

John Trumbull's 1786 painting *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775*, depicts the death of Brigadier General Richard Montgomery. In the shadows, Colonel Louis Cook is wielding a tomahawk, fending off assailants.

Unwavering Dedication to the Cause

American Indian Louis 'Atayataghronghta' Cook Was a Warrior for Independence

In honor of the upcoming 250th anniversary of the United States of America in 2026, the DAR is planting trees to honor famous patriots as well as some of the Revolutionary War's lesser-known heroes. Louis Cook is one of these heroes. His contributions to the fight for American Independence were numerous, and yet his name remains relatively unknown. To understand the depth of his sacrifice and the significance of his achievements, it is important to know his story.

/ By Amanda Taylor /

One afternoon in August 1775, a tall, broad-shouldered Indian man arrived at Army headquarters in Cambridge, Mass. He was introduced to George Washington as Colonel Louis, Chief of the Caughnawaga. The warrior, who spoke fluent English, advised the newly appointed commander in chief that many Indians and Canadians supported the Colonists' rebellion against the Crown. He then asked for permission to raise a company of Oneida and Tuscarora warriors. Washington was pleased to hear the news but skeptical about granting a commission. In a letter written later to Major General Philip Schuyler (*George Washington Papers, Series 3, Varick Transcripts, 1775-1785*), Washington admitted to feeling "a little embarrassed" upon meeting the Indian chief. This reaction, he explained, proceeded from the "little knowledge" he had of Col. Louis' intentions as well as from the expense that granting such a request could incur.

Former Foes Become Allies

Washington and Col. Louis were both veterans of the French and Indian War, fighting on opposite sides. During the war, both gained recognition as military leaders. Their lives, however, were nothing alike. Col. Louis was born in 1737 in Saratoga, N.Y., to an Abenaki mother and African father who named him Nia-man-rigouant, which means "multicolored bird" in French. When he was 8 years old, the young boy and his mother were captured by the Mohawk, the traditional enemies of the Abenaki, and taken north to Kahnawake, an Iroquois settlement in Canada, just south of Montreal. Years later, the Kahnawake tribe adopted the boy and gave him the name "Atayataghronghtha," which in Mohawk means "he unhangs himself from the group." He also developed close relationships with the Jesuit missionaries who lived among the tribe. They instilled in him a deep faith and gave him the name Louis upon his baptism into the Catholic church.

At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Col. Louis traveled north and volunteered as a messenger for Brigadier General Richard Montgomery during the invasion of Quebec. This brutal and disastrous campaign is memorialized in John Trumbull's 1786 painting *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775*. In this oil painting, the fatally wounded Montgomery is surrounded by his officers, while in the shadows, a tomahawk-wielding Col. Louis fends off the assailants.

Despite the loss of Quebec, Col. Louis stayed by the side of the American forces throughout the campaign, being, as Captain James Wilkinson would later write, "the only Canadian who accompanied the army in its retreat from Canada." After Col. Louis returned to America, he visited Washington a second time to ask for the "liberty to raise men to fight." Again his request went unanswered.

Nonetheless, Col. Louis continued to fight. His unwavering dedication to the American cause is proof of what Eleazer Williams described in an 1851 biography of Col. Louis as a man of "constancy and perseverance seldom equaled." Throughout the war, Col. Louis volunteered as a scout and spy for the Continental Army, providing critical information on the movements and strength of the enemy despite the consequences he could face.



Officially Joining the Revolution

In September 1776, the British circulated a letter throughout the Six Nations asking each tribe to take up arms against the Americans. By July 1777, four of the six Iroquois tribes—the Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca—had accepted this invitation. The remaining two, the Oneida and Tuscarora, refused. This infuriated King George and prompted him to denounce both tribes, saying they deserved to die for joining the rebellion. Ironically, at the time of this announcement, the Oneida and Tuscarora tribes were maintaining the stance of neutrality they had originally declared in 1776; however, that was about to change.

On August 6, 1777, Col. Louis and his detachment of Indian scouts were crossing a ravine near the Oneida village of Oriska when they were ambushed by Mohawk Chief Joseph “Thayendaneaga” Brant and his loyalist militia. Brant’s troops intercepted the Indian scouts along with General Nicholas Herkimer’s militia as they were on their way to reinforce the Patriot forces at Fort Stanwix. The ensuing battle, a slaughter of American soldiers and their Indian allies now known as the Battle of Oriskany, eventually became known as the bloodiest battle of the Revolution. The bitter rivalry that had severed these tribes resulted in a vengeful and vicious fight, which, according to *The Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, lasted six hours. Unfortunately, the retribution did not end there. According to British Colonel Daniel Clause, after the battle, Mohawk and Seneca soldiers continued raiding the Oneida settlements, burning homes, destroying crops and killing cattle.

After this battle, Col. Louis was put in command of a company of 150 Indian Rangers, made up of Oneida and Tuscarora Indians, who were attached to the 1st New York Regiment under Brigadier General Robert Van Rensselaer and Colonel Goose Van Schaick. The Indian Rangers fought courageously in the Battles of Saratoga in September–October 1777, brought food and reinforcements to the troops at Valley Forge in March 1778, and saved the Marquis de Lafayette’s army from capture at Barren Hill in May 1778.

A Life of Sacrifice and Devotion

At long last, on June 15, 1779, Congress granted Louis “Atayatahronghtha” Cook a commission as a lieutenant colonel, making him the highest-ranking officer of American Indian and African descent to serve with the Continental Army. Twelve of his fellow Oneida and Tuscarora chiefs also received commissions.

Together these men vowed to support the Americans, even if it cost them their lives—a sacrifice that some of them ultimately made. During the Battle of Klock’s Field in October 1780, Col. Louis and his men formed the vanguard of Van Rensselaer’s army in pursuing Mohawk Chief Brant and the notorious Walter Butler. Together, Brant and Butler had orchestrated the carnage at Oriskany as well as the massacre of men, women and children at Cherry Valley, N.Y., in November 1778. Although Brant was never caught, Col. Louis and his men had their revenge and gained notoriety for killing Butler during the Battle of Johnstown in 1781, one of the last battles of the war.

After the American Revolution, Col. Louis moved to an Oneida village and married Marguerite Thewanihatta. He had three sons and several daughters and went on to serve the United States as a peace negotiator among the various tribes of the Ohio River Valley. Although advanced in age, Col. Louis insisted on fighting with his sons during the War of 1812. On July 25, 1814, during the Battle of Lundy’s Lane, he was injured by a fall from his horse. Days later, in failing health, he asked to be carried back to the Indian settlements near the American camp. His last words were ones of faith, love for his family and tribe, and undying loyalty to the American cause. He died in October 1814 and was buried near Buffalo, N.Y. ☀

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