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- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 364.
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## The Stockbridge Indian in the American Revolution

Deirdre Almeida

The Stockbridge Indians, also known as the Mahican tribe, were a branch of the Algonquins. The Indian name is Muh-he-ka-neew, which means "the people of the ever-flowing waters." At the height of their glory their principal home had been on the banks of the Hudson River. Their possessions extended from the Hudson to the Connecticut Valley, and reached north of Lake George and Lake Champlain. The tribe was reduced in size through wars with their enemies, the Mohawks and the Six Nations. By 1680 the Mahicans had been entirely driven from the west bank of the Hudson. Then, they found themselves gradually crowded out of the east bank, by the farming and commercial activities of the Dutch. In addition the English were rapidly pushing inland. Until 1722 the tribe still held the "Housatonic open," which had been untouched by the white man. At that time, the Mahican tribe was reduced to perhaps thirty families scattered along the banks of the Housatonic.<sup>1</sup>

In 1722 the English felt the moment was opportune for settlement of this last strip of land that separated Massachusetts from New York. The idea of settling this region originated with John Stoddard, who was the "master mind" of the Connecticut Valley.<sup>2</sup> He emphasized the friendliness of the Indians who lived across the mountains and he noted how important it was to maintain this friendship. One hundred and seventy-seven bold men were eager for adventure, under the leadership of Joseph Parsons and Thomas Nash. They received the first grants of land in Berkshire County, in 1722.<sup>3</sup>

Konkapot, chief of the tribe, asked for four hundred and sixty pounds, along with three barrels of cider and thirty quarts of rum, in exchange for the title to the land. The Indians kept for themselves two small reservations, one on the northern boundary of the lower Housatonic township, which they called Skatehook, and the other beyond the mountain, Wnahtakook, later to become the town of Stockbridge. Konkapot lived in the latter, while Umpachene, second in command of the tribe, maintained the Great Wigwam at Skatehook, a tent sixty feet long, where important conferences and ceremonies took place.<sup>4</sup>

As the lower Housatonic township became the town of Sheffield, the Indians looked at their own depleted numbers and at the thriving English with growing feelings of distrust. Perhaps if they embraced the curious and rigid religion of the white man, and learned to live as he did, they would be saved from extinction. Certainly the English settlement looked neat and prosperous, with the church, the schoolhouse, and the little frame houses set in rows.

Ebenezer, the first member of the tribe to be converted to Christianity, sagely remarked: "The Indians continue in their Heathenism notwithstanding the Gospel has been bro't so near them, and they are greatly diminished, so that since my remembrance there were ten Indians, where there is now one. But the Christians greatly increase and multiply and spread over the land; let us therefore leave our former courses and become Christians." Konkapot listened to this advice, although he complained that if they became Christians they would probably be disowned not only by the rest of their own tribe, but by related tribes. However he had an open mind, and sent word to Stoddard that he would be glad to discuss the matter with him.<sup>6</sup>

Konkapot and Umpachene met with Stoddard in Springfield, where they were joined by Nehemiah Bull of Westfield and Stephen Williams of Springfield, both clergymen. First, the titles of Captain and Lieutenant were conferred upon the two Indians for services rendered to the English. Then they discussed Christianity. Bull and Williams agreed to Konkapot's suggestion that he go to Stockbridge to address the tribe and explain his method of saving the souls of the Indians. That meeting took place in July of 1734, and after four days of consultation, the Indians agreed that their souls should be saved and that a missionary should come to live among them.<sup>7</sup>

In October of 1734 the first missionaries arrived—Nehemiah Bull and a young twenty-four year old Yale tutor named John Sergeant. Sergeant was by nature peculiarly fitted for this task. He was the perfect combination of pioneer and cleric. The tragedy of the Indians had always touched his heart and it was said that he had prayed for God to send him among them.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the difficulty of traveling between the two reservations, Sergeant and his co-worker Timothy Woodbridge suggested the possibility of uniting the two reservations. After solving difficulties with settlers in the area who refused to leave until the land was bought from them, the Indians set up their own town in the Spring of 1736. In 1737 four English families moved into the area, and Sergeant built his home in the western end of the village. Soon a schoolhouse and a church were constructed. This was the beginning of a long lasting friendship between the Stockbridge Indians and the colonists.

That friendship was demonstrated during the American Revolution. In 1774 the Stockbridge Indians, under the command of Jehoiakim Metoxin, an Indian, volunteered as "minutemen." The Provincial Congress quickly realized the importance of Indian support, and a letter was sent to Metoxin and the other volunteers from Stockbridge. The Congress informed them that the Americans had been forced to arm in self defense, to protect their rights and privileges which had been threatened, and their property which had been confiscated. They told the Indians that the same thing would happen to them if the British were not stopped. They also reminded the Indians how much the Provincial Congress had done for them in the past. At the same time a blanket and a yard of red ribbon was offered to each Indian who enlisted.<sup>9</sup>

The Indians could not understand the political reasons for the Revolution, and it was contrary to their tradition to rush into war. War required an attack upon them, or a great deal of thought. As a result, they exchanged letters with the Mohawks, the Six Nations, and the other eastern tribes. A great deal of correspondence was carried on between the Stockbridge Indians and the Caughnawagas of Canada. The Stockbridge Indians listened to the advice of other tribes and they offered advice to the Canadian Indians.<sup>10</sup>

After a council of two days, Solomon Uhhaunhauwaumut, chief sachem of the tribe, announced that they had never understood the nature of the quarrel between America and England, but that they were willing to do anything they could to help. The Provincial Congress undertook to explain the political situation in words understandable to the Indian: "We have now made our hatchet and all our instruments of war sharp and bright. All the chief councillors who live on this side of the great waters are sitting in the grand council house in Philadelphia." The Indians were advised to do whatever seemed best to them, but it was suggested that if "some of your young men should have a mind to see what we are...doing here, let them come down and tarry among our warriors."<sup>11</sup>

The colonists learned of the value of recruiting Indians—if they could persuade other tribes to join them, they would have a better chance to defeat the British. They first sought the aid of the Canadian Indians. As the revolution had not spread to Canada, those tribes were hard to convince. Messengers were sent from the Stockbridge tribe to convince the Canadian Indians to join the struggle. It was not until the British attempted to hang the messengers as spies that the Canadian Indians decided that if they fought in the war, it would be against the British.<sup>12</sup>

The colonists also tried to recruit the Six Nations and the Mohawks. Stockbridge Indians were sent to tell them what would happen to them and their lands if they did not assist the colonists. They told them how all their land and liberty would be lost to the British. The Indians were promised pay for their services, and presents of blankets and ribbons upon enlistment.<sup>13</sup>

Father John Sargeant, descendant of the first missionary to the Stockbridge Indians, wrote to the Continental Congress in November of 1776. He described the success in recruiting other tribes to the patriot cause. He declared that the Stockbridge Indians "have made themselves acquainted with the merits of the controversy and have taken an active part in our favor, enlisting their young men in our army, while their counsellors and sachems have carefully sent presents of belts of wampum by their messengers to the Six Nations, to the Canadian Indians, and to the Shawwaunese on the Ohio, addressing in such terms as they judged would have the greatest tendency to attach them to the interests of the United States."<sup>14</sup>

The English were opposed to the use of Indians in the war, until they realized their value. A British soldier stationed in Canada wrote to a London newspaper to tell how the Indians could help England put down the revolution. First, he said that they would make excellent scouts and that they could find suitable campgrounds. Then, the Indians could also prove useful in fighting night battles, which would allow the British to attack when least expected. Finally, he told how the colonists feared the Indians.<sup>15</sup>

When the British did decide to seek the aid of the Indians, they tried to recruit tribes in Canada and Maine. These tribes were also recruited by the colonies. Once again the Stockbridge were used as recruiters. Messengers were sent from Stockbridge to speak on behalf of the Provincial and the Continental Congresses. When the British arrested the Messengers, the Canadian Indians informed them that if they hanged the Indians they would have more enemies. Faced with this threat, the British released them. The Canadian Indians told the Stockbridge Indians that if they did fight it would be against the British.<sup>16</sup>

The colonists were grateful to the Indians who enlisted, recognizing their value as scouts and recruiters. One of the problems, however, was in distinguishing the Stockbridge from the enemy Indians. The problem was solved when it was decided to issue blue and red caps to the Stockbridge Indians. Officers and soldiers were told to watch for the caps so as not to kill their friends instead of their enemies.<sup>17</sup>

The Stockbridge Indians had trouble adapting to the white man's way of fighting; they preferred their own form of warfare. When they enlisted they did so with the stipulation that they fight the Indian way. This made discipline a problem, and so the Continental Congress was hesitant about employing their services. They also complicated the problem by bringing women and children.<sup>18</sup>

However their major problem was excessive drinking. The Stockbridge Indians sent a petition to the Provincial Congress in which they apologized for their "aptness to drink spiritous liquors." Since they realized that their behavior made them unfit for service and that they were injuring themselves, they asked

that their wages be paid to Timothy Edwards and Jahiel Woodbridge, delegates from the town of Stockbridge to the Provincial Congress. The Provincial Congress approved, and Edwards and Woodbridge were given the Indian wages and required to keep an account of all expenditures. The Congress also asked those who sold liquor to be careful not to let the Stockbridge Indians drink too much.<sup>19</sup>

The colonists and the Provincial as well as the Continental Congress were at first skeptical of using Indians in the army. In the early part of the Revolution, the Stockbridge Indians were just used as scouts, and for local fighting. However, when the war grew more intense, Timothy Edwards sent a letter to General Phillip Schulyer, who commanded the New York troops, urging him to allow the Stockbridge Indians to fight in Canada. The letter was delivered by an Indian named Captain Solomon, who personally urged Schulyer to allow the Indians to go to Canada. Schulyer told him that he could not decide and he submitted the request to Congress.<sup>20</sup>

Later in 1776 Schulyer received a letter from George Washington, in which Washington agreed to the use of Indians. Then in July of 1776 Washington sent a letter to Congress in which he told of the eagerness of the Stockbridge Indians to serve in Canada. He urged Congress to employ the Indians as soon as possible. On August 2, John Hancock, the President of the Continental Congress, sent word to Washington that Congress had approved of his use of the Stockbridge Indians.<sup>21</sup>

Then Washington informed Schulyer that the Indians were to be given the option of going either to Canada or New York. Schulyer sent word back to Washington that most of the Indians were inclined to go to New York in October of 1776. Schulyer received a letter from Robert Harrison of Harlem Heights, who told of how the British were planning to penetrate into the colonies. He felt that if the Stockbridge Indians were sent to Canada, they could be used as scouts and thus could help prevent the British from moving out of Canada.<sup>22</sup>

The Stockbridge Indians served under the command of a number of commanders. They did not take part in any major battles but their services were crucial to much of the American success. Captain Goodrich and Charles DeBell formed two companies, and some Stockbridge Indians even went to Canada with Benedict Arnold. In addition, Washington was believed to have some Stockbridge Indians under his command when he went to New Jersey.<sup>23</sup>

They did suffer one disaster, though, when a company of Stockbridge Indians was hacked to pieces at White Plains. Then, John Sergeant received a petition from thirty-two surviving Indians, asking for blankets, coats, and money. They received more than they had requested, enabling them to return home.<sup>24</sup>

Even though their role in the Revolution was not as outstanding as that of the Mohawks or the Iroquois, the Stockbridge did play a significant part, which was appreciated by the American people and the government.

Feelings between the Indians and the citizens of Stockbridge remained the same throughout the war. The whites appreciated the services that the Indians were so ready to offer, and the Indians felt that they had always been well treated by the whites and that they owed a great deal to the Americans. In recognition of their services, Washington ordered an ox and rations of whisky to be given to the Stockbridge Indians, and they held a barbecue, presided over by John Sergeant.<sup>25</sup>

#### NOTES

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- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 9 Provincial Congress to Jehoiakin Metoxin, *American Archives*, series 4, volume 1 (Washington 1833), p. 1347.
- 10 Answer to a Speech to the Caughnawagas or Canadian Indians, in *Ibid.*, series 4, volume II, p. 1002.
- 11 Sedgwick, *Stockbridge 1739-1939*, p. 137.
- 12 Account of Capture of Stockbridge Indian Messengers by the British, in *American Archives* II, 1060.
- 13 Speech Given by Stockbridge Indians to the Mohawks and the Six Nations, in *Ibid.*, p. 1879.
- 14 Father Sargeant to Continental Congress, *American Archives*, series 5, volume III, p. 868.
- 15 Letter from British Soldier to London Newspaper, in *Ibid.*, series 5, volume II, p. 1120.
- 16 Gentlemen at Stockbridge to Continental Congress, in *Ibid.*, series 4, volume II, p. 1060.
- 17 Letter from American army headquarters, in *Ibid.*, series 5, volume II, p. 476.
- 18 Sedgwick, *Stockbridge 1739-1939*, p. 139.
- 19 Stockbridge Indians to Massachusetts Congress, in *Ibid.*, series 4, volume II, p. 1049.
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- 21 Letter to General Schuyler from George Washington, in *Ibid.*, series 5, volume I, p. 189.
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- 24 List of Articles sent to Distressed Stockbridge Indians, in *Ibid.*, series 5, volume III, p. 443.
- 25 Sedgwick, *Stockbridge 1739-1939*, p. 149.