

The Urge to Enlist:

Why Connecticut Natives and Whites Fought Side by Side

By Andy King

Native Americans enlisted in both Patriot and Loyalist military forces during the American Revolution, and there were many complicated reasons they did so. Connecticut Indigenous groups included the Mashantucket Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Mohegan, Quinnipiac, Tunxis, Schaghticoke, Niantic and Wangunk tribes, which were all different social and cultural groups whose lands are primarily in the central or eastern part of the state, and the Schaghticoke and Golden Hill Paugussett in the western part.<sup>1</sup> This blog post will explore the causes and effects of Native enlistment; for more information on African American enlistment, visit this blog post (link to Anna's blog post).

The American Revolution was not the first European war in which Connecticut Native Americans fought. The Pequot War of 1636 involved the Pequot, Mohegan, and Narragansett tribes with English and Dutch settlers. The relationships between these groups were complex: the Mohegan and Narragansett allied with the European forces against the Pequot (not to mention Sachem Uncas of the Mohegan switched sides frequently throughout the war).<sup>2</sup>

The Pequot War was an example of how colonial forces aimed to eradicate Native culture, but at the same time, established the political and economic benefits of Natives and colonists fighting side by side. Some groups could help the other by settling compromises surrounding land and resources. Any benefits that Native Americans gained from fighting side by side with colonists, like trade, land, or other resources, did not ensure peace or coexistence between the groups. European colonists continued to dominate the landscape and their dedication to eradicating Native culture did not end with the Pequot War.

About 150 years after the Pequot War, and two decades after the start of the French and Indian War, the American Revolution began, and once legally permitted, Native names were jotted down on muster rolls. Some tribes tried to stay neutral, some allied with Loyalist forces, and some allied with the Patriot cause. Native political leaders used the familiar sentiments of freedom and oppression to encourage Native people to join the Patriot cause.<sup>3</sup> Why would these sentiments resonate with them to support Patriots, when Patriots were such influential actors in Native oppression? Why would Natives join the Patriot cause if they could have benefited from the Loyalist cause?

What did “freedom” mean to Native people of early America? The multiple, complex answers to these questions give insight into Native Americans’ roles in early America and how the revolution affected Native lives and cultures.

Recent studies conclude that approximately 800 of those who served for Connecticut in the American Revolution were people of color, and around 220 of those people had Indigenous ancestry.<sup>4</sup> Our research has estimated that there were about 185 non-white soldiers at the Redding encampment. These numbers are not exact; there are multiple factors that contribute to those statistics. The few surviving records that give insight into these numbers primarily include muster rolls, pension records, and wills. Names listed in these records are sometimes repeated or have different spellings which has led to counting one soldier multiple times or missing information that could indicate one’s race. Sometimes, a name on a muster roll indicates a soldier’s Native heritage. For example, **Atus/Ates**, Benson, **Meason, Mossock, Pegan/Pigan/Pagan, Poheague**, Robbins, Sharper, Shephard, Unkus/Uncas are names on the Redding muster rolls that relate to known Native families.

Race was not always included in muster rolls, and when it was, Native Americans were usually described as “Indian.”

Surnames that were common in Native people could hint at a soldier's Native ancestry, but that could exclude finding soldiers who are Native from **matrilineal** descent or were mixed race. "Indian" or a tribe name may have been in the racial descriptor category or written as the soldier's surname, even if that soldier had a different last name. In this circumstance, those taking roll primarily identified soldiers by their race, rather than their own names.

Initially, Native Americans and African Americans, free or enslaved, were not permitted to enlist in the Connecticut military forces, as per the General Assembly in December 1776.<sup>5</sup> However, as the war went on, the patriot cause was struggling for recruits and resources. Many soldiers did not re-enlist when their contracts expired, and the patriot army needed bodies to fight, regardless of race. A proposal to officially allow enslaved people to enlist was denied by the Connecticut General Assembly in 1777, but that did not stop Natives or African Americans from enlisting.<sup>6</sup> Race-based enlistment restrictions did not seem to be strictly enforced, perhaps due to the desperate need to fill recruitment quotas.

Economic reasons were a strong motivator to enlist in the patriot cause, for Indigenous people, African Americans, and whites alike.

The General Assembly offered exemption from debt upon enlistment, and some towns offered assistance to soldiers' families, as well. This was enticing for Native Americans, a majority of whom were suffering from severe debt at the time.<sup>7</sup> This was partly due to the interaction of Native and European concepts of justice; for example, sachems, leaders, and relatives took responsibility for an individual Native person's crime, and there are several accounts, particularly in Rhode Island, of sachems and fathers paying exorbitant bonds and fees for their kin's release.<sup>8</sup> There were even cases where Native peoples were forced to sell or trade land to repay their debts. This directly resulted in Native leaders losing land and wealth, and forced many into indentured servitude or enslavement.<sup>9</sup> Soldiers were also offered land as a reward for joining Patriot forces; of course, most of the "free land" offered was stolen from Native groups in the Ohio territory, especially the Iroquois, Cherokees, Lenapes, Miamis, Ottawas, Potowatomis, and Shawnees.<sup>10</sup> However, New England Native peoples had been losing land from colonists for two centuries at the time of the revolution, and that process was not halted by the revolution. Moving west to own private land, a Western ideal that was not present in Native culture at the time, was one answer to freedom.

An individual's motivation to enlist might have been personal and did not always correlate with their tribe's or allies' political affiliations with the war. This became even more evident after the war when more Native people identified with American political philosophies, such as "life, liberty, and property," which inspired people to value personal success and independence, straying away from prioritizing one's community over oneself. Individualism grew in the aftermath of the revolution, and that was seen in Native communities. "Freedom" to Natives who joined the patriot forces in the revolution meant independence and self-autonomy. After centuries of being denied land and resources, joining the revolution gave Native peoples opportunities to own land and relinquish their debts.

An element of colonialism that played a role in the American Revolution's effect on New England Native Americans is the Great Awakening. The Great Awakening, a religious movement, was another method for British beliefs to integrate into Native society. Samson **Occum**, a Mohegan man, was a Christian preacher for his Mohegan community. In the hotbed of the American Revolution, Occum was frustrated with colonial powers. Native peoples were being pushed out of their lands and were denied access to educational resources in preference to white colonists.

Occum became a leader in the Brothertown movement, in which people from multiple Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New York tribes migrated west for more land, resources, and an opportunity to commune with other Christian Natives.<sup>12</sup> The Brothertown Indian Nation adapted to colonialism by relocating and combining Native traditions with colonial Christian values. To the members of this movement, “freedom” meant freedom of religion, Native cultural traditions, education, and autonomy over land. Often, people seek to understand “both” sides of history. There are multiple perspectives for New England Native involvement in the American Revolution.

Indigenous people were and are complex individuals with different cultural backgrounds and life experiences, rather than belonging to one monolith culture. This is especially true in understanding Native motivations to enlist in the American Revolution; there are multiple perspectives and outcomes for Natives that were affected by the war.

- <sup>1</sup>Alden T., Vaughan, *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620-1675* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 203; David J. Naumec, "Connecticut Indians in the War of Independence," *Connecticut History* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2008).
- <sup>2</sup>Leigh Fought, *A History of Mystic, Connecticut: From Pequot Village to Tourist Town*, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2007), 22.
- <sup>3</sup>David J. Naumec, "Connecticut Indians in the War of Independence," *Connecticut History* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2008).
- <sup>4</sup>David J. Naumec, "Connecticut Indians in the War of Independence," *Connecticut History* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 182.
- <sup>5</sup>Charles J. Hoadly, ed. *The Public Records of the State of Connecticut, from October, 1776, to February, 1778, inclusive* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, & Brainard Co. 1894) 92, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101075682300&view=1up&seq=7>.
- <sup>6</sup>David J. Naumec, "Connecticut Indians in the War of Independence," *Connecticut History* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 184.
- <sup>7</sup>David J. Naumec, "Connecticut Indians in the War of Independence," *Connecticut History* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 189.
- <sup>8</sup>Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of Slavery* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), 124.
- <sup>9</sup>Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of Slavery* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), 128.
- <sup>10</sup>Barbara Alice Mann, *George Washington's War on Native America* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 38.
- <sup>11</sup>"History: A Brief Historical Overview," Brothertown Indian Nation – History: A Brief Historical Overview, 2012. <https://www.brothertownindians.org/heritage/history/>.