

Project Canterbury

Missions to the Oneidas

By Susan Fenimore Cooper

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At the close of the war of the Revolution, in 1784, an important Council was held in the Oneida country, to settle the affairs between the United States and the Six Nations. In the treaty of peace, 1783, England abandoned her allies entirely. No mention was made of these tribes. Their territories had now passed into the virtual possession of the United States, yet many returned from Canada and occupied their old grounds. There was a party in the Legislature of New York in favor of expelling them from the State. But Gen. Washington and Gen. Schuyler were strongly in favor of treating them mildly, even those who had been employed by Great Britain during the war. By the treaty of Fort Stanwix--the first treaty between the Republic and Indian tribes,--the Six Nations agreed to relinquish a large part of the territory they claimed; to restore all prisoners; to deliver up certain notorious individuals for trial by the laws of the United States; and to surrender six hostages to remain with the authorities until the former conditions were fulfilled. On their part, the United States made peace with the four hostile tribes, and received them under their protection, as well as the Oneidas and Tuscaroras, and secured to each tribe the lands they actually occupied at that period, forming large "reservations" for their sole benefit. Ten thousand dollars, or good to that amount, were also paid to these tribes as a compensation for their losses during the war. The government provided the Oneidas with a grist mill, a saw mill, and a small annual sum to pay artisans to work for them, and for the purchase of stock and agricultural tools. This sum was "their share of \$4,500," apparently about a dollar a head; a few years later the tribe numbered 628 souls. The State of New York also paid the Oneidas an annuity of \$3,553, the interest on moneys accruing from the sale of Oneida lands. The moral and religious condition of the tribe, after the war, was at first discouraging. They had lost ground after those ten years of violence. Mr. Kirkland, on resuming the mission, found only thirty-six strictly sober persons; these were, with one exception, all women. Only one man, Skenandoah, appeared at the Holy Communion. He was the only sober man in the tribe. There were but twenty-four serious Christians among them. There were still Pagans on the reservation. They were very indolent; "Indians cannot work," was the common saying among them. When not fishing, or fowling, they were playing games, or entirely idle. Only one man, the steadfast Skenandoah, tilled the ground. The old superstitions lingered among them. Their faith in dreams was unbounded. Their dread of witchcraft was great. Before the door of an old chief, resting upright on the ground, stood the palladium of the clan, a stone of some size, declared by Mr. Kirkland to have been an object of idolatrous worship to many of the people. It was "a cylindrical stone of more than two hundred pounds weight, and unlike any other stone in that region." From the earliest records, the Oneidas were spoken of as the "People of the Stone." Onia is their word for a stone, and Oniota-aug means the people of the stone. The French called them Oneséionts; with the Dutch and English they were Oneidas. Tradition declared that wherever the tribe moved, this cylindrical stone of mystery followed them. A strong man could carry it forty or fifty rods without resting; in this way, as the missionary says, it may certainly have followed them in their wanderings. It would seem to

have been an essential of this ancient stone of the Oneidas that it could be lifted by the sinews of their warriors into "the crotch of a tree." and when placed in that position, it rendered their braves invincible. Such is the tradition given by Mr. Kirkland, who was thoroughly familiar with the language and habits of the Oneidas. History supports this assertion. Sir William Johnson, while his army, with its Indian allies, lay at Lake George, in 1755, proposed to the Six Nations that each tribe should raise its own peculiar emblem before their encampment. The Oneidas took a stone, painted it red, and lifted it into the crotch of a tree. Many of the old treaties between the Europeans and the Sachems of this tribe bear the sign manual of some renowned chief, and connected with it a rude picture writing of "a stone in the crotch of a tree."

There was another stone of much greater size, in the Oneida country, about which mysterious traditions hover. It was of considerable size and weight, and lay on the summits of a commanding height, overlooking the country on the Oneida Creek, as far as the lake, which on a bright day can be seen in the distance. At one period the principal Oneida village lay near a fine spring in a valley beneath the height. There are vague rumors connected with this boulder of syenite, shadows of the uncertain past, which claim for it the dignity of a tribal altar. Of this larger stone Mr. Kirkland makes no mention. It was removed in 1850, from the height on which it lay, to Forest Hill Cemetery in Utica. It is said that there is no stone of the same geological character nearer than the Adirondack Mountains. Its weight has been variously stated at from one to three tons.

Some of the principal Oneidas during those years of disturbance had become strongly impressed with fatalistic opinions. They asserted that the Indians were under the especial curse of the Great Spirit, that it was not possible for them to reform, and become civilized. They had become very jealous of the whites, and frequently burst out in impassioned exclamations. "The rivers and harbors where our canoes floated are now crowded with the great ships of the white people! Where we had only a few smokes--wigwams--they have now great cities and grand houses! Lands which our fathers sold for a few pence could not now be bought of the whites for a thousand dollars!" Then their breasts would heave and swell, their nostrils would dilate, and their eyes flash with indignation which seemed almost beyond control. The missionary, however, succeeded after a time, in pacifying them, and the year 1790 brought with it a degree of quiet industry and progress. They paid more attention to agriculture, especially to planting corn and wheat. One family harvested 100 bushels of wheat--a larger quantity than had ever before been raised among the Six Nations.

At this period the missionary's house was crowded with Indians seeking religious instruction, from morning to night. "Some whole nights I have sat up with them." "It is now more than seven months since there has been a single case of drunkenness in two villages. Many whose past life was stained with the foulest vices, have now become sober, industrious, praying Indians." There was some violent opposition however. A young and haughty Pagan chief, who had been much with other tribes to the westward, reviled the Christians, and attempted to get up once more a heathen dance at New Year's. He failed. Filled with rage he threatened the life of the missionary who lay concealed one night in a shed, guarded by several chiefs and young men. This was the last attempt among the Oneidas upon the life of a missionary. A public Council followed. The chief Sachem solemnly called on all to take sides for or against Christianity. Taking the missionary by the hand he said, with tears in his eyes, "Father, open your ears, and let all present hear while I declare in the presence of the Great Spirit that I love you; that I will die for Jesus, and die for you, Father, any day. Let every one give his opinion, as in the name of Jesus." After a prolonged council the Pagan party was rebuked. The religious feeling was strengthened by these events.

In 1793, in accordance with "A plan of Education for the Indians, particularly of the Five Nations," drawn up by Mr. Kirkland, and which for some years he had much at heart, the "Hamilton Oneida Academy" was incorporated. The missionary endowed the institution with a fine building site of twelve acres, and also with several hundred additional acres of land belonging to himself. This academy has now become Hamilton College. But, alas, we have no record of any Indians being educated there!

The foundation of the academy was 39 the last important act of Mr. Kirkland's life. He was now an old man, and many troubles had fallen upon him. His health failed; his wife died; he became impoverished through the bankruptcy of a son. There were painful disturbances with other Presbyterian missionaries, and in 1797 the Society of Scotland discontinued their connections with him. Through all these trials Skenandoah's affection and respect never wavered. The Oneida Sachem was the older man of the two. He had nearly numbered a hundred winters. His features were still good, his face but little wrinkled, the countenance mild and pleasing; but he was feeble, and had lost his sight. He lived in a small red house, four miles from the principal Oneida village.

In 1808 Samuel Kirkland died. After a solemn service he was buried in an orchard near his dwelling. After his death the Presbyterian Mission to the Oneidas, which had been in a languishing condition for some years, became very much enfeebled.

Skenandoah--the "White Man's Friend"--survived the missionary eight years. In 1810 he was described as tall, erect, but sightless, still dignified in manner and person. "I am an aged hemlock," he said: "the winds of a hundred winters have whistled through my branches. I am dead at the top. My own generation have left me. Why I live the Great Good Spirit only knows. Pray to the Lord that I may have patience to await my appointed time." The Indian chief died in the spring of 1816, at the age of 110 years. According to his own request he was laid by the side of the missionary, that he might "hold on to his garment, and go up with him at the great Resurrection."

The Oneidas were now about to pass under the care of the Episcopal Church in America, with which they have remained closely connected until the present date. The work of the S.P.G., discontinued at the breaking out of the Revolution, was resumed by the daughter Church in America in 1816.

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