

# Tyonajanegen OF THE ONEIDA NATION

By Bill Hudgins

During the Revolutionary War, the Oneida and Tuscarora nations in New York state broke with the pro-British Iroquois Confederacy, to support the Patriots. One of the Oneidas who fought for the Patriots was Tyonajanegen, who is remembered for her service at the battles of Oriskany and Saratoga.

**T**YONAJANEGEN—whose name means “Two Kettles Together”—was born sometime in the 1730s in New York. In the 1750s, she married Tewahangarahken (He Who Takes Up the Snow Shoe), who was part Mohawk and part German, according to her biography by David D. Dry in *An Encyclopedia of American Women at War: From the Home Front to the Battlefields Volume 1* (ABC-CLIO, 2013).

Known to whites as Han Yerry (spellings vary), he was a chief warrior of the

Wolf Clan branch of the Oneida and renowned for his fighting prowess. He and Tyonajanegen were part of a group of Oneidas who founded the village of Oriska near the present-day village of Oriskany, N.Y. They had three sons and a daughter and became prosperous farmers with a house and barn, hogs, horses, chickens, a wagon and a sleigh for winter travel, according to Dry.

The Oneidas were longtime members of the Iroquois Confederacy, an alliance dating to 1200 A.D. They and the other members—Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga,

Mohawk and Tuscarora—had pledged peace among themselves and mutual defense against outsiders. The nations were longtime trading partners with the French, and after the English arrived, they became adept at pitting France and England against each other.

The British victory in the French and Indian War in 1763 expelled the French, and the Iroquois Confederacy formalized relations with England. Nevertheless, England’s principal agent to the Confederacy, William Johnson, took a harder line toward them than the French had. The French had lavished gifts including weaponry and alcohol on the nations. England, however, reduced the largesse.

In the Boundary Line Treaty of 1768 negotiated at Fort Stanwix, N.Y., Johnson browbeat the Oneidas into opening much of their eastern lands, including Oriska, to white settlers. Yerry, Tyonajanegen and their fellow Oneidas deeply resented England’s coercion.

When the Revolutionary War broke out, the other four nations stayed loyal to England, but the Oneida and the Tuscarora opted to support the Patriots, according to the National Park Service’s history of Fort Stanwix. (Read more on the Onedia alliance with the Patriots in the November/December 2016 issue). Located near today’s Rome, N.Y., Fort Stanwix was a British fort in Oneida territory during the French and Indian War. It was on the Oneida Carry, a portage path that was a part of the major water trade—and invasion—route between New York City and the Great Lakes.

Now a national monument, Fort Stanwix stood near several Oneida villages, and served as a nexus for trade, intelligence gathering, and succor and protection for the Oneidas during hard times. The British abandoned the fort after the war ended. As tensions rose between

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the Colonies and England and among the Iroquois Confederacy, the Oneidas urged the Patriots to repair and garrison the fort.

The Americans took their advice. In July 1776, the 3rd New Jersey Regiment led by Colonel Elias Dayton occupied the fort, renamed it Fort Schuyler in honor of General Philip Schuyler and began repairs.

### A Force to Be Reckoned With

In the spring of 1777, the 3rd New York Regiment under Colonel Peter Gansevoort garrisoned the fort amid rumors of a pending invasion. Other states dispatched reinforcements, and a number of Oneidas joined the garrison as scouts, spies and warriors.

The invasion rumors were well-founded. In the summer of 1777, England launched an ambitious, three-pronged onslaught to seize the Mohawk and Hudson river valleys and sever New England from the rest of the states.

The complex plan called for General John Burgoyne to lead an army south from Canada toward Albany. Colonel Barry St. Leger was to land and lead 2,000 British, Canadian, German, Loyalist and Iroquois Confederacy fighters eastward from Lake Erie to capture Fort Schuyler and join Burgoyne. British troop ships were to sail up the Hudson River from New York City to provide the third avenue of attack.

The grand strategy would fail. The fleet never arrived, nor did St. Leger, though he came close. His force reached Fort Schuyler on August 2, 1777, and immediately besieged the defenders crammed inside. Tyonajanegen was at the fort and was dispatched to summon help from nearby Fort Dayton and alert militia along the way, according to Dry.



A wounded General Nicholas Herkimer rallies the Tryon County militia at the Battle of Oriskany on August 6, 1777.



An aerial view of Fort Stanwix near Rome, N.Y.

She slipped past the besiegers and rode nearly 30 miles to Fort Dayton to alert General Nicholas Herkimer's 4th Tryon County militia. Yerry and their son Cornelius were also at Fort Dayton, and she rode with them to relieve Fort Schuyler. However, the British were tipped off about Herkimer's approach. Loyalists and Iroquois Confederacy warriors ambushed

the relief column at a deep ravine near Oriska and almost overpowered it in one of the bloodiest actions of the war.

Astride her horse, Tyonajanegen carried two pistols and fired at the enemy until Yerry was shot in the wrist. She then took over loading his guns so he could continue fighting. He was credited with killing nine of the enemy, Dry wrote.

After a desperate six-hour battle, the ambushers finally withdrew, and Tyonajanegen rode to Fort Schuyler to deliver the news. St. Leger ended the unsuccessful siege after 21 days and retreated to Lake Erie and Canada. As they withdrew, the Loyalist American Indians burned Oriska, including Tyonajanegen and Yerry's home. For the rest of the Revolutionary War, a civil war raged between the Oneidas and the Iroquois Confederacy.

Nevertheless, they continued to support the Patriots. Some 150 Oneidas, including Tyonajanegen and Yerry, joined the Revolutionary Army at the Battle of Saratoga. She carried messages for the Patriots, and General Horatio Gates rewarded her service with a gift of three gallons of rum.

### Later Years

Yerry was given a commission in the Continental Army by the Continental Congress in 1779, along with 11 other American Indian Patriots, and received some land for his services, according to [oneidaindiannation.com](http://oneidaindiannation.com). He also accompanied a delegation of Oneida warriors to Valley Forge, where they dined with General George Washington at his encampment.

Little is known about the rest of Tyonajanegen's life. Yerry died around 1793, and Tyonajanegen died in 1833. The war destroyed the Oneidas' way of life and left them dependent on the state and national governments.

In 1794, all nations of the Iroquois Confederacy signed the Treaty of Canandaigua with the new United States, which promised to preserve their lands, although this was not enforced. Many left for new homes in Wisconsin and Canada, while those who stayed in New York were crowded onto small reservations.

The treaty, however, remains in effect. Each year, representatives of the Iroquois Confederacy and the United States meet in Washington, D.C., to perform the now-222-year-old rite confirming the treaty—the presentation of a quantity of “treaty cloth” by the U.S. government to the Confederacy's representatives. 