caused The Collapse Of The Iroquois Confederacy

By Jessica Howe

Abstract: This report hopes to answer the question, how and why one of the most powerful and long lasting Native American Confederacy collapsed during the Revolutionary War? This paper investigates how the economy, diplomatic disunification, and the deterioration of traditional religious beliefs through Christianity caused the Iroquois Confederacy to crumble. Although many others have attempted to answer this question, this research is different in that it relies heavily upon both historical and anthropological sources providing it with a unique interdisciplinary perspective. Furthermore, the specific context of this paper is also distinctive and is supported by primary and secondary sources. The narrow focus, the specific areas, and examples listed above are also independent. However, this is only one report and it is not nearly extensive enough to fully encompass every aspect of the Iroquois Confederacy. This report highlights the main factors that led to the collapse, but there are many other different or sub factors that caused change within the tribes, such as the introduction of alcohol and guns into the confederacy.

The Iroquois Confederacy was one of the strongest Native American political forces in North America for over a century. The Confederacy, often referred to as the Six Nations, was actually five separate Iroquoian speaking tribes that later became a coalition of six tribes in the 1720s who lived in and around the New York and
Great Lakes region. This coalition proved to be one of the most influential Native American groups within the colonies. The Iroquois’ ability not only to halt European expansion, but also to effectively maintain control over their land, is an achievement accomplished only by a select few. Despite their success, the Iroquois Confederacy fundamentally collapsed after the American Revolutionary War. Many have portrayed their demise as the result of a few successive, isolated decisions within a short period of time, but it is clear from textual and anthropological evidence that this theory is inaccurate. The true decline of the Iroquois Confederacy was the result of transformations in the economy through changing trade practice, as well as diplomatic disunification proliferated by outside influencers, and most importantly, the disintegration of traditional Iroquoian beliefs facilitated by the introduction of Christianity.
Despite their influence, the history of the Iroquois Confederacy has been marginalized within the standard historical narrative of the United States. It has only been within the last thirty years that a flood of new research has been conducted on historical minority groups. A majority of the research, new and old, on Native American communities in the United States is Eurocentric, focused on ethnography and is predominantly framed around the same question: How did Europeans influence Native American societies? This framework, however, places an increased emphasis on European figures and events and strips the complexities of Native American communities. Native American historian, Richard White, beautifully illustrates this problem in _The Middle Ground_, stating, “The history of Indian white relations has not usually produced complex stories, Indians are the rock, European peoples are the sea, and history seems a constant storm. There have been two outcomes: The sea wears down and dissolves the rock, or the sea erodes the rock but cannot finally absorb its battered remnant, which endures.”

The oversimplification White highlights is the result of studying Native American groups only through their interactions with the Europeans.

White’s research on Native American communities has greatly contributed to the overall understanding of these groups, because as shown above, he understands the deficiencies of the previous historical research. As the title suggests, White studies these events and beliefs through the concept of the middle ground. The middle ground is the idea that two opposing cultures, the Europeans and the Native Americans, understood that assimilation within the others’ culture was necessary to an extent, in order to

---

further the needs and wants of both groups. The overall argument he makes is that contact was the catalyst for societal change and that it was neither a one-sided exchange nor did societal transformation occur overnight. White’s research primarily studies the relationship between the Algonquian tribes, the French, and the British. Although White does not specifically focus on the Iroquois Confederacy, the Algonquians provide a close cultural comparison. The Algonquian tribes are a collection of various tribes in the Great Lakes region, very similar to the Iroquois. White studies large changes to the Algonquian society over time, which is beneficial for covering large amounts of data, but some intricacies and complexities within the individual tribes are overlooked.

Another prominent figure that has contributed considerably to the study of Native Americans is British American historian Collin Calloway. Calloway contends in his book, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, that economic dependence, Christianization, and the integration of foreigners provoked a change in traditional tribal structures. Calloway mainly focuses on the manifestation of these changes in the years before, during, and directly after the Revolutionary War. He also extensively analyzes the influence of certain individuals, such as Joseph Brant and Samuel Kirkland, who carried out and propagated changes within the Confederacy. The specific events and figures the author included in the book clearly illustrate that he is not attempting to show how these factors transformed, but instead focusing on the products of societal changes that began materializing much earlier. The title, “...the impact of the revolution on Indian life” clearly reflects this idea. Rather than disproving Calloway, highlighting how these factors developed over time and presenting more specific examples of these within the various Confederacy tribes will work to strengthen his argument. By studying these institutions and cultural practices outside the context of the

---

3 Ibid.
revolution and solely focusing on the Iroquois Confederacy, this paper hopes to further the current understanding of the Iroquois.

Military Historians, James Kirby Martin and Joseph T. Glatthaar, have also advanced the study of the Iroquois Confederacy through their joint publication *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and The American Revolution*. Their book studies how and why the Oneida, an Iroquois tribe, joined the American Revolution and chose to fight alongside the colonists. Unlike the previously mentioned historians, Kirby and Glatthaar’s book has a much more narrow focus, primarily studying only one tribe of the Confederacy, the Oneida. In this comprehensive study, the authors argue that the Oneida cultural change occurred over two centuries with the introduction of Europeans. The authors do not research the Oneida only within the context of the revolution, providing a wealth of important theories and ideas about the other tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy, such as the Mohawk and the Seneca.

A fundamental basis of the scholarship of the Iroquois Confederacy is built upon archeological and anthropological research. A report that not only summarizes the vast amount of previously conducted archeological work, but also contributes new theories and perspectives, is *Iroquois archeology and the development of Iroquois social organization*, written by William Noble. Despite being written in 1968, the information presented in this doctoral thesis is still largely accurate. The paper primarily concentrates on the cultural development of the Iroquois before 1650, discussing the transformation of the original ten Iroquois tribes into the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy’s five tribes: the Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga, and Seneca. Noble, however, does not write on the Tuscarora, the sixth tribe of the

---


Confederacy, added in 1722. The ethnographic portion of Noble’s report generally focuses on political structures, warfare, and religion. However, the majority of the thesis is an archeological study of the lithics, pottery, analysis of both the settlements, and diets of the Iroquois.

A report that successfully interprets both archeological and anthropological data is *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: Change and Persistence on the Iroquois Frontier, 1609-1720*. In this doctoral thesis, Daniel Richter creates complex theories through his thorough analysis of primary source documents and anthropological data. His paper is a case study of the Six Nations of the Iroquois that showcases the social changes of Native American Communities in the early American frontier. The report highlights “Five avenues of intercultural exchange: trade, disease, warfare, religion, and diplomacy.” Although Richter’s report is centered on many of the same areas as this study, the evidence used and the conclusions of many topics differ greatly. This paper only serves to contribute a different context and to critically analyze the theories and research of many scholars, such as Richter.

Finally, Peter Pratt’s report of Oneida Archeology further provides primary source documents from the earliest European contact with the Iroquois. Both Noble’s and Pratt’s reports contribute to the overall understanding of the Iroquois and the evidence and research contained in them is essential to our historical interpretations. In the forming of this paper, Noble’s research contained much more relevant and extensive archeological information. Studying the cultural and structural

---

7 Noble, “Iroquois Archaeology,” vii.
8 Daniel K. Richter, “The Ordeal of the Longhouse: Change and Persistence on the Iroquois Frontier, 1609-1720. (Volumes I and II).” Order No. 8604666, Columbia University, IV.
9 Ibid., 1.
10 Peter Pratt, “Archaeology of the Oneida Iroquois As Related to Early Acculturation and to the Location of the Champlain-Iroquois Battle of 1615.” 1966, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
changes over time from an interdisciplinary perspective will provide a more thorough understanding of what really caused the decline of the Iroquois confederacy. This report will study a few specific societal contexts within the confederacy from 1570 to 1780 and is structured around the question: How and why did the Iroquois Confederacy virtually collapse during the American Revolutionary War?

**Economics and Trade**

In order to answer this specific question, the basic cultural practices and structure of the Iroquois must be considered to quantify accurate theories and ideas. One of the most important aspects of cultural analysis is the economy. It shows, materially, what products were viewed as essential or important to the functioning of the civilization. In the case of the Iroquois Confederacy, “Traditionally the tribes of the Iroquois have been hunter-gatherer communities that practice some subsistence farming.”11 The practice of a mixed economy was not unique to the Iroquois and was extremely common among Native American tribes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.12 This economic system created a safety net that ensured villages would have enough food even if the hunt was unsuccessful or the crops did not yield their expected amount, enabling the tribes of the Iroquois to live with relative food security.

This abundance of resources, however, did alter the way in which tribes expanded. Large-scale farming did not develop naturally, which meant that sizable centralized cities could not be sustained. Although huge cities did not develop like those of Europe, “considerable population increases did occur through the formation of many semi-autonomous towns within each tribe’s

---

12 Ibid., 3
The typical structure of one of these settlements was “... often palisaded, sometimes surrounded by one, two or three lines of pickets, and they enclosed from one to forty acres of land. The number of longhouse households within a given Iroquois village varied; there could be as few as one, or as many as 200, as recorded by Champlain.”

This interconnected form of living, which was influenced by agriculture, created a society with a socialistic structure. Longhouses were large semi-permanent structures that housed various extended family units who shared resources collectively. These communal homes then made up a town or moiety. Multiple moieties constituted a tribe, and finally, the six tribes formed the Confederacy. The Iroquois Confederacy’s population was modestly sized, about ten to twelve thousand Iroquois made up the Iroquois Confederacy. The concept of the longhouse was the essential building block for Iroquois society, which is shown in their name a rough translation of Haudenoseenee is people of the longhouse. The communal structure of each tribe and the confederacy itself allowed the Iroquois to be largely self-sufficient. While a central council did exist, consisting of representatives from each tribe, the government did not function as a centralized state. Each of the six tribes functioned independent of one another and possessed “political autonomy.” Prior to European contact, the tribes of the Iroquois were not only independent from other Native American communities but were also largely independent from one another. This sovereignty is shown through their trade practices. The majority of goods traded were unregulated by the Confederacy.

---

15 A moiety is a social or ritual group in which a people are divided.
16 Noble, “Iroquois Archaeology,” 41.
17 Richter, “The Ordeal of the Longhouse,” 27.
Whether internal or external, trade is an essential component of the economy. Its transformation largely influenced the Iroquois. From first contact, trade between the Iroquois and the Europeans created not only an exchange of goods, but also of ideals. The relationship formed between the various cultures molded both traditional economic practices and societal structures. This fluid exchange, however, did not develop quickly, but was a slow progression that occurred over hundreds of years. From anthropological work conducted on the Iroquois, this slow integration is evident. In the beginning, the trade that was conducted between Native tribes and Europeans was symbolic and steeped in ritual. Specifically, one of the earliest observable trade goods was beads; these European-crafted beads soon became an important burial good for the Iroquois. The integration of seemingly unimportant beads proves the influence trade had, because these beads became an element of their religion and

---

18 This image was submitted to the U.S. Copyright Office before January 1, 1925. Public domain, no license. Accessed: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iroquios_Longhouse.tif.
This one example of European beads is a small glimpse of how the integration of goods influenced various sections of society, such as religion.

The bartering of goods had been occurring for a long period of time, so the development of an organized fur trade network was a natural progression. French navigator Jacques Cartier engaged in some of the earliest documented trade with North American Indians during his expedition of the St. Lawrence River. The Frenchman outlined his experience trading with Natives stating, “The following day 9 canoes came to the point of land at the entrance to the bay by where the ships were lying, and when two boats had been sent ashore to meet them, the savages bartered away their furs to such an extent that most of them were left stark naked…” Even before the creation of the Iroquois Confederacy, this entry shows European trade was occurring.

Archeological evidence has identified the St. Lawrence Indians to be the Oneida. This means that before the official formation of the Confederacy, which is believed to be in 1570, Iroquoian tribes were already conducting trade with Dutch explorers. By the year 1588, the fur trade had already grown so much since 1534 that traders persuaded the French King, Henry III, to rewrite the previously issued trade policies. “King Henry III’s grant of a monopoly on the entire trade of the two of Cartier’s nephews had to be revoked because of the outcries of other traders.” This event further shows that before the introduction of large-scale fur trading companies or the official formation of the Confederacy, both cultures had become accustomed to some level of trade with one another.

---

20 Peter Pratt, “Archaeology of the Oneida Iroquois As Related to Early Acculturation and to the Location of the Champlain-Iroquois Battle of 1615,” 1966, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 26.
21 Ibid., 26.
22 Ibid., 28.
Trade’s early impact is shown archeologically as well, through the erasure of handmade goods, such as canoes. Canoes traditionally had been a quintessential good created by the Iroquois, but after the integration of substantial European trade over generations, the Iroquois began to lose the ability to create them.23 Not only did the Iroquois grapple with the integration of so many new goods into their society, they also had to deal with the new problem of scarcity. “Records indicate, for example, that by A.D. 1640, local Indians were receiving ‘Indian corn’ from the English farmers… lack of naturally fertile soils throughout most of Coastal New York had apparently limited the productivity of maize.”24 However, experiencing scarcity from European expansion was not unique to the Iroquois. Chief Sachem of the Narragansett tribe is cited, stating in 1642, “Our fathers had plenty of deer and skins, our plains were full of deer, as also our woods, and of turkeys… But these English have gotten our land, they with scythes cut down the grass and with axes fell the trees.”25 This speech, although not directly from an Iroquois, was presented in front of a group of New York Indians and surely represents the sentiment some Iroquois had about scarcity and the threat against their lands. This speech proves, along with many other interactions shown, that the Iroquois, and Native Americans in general, were acutely aware of the lifestyle changes that were occurring.

The transformation that took place in the French, British, and Dutch settlers that lived alongside the Iroquois is also noteworthy. In the case of the French settlers, the French living in France began calling the French colonists “savages” because they adopted Indian ways of dress and various other cultural norms. In

---

25 Ibid., 72.
Peter Pratt’s report, he includes a journal entry that highlights French colonists who were aware of their changing reputations in France. The journal author describes the story of three Frenchmen who worked under French navigator and fur trader Samuel de Champlain. In the story, the three men steal an entire cache of furs from Champlain because they believe he had taken advantage of them and wrote, “we are all savages” on the wall. This story, whether factual or fictional, explicitly shows that the French living in the colonies acknowledged the transformation of French culture in the colonies that was caused by their interactions with Native American tribes. This is just one small example of European cultural transformation, but it showcases how important trade had become with the Iroquois and how interconnected European and Native American societies were.

Despite the complex economy and trade relations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many historians who study the Iroquois Confederacy and its decline cite the trade relations that occurred about 20 to 30 years before the revolution as the cause for the Confederacy’s collapse. While trade is inarguably one of the main causes for their decline, studying only the last two decades before their collapse portrays an incomplete picture. Statements like “The Iroquois had become economically dependent on European trade by 1775” are extremely common within the literature about the Iroquois, especially those that discuss the reasoning for their collapse, which greatly contributes to the standard rock and sea narrative. By emphasizing the lengths of Native American’s dependency, it gives the control of the terms upon which trade occurred to the Europeans.

The problem with statements such as these is that they forget to take the concept of a middle ground into consideration.

26 Peter Pratt, “Archaeology of the Oneida Iroquois As Related to Early Acculturation and to the Location of the Champlain-Iroquois Battle of 1615.” ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
For example, many historians cite the language of the Iroquois tribes themselves, but the issue with that is, during this time period, it was common for the Iroquois to use pity and paternalism to ensure they received fair trade prices. Although it is not necessarily an inaccurate statement that, by the Revolutionary War, the Native Americans were financially dependent on Whites, it promotes the idea that European trade was controlled solely by Europeans and that it occurred virtually overnight, not an evolution of multiple cultures over two centuries. Iroquois were incredibly good businessmen, which showed in their dealings with Native American Superintendent, Sir William Johnson - a Seneca in 1756 is cited stating, “Sir William Johnson’s ability to supply them with the necessities of life, ‘cheaper and better than the French could possibly do.’” This does not portray the vision that Kirby outlines of “a people who were susceptible to bad trade deals.”

Whether or not the Iroquois Confederacy was dependent on European products, there was a variety of traders and they were aware of the prices. Similar to the argument that surrounds the various aspects that facilitated the collapse of the Confederacy, larger societal structures and practices are not analyzed within historians’ arguments. Although economics was not necessarily the sole cause for the Confederacy’s collapse, they were a vehicle for change, in which the other cultural changes were made possible. Not only did trading transform society, but also the goods such as the beads transformed countless other areas of civilization. Some notable products that influenced Iroquois society in immeasurable ways were alcohol, which extremely influenced relationships within tribes, and guns, which virtually transformed the idea of warfare.

Warfare and Warriors

Warfare, and the principles therein, are also a large factor that contributed to the decline of the Iroquois Confederacy. Prior to European involvement, or the formation of the Confederacy, the Iroquois had developed an extremely complex concept of warfare. The Iroquois’ ideology of warfare is deeply connected to the creation of the Iroquois Confederacy. Before the creation of the Iroquois Confederacy in the late fourteenth century, “Ten historic tribes: the Huron, the Petun, the Neutral, the Erie, the Seneca, the Cayuga, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Mohawks and the Susquehannock, all shared a generally similar Iroquoian culture.”

Archeological studies on the Iroquois show that, over hundreds of years, the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, and the Mohawks split away from the Huron, Petun, Neutral, Erie, and the Susquehannock due to geographical distance and evolving cultural identities. The Confederacy consisted of five original tribes: the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Mohawk and later absorbed a sixth tribe, the Tuscarora. The primary reason for the formation of the Confederacy, according to Iroquois mythology, was to put a stop to the small-scale disputes that persisted among the tribes.

Before the Confederacy, “Intertribal warfare among the early historic Iroquois was endemic. Often stimulated by the desire of revenge.” After the formation of the Confederacy, frequent conflicts still persisted, but now outside the Confederacy. These battles usually centered on access to essential resources, ideological differences, or familial disputes. Above all, the purpose of warfare was not large-scale murder and total defeat. Another vital component that influenced the Iroquois warfare ideology was trade. The Beaver Wars started by the Europeans is an example of

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 68.
divergence in traditional economics and war. The Beaver Wars, fought from 1629–1701, show that no longer were wars being waged by the Iroquois about small tribal disputes, but instead, turf wars for access to more pelts. This change in war also provoked a transformation in the role for which the warrior held. Traditionally, “participation in a war party was a benchmark episode in an Iroquois youth’s development…”34 Potentially, battle victories could influence an individual’s status within the village. In this new landscape, however, warriors played an integral role in supporting the economy. The warriors’ role within society now was much more important and thus they gained more power and influence over tribal affairs. The rise of the warrior’s position in society also influenced other societal roles as well; therefore, bypassing traditional safety guards and causing the conflicts that led to the collapse of the Confederacy. Before the Beaver Wars, Sachems, or chiefs, held a greater amount of power in village decision-making. This power structure occurred for two reasons: first, sachems’ positions were often hereditary, which gave them authority, and, second, for a large part of the Confederacy’s existence, the fighting of wars had not been an essential societal element. But with the emergence of turf wars waged for and against foreign European governments over resources, the tribes now became more dependent on warriors, economically and for protection, which elevated their status within society.

Even after the conclusion of the Beaver Wars, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, this shift in the power dynamic continued to build. For example, in 1762, a group of Seneca warriors went alone to meet with Sir William Johnson and lied, stating that their sachems, “had not made the trip because the road were very bad.”35 There is also a written source from the same period that states, “We are in fact the people in consequence

for managing affairs, our sachems being generally a parcel of old people who say much, but mean very little." Both of these quotes show the growth of the warrior’s role over time. The first instance shows that the Seneca warriors felt so empowered that they fooled the sachems out of going to the meeting and conducted foreign affairs with Sir William Johnson. The second further shows the extent to which individuals felt disenfranchised with sachems as a whole. Also, the fact that they are emboldened enough to have written it down, again illustrates just how much power had been lost from the sachem’s position.

The Iroquois overall unhappiness with the position of sachem stems from the rules and responsibilities they held within the tribe. Generally, the duty of Sachems within each tribe or village was to act as a buffer against rash or quick decisions, which was extremely useful. Not only did the role of Sachems and warriors change, the breakdown of Sachems also affected the structure of the entire clan. If the sachem was no longer legitimate, neither was the Clan Mother. The Clan Mother was, in essence, the figurehead of each tribe who appointed the leaders that represented each tribe in the tribal council. A practice that was not sustained within the ever-changing cultural landscape was fighting battles outside of the villages. In the early-to-mid-seventeenth century, it was common practice for the Algonquian and Iroquois to fight outside of their town so that each could sustain minimal casualties and damages, but during the eighteenth century, Iroquois began taking as many as one hundred prisoners during battle.

However, not every aspect and tradition of warfare dissipated. The capture of a white child named by the Seneca is proof of this. The narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison is a ‘firsthand’ account written down by James Seaver. In her interview with James Seaver, Mary Jemison outlines her experience of witnessing her parents’ death and being abducted by the Iroquois.

---

36 Ibid., 7.
37 Richter, “The Ordeal of the Longhouse,” 69.
38 James E. Seaver, Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison (Project Gutenberg, 2004), 34.
This account is important to this essay because it is evidential of cultural and biological change occurring within the confederacy. Her testimony also provides further primary evidence about the attitudes and events that took place within the Revolutionary War era. “In 1758, Mary Jemison was captured by a party of Indians and adopted by two Seneca sisters.”39 Traditionally, in the Iroquois Confederacy, it was common practice for prisoners of war to be adopted into the society because it connects back to the purpose of warfare. In general, killing the enemy or replacing the prisoner into the family unit could avenge murders. This practice of avenging murder and the adoption of prisoners was known as “mourning wars.” This practice not only helped sustain a declining population, but it was beneficial for the Iroquois families who faced the grief of losing family members.

The story of Mary Jemison clearly shows that, even in the late-1750s, some rituals and beliefs of the Iroquois persisted, despite large-scale transformation in the area of warriors. Even as warfare was evolving, certain elements were still common practice. Oneida missionary Samuel Kirkland is also made aware of a similar practice in the 1760s. In Kirkland’s journal, he writes, “Sir William told me, if I was cordially received by the Seneka’s, I should in one week or two be adopted into one of the principal families…”40 In a biography written about Mary Jemison’s life, the author states, “You’ve been drinking the bitter cup of slavery…to which she responds, I hardly recognize myself in what you say.”41 Despite the fact Jemison was originally a “prisoner,” her assimilation into the Seneca tribe shows the emergence of traditional Iroquois beliefs, which stood in extreme contrast to

41 James E. Sheridan, Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison (Project Gutenberg, 2004), 34.
those of European cultures, such as the British or French. In traditional European societies, the best-case scenario for someone taken during war was that, maybe, that person’s children, or their children’s children, could become full members in the oppressor’s society. As for the case of Mary Jemison and many other peoples captured by the Iroquois, they were given nearly full rights and many who were abducted never left, even after they were given the opportunity to escape.

Referring back to Mary’s case, after the conclusion of the French and Indian War, the King of England offered rewards for the release of prisoners that had been taken during the war. This action encouraged, as Jemison states, “John Van Sice, a Dutchman, who had frequently been at our place, and was well acquainted with every prisoner at Genishau, resolved to take me to Niagara, that I might there receive my liberty and he offered bounty. I was notified of his intention; but as I was fully determined not to be redeemed….”42 Jemison was able to evade him by running to a neighboring town, as she did not want to return to her host culture. Mary Jemison’s experience, along with that of missionary Samuel Kirkland, show that despite fighting both the Beaver Wars and the participation of the Iroquois in the French and Indian War, both of these white individuals were adopted and felt truly accepted by their new culture. These examples clearly illustrate that, not only did the mourning warfare still exist, but that the Iroquois still genuinely carried out this practice, giving prisoners of war full citizenship. This is yet another belief, ritual, or practice that did not dissolve in the wave of European influence and possibly one of the most helpful in sustaining power. Although absorbing foreigners and other Native Americans into their society helped to keep population sizes up it also allowed for the outsiders to influence traditional Iroquois beliefs and to further complicate diplomatic relations within the Confederacy.

42 Ibid., 623-624.
Joseph Brant, the brother-in-law of Sir William Johnson, is a prime example of both the complication outsiders contributed but also of the changing of traditional power structures between warriors and Sachems. Brant, although from a prestigious Iroquois family, was never appointed to the position of a Sachem because of the Hereditary requirement. However, he gained so much power within the Mohawk tribe through his battle experiences, he was given the position of an Honorary Chief. Joseph Brant, as well as many other Mohawks, was very religious and even attended missionary school with Samuel Kirkland. Considering his faith and close relationship with Sir William Johnson, it is no surprise that Brant sided with the British. Brant was actually one of the

earliest Iroquois to enter the war of which he began fighting in 1775. He entered the war against the advice of the Mohawk Sachems and the Council’s neutrality order, which is evidence of elevated warrior status.

Brant was not the only one who held disloyalty to the Confederacy: he and a group of Mohawk, Seneca, Onondaga, and Cayuga warriors decided to fight for the British in the Battle of Orinsky. After the entrance of 4 of the 6 nations into the Revolutionary War, he and his war party fought on August 7, 1777. The change in hierarchical position of warriors was not only present in the Iroquois. Red Shoes, a Choctaw warrior, had disobeyed the trade policies of his tribe and unlawfully attempted to take control over his tribe in the 1740s. War was also not the only place this disregard for social hierarchy occurred and the practice of disobeying rules within the Iroquois had been happening since the fifteenth century. In 1630, Sikarus, an Iroquois, went out of his way to trade with the Dutch because he felt he and his family were not receiving a large enough share. This clearly illustrates a breakdown and decentralization of power occurring in the confederacy.

Religion

More so than trade or war, religion played a key role in the evolution of Iroquois society, which has been supported by many historians. When scholars outline the Christianization of the Iroquois, they often paint an artificial picture of the religious landscape of this time period. Similar to the other factors discussed above, tribal religion did not change quickly. Just as the other factors discussed in this paper, religion was a large part of the

---

46 Colin Calloway, Robert Christine, Patrick Ganyard, Joseph Glatthaar, James Kirby Martin, Daniel Richter, and Christopher Vecsey have all argued in favor of this.
societal structure. For example, the creation story of the Iroquois plays an integral part in the way the government was structured. Further, holding a common religious identity was also something that unified the tribes under one cultural identity. Religion, as a whole, generally develops ethnocentrically and geographically in order to answer big questions like the origin of civilization itself. From the research conducted, the Iroquois Confederacy has multiple versions of its own creation story. The religious story created the basis for which the many structures of the culture and the government are established within the story. A few important aspects of the story itself are that one of the main characters, the Chief of the Oneida, had originally been a monster, but at the end, the Chief is good and follows the values of Tarenyawagon, who is the essential protagonist and savior of the story. This section is the basis for the beliefs held by the Confederation, that everyone possessed the ability to be both good and evil. This underlying idea of the duality of both the individual and the group, ideally suited the Iroquois in their dealings with the British, French, and Americans.

The idea that tragedies or certain events did not permanently define a group or person, overall contributed to the Iroquois being a rather understanding people. Another important element of the creation story is the ideology of the refugee. The story discusses the terrible events and treatment the tribes of the Five Nations inflicted on each other. The creation story compared the five independent tribes all to refugees because of their lack of unity. Tarenyawagon’s message of peace influenced the Iroquois Confederacy to emphasize peace; later, the Confederacy became known as the League of Peace.

Additionally, another vital passage from the Iroquois creation story is the birth of the savior of the story who becomes the unifier of the Confederacy. The birth scene says,

---

“Tarenyawagon visited the mother in a dream and told her that the child, born of a virgin, would do the work of the divinities on earth.” Following the birth scene, another scene of importance states, “The Great Creator from whom we are all descended sent me to establish peace among you. No longer shall you kill one another and nations shall cease warring upon each other.” These two scenes were extremely important because they hold many commonalities with Christianity, which may have aided in the conversion efforts put forth by the Europeans. The specific commonalities that are present in the two previously mentioned scenes are the imagery of the peacemaker and the divine child.

In Christianity, Jesus Christ is portrayed as the savior to the world who has come to earth to establish a peace among his people. The imagery of the divine child, born of a virgin, in order to fulfill the wants and desires of the divine figure, is very similar. It is plausible that when introduced to Christianity, the Iroquois could have believed their creation story and that of the Bible was one in the same or at least very interconnected. Finally, one of the single most important power structures that is established in the story is the role of the Clan Mother. In the story, a tribe’s woman is the first one to accept the message of the protagonist, so in turn he grants her the single most important position within the tribe. This role of the Clan Mother was arguably the most important role within the Iroquois Confederacy. It was her job alone to establish the three Sachems or Chiefs for each community. If any of her appointees were insubordinate, she reserved the right to rescind her nomination. If the creation story had the power to not only bestow and hold this position, it shows how powerful this creation story was, whether or not the average Iroquois truly believed the events and characters of the story, it influenced nearly every aspect of his or her life.

The divergence away from their traditional religion must be largely attributed to the work of missionaries over at least 100

50 Ibid.
years. Further, the conversion of the Iroquois tribes is the culmination of many different individuals’ works. Some of the most significant individuals who worked to convert the Iroquois from their traditional beliefs are Sir William Johnson, Samuel Kirkland, and many French Jesuits. Although the work of these individuals is substantial, one cannot help but ask how much they were truly converted or whether it was a mixture of ideas from both Christianity and the traditional belief systems of the Iroquois. The integration of Christianity within the Confederacy’s culture affected much more than their religion alone. When the relationship between religion and culture began to degrade within the tribes, so too did the confederacy itself. Many of the Iroquois were also aware that this integration of a foreign religion was not beneficial to their society.52

Diplomacy

Loyalties like the one the Oneida held with Samuel Kirkland and religious indoctrination were not the only determining factors in the choosing of sides in the Revolutionary War. A multitude of policies and diplomatic relationships influenced a diversity of beliefs and loyalties within the Confederacy. Johnson traded, advised, and even led the Mohawks in the French and Indian War. Johnson’s estate was located within the Mohawk Valley and he, almost daily, entertained various tribe members, either for the purpose of trade or to discuss diplomatic issues. Through his fair business practices and consideration of their culture Sir William Johnson became a very large influence in the Confederacy’s affairs, especially those of the Mohawk. The acknowledgment of

this close relationship is cemented by the fact he was appointed as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the northern colonies.\textsuperscript{53}

Not every tribe within the Confederacy was loyal or supported Johnson. For example, many of the Seneca distrusted him after he renegotiated the Proclamation Line of 1763, to run right through the heart of Seneca territory. Johnson not only influenced the tribes, but diplomatic policy did, too. The Seneca were known as the “Keepers of the Western Door,” who had to distance themselves from the ever-encroaching Colonist.\textsuperscript{54} Additionally, they were the closest Iroquois tribe to the sea, which enabled them to trade more with the British. Mary Jemison also discusses in her book that the British offered to amply reward the Senecas\textsuperscript{55} if they assisted in the war, which was another reason the Seneca decided to represent the British.

In 1775, Congress sent a letter to the six nations asking them to stay neutral. This was a stark difference in diplomacy from the strategy of the British. One interesting aspect about this document is, first, the reasoning for writing it. Congress felt the need to write a letter asking for Iroquois neutrality suggests that they are already quite connected. Also, one section is addressed to the “Brothers, Sachems, and Warriors,”\textsuperscript{56} Both the Sachems and warriors are being addressed, clearly showing that warriors, at least to the colonists, are seen on an equal level by this point or at least that all three of these positions demanded acknowledgment. The intertwining of religion with diplomacy was a strategy used by Samuel Kirkland to persuade them to fight for the Colonists. One of many examples where he does this is in a speech, where he states, “Brother, The great God has brought about this happy Revolution, as you observed in your Speech to us. We must all


\textsuperscript{54} James E. Seaver, \textit{Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison} (Project Gutenberg, 2004).

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 707.

ascribe the Honour, the Wisdom and the Victory to him.”\textsuperscript{57} and by the mid-1600s, 20 percent of the Iroquois were already “Christian.”

This choosing of the tribes in the war was the last straw in the fall for the confederacies and caused a large amount of disunification among them. The League’s unity was their saving grace that enabled them to last and saved them from the fate of the previous five Iroquois tribes that were much bigger. The argument that some modern historians hold that it was intentional to take different sides, as a diplomatic strategy, is misleading.

A central theme in the Confederacy creation story is also the peace tree, the place where the five nations laid down their weapons and vowed to never fight each other again. The idea that they had engaged in warfare with each other cemented the disunification and loss of power of the Confederacy. Earlier in 1775 Iroquois’ Little Abraham and Flying Crow state “Mohawk and Onondaga speakers asked Congress to ignore the actions of individuals who went against the consensus of the Iroquois League”\textsuperscript{58} This speech shows that the Iroquois truly hoped to stay neutral and attempted to do so for as long as possible. Beside the previously outlined information, each of the six nations functioned independently from one another and did not operate with a strong centralized state, meaning they were not able to orchestrate multiple tribes to choose different sides in the war. In 1777, the ritual peace fire was extinguished (a cultural symbol that reflects the unity of the Iroquois Confederacy) and this event represented the virtual end to the power of the Iroquois Confederacy. It was not the decimation of battle that ended the Iroquois but that many tribes had taken up weapons against each other meant that they could not reconcile differences.

\textsuperscript{57} Samuel Kirkland and Walter Pilkington, The Journals of Samuel Kirkland: 18th Century Missionary to the Iroquois, Government Agent, Father of Hamilton College (First ed. Clinton, N.Y. Hamilton College, 1980), 54.

Whether or not accepted by all, Iroquois Samuel Kirkland contributed significantly to the conversion to Christianity and to that of the colonists’ cause in the Revolutionary War. He specifically influenced the various tribes focusing on the Oneida. Also, he carried out these changes through the intertwining of religion and politics, which further caused the breakdown of the beliefs that created their society and culture. “Brothers, it is time we were roused up. The late event is a warning to us… This white man we call our brother has come upon a dark design… or he would not have traveled so many hundred miles.”

This quote from a Seneca meeting during the 1760s, from an Iroquois man argues that he knows that missionary work has a dark element; he doubts that Samuel Kirkland holds truly pure intentions. Which shows that even before Kirkland began advocating for participation in the Revolutionary War, the Iroquois were keenly aware that missionaries, or rather any white figures attempting to build a relationship or integrate into their society, often had ulterior motives. When enslaving people, even in the case of the Iroquois themselves, in their absorption of various other tribes they stripped the population of their identity and religion, which caused the Iroquois Confederacy to collapse and thoroughly integrate. Unfortunately, this same practice was used on them and effectively caused their collapse.

**Conclusion**

In the study of the Iroquois, only a small amount of scholarship has analyzed the various creation stories within their argument of eventual collapse. To accurately understand Iroquoian cultural practices and their governmental structure, it is necessary to study how and why these cultural practices were formed. By leaving out important societal aspects such as religion, Iroquois scholarship

---

that has been produced by the historical community still has room for improvement. Most of the research considered here only highlights changes in society in the latter years before the Iroquois Civil War. This consequently paints an inaccurate and biased view of what factors caused the collapse of the Confederacy. With this compilation of research, I hope to show at least a fraction of the background and progression of the society. This study has demonstrated that economic development in goods and trading practices, the role of key individuals in diplomacy, and the disestablishment of core religious beliefs within the Confederacy detrimentally altered the standard societal structure which caused America’s “first democracy” to collapse.

The goal of creating this report was to illustrate that the Iroquois were an extremely complex culture with centuries of history and cultural development and that they deserve to be understood for more than just their collapse. In civilizations such as the Romans, historians focus on their achievements, the changes to their culture over time, as well as their collapse, but the collapse is not the focal point. I hope to have overcome the standard narrative of the rock and the sea; the Iroquois deserve to take their rightful place in United States history and to inspire further research and scholarship to take place.
Bibliography


Pratt, Peter. “Archaeology of the Oneida Iroquois As Related to Early Acculturation and to the Location of the Champlain-Iroquois Battle Of 1615.” 1966, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.


_____.


Author Bio

Jessica Howe is a CSUSB alumni. She is currently working towards a dual master’s in education and history. She is very passionate about motivating the next generation to contribute to the study of history. She hopes to one day become a community college professor specializing in Native American history. She would like to thank her mother and grandmother for all the late nights and support they have shown her on her academic journey. She would also like to thank all of the history professors at CSUSB who have mentored and inspired her.