



*Memorial, at Veterans Memorial Park, Kent Lakes, New York, commemorating chief Daniel Nimham (1724-1778), who commanded the Stockbridge/Mahican Indians at the Battle of Kingsbridge, N.Y., Aug. 31, 1778.*

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## Mohicans in the Revolution

*“I am a dry tree. I will die here...” - Chief Daniel Nimham*

We so take as a given the wide scale involvement of the Native American in the Revolutionary War. And yet might events have resolved themselves quite differently for the Indians (than they did) had they not been so actively enlisted into British service? For example, the mid-war invasions by the Iroquois, the Cherokees, and Creeks soon enough became a pretext for the Americans to subsequently and ruthlessly maul and devastate those nations; so that by the same token had these tribes not been used to attack, might they have ended up surviving the conflict much better than they did? Such a what-if cannot serve but to entice our wonder. But as is usual with such speculations our answers are or can at best only provide us with tentative surmises. Yet if we do assume an affirmative to the question, should then the Americans be blamed for not making much more of an effort to sway the Indians to their own side or a least to a neutral one? The answer to this second question, may also very well, and tragically, be yes; with there being evidence to suggest as much. Notwithstanding, it may have been simply gold, or the lack of, that finally determined the matter, and in *that* contest the rebelling Americans were easily and hands down the losers.

There were a few Indians, despite this, who did fight alongside Washington’s army, most notably the Oneida, the Seneca, the Catawba,<sup>1</sup> and the Wappingers or Mahicans; and it might come as a surprise to some that the latter were not only not merely an invention of James Fenimore Cooper, but indeed a number of the descendants

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<sup>1</sup> Particularly deserving of our notice is that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Troop of Lee’s Legion cavalry was originally composed entirely of Oneida Indians in the period from 1778 to 1779, and in the Guilford Court House campaign, the Catawba Indians (of South and North Carolina) fought alongside the Legion at the battle of Alamance, aka Clapp’s Mill, N.C., on 2 March 1781.

of that tribe are still alive today -- thus happily making the title of Cooper's most famous novel, in real-life, a misnomer.

To give us some introductory perspective on the Native Americans in the Revolutionary War, I have here two excerpts. The first of these is from James Kirke Paulding's serio-comic historical novel *Koningsmarke, the Long Finne* (1823), Book IV, ch. 2, pp. 192-198, and provides a summary overview of the predicament besetting Indians generally in the face of early white encroachment; with Paulding using late 17<sup>th</sup> century Delaware and Pennsylvania as his setting. The second, and also a striking and ironic complement to the first text, comes from Loyalist and Provincial officer John Graves Simcoe's *A Journal of the Operations of the Queen's Rangers, from the End of the Year 1777 to the Conclusion of the Late American War* (1784),<sup>2</sup> and recounts from British-American eyes the last stand of the Stockbridge Indians, fighting on behalf of General Washington's forces on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1778 in an engagement that took place in The Bronx; lying on the outskirts of the northern part of New York City. While Chief Daniel Nimham figures prominently in accounts of the fighting, it was his son Captain Abraham Nimham who actually command the Wappinger forces.

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### **A Sketch of the Native of North America**

By James Kirke Paulding (1778-1860)

...In the intermediate spaces, between these distant settlements [i.e., roughly in and between present-day western New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, and Delaware], resided various small tribes of Indians, who sometimes maintained friendly relations with their new neighbours, at others committed depredations and murders. The early settlers of this country were, perhaps, as extraordinary a race of people as ever existed. Totally unwarlike in their habits, they ventured upon a new world, and came, few in numbers, fearlessly into the society and within the power of a numerous race of savages. The virtuous and illustrious William Penn, and his followers, whose principles and practice were those of non-resistance, and who held even self-defence unlawful, trusted themselves to the wilds, not with arms in their hands, to fight their way among the wild Indians, but with the olive branch, to interchange the peaceful relations of social life. There was in these adventurers generally, a degree of moral courage, faith, perseverance, hardihood, and love of independence, civil and religious, that enabled them to do with the most limited means, what, with the most ample, others have failed in achieving. We cannot read their early history, and dwell upon the patient endurance of labours and dangers on the part of the men, of heroic faith and constancy on that of the women, without feeling our eyes moisten, our hearts expand with affectionate admiration of these our noble ancestors, who watered the young tree of liberty with their tears, and secured to

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<sup>2</sup> Here reproduced from the 1844 edition, pp. 81-87.

themselves and their posterity the noblest of all privileges, that of worshipping God according to their consciences, at the price of their blood.

The character of the Indian nations, which inhabited these portions of the country, and indeed that of all the various tribes of savages in North America, was pretty uniform. Like all ignorant people, they were very superstitious. When the great comet appeared in 1680, a Sachem was asked what he thought of its appearance. "It signifies," said he, "that we Indians shall melt away, and this country be inhabited by another people." They had a great veneration for their ancient burying-grounds; and when any of their friends or relatives died at a great distance, would bring his bones to be interred in the ancient cemetery of the tribe. Nothing, in after times, excited a deeper vengeance against the white people, than their ploughing up the ground where the bones of their fathers had been deposited. When well treated, they were kind and liberal to the strangers; but were naturally reserved, apt to resent, to conceal their resentment, and retain it a long time. But their remembrance of benefits was equally tenacious, and they never forgot the obligations of hospitality.

An old Indian used to visit the house of a worthy farmer at Middletown in New-Jersey, where he was always hospitably received and kindly entertained. One day the wife of the farmer observed the Indian to be more pensive than usual, and to sigh heavily at intervals. She inquired what was the matter, when he replied, that he had something to tell her, which, if it were known, would cost him his life. On being further pressed, he disclosed a plot of the Indians, who were that night to surprise the village, and murder all the inhabitants. "I never yet deceived thee," cried the old man; "tell thy husband, that he may tell his white brothers; but let no one else know that I have seen thee to day." The husband collected the men of the village to watch that night. About twelve o'clock they heard the war-whoop; but the Indians, perceiving them on their guard, consented to a treaty of peace, which they never afterwards violated.

Their ideas of justice were nearly confined to the revenging of injuries; but an offender who was taken in attempting to escape the punishment of a crime, submitted to the will of his tribe, without a murmur. On one occasion, a chief named Tashyowican lost a sister by the small-pox, the introduction of which by the whites was one great occasion of the hostility of the Indians. "The Maneto [i.e. god] of the white man has killed my sister," said he, "and I will go kill the white man." Accordingly, taking a friend with him, they set upon and killed a settler of the name of Huggins. On receiving information of this outrage, the settlers demanded satisfaction of the tribe to which Tashyowican belonged, threatening severe retaliation if it were refused. The Sachems despatched two Indians to take him, dead or alive. On coming to his wigwam, Tashyowican, suspecting their designs, asked if they intended to kill him. They replied, "no -- but the Sachems have ordered you to die." "And what do you say, brothers?" replied he. "We say you must die," answered they. Tashyowican then covered his eyes, and cried out "kill me," upon which they shot him through the heart.

Previous to their intercourse with the whites, they had few vices, as their state of society furnished them with few temptations; and these vices were counterbalanced by

many good, not to say great qualities. But, by degrees, they afterwards became corrupted by that universal curse of their race, spirituous liquors, the seductions of which the best and greatest of them could not resist. It is this which has caused their tribes to wither away, leaving nothing behind but a name, which will soon be forgotten, or, at best, but a miserable remnant of degenerate beings, whose minds are debased, and whose forms exhibit nothing of that tall and stately majesty which once characterized the monarchs of the forest.

But the most universal and remarkable trait in the character of the red-men of North America, was a gravity of deportment, almost approaching to melancholy. It seemed as if they had a presentiment of the fate which awaited them in the increasing numbers of the white strangers; and it is certain, that there were many traditions and prophecies among them, which seemed to indicate the final ruin and extinction of their race. Their faces bore the expression of habitual melancholy; and it was observed that they never laughed or were gay, except in their drunken feasts, which, however, generally ended in outrage and bloodshed. The little Christina [a fictional character in *Koningsmarke*] always called them THE SAD PEOPLE; and the phrase aptly expressed their peculiar character.

It is little to be wondered at, if two races of men, so totally distinct in habits, manners, and interests, and withal objects of mutual jealousy, suspicion and fear, should be oftener enemies than friends. Every little singularity observed in the actions and deportment of each other, accordingly gave rise to suspicion, often followed by outrage; and every little robbery committed on the property of either, was ascribed to the other party, so that the history of their early intercourse with each other, is little other than a narrative of bickerings and bloodshed. Thus they continued, until it finally happened in the new, as it hath always happened in the old world, that the “wise white-man” gained a final ascendancy, and transmitted it to his posterity...

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From *Journal of the Queen's Rangers* by John Graves Simcoe.

The Stockbridge Indians about sixty in number, excellent marksmen, had just joined Mr. Washington's army. Lt Col. Simcoe was describing a private road to Lt. Col. Tarleton: Wright, his orderly dragoon, alighted and took down a fence of Devou's farm yard, for them to pass through; around this farm the Indians were ambuscaded; Wright had scarce mounted his horse, when these officers, for some trivial reason, altered their intentions, and, spurring their horses, soon rode out of sight, and out of reach of the Indians. In a few days after, they had certain information of the ambushade, which they so fortunately had escaped: in all probability, they owed their lives to the Indians' expectations of surrounding and taking them prisoners. Good information was soon obtained, by Lt. Col. Simcoe, of General [Charles] Scott's situation, and character; and he desired Sir William Erskine would lay before the Conmander in Chief his request, that he would permit the York Volunteers to join him, for a week; that, during that time, he might attack Scott's camp: he particularly named the York Volunteers, as he wished to unite the Provincials in one enterprise; unfortunately, that regiment could not be spared,

as it was ordered for embarkation. Scott soon altered his position; and the source of intelligence, relative to him, was destroyed.

The rebels had, in the day time, a guard of cavalry, near Marmaroneck, which was withdrawn at night: it was intended to cover the country, and protect some sick horses, turned into the salt marshes in the neighbourhood; Lt. Col. Simcoe determined to attempt its surprisal; General Scott's camp was not above three miles from it; and, in case of alarm, he had a shorter march to intercept the party, at Eastchester bridge, than it had to return there. The troops, consisting of the Queen's Rangers, and the cavalry of the Legion, marched at night; at Chester bridge, Captain [John] Saunders, an officer of great address and determination, was left in ambuscade in a wood, with a detachment of the Rangers, and in the rear of the post that the enemy would, probably, occupy, if they should attempt to cut off the party in its retreat. His directions were, to remain undiscovered; to let a patrol pass; and, in case the enemy should post themselves, to wait until the party, upon its return, should be engaged in forcing the passage, and then to sally upon their rear. The troops continued their march, passing the creek, higher up, with the greatest silence; they went through fields, obliterating every trace of their passage when they crossed roads, to avoid discovery from disaffected people, or the enemy's numerous patrols. When they arrived at their appointed station, Lt. Col. Tarleton, with the cavalry, ambuscaded the road, on which the enemy's guard was to approach; Lt. Col. Simcoe occupied the centre, with the infantry, in a wood, and Major Ross was posted on the right, to intercept whomsoever Lt. Col. Tarleton should let pass. Two or three commissaries, and others, who were on a fishing party, were taken. At six o'clock, as he was previously ordered, Lt. Col. Tarleton left his post, when the party of the enemy instantly appeared in his rear: they owed their safety to mere accident. The information that both the old and new piquet of the enemy generally arrived at this post at five o'clock, was true; a horse, belonging to a Serjeant, breaking loose, the officer chose to wait till it was caught, and this delayed them for a full hour. Three dragoons, who had previously advanced to a house within the ambuscade, were now taken, and about thirty or forty lame or sick horses. The troops, followed at a distance by the rebel dragoons, returned home without any accident. Scott, upon the alarm, ordered off his baggage; and Washington sent cannon, and troops, to his assistance, and put his army under arms. Captain Saunders permitted two patrols to pass, having effectually concealed his party. The prisoners said, that, two mornings before, General Gates had been there fishing.

Lt. Col. Simcoe, returning from head quarters, the 20th of August, heard a firing, in front, and being informed that Lt. Col. Emmerick [Andreas Emmerich] had patrolled, he immediately marched to his assistance. He soon met him retreating; and Lt. Col. Emmerick being of opinion the rebels were in such force, that it would be adviseable to return, he did so. Lt. Col. Simcoe understood that Nimham, an Indian chief, and some of his tribe, were with the enemy; and by his spies, who were excellent, he was informed that they were highly elated at the retreat of Emmerick's corps, and applied it to the whole of the light troops at Kingsbridge. Lt. Col. Simcoe took measures to increase their belief; and, ordering a day's provision to be cooked, marched the next morning, the 31st of August, a small distance in front of the post, and determined to wait there the whole day, in hopes of betraying the enemy into an ambuscade: the country was most

favourable to it. His idea was, as the enemy moved upon the road which is delineated in the plan as intersecting the country, to advance from his flanks; this movement would be perfectly concealed by the fall of the ground upon his right, and by the woods upon the left; and he meant to gain the heights in the rear of the enemy, attacking whomsoever should be within by his cavalry and such infantry as might be necessary. In pursuance of these intentions, Lt. Col. Emmerick, with his corps, was detached from the Queen's Rangers, and Legion; as, Lt Col. Simcoe thought, fully instructed in the plan; however, he, most unfortunately, mistook the nearer house for one at a greater distance, the names being the same, and there he posted himself, and soon after sent from thence a patrol forward, upon the road, before Lt Col. Simcoe could have time to stop it. This patrol had no bad effect, not meeting with any enemy: had a single man of it deserted, or been taken, the whole attempt had, probably, been abortive. Lt. Col. Simcoe, who was half way up a tree, on the top of which was a drummer boy, saw a flanking party of the enemy approach. The troops had scarcely fallen into their ranks, when a smart firing was heard from the Indians, who had lined the fences of the road, and were exchanging shot with Lt. Col. Emmerick, whom they had discovered. The Queen's Rangers moved rapidly to gain the heights, and Lt. Col. Tarleton immediately advanced with the Huzzars, and the Legion cavalry: not being able to pass the fences in his front, he made a circuit to return further upon their right; which being reported to Lt. Col Simcoe, he broke from the column of the Rangers, with the grenadier company, and, directing Major Ross to conduct the corps to the heights, advanced to the road, and arrived, without being perceived, within ten yards of the Indians. They had been intent upon the attack of Emmerick's corps, and the Legion; they now gave a yell, and fired upon the grenadier company, wounding four of them, and Lt Col. Simcoe. They were driven from the fences; and Lt. Col. Tarleton, with the cavalry, got among them, and pursued them rapidly down Courtland's-ridge: that active officer had a narrow escape; in striking at one of the fugitives, he lost his balance and fell from his horse; luckily, the Indian had no bayonet, and his musket had been discharged. Lt Col. Simcoe joined the battalion, and seized the heights. A Captain of the rebel light infantry, and a few of his men, were taken; but a body of them, under Major Stewart, who afterwards was distinguished at Stony Point, left the Indians, and fled. Though this ambushade, in its greater part, failed, it was of consequence. Near forty of the Indians were killed, or desperately wounded; among others, Nimham, a chieftain, who had been in England, and his son; and it was reported to have stopt a larger number of them, who were excellent marksmen, from joining General Washington's army. The Indian doctor was taken; and he said, that when Nimham saw the grenadiers close in his rear, he called out to his people to fly, "that he himself was old, and would die there;" he wounded] Lt. Col. Simcoe, and was killed by Wright, his orderly Huzzar. The Indians fought most gallantly; they pulled more than one of the cavalry from their horses; French, an active youth, bugle-horn to the Huzzars, struck at an Indian, but missed his blow; the man dragged him from his horse, and was searching for his knife to stab him, when, loosening French's hand, he luckily drew out a pocket-pistol, and shot the Indian through the head, in which situation he was found. One man of the Legion cavalry was killed, and one of them, and two of the Huzzars, wounded.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> An further contemporary source for this battle is Johann Ewald's *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal*; translated and edited by Joseph P. Tustin. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1979. p. 145.

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