While America observes Veterans Day on November 11, members of the Oneida, Cayuga, Onondaga, Seneca, Mohawk and Tuscarora American Indian nations will also observe the 222nd anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Canandaigua. Also known as the Pickering Treaty, it established peace between the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy and the United States.

At the time of the American Revolution, the Iroquois Confederacy, also called the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, was already a centuries-old pact that secured peace, trade and mutual self-defense among its members. And, just as the Revolution dissolved the political bonds connecting Great Britain and the United States, it also ruptured the Confederacy as the Oneidas and Tuscaroras decided to support the Patriot cause, while the other nations sided with England.

Serving as scouts, guides and warriors, the Oneidas played a critical role in the Revolution in New York. One of their most important contributions was helping the Patriots prevail at the 1777 Battle of Saratoga, a victory that buoyed sagging Patriot spirits and helped convince France to become America’s ally.

In 1777, the Continental Congress recognized the Oneidas’ achievements by declaring, “We have experienced your love, strong as the oak, and your fidelity, unchangeable as truth. You have kept fast hold of the ancient covenant-chain, and preserved it free from rust and decay, and bright as silver. Like brave men, for glory you despised danger; you stood forth, in the cause of your friends, and ventured your lives in our battles. While the sun and moon continue to give light to the world, we shall love and respect you.

‘OUR TRUSTY FRIENDS’

Remembering the Role of the Oneida Nation in the American Revolution

By Bill Hudgins
As our trusty friends, we shall protect you; and shall at all times consider your welfare as our own.”

The Iroquois Confederacy

Many Americans are unaware that the members of the Iroquois Confederacy and other American Indians had developed sophisticated diplomatic, political and military strategies to foster peace, independence, trade and territorial sovereignty among themselves, said Dr. Scott Stephenson, vice president of Collections, Exhibitions and Programming at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia. (In 2012, the Oneida Nation donated $10 million toward the campaign to build the museum, which will include a gallery exploring the role the Oneida Nation played in the Revolutionary War. The Museum of the American Revolution opens on April 19, 2017.)

It’s not clear exactly when the Iroquois Confederacy was founded, but it was already firmly established by the time European contact and exploration began, Stephenson said. The Confederacy originally comprised the Oneida, Mohawk, Cayuga, Seneca and Onondaga nations. After migrating north from the Carolinas in the early 1700s, the Tuscarora were invited to join under the protection of the Oneidas.

“The most important tenet was to keep peace internally within the Iroquois Confederacy,” Stephenson said. “They had a number of mechanisms to reduce and manage internal tensions, and they were largely successful up to the time of the American Revolution.”

One of the most successful strategies was to play the various Colonial powers against each other to extract favorable trade arrangements, gifts, military support, and promises to respect territory and sovereignty, he said.

For many years, the Confederacy had remained officially neutral during wars among the Dutch, British and French. However, Stephenson noted, members of each nation enjoyed considerable personal freedom, so individuals could, and did, choose to take part in those struggles.

The policy of official neutrality broke down during the French and Indian War (1756–1763; also called the Seven Years’ War) when the British persuaded the Iroquois nations to side with them against the French and their allies from the Great Lakes and other western tribes.

Ironically, given the Confederacy’s support of the winning side in the French and Indian War, the British victory left the Iroquois in a precarious position: The French were gone, and the Confederacy could no longer use them as leverage over the British.

The war left Great Britain deeply in debt and prompted English officials to scale back on traditional gifts and support supplied to the Iroquois. The British also demanded that native peoples pay more for trade goods they had come to depend on such as clothing, blankets, food and weapons.

“We know that Colonial Americans bristled under Great Britain’s efforts to raise money through taxes and new regulations, but native peoples were actually...
among the first to experience that,” Stephenson said.

**From ‘Family Quarrel’ to Revolution**

As relations between Great Britain and the Colonies deteriorated, the Iroquois nations once again debated neutrality. After the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, both the British and the Patriots asked the Six Nations to stay out of what each side described as a “family quarrel,” according to *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution* by Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin (Hill and Wang, 2007). However, the Continental Congress also asked the Oneidas to report on any potentially warlike actions by the Mohawks and other British-leaning nations.

The Mohawks were originally the Confederacy’s easternmost nation and had the most contact with the Europeans. But many migrated west as whites encroached on their lands, making the Oneidas next-door neighbors to the white settlements.

Unlike the Mohawks, the Oneidas enjoyed generally good relations with the colonists. Many were followers of Presbyterian missionary Samuel Kirkland, who had lived among the Oneidas since 1766. Kirkland’s teachings and increasingly pro-Patriot stance influenced many of the young warriors, as well as powerful Oneida leaders such as Good Peter, Oneida War Chief Skenandoa, and War Chief Han Yerry and his wife, Tyona.

The Mohawks, on the other hand, had been courted as British allies by Sir William Johnson, British superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Northern Department. Having already lost lands to Colonial encroachment, the Mohawks looked to the British to halt further losses. In 1775, Johnson took the Mohawk chief warrior Joseph Brant to England, where he had an audience with King George III. The king promised to restore all lost Mohawk lands if they supported the British: His sister, Molly, was Johnson’s common-law wife.

The Oneidas detested Johnson. During negotiations at the 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix (near present-day Rome, N.Y.), Johnson had forced the Oneidas to surrender a large tract of land that included the fort and the small Oneida town of Oriska. To promote dependence on the British, he also thwarted Oneida efforts to regain self-sufficiency.

From 1774–1776, despite their Patriot leanings, the Oneidas refused to take sides. Even as they sought neutrality, they increasingly helped the Patriots garrisoning Fort Stanwix (called Fort Schuyler during the Revolution in honor of General Philip Schuyler), which was located in the heart of traditional Oneida territory.

"During the period that the Americans garrisoned the fort, the Oneida provided them with information, warriors, scouts, spies and aided the troops in catching deserters,” according to the National Park Service’s history of the military base.

Coincidentally, the U.S. flag was flown for the first time on August 3, 1777, at Fort Stanwix. Three days later, the flag came under fire for the first time in a decisive New York battle.

**The Battle of Oriskany**

In early 1777, the British planned to wrest control of the Hudson River-Lake Champlain waterway from the Patriots, thus isolating New England from the rest of the Colonies and potentially ending the conflict. General John Burgoyne was to lead an army of Redcoats, Loyalists and American Indians south from Canada past Lake Champlain to Albany, N.Y.

Meanwhile, another mixed force led by Lieutenant Colonel Barry St. Leger was to march from Lake Ontario through Oneida territory to take Fort Schuyler and then to rendezvous with Burgoyne at Albany. A third army under General William Howe was to march up the Hudson from New York City.

Although the British warned the Oneidas they would face dire consequences if they opposed St. Leger’s invasion, they decided they could not allow this violation of their territory, according to *Forgotten Allies*.

When St. Leger surrounded Fort Schuyler on August 3, 1777, Tyona, the wife of Oneida Chief Warrior Han Yerry,
rode 30 miles to alert the Tryon County Militia commander Nicholas Herkimer, who summoned 800 militiamen and set out to relieve the fort.

Unfortunately, Herkimer rejected the Oneidas’ offer to scout ahead of the Patriots. The militia was ambushed the next day by hundreds of Iroquois warriors, as well as Loyalists and Redcoats, near Oriska, a few miles from Fort Schuyler.

The Battle of Oriskany on August 6, 1777, was one of the war’s bloodiest, with more than 1,000 killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner, according to Forgotten Allies. Herkimer was killed, and most of his militia were killed or wounded. The surviving militia retreated.

The heavy British losses stunned and disheartened their native allies, who had not expected such fierce opposition nor that they would comprise the main fighting force. They left for home, forcing St. Leger to lift the siege after three weeks and retreat to Lake Ontario.

A month later at a conference in Albany called by General Schuyler, the Oneidas learned that General Horatio Gates at Saratoga needed reinforcements in his efforts to block Burgoyne’s advance. At least 150 Oneidas, including Han Yerry and Tyona, went to his aid.

**Broken Confederacy, Broken Promises**

At great cost to themselves, the Oneidas continued to assist the Patriot cause for the rest of the war. The war destroyed their homes, farms and way of life. They were destitute and dependent on the new state and national governments for subsistence. According to NPS history, the U.S. government finally paid restitution for their losses in 1794.

After the war, Congress promised to respect Oneida sovereignty. And in 1784, New York Governor George Clinton assured them the state had “no claim on your lands; its just extent will ever remain secured to you.” But just a year later in June 1785, Clinton summoned the Oneidas to a council and demanded they sell large tracts of land.

Once the land grab began, it eventually reduced Oneida territory to a 32-acre reservation near present-day Sherrill, N.Y., according to the NPS. A number of Oneidas moved to Wisconsin and Canada in the early 1800s. An 1838 treaty with the Oneidas in Wisconsin established a 65,400-acre reservation that has been their home ever since.

In 1792, the revered Oneida Chief Good Peter observed, “We Indians are unwise, and our want of wisdom is owing to our want of knowledge of the ways of white people … We verily thought our white brothers meant good to us; and hence we have been deceived in respect to our lands.”

Still, the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua recognizing Oneida sovereignty, land rights and tax freedoms remains in effect, and is honored by both the United States and the Six Nations.

On February 22, 2016, about 50 leaders of the Six Nations and the United States gathered in the Indian Treaty Room of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in Washington, D.C., to perform the 222-year-old ceremony confirming the treaty: As specified by the pact, the U.S. government presented a piece of muslin called “treaty cloth” to the Haudenosaunee representatives.

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**DAR and the Oneida Nation**

As part of its effort to uncover and document the minorities in the American Revolution, the DAR has long been involved in helping tell the story of the Oneida Nation and its accomplishments in the fight for American independence.

The story was publicly lauded in 2002, when a DAR Museum exhibition titled “Forgotten Patriots: American Indian and African American and American Indian Service in the Revolutionary War 1775–1783” opened. It featured artifacts such as the silver pipe given to Oneida War Chief Skananda by New York State Governor Daniel Tompkins.

The exhibit showed the names of thousands of American Indian and African American Patriots identified by DAR at that time, and it described the methods used by the DAR to identify these individuals.

The DAR Genealogy Department and the DAR Library published their work on the project in the DAR volume, Forgotten Patriots—African American and American Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War. It lists, state by state, the names of identified minority Patriots as well as the type of service given to aid the patriotic cause.

As part of the 2002 event, the DAR presented the Oneida Nation with a lifesized bronze eagle sculpture. “This eagle symbolizes the peace and friendship shared by all whose ancestors fought in the American Revolution,” said DAR President General Linda Tinker Watkins (2001–2004) at the ceremony (see photo). “It also symbolizes the strength of this nation, of our diverse cultures and of our resolve to live together in harmony.”