

BLIND FAITH: THE TRAGEDY OF SCHENANDOA*

Laurence M. Hauptman
State University of New York at New Paltz, New York

With few exceptions, American Indians who have collaborated or allied themselves with the white man have been treated harshly by both historians and Native Americans themselves. From the time of Uncas in the first half of the seventeenth century to the reservation era of Red Cloud in the second half of the nineteenth century, those who recognized the omnipotent power of the Euroamerican world and sought accommodation have been viewed as less worthy than those who took up the warpath against the "long knives." Instead of analyzing individual motives that led to cooperation with the white man, these Indian leaders have been too easily labeled "government chiefs" or "sell-outs."

On the surface, Schenandoa, the famous Oneida leader of the American Revolutionary era, can likewise be judged in this negative way. To the white man, Schenandoa, whose name meant "the hemlock," was the archetype of the "good Indian." Indeed, among his own Oneida tribesmen, he was known universally as "the good friend of the white man," although it is not clear whether this was an altogether derogatory designation. In other ways, it would be easy to suggest that Schenandoa was a "sell-out." First, he was more willing to lease or cede Indian lands more than most other Oneida leaders. Second, his cooperation with the white man brought more economic advantages for himself and his family than most other Oneidas had in the three decades after the American Revolution. Finally, Schenandoa's conversion and devotion to the white man's religion, Christianity, was all-consuming.

Despite the factual truth of all three points, Schenandoa was, in my estimation, no "uncle tomahawk" or "apple," red on the outside and white in the inside, terms used by Red Power activists of the 1970s to describe untrustworthy accommodationists. In order to recover from the disease of alcoholism that plagued him in the first half of his extraordinary long life, Schenandoa turned to Christ as his Savior. In doing so, he became the faithful follower of the missionary Samuel Kirkland, who became a father figure to him and who could do no wrong. It was largely this blind faith that resulted in Schenandoa's poor decision making in the last decades of his life.

Although one of the most famous Oneidas of all time, we know little of Schenandoa's early life. He was actually born into a Susquehanna (Andaste or Conestoga) Indian family around 1706. He was later adopted by the Oneidas, rising to the role of war chief and later Pine Tree chief of the Oneida Wolf Clan. During his youth, he was described as a "tall, well-made and robust man" and as a "brave and intrepid warrior." Although no portrait of Schenandoa exists, he was believed to have had tattoos on his chest and hands and apparently also had enormous ears.

From sketchy records, we know that Schenandoa suffered from alcoholism in the first half of his life. In the refugee village in Oneida Territory along the Upper Susquehanna where he was raised, the alcohol trade was extensive and alcoholism and problems associated with it were prevalent. The resettlement of refugee Indian populations in the eighteenth century—Conoy, Munsee, Nanticoke, Saponi, Shawnee, Tuscarora, and Tutelo—mostly at Oquaga and Otsiningo, as well as at Brothertown, Chemung, Chugnuts, New Stockbridge, Owego, Tioga, and Unadilla, was one filled with trauma and social disintegration, leading to the increased use of alcohol, bout drinking, violence, and mayhem. As early as 1737, Conrad Weiser described Otsiningo as "this miserable place, where more murders occur than in any other nation." Disorderliness caused by alcohol appears to be the major factor in the rise of aggressive behavior. Weiser was told by the Indians at Otsiningo that "rum will kill us and leave the land clear for the Europeans without strife and purchase." In June 1753, the Reverend Gideon Hawley, on his way to Oquaga, described the results of the dealings of one George Winedecker, a nefarious rum dealer with an appropriate-sounding name: "We soon saw the ill effects" of the trader's rum. The missionary added:

This night we went to sleep with some apprehensions. We were awoken by the howling of the Indians over their dead. The whole village was agitated. We arose very early in the morning. We soon saw the Indian women and their children skulking in the adjacent bushes for fear of intoxicated Indians, who were drinking deeper. The women were secreting guns, hatchets, and every deadly or dangerous weapon, that murder or harm might not be the consequence.

Soon after, Hawley soon found himself threatened by some of the inebriated Indians he met at Oquaga.

According to Oneida tradition told to William Beauchamp, the Episcopal minister at Onondaga and anthropologist, Schenandoa, also known as Skenandon, Skenandoah, Skanondonagh, Skenondough, Skenandore, John Skanondo, Johnko Skenando, as well as many other variations of the name, had a religious transformation after an incident in Albany in 1755. He embarrassed himself at a treaty council when he became very drunk and found himself the following morning in a naked state. His conversion to Christianity was complete when he met and fell under the influence of Samuel Kirkland in 1765. His unbridled friendship with Kirkland, a father figure to the Indian despite the missionary's younger age, lasted until Kirkland's death in 1808. This friendship was to significantly shape Oneida history as well as Iroquois and American histories as a whole.

Kirkland's career among the Oneidas had two stages. The first stage occurred before, during, and immediately after the American Revolution; Kirkland was seen, especially among the warrior element within the Oneidas, as their "friend" or "father." To historian James

* This paper was delivered at the Oneida History Conference, Oneida Nation of Indians of Wisconsin, Oneida Indian Reservation, June 1998.

Ronda, there was more to these designations "than just Iroquois courtesy in the air. The Oneida faithful saw Kirkland as a spiritual director, a guide in the midst of troubled times." His rigid message emphasized the notion of a solitary believer standing naked before an all-powerful, all-knowing angry God to be judged, in his lengthy unyielding hell-fire-and-brimstone sermons which lasted hours at a time.

Despite Kirkland's demanding New Light message, some prominent Oneidas did indeed see the Presbyterian theologian as the right antidote for a growing dysfunctionality in Oneida society. Kirkland's sermons stressed a complete reliance on farming and the abandonment of the demon rum, whose use had reached epidemic proportions among the Oneidas and their associated refugee Indian populations. At the centerpiece of Kirkland's thinking was education which he believed could prepare the Indians for the Christian white world by erasing native ways and serve the Indians as a survival skill to live in a hostile white world. Cooperating with Schenandoa, Good Peter, and other influential Oneidas such as Laulence and Onondiyō, he pushed his "civilization plan." Thus, to some Oneidas such as Schenandoa, a former alcohol abuser, Kirkland offered a new level of self-respect.

Although not the sole reason for Oneida factionalism in the period, Kirkland's presence contributed to the divisions and helped shape the Oneida world long after the American Revolution ended. Besides his influence in bringing the Oneidas to the American side during the Revolutionary War, encouraging acculturation to the white man's ways, and introducing Christianity, he reinforced already existing divisions within the community between warriors, mostly his supporters, and sachems. According to ethnohistorian Jack Campisi:

Kirkland challenged the traditional beliefs of the Oneidas, and it is no coincidence that his followers came mainly from the ranks of the warriors. However, he did not cause factionalism; what he did was to introduce a doctrine that gave religious validation to the political reality that was already extant. Kirkland capitalized on this division and challenged the efficacy of the political structure by his insistence upon the rejection of Iroquois religious beliefs. In so doing, he attacked the symbolic basis of the political structure, thus weakening the position of the hereditary chiefs. Needless to say, they opposed Kirkland's religion and, by extrapolation, his politics. However, Kirkland's influence did not depend upon the support of the sachems but of the warriors who, by converting to the new religion, found a means of challenging the strictures and limitations of the Iroquois political system.

Thus, at the end of the American Revolution, the pro-Kirkland warriors such as Schenandoa who had been allied to the Americans and who had become converted to Christianity largely resided at Oneida Castle, twelve miles south of the easternmost section of Oneida Lake; while the sachems and their supporters, now organized as the "Pagan Party," resided at Oriskany (Old Oriske), eight miles west of present-day Rome, New York.

Schenandoa was one of the key links to the Oneida-American alliance in the Revolution, although to some he was suspect because he was the former father-in-law of Joseph Brant, the famed Mohawk war chief and British ally. Two incidents during the war illustrate his commitment and unabiding loyalty to Kirkland and the Americans. Beauchamp writes: "His vigilance once preserved from massacre the inhabitants at German Flats." Secondly, his commitment to the Americans included his being sent by General Schuyler to Fort Niagara on a special mission where he and his lifelong friend Good Peter were promptly imprisoned by British military authorities.

After the war, nearly every prominent non-Indian visitor to the Oneida Country was taken to see the aging warrior, who by that time had become blind. To some white men in the post-Revolutionary War period, Schenandoa became the "noble savage" incarnate, a symbol of the "genius" of the Indian character. By 1810, he was described inaccurately by De Witt Clinton as "first chief of the Oneidas." Clinton then compared the impressive Oneida centenarian to an English monarch or to one of Queen Anne's famous Indian kings of a century earlier.

The aged blind warrior, who by the 1790s was described as the "second chief" of the Oneidas, was to live in his declining years through the worst upheaval in his people's history. As in Good Peter's case, Schenandoa had few options, negotiating from a hand of weakness, not one of strength. Using an accommodationist approach to the white man's land pressures, it is clear that Schenandoa agreed to piecemeal land cessions in a failed attempt to keep the whites from taking all of Oneida Country, especially the Oneida Castle. Faced with religious and political pressures from within the Oneida world that would spill over into internecine tribal violence in the last three decades of his life, Schenandoa's strategy was to fail miserably. In this regard, the aged warrior used the *very same* methods that the Oneidas had used since the crisis years of the 1770s: ingratiating himself to more powerful forces such as Philip Schuyler and Peter Smith, supported by his "father," the white missionary Samuel Kirkland. Always drawing support from his devout Christian faith, Schenandoa appealed for harmony within the terribly divided Oneida Indian community. On September 19, 1793, Kirkland wrote in his journal:

Towards the close of the day, Schenandoa, their second chief, addressed them in a very pathetic manner upon their present state, both in a religious and secular view; their declension in regard to religion, and their divisions and animosities in respect to their civil and political interest. He observed that it appeared to him the great God was about to give them up. He spoke for about three quarters of an hour, and very feelingly; often wept, which is a rare thing for him to do.

Yet, his calls for unity and peaceful coexistence were largely ignored.

The death of major Indian voices and the aging of others, besides Schenandoa, created a definite crisis in the Oneida community in the 1790s. The Oneidas were totally unprepared for the foxes at the gates. In the last decades of Schenandoa's life, there occurred a power vacuum in Oneida leadership and one not solely attributable to Indian factionalism or caused by religious divisions. In the space of the brief period between 1788 and 1795, the Oneidas lost four of their most powerful voices, including the remarkable Good Peter in 1792. The Oneidas at Old Oriske were led by Colonel Hongarry until his death in 1788. He was succeeded by [Peter] Oneyanha, Beechtree, or Peter the

Quartermaster of the Turtle Clan. Although Beechtree was present at both of the state negotiations with the Oneidas in 1785 and 1788, which he signed, he died just prior to the key events of the 1790s. Moreover, Captain John (Onondiyo) died on September 12, 1795, three days before the New York State-Oneida accord of that year.

Schenandoa's acceptance of the missionary's message offered him a way to free himself from the demon rum and the troubling world around him. Whatever the missionary advised him to do, Schenandoa, the faithful son, complied. Right to Kirkland's death in 1808, Schenandoa followed his "father's" teachings. Kirkland's emphasis on hard work, self-discipline, and self-worth also brought economic rewards as well. It also brought presents from influential whites such as New York State Governor Daniel Tompkins who bestowed on Schenandoa an elegant silver pipe. Thus, those Oneidas more associated with the white man had clear economic advantages and lived in better housing than their "pagan" brothers. Schenandoa, for one, lived in a well-made house built in a Dutch style with a hearth on one side "with an open space all around and a kind of funnel above to let out the smoke." His elaborate residence for Oneida was situated on the edge of the village commanding "an extensive and grand view all round."

When Kirkland proposed his "Plan for Education of Indians," which emphasized teaching Oneidas using the English language, western methods of agriculture, and moral reform through Christian teachings, Schenandoa faithfully endorsed it. Besides ceding land for the project, the Hamilton-Oneida Academy, the predecessor of Hamilton College, Schenandoa and his fellow members of the Christian Party even went as far as writing to the New York State Board of Regents and recruiting Onondaga and Seneca children from Buffalo Creek and petitioning federal authorities such as the powerful Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, Philip Schuyler's son-in-law, to support Kirkland's efforts in this regard. It is little wonder that at Schenandoa's death in 1816, at somewhere between 96 and 106 years of age, the Oneida was buried on the grounds of Kirkland's Hamilton College next to the grave of his white father the missionary.

Kirkland's prewar concerns about his Oneida flock melted away with his concerns about building this Hamilton-Oneida Academy, his dream, as a result of financial exigencies. By clearly aiding and abetting land interests intent on dispossessing the Iroquois, Kirkland sacrificed his principles and broke his bond to his surrogate son Schenandoa. In 1788 Kirkland allegedly told his flock that they should sell part of their lands which led to his rejection by some former faithful Christian Oneida followers. By his presence at six illegal state treaties with the Cayuga, Oneida, and Onondaga from the mid-1780s to the mid-1790s, as well as in the negotiations for the gigantic Phelps-Gorham Purchase in 1788, the missionary gave a sense of moral legitimacy to these outright frauds and/or clear violations of federal supremacy in Indian affairs. Moreover, as Jack Campisi has astutely observed, Kirkland encouraged the sale of Oneida lands to whites which could "serve to offer a model of thrift and industry for Indians to emulate." Since he was convinced that Oneidas as a whole "would never become farmers unless forced to by the loss of land for hunting," the Presbyterian missionary could easily find it acceptable to serve the Oneidas on occasions as both a minister as well as a government representative dealing with the likes of John Livingston or Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham. But there were apparently other reasons for Kirkland's turnaround.

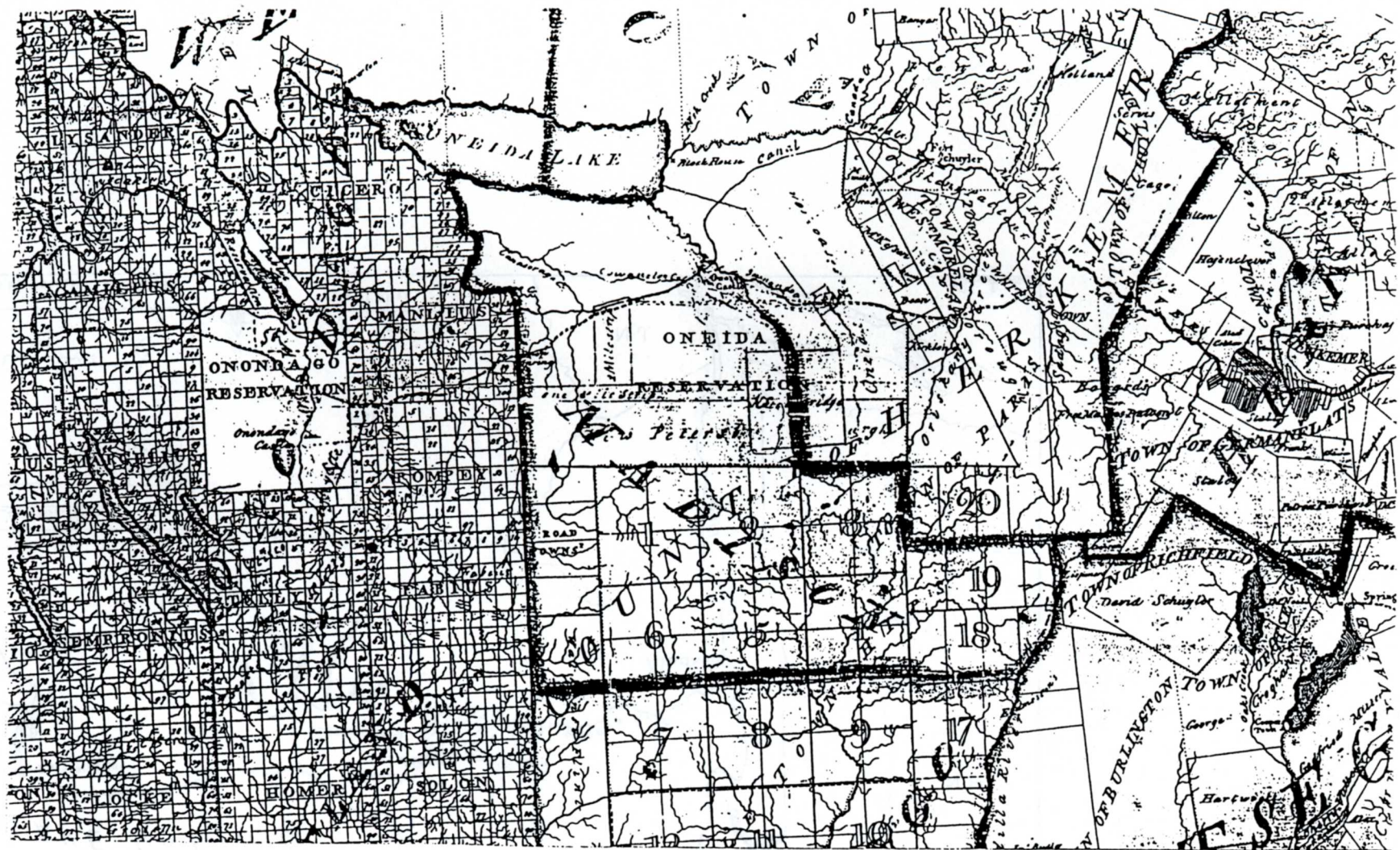
In 1790, the Oneidas and the State of New York granted Kirkland and his sons 4,000 acres on the present site of Utica. Subsequently, after lobbying feverishly, Kirkland obtained an additional 2,000 acres for his role in the Phelps-Gorham Purchase negotiations. The pre-American Revolution Kirkland, who sincerely saw himself as the protector of his Oneida flock, leading them away from the fires of damnation, apparently compromised his principles under the pressures of family and mission financial exigencies and under his all-consuming passion to create the Hamilton-Oneida Academy. Although he married a woman of means after the death of his first wife in 1796, Kirkland in the early 1790s was increasingly desperate for money caused by his substantial medical expenses and by the extravagance of his profligate son George Whitfield, a land speculator. It appears as no coincidence that the missionary looked the other way when the Oneidas slowly "got taken" during this period. Increasingly dependent on outside sources for his mission, Kirkland was not going to risk his mission sinecure by criticizing Philip Schuyler, perhaps the most powerful New Yorker of the 1790s.

Kirkland's mindset in the period 1788 to 1795 was most affected by his obsession with creating the Hamilton-Oneida Academy and promoting his specific program of Indian education. Much like some modern college presidents, although he never officially served in that capacity, Kirkland apparently never questioned the sources of his funding or the aims of the donors. He traded favors for donations and appointed "money-bags" to the board of trustees of his institution. Although he gave three thousand acres of land he had obtained from the Oneidas as well as most of his money, not drained away by his son, to build the school, Kirkland clearly made "compromises" in the period after 1788 that alienated many of his flock.

In the late 1780s and 1790s, Kirkland's relationship with Oliver Phelps, the major land speculator, raised eyebrows. From 1788 onward, Kirkland attended land negotiations with the Senecas adding his moral suasion, whereby Phelps furthered the building of his vast landholdings. Soon Phelps was writing Kirkland about the laying out of roads in the Phelps-Gorham Purchase. By November, 1790, Iroquois Indians, including Complanter, accused Phelps, Kirkland, and Joseph Brant of altering deeds in favor of Phelps. When the Hamilton-Oneida Academy was chartered in 1793 by the Regents of the State of New York, Oliver Phelps was the largest financial contributor to the project!

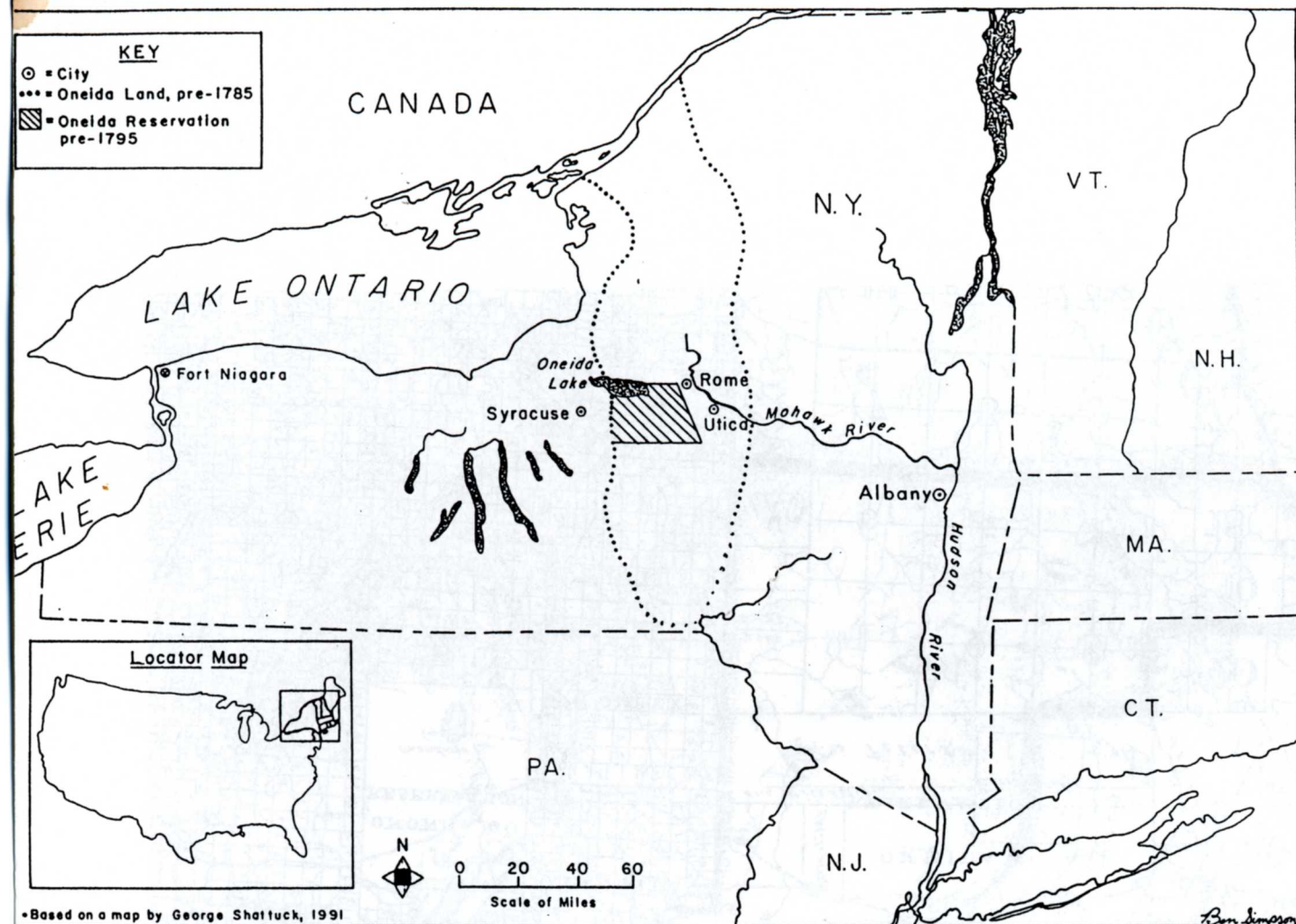
The school and its founding illustrate much about Kirkland and his motives. In the same month the Hamilton-Oneida Academy was chartered, the nefarious Peter Smith asked Kirkland to do him a favor. Smith requested that Kirkland mention to Israel Chapin, the federal superintendent to the Six Nations, that "if any of the Indians should inquire that you think they ought to be satisfied with the rents which I gave them as I should wish the Indians all to be satisfied. . . ." It is little wonder that Smith, in the same month, matched Phelps' financial contribution to Kirkland's Hamilton-Oneida Academy. The list of donors and trustees of the school in the early years illustrates much. Other donors included land speculators Jonas Platt and Moses De Witt, with Platt also serving as an original trustee of the school.

Even more revealing was Kirkland's notes of 1792 in which he discussed his "Plan of Education." Kirkland optimistically saw the bright future for the institution because of the support of the state's scion, Senator Philip Schuyler: "The Honorable Philip Schuyler, Esq. of

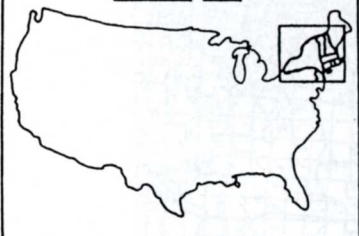


KEY

- ⊙ = City
- *** = Oneida Land, pre-1785
- ▨ = Oneida Reservation pre-1795



Locator Map



0 20 40 60
Scale of Miles

•Based on a map by George Shattuck, 1991

Benjamin