C H A P T E R 9 CHOOSING SIDES

By the mid-eighteenth century, it was becoming clear to Native people that unless they refocused their diplomatic and military strategies, the rising tide of European settlers would overrun them. When the American War of Independence began, most nations joined whichever side they thought was more likely to protect their interests. For some, the choice had painful consequences. The once-powerful Five Nations, for example, fractured when some of the confederates decided to remain loyal to the British while others chose to support the Americans. After the fighting ended, many groups fled to British North America as Loyalist refugees. In the end, however, peace among Europeans proved to be as menacing as war.

ALLIES AND ENEMIES OF THE FRENCH

The Abenaki had attempted to halt the northward flow of colonists into their homelands east of the Hudson River and Lake Champlain by joining the French cause during the War of the Spanish Succession. They tried the same tactic again between 1739 and 1748, when Europe became embroiled in yet another series of conflicts known as the War of the Austrian Succession. England and France were again on opposite sides, and hostilities spilled over into North America, when the British Royal Navy and a force of New Englanders successfully laid siege to Louisbourg in June of 1745. The Abenaki promptly joined the fray on the French side to strike back at their old colonial foes. Over the next two years their warriors fought beside French colonists, and together they attacked many frontier settlements between Albany and the Atlantic Coast northeast of Boston.

Meanwhile, the nations of the eastern Great Lakes region watched the unfolding war closely, waiting for economic opportunities. They did not have to wait long. The loss of Louisbourg disrupted commerce between France and the colony. As a result, the prices of French goods rose sharply, and some post commanders ran out of merchandise for trading and gift giving. At the same time, traders from the colony of Pennsylvania began carrying greater quantities of cheap goods into the Ohio valley. To gain access to these goods, Native groups from the eastern Great Lakes area gave the Iroquois agents of traders in the Thirteen Colonies a cordial welcome. They also listened intently to their schemes, which included launching a general uprising against the French. Many of the traditional Aboriginal allies of New France were receptive to this idea by 1747, yet very few acted. Some Huron burned the mission at Detroit and harassed the French traders who were located there. But other Native nations did not take part in an uprising, deterred by the French reinforcements sent to the region after the attack on Detroit. The peace treaty of 1748 and the restoration of Louisbourg to France enabled the French to resupply New France, cut their prices for trade goods by 50 per cent, and renew the liberal distribution of presents to loyal allies. However, the Thirteen Colonies' traders still threatened to undermine New France's network of Aboriginal alliances in the Great Lakes region. In 1752 officials in New France (the colony was popularly referred to as Canada, to distinguish it from Acadia) took the bold step of dispatching a combined force of Canadian militia and two hundred Ottawa and Ojibwa from Michilimackinac to attack and destroy the key colonial American distribution centre of Fort Pickawillany on the Great Miami River, a tributary of the Ohio. The Ottawa and Ojibwa participated partly because they had been promised a share in the expected booty. Immediately afterwards, the French secured the area south and southwest of Lake Erie by building several posts in the western Pennsylvania area.

This work had barely been completed when an even greater European conflict decisively erupted in 1756—the Seven Years' War. In this global contest, which was also France's final struggle against England to establish an empire in North America, the French adopted a military strategy that depended heavily on their Native allies. It involved employing Aboriginal warriors and Canadian militia in lightning raids all along the British colonial frontier while regular army troops defended the French central colony. During the first four years of the war, Native and Canadian forces penetrated deep into the heartland of the New England and midatlantic-seaboard colonies, terrorizing colonists wherever they went. To this day, Americans still refer to this conflict as the French and Indian War. Although New France's Native allies quickly joined the hostilities, the Iroquois, traditional supporters of the British but having pledged in 1701 to remain neutral in any British-French conflict, held back, not wanting to commit themselves until the tide of battle was clear. At first the French appeared to be winning; nonetheless, the Iroquois waited. When a British and colonial force set out for Fort Niagara in 1759, a party of one thousand Iroquois went along and watched from the sidelines. Once the attackers gained the upper hand, the Iroquois jumped in and helped overcome the French and their allies. Fort Niagara was a major victory for the English, because it meant that their foes no longer commanded the southeastern Great Lakes and Ohio country. Shortly after the fall of Fort Niagara, the French forces suffered a crushing defeat on the Plains of Abraham, overlooking Quebec City. With the arrival of additional British reinforcements in the spring of 1760, further French resistance was futile and hostilities ceased.

PONTIAC'S UPRISING

The French surrender shocked their Native allies, who faced an uncertain economic and political future. But they were not the only ones. Of immediate concern to all Native groups was the English threat to end the long-standing tradition of giving lavish presents and offering highly favourable trading terms to buy their loyalty or neutrality. The groups living near Lake Erie and the Ohio River were even more alarmed by the actions of the Thirteen Colonies' traders whom they had welcomed into their midst. Soon it became clear that a number of these men were acting as advance agents for development companies intent on seizing control of Native land. Unrest mounted steadily between the time the British forces began occupying former French strongholds in 1760 and 1761 and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. The Seneca, for example, were calling for an uprising against the British as early as 1761. The Delaware prophet, Neolin, from Ohio country, preached that Native people did not need foreign trade goods to survive and warned that the intruders prevented Native people from achieving eternal happiness. Pontiac, who lived near Detroit, embraced these ideas. Although he is the most famous Native leader from this area, little is known about him. Born of mixed Ottawa-Ojibwa ancestry about 1720, he had become a noted Ottawa war chief by the end of the Seven Years' War. As the war drew to a close, Pontiac decided to act on Neolin's teaching by rallying various eastern Great Lakes groups together in order to push the British and colonists out of the region. Eventually substantial numbers of Ottawa, Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Sauk, and Wyandot agreed. After a year of discussions and planning, they launched their massive campaign. Between May 9 and June 22, 1763, they seized nine forts in the region and laid siege to Detroit and Pittsburgh.

The successful surprise attack on the well-armed British garrison at Michilimackinac is probably the best-known incident. An influential local Ojibwa chief named Minweweh planned it. He staged a game of lacrosse, a traditional Native sport, with the visiting Sauk outside the fort gates on June 2, 1763. During the match, he cunningly had one of his men hook a ball over the garrison walls. The players rushed inside, apparently in hot pursuit of the ball, and once there they took control of the fort. At its peak strength, Pontiac's combined force numbered just under nine hundred men, but this small corps dealt a heavy blow to their enemies. Keeping the alliance together proved to be an impossible task, however. The approach of winter, the need to resume the fur trade, disagreements about the treatment of prisoners, and news of the peace agreement between England and France worked against Pontiac. Wabbicommicot, the most powerful Ojibwa chief in the area of present-day Toronto, played a key role in ending the hostilities. He was a close friend and ally of local British officers, particularly the commander at Fort Detroit, and he was worried about the disruptive impact a war would have on the local fur trade. For these reasons, Wabbicommicot opposed Pontiac's call to arms and warned the British that an uprising was coming. In the autumn of 1763, he came to the aid of his friend at Fort Detroit, which had been under siege since May 9. When word spread of Wabbicommicot's overture, other members of Pontiac's alliance followed the Ojibwa chief's lead and quit the fight, ending the siege. Negotiations aimed at ending the general uprising took place at Fort Niagara in 1764 and at Sir William Johnson's home, Johnson Hall in the Mohawk valley, in 1765. Johnson had been appointed superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Northern Department ten years earlier. At the Johnson Hall meeting, Wabbicommicot agreed to be Johnson's peace emissary to Pontiac. The Ojibwa chief presented Pontiac with a wampum peace belt and persuaded him to accept Johnson's offer of peace. When Pontiac finally met Johnson, he pointedly told him that the French had been tenants of the lands on which they had built their forts and, therefore, they did not have the right to transfer any territories to the British. The Native nations were willing to allow the British to occupy the old French forts, but they did not give their consent for the establishment of new settlements. Furthermore, Pontiac insisted that Native hunting territories not be disturbed.

Even before Pontiac's uprising, the British were aware of a number of the problems that concerned the Ottawa chief. Officials in London were taking steps to address them in order to maintain peaceful relations on the settlement frontier and to win Native people's allegiance in the event of any future conflict with the increasingly troublesome Thirteen Colonies. The British government drafted a policy statement, which formed the basis of the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Issued on October 7, this edict stated it was just, reasonable, and in the interests and for the security of the British colonies that "the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with whom We are connected, and who live under our Protection, should not be molested or disturbed in the Possession of such Parts of Our Dominions and Territories as, not having been ceded to or purchased by Us, are reserved to them, or any of them, as their Hunting Grounds." A second crucial clause stipulated that "no Governor or Commander in Chief in any of our Colonies or Plantations in America do presume for the present, and until our further Pleasure be known, to grant Warrants of Survey, or pass Patents for any Lands beyond the Heads or Sources of any Rivers which fall into the Atlantic Ocean from the West and North West, or upon any Lands whatever, which, not having been ceded to or purchased by Us as aforesaid, are reserved to the

said Indians." To reinforce this provision, the declaration asserted that it was the Crown's intention "to reserve under our Sovereignty, Protection, and Dominion for the use of the said Indians, all the Lands and Territories not included within the Limits of Our said Three new Governments [Quebec, East Florida, and West Florida], or within the Limits of the Territory granted to the Hudson's Bay Company, as also all the Lands and Territories lying to the Westward of the Sources of the Rivers which fall into the Sea [Atlantic] from the West and North West as aforesaid."

Within the "Indian Territory," as defined above, the imperial government barred settlers from buying or occupying land without first obtaining special permission to do so from the government. Additionally, any colonists who were homesteading on unceded lands in this territory were supposed to "forthwith remove themselves from such settlements." To prevent the fraud and corruption that had characterized most previous "sales" of Native land, the edict banned purchases by private persons. In the future, Native groups could dispose of their lands only by selling them to the Crown "at some public Meeting or Assembly of the said Indians, to be held for that Purpose by the Governor or Commander in Chief of our Colony respectively within they shall lie." Despite the Royal Proclamation's assurances, Pontiac remained very suspicious of the British. In 1765, when he initially but reluctantly agreed to come to terms with them, Pontiac allegedly said, "The English are the most cruel of enemies, with whom there is no guarantee for any conventions they might enter into as to what regards their country and who conceal their resentment until they would have an opportunity to satisfy it." In many respects this was a prophetic statement. The Crown in years to come often lacked the will to uphold the spirit or the provisions of the proclamation; it was a document born of expediency rather than from a deeply held sense of moral obligation towards Native people.

REVOLUTIONARIES AND LOYALISTS

The Thirteen Colonies had participated in the struggle against the French partly with the goal of securing the heartland of the continent for their development schemes. For this reason, they considered the establishment of a western "Indian Territory" to be a betrayal of their interests. In the 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix, Native groups endorsed the essential provisions of the Royal Proclamation and agreed to establish a boundary line that set aside western New York, northwestern Pennsylvania, and all the region north of the Ohio River for Native nations. Subsequently, as a clash between the home government and the colonies appeared ever more likely, British officials decided it would be wise to take steps to cement the allegiance of French Canadians, too. The proclamation of the Quebec Act of 1774 was the first step in this process. However, a key provision of the decree redrew the 1763 boundaries of the colony to include the "Indian Territory" that lay between the Ohio River, the upper Mississippi River, and southern Rupert's Land. This was a significant unilateral alteration of the Fort Stanwix agreement.

When the American War of Independence finally began in 1775, the Iroquois found themselves in an extremely awkward position. Their long-standing covenant with the British remained in effect, but now the house of their ally was divided into two warring factions. Both camps recognized the strategic importance of Iroquois country and lobbied hard for the league's support. The Iroquois leaders had to answer two crucial questions, Which side was more likely to win, and Which one would protect their interests? Unable to agree on the answers, in 1777 they "covered the council fire of the league" so that each nation could make its own decision.

The Cayuga and most of the Onondaga and Seneca joined the British. But the Oneida and Tuscarora (the latter refugees from North Carolina who had been adopted into the league, making it the League of Six Nations, in the early 1720s) threw their lot in with the Americans. The Mohawk chose the British because American colonists were already overrunning their country. In addition, one of the Mohawk war chiefs, Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea), and his older sister, Molly (Konwatsi'tsiaiénni), were closely connected with Sir William Johnson. Joseph Brant was born about 1742 into an influential family at Cayahoga (near present-day Akron, Ohio) and grew up in the Mohawk settlement of Canajoharie, located on the lower Mohawk River. At the age of nineteen, he enrolled for two years in Moore's Charity School for Native children in Connecticut, where he learned to read and write in English. While there he also converted to Christianity. When Joseph was a young teenager, his sister became Johnson's third wife. This made her even more influential among her people than she already was as head of a society of Mohawk matrons. Understandably, Joseph and Molly were staunch supporters of the British. Joseph fought alongside Johnson in the Seven Years' War at Fort Niagara in 1759, and he refused to join those who rallied to Pontiac in 1763.
Fighting raged throughout Pennsylvania and New York between 1777 and 1779. Joseph Brant and his followers played a key part in the Loyalist offensive. Their attacks provoked counterstrikes by combined American-Native forces, the most catastrophic of which took place in 1779. Troops from Fort Stanwix destroyed the Onondaga villages in April, and a raiding party sent into Cayuga and Seneca country in August burned forty villages and destroyed their winter food supply of corn, as well as a substantial quantity of vegetables. This forced some five thousand Iroquois to flee to Fort Niagara and British protection. The next year, sixty-four Native forces totalling just under three thousand warriors struck all along the frontiers of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. By that time, however, it was apparent that the British were losing the war, which made their Native allies increasingly apprehensive about their own future. In 1779 the governor of Quebec, Sir Frederick Haldimand, quickly reiterated that the government would uphold its guarantee that all Native Loyalists would have their property rights restored as soon as hostilities ceased. But the elders of the Iroquois Loyalists remained sceptical; they feared that their interests would be overlooked when peacemaking began. As the war began to go badly for the British forces, the elders had good reason to doubt that their ally could compensate them for the property losses they had suffered in what is now New York State. Brant was one of the key spokesmen who confronted colonial officials about Native concerns over property. They admired the influential Brant and tried to mollify him by appointing him captain of the Northern Confederate Indians. But the Mohawk leader refused to be so easily bought off. Just before receiving his commission, he reminded Haldimand of the promises the Crown had made to the allied nations at Fort Stanwix in 1768. Brant and his followers were not satisfied with the governor's noncommittal reply, and they harboured growing suspicions about British intentions.

Although Brant and his people had good reason to worry, Haldimand likely was sympathetic to their concerns. He also feared the possibility of another rebellion similar to the one led by Pontiac. In response to the growing crisis, he devised a solution that took into account some of Brant's views. Significantly, he accepted the Mohawk leader's idea that it would be wise to establish a colony of Native Loyalists on the settlement frontier of British North America to block any further American encroachments. In the spring of 1783, Haldimand took steps to implement

this plan. He dispatched a surveyor to the location he had chosen for the proposed settlement—the fertile shores of the Bay of Quinte near present-day Kingston, Ontario. Brant preferred the Grand River valley where he would be able to maintain contact with the Seneca in New York. While Brant and Haldimand were dickering about this issue, the Americans and the British concluded a peace treaty. In it the Americans agreed to “protect” their former Aboriginal enemies, provided that they gave up most of their traditional territories in New York State. These terms stiffened Brant’s resolve to maintain close contact with his relatives on the American side of the border and he insisted on the establishment of a settlement on the Grand River. Other Mohawk leaders disagreed with Brant. Chief John Deserontyon was the most important of them. He had aided the British during the Seven Years’ War, Pontiac’s Uprising, and the American War of Independence. Although he, too, was very angry about being forced to leave New York, Deserontyon was against a Grand River location because he feared this area would eventually be exposed to American settlement pressures. He preferred the comparatively isolated Bay of Quinte. In the end, Haldimand had to abandon his plan of creating a unified Iroquois community and yield to the wishes of these two leaders by establishing separate settlements. Land for the settlements was Native land. In March 1784 a tract was purchased from the Mississauga for Brant and his followers. Initially, the Mississauga resisted the idea of providing land for their old foes. However, at least one of their leaders, Pokquan, decided that the Iroquois were preferable to European settlers and that Brant’s knowledge of the British could be useful to his people in the future. On May 22, 1784, the Mississauga assembled at Fort Niagara, along with British officials and representatives of the Six Nations, and they graciously agreed to make the lands next to the Grand River available to Brant and his followers. We do not know how much pressure the British exerted on the Mississauga to make this concession, but it is certain that some of them were not enthusiastic about the arrangement. At the assembly Pokquan may have tried to put a positive gloss on the agreement by declaring to the British officials, “Your request or proposal does not give us that trouble or concern, that you might imagine from the answer you received from some of our people the other day, that difficulty is entirely removed, we are Indians, and consider ourselves and the Six Nations to be one and the same people, and agreeable to a former, and mutual agreement, we are bound to help each other.…” Turning to Brant, the chief continued, “Brother Captain Brant, we are happy to hear that you intend to settle at the River Oswego [Grand River] with your people, we hope you will keep your young men in good Order, as we shall be in one Neighbourhood.”

The British concluded their first major purchase of Native land in Upper Canada by giving the Mississauga presents and a cash payment of £1,180/7/4 for their “fraternal agreement.” The displaced Six Nations people began to settle in their new homeland during the winter and spring of 1784–85. The first refugees to arrive numbered approximately 1,600 people and included 450 Mohawk, 380 Cayuga, 200 Onondaga, 125 Tuscarora, 75 Seneca, and a few Oneida. Seven years later, a group of Moravian Delaware refugees obtained Ojibwa consent to settle nearby in the upper Thames River valley at Moraviantown. Upper Canada thus became a refuge for Britain’s Native allies, who had little choice but to leave their traditional territories and take up lands purchased from their ancient enemies. In the Atlantic region, the Mi’kmaq and the Maliseet wavered during the American War of Independence. Most of them wanted to remain neutral, but some of the younger men were sympathetic to the American rebels. They wanted to use the conflict to gain trading concessions and to eject settlers who had taken up lands on the

Saint John River in the 1760s. During the early phases of the war, the British paid little attention to these small groups, who did not seem to be a major threat. The Americans, in contrast, courted their favour from the outset. The initial success of the rebel forces in the north, particularly Benedict Arnold's foray into Quebec in 1775, made the Maliseet and some Mi'kmaq receptive to Yankee overtures. In the winter of 1776, a group of Maliseet joined Kahnawake and Penobscot leaders at Gen. George Washington's camp near Boston. At this conference the Kahnawake Mohawk, who had also been impressed by the rebel attack on Quebec, concluded a treaty. For the time being, however, Washington merely wanted a pledge of neutrality from the others in return for the promise that his forces would protect them against any British attacks.

The following summer, a deteriorating military situation forced Washington to change his mind. His need for more soldiers led him to ask the Continental Congress for the authority to enlist Penobscot, Maliseet, and Mi'kmaq warriors. While Washington was obtaining this approval, a delegation from the latter two groups visited Massachusetts government officials and pressed them for better terms of trade at Machias, a post at the outlet of the Machias River on the western shore of the Bay of Fundy. In a treaty concluded on July 19, 1776, the authorities agreed to this request and the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet delegation recognized the independence of the United States, agreed to supply men for the rebel army, and promised to encourage other Native nations to do the same. Mi'kmaq leaders, however, promptly denounced the treaty, telling British officials that the young men who had signed it lacked the authority to do so. In 1777 the Royal Navy sent a thirty-four-gun man-of-war to the Saint John River to intimidate those who had sided with the rebels. This had the desired effect, and in 1778 the two groups concluded the Treaty of Fort Howe with the British, under which they pledged their loyalty to the Crown and renounced their earlier agreements with the Americans. In the northern New England–southern Quebec areas, most of the eastern Abenaki, led by the Penobscot, cast their lot with the American rebels when the war began. They took part in the attack on Quebec in 1775–76 and fought in local skirmishes. In the opening phase of the rebellion, some of the western Abenaki, who lived beyond the Merrimack River, sided with the Americans and others with the British. The Missisquoi, who lived near the present Vermont–Quebec boundary, sought shelter in the St Lawrence valley as they had done previously during the Seven Years' War. Groups living on the lower St François River at Odanak, in presentday Quebec, remained neutral. When the war ended, few of the Missisquoi returned to their traditional territory; most joined the Abenaki at Odanak. Years later, in 1805, the Crown granted additional lands for these people farther up the St François River at Durham, Quebec, to relieve the overcrowding at Odanak that had been caused by continuing immigration from New England and natural population growth.

THE LAST WAR

Although the 1783 Treaty of Paris ended hostilities between Great Britain and the United States, the Native nations living in the region between Lake Erie and the Ohio River continued fighting against the new republic until 1794. They had compelling reasons for doing so. The peace accord made no provisions for the various Native groups that had participated in the war. As far as the Americans were concerned, they thought they had gained rightful title to Native lands by virtue of the treaty. Even before the war officially ended, would-be pioneers had moved across the Fort Stanwix Treaty line in anticipation that the territories lying beyond would be thrown open

to settlers. Between 1784 and 1789, Americans pressured the Iroquois, Shawnee, and Delaware into a series of treaties, under which they surrendered large tracts of the upper Ohio valley. Other western Native nations refused to recognize these agreements, maintaining that various groups had not been properly represented at the negotiations.

A collective Native response was in order. Many of the nations had already taken steps in that direction during the American War of Independence when they organized the Western Confederacy. Its purpose was to hold settlers behind the Fort Stanwix line by creating a mutual defence alliance. All member nations agreed to aid any fellow members if they were attacked by the Americans. When the nations of the Western Confederacy rejected the bogus treaties, several skirmishes took place. These initial encounters led to a major clash in 1791, when an army of about a thousand members of the confederacy attacked and routed fourteen hundred American troops near the later site of Fort Recovery, close to the present western boundary of Ohio. Up to this point, the Ojibwa confederates from Upper Canada had not taken part in any of the clashes. However, they played a major role in the next crucial confrontation that took place three years later at Fallen Timbers, on the southwestern shore of Lake Erie. This time, a disciplined American army of three thousand regular and militia troops triumphed over a badly outnumbered and disorganized Native force. They destroyed nine towns and torched cornfields along the Maumee River belonging to Delaware, Shawnee, Miami, Wyandot, and Ottawa. This crushing defeat forced the confederacy to abandon their fight to hold the Fort Stanwix Treaty line of 1768. In the Treaty of Greenville, concluded in 1795, eleven confederate nations (the Ojibwa among them) yielded most of present-day Ohio except for the northwestern corner. In the Jay Treaty, concluded in 1794, Britain agreed to withdraw all the military posts it continued to operate in American territory. In return, it obtained important concessions giving Native people unrestricted movement across the border (a right that continues to the present) and granting British traders and settlers the right to remain. These provisions enabled officials in British North America to continue their tacit support of Native resistance to American expansion through the traditional avenues of trade and gift giving with various nations living south of the border. In turn, this would guarantee British control of the Upper Canadian peninsula by making sure that Native groups in the region would aid the British in any future conflicts with the Americans.

The grievous defeat at Fallen Timbers and subsequent loss of territory led the great Shawnee war chief, Tecumseh, to work tirelessly, and with considerable success, to rally his dispirited confederates. By all accounts, the twenty-sixyear-old visionary leader was an impressive man. A British army officer described him as being “five feet nine or ten inches; his complexion light copper; countenance oval, with bright hazel eyes, beaming cheerfulness, energy and decision.” In Shawnee councils Tecumseh argued strongly against reaching any accords with the victorious Americans, and he took steps to rebuild an alliance of western nations to fight against further encroachment on Native lands. Meanwhile his half brother, Tenskwatawa—better known as the Prophet—preached a return to traditional religious beliefs and values. Like Neolin before him, the Prophet urged his followers to abandon their dependence on the material goods the invaders provided. In 1807 the various nations held councils throughout the territory extending from New York to Illinois country. The assembly that Tecumseh convened at Greenville, located

near the western boundary of present-day Ohio, was one of the most important. Although he had invited the Iroquois of New York and the Six Nations of the Grand River to attend, they declined, partly because British colonial officials had lobbied against the participation of Brant's people. Nonetheless, Tecumseh pressed forward and encouraged the other members of the Western Confederacy to adopt a decidedly more militant stance. Additional Native land surrenders in the lower Ohio River valley encouraged more groups to rally to his cause. Tecumseh's success led the governor of Indiana Territory, Gen. William Harrison, to conclude that Tecumseh and his followers posed a threat to settlers. He attacked the Shawnee leader's home base at Prophetstown (Indiana) beside the Tippecanoe River on November 7, 1811, while Tecumseh was away recruiting support. In the well-known Battle of Tippecanoe, the governor delivered a devastating blow to Tecumseh's people.
Eight months after the Battle of Tippecanoe, the United States declared war on Great Britain. Most Canadian schoolchildren are taught that the War of 1812 was a heroic struggle in which Laura Secord and Maj.-Gen. Isaac Brock played crucial roles in thwarting the last American attempt to seize territory in present-day Canada. In reality, it was two intertwined contests. One was an American-Native war that really began at Tippecanoe and took place mainly in the Mississippi valley and the lower Great Lakes area. The other for the most part involved American and British naval and land forces operating in the St Lawrence River valley and along the Atlantic and gulf coastal areas. That Upper Canada did not fall into American hands was largely due to the successes of allied resident Native warriors in key battles during the first year of the war. Three clashes stand out. In the summer of 1812, British allies played central roles in the taking of strategic forts of Michilimackinac, Dearborn (Chicago), and Detroit. Those involved in the successful assault on Fort Detroit included Tecumseh and his men, approximately 280 Mohawk from Kahnawake and Akwesasne, another 100 Iroquois from the Grand River settlement, and about 100 Ojibwa from the Thames River area.

On June 24, 1813, the Iroquois played a pivotal role in another major American defeat at Beaver Dams (Thorold, Ontario) on the Niagara Peninsula. This time they ambushed an invading force of about 500 men. Acting under their own command, the Native force inflicted heavy losses on the invaders. The Americans surrendered to the British lieutenant, James Fitzgibbon. Afterwards, a wag said of the battle that the Kahnawake Mohawk fought it, the Six Nations Iroquois got the plunder, and Fitzgibbon got the credit. This defeat and one at Stoney Creek convinced the Americans that it was highly risky to venture very far afield from their fortified positions on the Niagara frontier. When this opening phase of the war ended, the allied nations and a handful of British troops and colonial militia clearly held the upper hand. Soon, however, the Americans mounted several important counterattacks and shifted the tide in their favour. The destruction of the British Great Lakes fleet at Put-in-Bay on Lake Erie, in early September 1813, was a turning point because it cut the main British supply line to Fort Detroit. The British decided their only option was to evacuate the fort and its satellite, Fort Malden. The order to withdraw from Detroit enraged Tecumseh, who had assembled a large force of two thousand to three thousand men, and led to a division in the ranks of the allied nations. One-third of them chose to cross over to the American side and seek peace with their old adversaries. Their defection set the stage for an American invasion of Upper Canada and a calamitous battle on the Thames River. General Harrison, who had taken over command of the Ohio Territory, led the

strike force. He sent nearly five thousand men by ship across Lake Erie and they chased the retreating British-Native force up the Thames River, finally pinning them down near Moraviantown. The Americans were triumphant. Early in the melee they killed Tecumseh, and legend has it that a call immediately circulatedamong his warriors: “Tecumseh is dead! Retreat! Retreat!” The battle’s British and Native survivors took flight to the head of Lake Ontario, while Harrison’s army returned to Fort Detroit where they fortified their position. To this day, conflicting stories are told about what happened to the remains of Tecumseh. Some accounts say that the Americans mutilated the great chief’s body where he had fallen. Shawnee tradition holds that Tecumseh’s compatriots temporarily buried him near the battlefield, intending to return later for his remains. A group of warriors supposedly did make an unsuccessful attempt to locate the burial site. According to a Shawnee story, “No white man knows, or ever will know, where we took the body of our beloved Tecumseh and buried him. Tecumseh will come again!”

Although the Americans held the balance of power in the area west of Lake Ontario after the battle of Moraviantown, their defeats at the hands of Britain’s Native allies at the beginning of the war dissuaded them from venturing into Upper Canada at that time. Instead, they set about making peace with their Native adversaries in the area south of the Great Lakes. In October 1813, Harrison reached an armistice with those groups who had switched sides when the British evacuated Fort Detroit. In July 1814 the Americans concluded the second Treaty of Greenville with 1,450 Native people, who included Wyandot, Delaware, Shawnee, Seneca, and Miami. In the accord, these groups pledged to fight for the United States. Although Native warriors played an important role in battles west of the Niagara Frontier during the War of 1812, to the east they mostly stayed on the sidelines. One of the reasons they refused to be drawn into the conflict was that the Mississauga and the Six Nations of Upper Canada, and the Seneca, Tuscarora, and Onondaga of New York, did not want to fight against one another. It took lavish gift giving and arm twisting by British officials, in conjunction with the early military successes in the west, to persuade the two Upper Canadian groups to play auxiliary roles. Likewise, the New York groups responded to American calls to arms only after intensive lobbying.

Of the sixty-three battles that took place to the east of Moraviantown during the course of the war, only seven skirmishes involved significant numbers of Native warriors on either side and only at the Battle of Beaver Dams did they predominate. In general, the Native nations took part only when military expeditions threatened them by operating near their settlements. If they found themselves opposing their cousins from south of the border, it caused great consternation among their ranks. For instance, in July 1814 five hundred American Iroquois faced three hundred Six Nations people, Ojibwa, and other British allies at the Battle of Chipewya near the confluence of the Welland and Niagara rivers, and the American forces won. This clash and other similar incidents led the Six Nations to call a council at Burlington Bay (Ancaster, Ontario) to consider adopting a neutral position. Over the vigorous objections of the local British commander, a delegation of Iroquois from the United States accepted an invitation to attend. At this conference the Native nations agreed to restrict their military participation in the war. The only clash in which Native warriors played a major role after the conference took place at Brants Ford (Brantford, Ontario) in November 1814, when the Six Nations took up arms to defend their community on the Grand River against an impending American assault. The United States dispatched an invading force to seize the valley because it provided easy access to the heart of Upper Canada from Lake Erie, which was now an American lake, thanks to the earlier victory at

Put-inBay. The Americans had little trouble defeating the British regulars and militia on their way to the ford. However, extended lines of communication, the exhausted state of the troops, and the impassable river forced the Americans to abandon their plan to carry on to the head of Lake Ontario. Instead, they scorched the surrounding countryside before beating a retreat.

Great Britain and the United States fought to a standstill, ending the war with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in December 1814. The Native people were the big losers. The death of Tecumseh at Moraviantown crippled the Western Confederacy, even though his second-in-command, Oshawanah, an Ojibwa from Upper Canada, tried to carry on. Despite the success Native warriors had had in holding Upper Canada for the British, the Americans were in the ascendancy in the heart of the continent. The Native allies of the British had good reason to feel bitter and to be fearful. In 1818 the Ojibwa chief Ocaita from Drummond Island in Lake Huron stated their case succinctly and with great emotion.

With the close of the War of 1812, the efforts of eastern nations to preserve their ancient homelands through the formation of European and American alliances and participation in their wars came to a sorry end. After almost one hundred years of intermittent warfare, they had managed to secure only widely scattered tracts of land in British North America. And even these enclaves were not safe.