

Abimelech Uncas: On Command with Indians

by Dan J. MacNeil

The town of Redding, Connecticut, holds a special place within American history. As the site of a Revolutionary War encampment during the winter of 1778-1779, it symbolizes the memories and actions of those who served in any capacity during the war. However, what gives the Redding encampment an additional layer of significance is the diversity of the camp. Regiments of the Connecticut and New Hampshire lines included soldiers of African and Native American descent. One of these soldiers, Abimelech Uncas was a notable figure who exemplifies the vital roles that non-white soldiers played during the American Revolution. By remembering them for their place in history as well as for their humanity, the public can recognize their contributions to the Revolution. Uncas' full story, found piecemeal in several documents, is remarkable not only for the role he played at Redding but in the war at large.

Abimelech Uncas – A Soldier of Many Battlefields

Abimelech Uncas was a [Mohegan](#). While it cannot be said with absolute certainty why he chose to fight for the Americans, a case can be made for why the tribe decided to fight. The Mohegans were – and are – a Native American nation that inhabited southeastern Connecticut and parts of

Rhode Island. The surname Uncas is quite familiar within the pages of Connecticut history. He likely shared the same bloodline with [Uncas](#), the great Mohegan Sachem of the 17th century who sided with the English in the war against the Pequot.¹ Uncas had decided to ally the Mohegan tribe with the colonists in order to protect their autonomy and their land.² However, over time the Mohegans came to clash with the colony of Connecticut over the rights to their land, and began to lose much of their land in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.³ When the American Revolution began, tribes within or adjacent to the territory of the United States either remained neutral if possible or joined the war. Some, like the [Mohawk](#), fought for the British while others, including the Mohegan, fought for the Americans. It is possible that regardless of the issues over land the Mohegan saw the English as a greater threat than the colonists.⁴

The Mohegan choice to ally themselves with the Americans surely would have been enough for Abimelech Uncas to enlist. He had enlisted and fought in the war as early as 1775, playing a role in the [siege of Boston](#).⁵ Reenlisting in 1777, he spent that winter hunkered down at the famous [Valley Forge encampment](#).⁶ It was a long road that took Uncas to Redding in 1778, but an important one as it serves to further highlight the

extensiveness of Native American service in the Continental Army. The encampment at Redding came to further emphasize that service, and the information available on Uncas at the camp leaves researchers with information on his unit and his duties.

The Redding Encampment

In the winter of 1778-1779, Continental [General Israel Putnam](#) and the units under his command encamped at Redding, Connecticut. The American Revolution had been underway for more than three years by that point, and those who inhabited the camp at Redding had more than likely seen their fair share of hardship. Abimelech Uncas was one such individual who was well-versed in life and war by the time he and his comrades made their encampment at Redding. The evidence that pertains to his life during the war is exceptional, as it provides many details regarding his service during the war and at Redding. When one looks at the evidence of the camp's inhabitants – primary source materials such as muster rolls, letters, and pension records are a great start – one sees how diverse the regiments were. Aside from white Euro-American soldiers, African Americans and Native Americans were a significant presence at the camp.

During his time at Redding, Uncas appeared in the muster rolls of the 1st

CT Regiment.⁷ Camp life during the American Revolution did not provide a comfortable existence – sickness, such as smallpox, was an ever-present threat in the 18th century, and the need for food was a constant concern among the enlisted.⁸ Uncas had without a doubt undergone these stresses alongside those with whom he served. Conditions at the camp deteriorated as the winter wore on, which culminated in a mutiny and executions.⁹ Despite the harsh conditions and the mental strain upon the soldiers, the regiments held together through the winter. When considering all these obstacles, and taking further consideration of the fact that non-white people made up a significant portion of the camp's populace, one comes to appreciate the added weight that surely set upon the shoulders of individuals like Uncas.

In the December 1778 muster roll, Uncas is listed as “On Command with Indians.”¹⁰ As for what that duty precisely entails, it's difficult to say. Given the exact words of the description, the phrase may be interpreted as literal. Given the length of Uncas's service by that point in the war, he may have been assigned a role akin to that of a squad leader – taking temporary command of a small group of Native American soldiers in his unit and leading them on whatever objectives needed accomplishing within the

Redding encampment. These duties could have included guard duty and going hunting, as well as obtaining other supplies like firewood and clothing. Secondary sources include references to “Indian duty,” and although outside of the time period of the American Revolution, it is safe to assume that the meaning remained roughly the same.¹¹

Nov. 7	Nov. 22	Timothy Stark	W. d.	d. cap. Selden	Sick
		Sam. Stark		d. cap. Shumway	Sick
	Jan. 2	Cudgo Sheppard	3 years	Re. d. Col.	
	Apr. 17	Rowland Swift	W. d.	Re. cap. Selden	on furlough
	Jan. 25	Tooth Tucker	W. d.	d. cap. Shumway	
	Feb. 16	Stephen Selden	3 years	Re. from Cap. Selden	
	Sept. 18	Abimelech Unkut	W. d.	d. cap. Shumway	on board
		Elijah Vargason		d. d.	with Indians
		George Wilson		Re. from Lt. Colonel	
	Jan. 1	Abraham Wadg	3 years	Re. from Cap. Holmes	on duty

[Alt Text] December 1778 muster roll listing Uncas as “On Command with Indians” (War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records, Record Group 93).

As to whether such assignments given to Uncas were based on merit, seniority, or rotation, it is unclear by looking only at documents related to Uncas. However, what can be inferred from the evidence available is that Uncas was handed such assignments on a semi-regular basis.¹² Therefore, by the time he was at Redding – and likely before – he had come to possess leadership qualities and was given room to exercise those abilities, at least among other Native American soldiers in his unit.

Desertion was a major concern throughout the American Revolution, and dedicated soldiers were desperately needed in the ranks of the Continental Army.¹³ Uncas, who was in his third year of war at Redding, and who had chosen to reenlist in 1777, and all others like him who braved the winter at the encampment played an increasingly vital role each day the war dragged out. When the turmoil that occurred within the Redding encampment throughout the 1778-1779 winter is taken into consideration, the significance of roles played by soldiers like Uncas become clear. Those who made it through the winter at Redding had shown an irreplaceable dedication to the war effort.

An Uncertain Ending

After Redding, Uncas disappeared from the ranks. In May of 1779, for reasons lost to time, he deserted.¹⁴ This brings up a multitude of questions.

What drove him to desertion when he only had one year left in his enlistment? Was this an act he took upon himself or as part of a group of deserters? Why didn't he desert sooner – could it have been due to the improbability of survival when escaping in the winter, or was it out of loyalty to his fellow soldiers undergoing the hardships of the Redding encampment, just as he was? Regardless of his logic, one cannot deny the painful uncertainty that surrounded the cause of American independence. Months later, Uncas would appear once more in the historical record.

U | 1 | **Conn.**

Abimelech Uncas
Priv., Shunway Co.,
1st Connecticut Regiment.

(Revolutionary War.)

Appears in a book *

Copied from Rolls

of the organization named above.

Date of appointment } *Sep. 19, 1777.*
or enlistment

Term *3 years*

Casualties

Remarks *Deserted May 79.*

[Alt Text] Record of Uncas's desertion in May of 1779 (War Department

Collection of Revolutionary War Records, Record Group 93).

The [Oliver Cromwell](#) was a privateer ship in the service of the newly formed United States from 1776 to 1779. In its last year of operation, Uncas showed up on the ship's crew list as a landsman. On June 5, 1779, the *Oliver Cromwell* engaged with the British Navy and was overtaken. As for the sailors on board, they were taken aboard the British prison ships that sat in New York Harbor, and Uncas was held onboard the *Old Jersey*.¹⁵ His ending, whether it was in chains or free, is unknown. Nevertheless, Uncas's place in history must be taken into consideration when thinking about the significance of the roles played by Native Americans in the American Revolution. It is known that Abimelech Uncas was a Mohegan from Connecticut, and there is a good deal of evidence that shows the extent of his participation in the war; the importance of such information stretches beyond biographical prose. By understanding his story, the lives of other Native Americans can be understood with greater clarity.

A Note on Additional Sources

In regard to researching the available military records pertaining to Abimelech Uncas, the "U.S., Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783" on Ancestry (<https://www.ancestry.com/>) are necessary in order to obtain

information on where Uncas was serving and when. Additionally, muster rolls within those collections often contain remarks about the capacity in which a soldier was serving as well as the physical condition of the soldier. One fascinating source of information can be found on the [PBS website](#); when Antiques Roadshow came to CT in 2016, an individual brought a decoratively carved horn to the program which was inscribed with “by Abimeleck Uncus” – a soldier of Mohegan decent from CT who had a history of being assigned to “Indian duty.” As to the Redding encampment location, the park website (<https://www.putnampark.org/history-of-the-park/>) serves as a good source of general information about the park and if one chooses to visit the site in person. Other secondary sources that relate to information on Native Americans serving during the American Revolution and camp life are left to what the researcher may find, but any information relating to those areas are of great help when contextualizing a figure such as Uncas.

The American Revolution has been given the status of ‘myth’ by many who remember the war as a crucial fight for basic human rights and independence. However, the vast majority of its history has been whitewashed since its inception. This includes the history of those who fought in the war; the public mind has been enamored with the image of the

young white militiaman standing his ground on Lexington Green or of the gallant George Washington leading his troops to victory at Yorktown. Within and beside the ranks of the Continental Army, at Redding and throughout the war, there stood many faces next to the white ones – African American faces, Native American faces, and the faces of women, all who played invaluable roles in the revolution. One of those faces belonged to Abimelech Uncas. Aside from white Euro-American soldiers, African Americans and Native Americans were a significant presence at Redding. It cannot be forgotten that included within the population were enslaved people, as well as women and camp followers, all of whom earned their places within the history of Redding and the American Revolution as a whole.

¹ For information on the Pequot War, see: Stephen T. Katz, “The Pequot War Reconsidered,” *The New England Quarterly*, 64, no. 2 (Jun., 1991): 206-224.

² For biographical information on the Sachem Uncas, see: Michael Leroy Oberg, *Uncas, First of the Mohegans*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

³ For information on the case concerning Mohegan land rights, see: Craig Bryan Yirush, “Claiming the New World: Empire, Law, and Indigenous

Rights in the Mohegan Case, 1704-1743,” *Law and History Review*, 29, no. 2 (May, 2011): 333-373, and Mark D. Walters, “Mohegan Indians v. Connecticut (1705-1773) and the Legal Status of Aboriginal Customary Laws and Government in British North America,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, 33, no. 4 (1995): 785-

829. <https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/ohlj/vol33/iss4/6>

⁴ Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017), 254.

⁵ “Appraisal: 1775 Abilmeleck Uncus-carved Powder Horn,” *Antiques Roadshow* (Jan. 3, 2021), <https://www.pbs.org/video/appraisal-1775-abilmeleck-uncus-carved-powder-horn-bn7tbk/> , accessed 4/3/22.

⁶ Abimelech Unkus, “Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783,” National Archives Microfilm Publication M246, 138 rolls; War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records, Record Group 93; National Archives, Washington, D.C., <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui/content/view/1595017:4282?tid=&pid=&queryId=6f7143409f597c1202cf8732403feceb&phsrc=hkP4997&phstart=successSource> , accessed 4/3/22. Also: Abimelech Unkus, “Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783,” National Archives Microfilm Publication M246, 138 rolls; War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records, Record Group 93; National

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⁷Abimelech Unkus, “Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-

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⁸ Taylor, *American Revolutions*, 276.

⁹ William Edgar Grumman, *The Revolutionary Soldiers of Redding,*

Connecticut, and the Record of Their Services, Hartford: The Case,

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¹⁰ Abimelech Unkus, “Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-

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¹¹ Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era*, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002.

¹² “Appraisal: 1775 Abilmeleck Uncus-carved Powder Horn,” *Antiques Roadshow* (Jan. 3, 2021), <https://www.pbs.org/video/appraisal-1775-abilmeleck-uncus-carved-powder-horn-bn7tbk/> , accessed 4/3/22.

¹³ Taylor, *American Revolutions*, 197.

¹⁴ Abimelech Unkus, “Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783,” https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/1309/images/MIUSA1775C_117334-00701?treeid=&personid=&hintid=&queryId=92027e65681dcff77c0b196b7e21d0ab&usePUB=true&_phsrc=hkP4806&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&_ga=2.22356795.1064669501.1646616061-2095471832.1612655182&pId=470951 , accessed 4/3/22.

¹⁵ David J. Naumec, “Connecticut Indians in the War of Independence,” *Connecticut History Review*, 47, no. 2 (Oct., 2008): 199.

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