

THE SENECA IN THE WAR OF 1812

Author(s): ARTHUR C. PARKER

Source: *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association*, 1916, Vol. 15 (1916), pp. 78-90

Published by: Fenimore Art Museum

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42889521>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Fenimore Art Museum is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association*

JSTOR

THE SENECA IN THE WAR OF 1812

ARTHUR C. PARKER, NEW YORK STATE ARCHEOLOGIST

The first decade of the nineteenth century was one of readjustment for the Senecas. The victory of the American colonists had proved the power of the "Thirteen Fires" and the weakness of the British as allies and as a continental power. The years that followed the destructive raid of Major General John Sullivan, in which he burned nearly every town of the Iroquois west of the Oneidas, gave the Senecas time for much serious thinking. White men could be as savage as they, they well knew, but that this fury would turn to fire and blast their dominion as it did, they never dreamed. They learned the power of the whites and their own defenseless condition when attacked at home. The tables were turned and Sullivan's men played the savage, even skinning a young Seneca to make leather for leggins. Their ancient farms were devastated and thousands of bushels of corn burned and thrown in the rivers. They abandoned their old homeland and fled to the protection of the British at Fort Niagara. Never as a people did they resume their old seats on the "river beautiful," the Jen-nes-see-u. They settled at Buffalo or wandered off into Ohio with their broken vassals, the Eries and Neuters, who in small numbers camped there, like dead men, dreaming, meditating, but only half seeing or hearing.

Then came the secret word from Ohio. It roused the restless young men to life. It spread like the wind and fanned to a flame the patriotism of the young Senecas who had been but babes when the boom of Sullivan's cannon spoke the doom of Seneca power. The word which came was whispered in the ears of the young men, lest the old became hostile. It told of a great leader who had arisen, who had proclaimed that if all the red men of the continent would unite and fight, the invading white man would be

driven out. The great "earth-island" again should belong to the red men alone as their supreme possession. The name of Tecumseh became a watch word to the young men who regarded him as the hero of the race. His plan for a mighty league of the tribes who should unite to resist further enroachment of the invading whites appealed to their native love of country. It made them aspire for great things and served to revive their hopes as a people.

True, the Iroquois of New York lived in tracts of country entirely surrounded by white settlers and had been at peace since the Revolutionary War. The chiefs were friendly with their white neighbors, but notwithstanding all this the young men had not yet seen that their salvation lay in learning all the good things the settlers had to teach and eschewing the evils they brought. They felt a consciousness that their race had been wronged and thought it patriotism to revenge it and seek to make the land the red man's undisputed own. Many of the younger men hurried west to join the forces of Tecumseh and the prophet, or ally themselves with Little Turtle, the Miami. This bold idea was opposed with vigor by both Red Jacket and Handsome Lake. The latter used his influence to dissuade his converts from having anything to do with the affairs of the western tribes against the Americans. Handsome Lake was a "peace prophet" and urged his people to obey the precepts that he claimed to have received from the "four messengers" from the land above the sky. In this respect he was directly opposed to Elskawata, the "war prophet" of the Shawnees who was fostering, by convenient revelations, the plans of his brother Tecumseh. In other respects, however, there are strange similarities between the moral teachings of the two prophets and their ideas of the hereafter are quite identical.

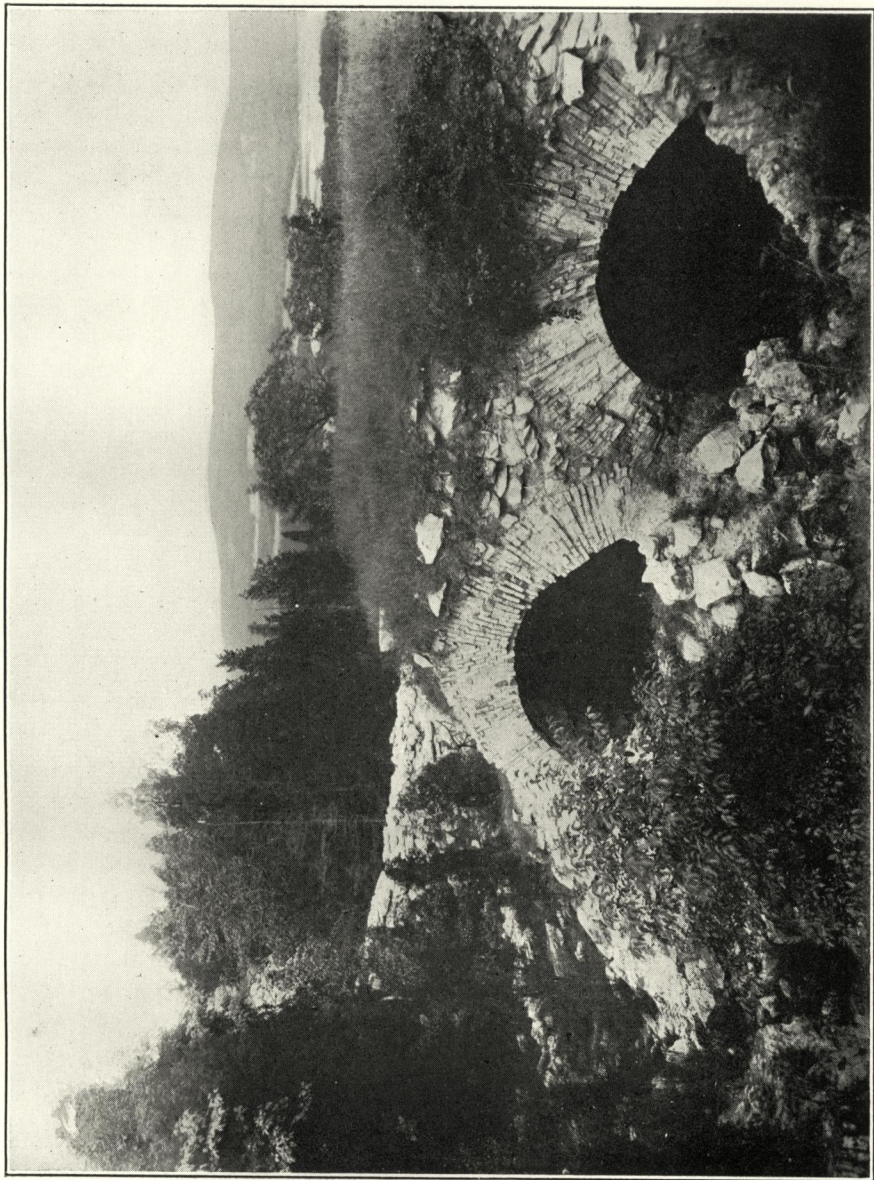
Red Jacket, that vigilant guard of the Senecas, went to the various councils in the west as held in the interests of Tecumseh's confederacy, and was particularly conspicuous at the council at Detroit. The largest intertribal council held for generations had met there. With Red Jacket were many of the finest examples of Seneca manhood to be found in the nation. The Senecas, haughty in their demeanor, manifested a keen consciousness of their former

glory. Upon the first day a spirited debate arose as to the right of precedence in debate. This was a delicate point of honor. The Wyandots claimed it but Red Jacket, ignoring their able chiefs, arose and with such a brilliant oration argued for the Senecas that no one afterward disputed him. The intimate knowledge that he displayed of the history and traditions of all the tribes gathered before him was too profound, and some of it too galling, to be disputed. Not one wished to argue against Red Jacket's assumption of the superiority of the Senecas. Then, as his turn came to voice the ideas of the Seneca nation, he argued for peace and afterward consistently worked to prevent the members of the Iroquois League from entering into conflict with the whites under the leadership of Tecumseh.

Merely to digress, suppose that the gallant leader had succeeded in getting the solid support of the Six Nations, embittered as they were by the suffering and humiliation they had endured through Sullivan and Broadhead? Suppose the Iroquois, stung with their former ignominious defeat, had again taken up the tomahawk and wielded it with their ancient vigor, might not Tippecanoe have been won by the red man and that battlefield be described differently in the pages of history? But Tecumseh was not there and the Six Nations as a unit held back their experienced warriors.

Perhaps there was a reason for delaying or refusing to engage in such a momentous undertaking. Perhaps there was another and more poignant reason than the bans of the prophet and the logic of Red Jacket. Every Iroquois today knows the reason why the tomahawk lay buried deep and why they continued friendly with the whites.

The Iroquois were grateful to Washington. It was he who had shown them mercy and provided for them at least a portion of their ancient domain in New York, when the entire country clamored for their removal into the west. The treaty at Fort Stanwix in 1784 gave the Six Nations a guaranty of their lands, diminished though they were. Many of the people were not satisfied, but Cornplanter in 1790 expressed the general thought of the nations to Washington: "When you gave us peace, we called you Father because you promised to secure us in the possession of



RUINS OF OLD FORT PUTNAM ON HEIGHT OVERLOOKING WEST POINT GROUNDS, INTENDED TO PROTECT THE RIVER DEFENSES FROM THE REAR

our lands. Do this and so long as the lands remain, that beloved name will live in the heart of every Seneca." The name was Town Destroyer, the Seneca name for George Washington.

Six or seven months after the war council of the Senecas, a general meeting of the Onondagas and Senecas was held at the residence of Hon. Erastus Granger, then superintendent of the Senecas. Judge Granger pleaded with the Senecas to remain neutral and reminded them of Washington's advice, "That you take no part in the quarrels of the white people." Even Red Jacket deplored that the Canadian Mohawks of Brant's party were bound to fight as British allies, even as they had done before. This embittered the two divisions of the Iroquois and caused a breach that even yet has not entirely healed. Both Judge Granger and Red Jacket made impressive speeches and the outcome was so important in the minds of the people that the first book published in Buffalo was a record of the speeches of Granger and Red Jacket.¹

The mummings of war disturbed many of the inhabitants of the village of Buffalo. They were in a position exposed on all sides to danger. The British were opposite and the Indians swarmed all around them. Many left the village and sought refuge beyond the frontier. Fears were entertained that the New York Indians were in reality under the influence of the British, through the Canadian Mohawks who were constantly visiting them. It was under this apprehension that Judge Granger called the council to explain the reasons of the war. Red Jacket afterward alluded to the fear of the residents of Buffalo and said as he unrolled the great George Washington treaty belt that the whites should never regard an Indian council as serious, not regard it as a dangerous thing, unless the national wampums were brought forth and displayed. He scoffed at the panic that resulted from a fisherman's fight on the bank of the creek.

On June 6, 1812, the British were reported to have taken forceible possession of Grand island, the property of the Seneca

¹Public Speeches, delivered at the village of Buffalo on the 6th and 8th days of July 1812, by Hon. Erastus Granger, Indian Agent, and Red Jacket, one of the principal Chiefs and Speakers of the Seneca Nation. Respecting the part the Six Nations would take in the present war against Great Britian. Buffalo: Printed and sold by S. H. and H. A. Salisbury. 1812.

Nation. The Senecas would no longer promise neutrality. A council was called at Buffalo reservation, "the old council fire of the nations" was kindled and a general proclamation was issued. Red Jacket, who but a few days before had argued for peace and who had displayed the famous Washington treaty wampum, now argued for war. The British had seized the lands under the dominion of the Senecas! War should be declared. As allies of the United States the Six Nations of New York would punish the invaders. The declaration was read as follows:

We, the chiefs and councilors of the Six Nations of Indians residing in the State of New York, do hereby proclaim to all the war chiefs and warriors of the Six Nations, that war is declared on our part against the provinces of Upper and Lower Canada. Therefore we hereby command all war chiefs of the Six Nations to call forth immediately the warriors under them and put them in motion to protect their rights and liberties, which our brethren, the Americans, are now defending.

The call was generally respected and later on, September 28, 1812, a memorial was sent out from the ancient capital of the League of the Iroquois at Onondaga, in which it was said, "We are few in number, and can do but little, but our hearts are good." They might have added, "likewise our weapons, too, are good and our aim unsurpassed."

When the council at Buffalo on August 4th was called, Red Jacket mentioned the rumor of the British occupation of Grand island. In addressing Judge Granger, he said:

Brother! Our property is taken possession of by the British and their Indian friends. It is necessary for us now to take up the business and defend our property and drive the enemy from it. If we sit still upon our seats and take no measure of redress, the British, according to the customs of you white people, will hold it by conquest, and should you conquer Canada you will claim it upon the same principles, as conquered from the British. We therefore request permission to go with our warriors and drive off these bad people and take possession of our lands.

Little Billy, one of the wise councilors of the Senecas, on September 8, 1812, at Buffalo, made a stirring address in which he explained most logically the situation of his people, as follows:

Brother! I have spoken of the pains we have taken to preserve peace. Your agents have done the same, but in vain.

We went to Grand river (Canada) lately, to keep peace, but in vain. The path of peace is broken in every part. We find no place to flee to, where there is peace now. Upon this subject we have been deliberating.

Brother! I have said we have come with all the others to seek the path of peace. We find that there is no path left for us, but between us and the United States. It is cut off in every direction.

Agreeable to your communication we, the Senecas, shall now prepare to defend ourselves against the common enemy. It is true we have friends on the other side, but we are exposed to the blow as well as you and must prepare to meet it.

We know of no other way to preserve peace but to rise from our seats and defend our own firesides, our wives and our children. We hope you will not ask us to cross over. Those who go must go voluntarily. We wish to act only on the defensive. Part of the Onondagas and Cayugas who live with us, agree with us.

We volunteer: We must act under our own chiefs, according to our own customs; be at liberty to take our own course in fighting; we cannot conform to your discipline in camp. So far as we can we will conform with your customs.

We volunteer for this service. We wish you not to place us in forts, where we can not act. You know what took place at Detroit; an army was sold. We wish not to be sold!

Among the Senecas were many whose ancestors of a century and a half before had been captured and adopted in the war with the Neuter Nation. Although the laws of the league commanded its adopted members to "forever forget their own tribal origin and to know themselves henceforth and forever as Iroquois," yet as an actual fact they never forgot and the knowledge was passed down to their children. Thus it was that there were many Senecas who felt an interest in defending Grand island, besides that of protecting their nation's domain. To the descendents of the Neuter Nation's captives, it meant the defence of the graves of their forefathers. To be sure, there was no loud discussion over the matter; it was contrary to convention and besides it was not etiquette to mention the dead, especially to mention them in connection with trouble. It was a belief that their spirits heard such things and would be disturbed.

The call to arms gave rise to great industry among the Iroquois. They had arms and equipment to get and many of

them spent hours carving out war clubs and hammering out iron spearheads. Some of these war clubs are now in the State Museum at Albany. They were not used, for the Iroquois agreed to fight under "civilized rules" and "to take no scalps and to murder no captives." This pledge they sacredly kept.

The call to arms brought all the war chiefs together. They mustered their troops in companies, each under its own captain, and several companies were placed under the leadership of a colonel. Among these Indian military leaders not one outranks Colonel Farmer's Brother. Though a man of eighty years, he gathered his captains and warriors and led them on to battle. He was a true nobleman, morally clean, physically perfect and intellectually the peer of Red Jacket. Unlike Red Jacket, he was never addicted to the use of rum. Had it not been for his great modesty, the name of Farmers Brother today would be known far more widely than even Red Jacket's. Other leaders were Major Henry O'Bail or Young Cornplanter, as he was called. It was he who, with four hundred Senecas, took part in the defense of Buffalo.

The roster kept by the survivors of the war, besides the names mentioned above, gives the following captains: John Kennedy, a Cayuga, who is on the record as being exceedingly brave; and Captains Sundown, King, Peter Kenjockety, Isaac, Jovas, Joeh, Snow, Jackson, Bone, Shongo, Cold, Heegan and Tomney. Other names are Colonel Lewis, Colonel Smith and Major Berry.

In the battles of Fort George, Farmers Brother, Smith Billy, Captains Halftown, Pollard, Red Jacket, Black Snake, Johnson, Silverheels and Cold of the Onondagas, were in command of the Indians. This is from the official report of General John N. Boyd, who speaks well of the behavior of the Indian allies.

Crossing over the line into Canada, the Iroquois troops fought at Chippewa and at Lundys Lane under General Scott. At the former battle, while fighting under Captain Pollard, William Parker was wounded in the shoulder. So splendidly did these Indians fight that General Boyd, who noticed their action in particular, said, "The bravery and humanity of the Indians were equally conspicuous."

And here truth again appears stronger than fiction. So

thoroughly aroused were the Iroquois, to such a fervent pitch was their patriotism wrought that more than a score of their women donned uniforms, shouldered muskets and fought like the patriots they were. Most of them were Oneidas and went to war with their husbands. The Oneidas had long been a tribe faithful to the American cause.

In the old army register we find a list of these patriotic women. Lest we forget, let us doff our hats at the names of Annie Metoxen, Usena Reed, Polly Antonine, Margaret Adams, Susan Hendrick, Dolly and Mary Schenandoah, Salmo Arggnette, Margaret Stevens, Polly Cooper, Mary Williams, Margaret John, Mary Antoinne and Susan Jacobs. They wore sometimes the rough garments of the men, they fought like men, they bled and died like heroes. What more patriotic heroes indeed does our history record than these!

Some of the warriors were mere boys just in their "teens" like Saul Logan, the Squawkie Hill Indian, the sentry at Black Rock. He was fourteen years old. Others were white-haired old men. There we have it. The whole people fought, men, women and youths!

There are many stories of gallant service, of courage and of daring. Ga-uch-so-wa of the Beaver clan clung close to the front at the redoubt at Black Rock. It was he who bayoneted the first red coat to appear. White Seneca was hailed by his people as the "Bravest of the brave." There were men like Sho-ago-wa, of the Turtle clan; it was he who volunteered to run in front of the enemy's line, in order to get him to discharge his guns. Then immediately our troops poured upon them. Yet brave Sho-ago-wa was not even scratched. Like his patron totem, "he lived long and died hard." Other men were eager and fearless, like Do-sa-ga-ni-yak, of the Beaver clan. In his eagerness to get at the enemy he crossed the Niagara, on a raft, and in the rapids just above the falls. John Street (Howayokse) did not even have a raft. He tied his gun to his long hair, let it rest upon his back and then swam the river, making directly for the Red Coats when he landed. Native strategy was shown by Captain Isaac, who was shot in the neck and taken to the British camp. Regaining consciousness he slowly opened his eyes, kept quiet and, when he

located himself as in the enemy's lines, he waited his chance and escaped to the American encampment. Jo-ho-a-hoh was captured in the Buffalo fight but mixed with the crowd calmly and when he was ready he simply "disappeared" and entered his own ranks again. Some of the older men, having greater faith in the arms of their ancestors, used their ancient arms, the tomahawk and bow. Peter Halfwhite (De-gai-i-da-goh, of the Deer), was one of these and carried his bow, arrows and quiver all through the war.

Even the captives of the Iroquois fought with them—the Delewares, Squawkies, Cherokees, Shawnees and Chippewas. The record shows them as daring as the Iroquois themselves. Thus it was that the Six Nations of Indians became the allies of the United States of America. Indian Americans they were, and defending with the pale-faced Americans, "their wives and their children," they had a common cause. All through the war they fought, at Buffalo, Black Rock, Youngstown, Fort George, Lundys Lane, Chippewa and Fort Niagara. William Parker, my great-grandfather, with his brother Samuel, who was eleven years older than he, took part in all these engagements. His commanders had been Young King, Red Jacket and Little Beard. Nearly all the Seneca captains operated under orders from the venerable Farmers Brother, who in turn was subject to the general orders of Generals Scott, Boyd and Porter.

We can not leave the discussion of the brave Indian, Farmers Brother, without relating an incident that occurred at Lundys Lane. It is a familiar tradition in the Parker family and is found recorded in the life of Red Jacket, by Stone. At Lundys Lane several of the American officers were severely wounded, among them General Scott, Major General Brown and his aide-de-camp, Captain Worth. The general nature of the latter made him popular with the Senecas, who delighted to do him small courtesies. Farmers Brother especially was constantly at the bedside of the captain.

The British were anxious to discover just how conditions were in the American camp and sent over a Chippewa Indian to mingle with the Senecas who were in the village of Buffalo, and get all the information he could. He claimed to have deserted the British, swum Chippewa river and crossed the Niagara in order to join

the American army. This was a little more than the Indians could believe, and it being an exceedingly hot summer day, they proceeded to imbibe a little freely of the army rum. Perhaps it was to wash down the improbable tale. As their spirit was awakened they commenced to boast of their exploits; how many red coats they had killed and how they had defied and outwitted the enemy. The Chippewa spy then forgot his character and began to boast of the Yankees and Senecas he had killed. Twenty Senecas sat around him and heard his confession. A dispute arose and the Chippewa was told just what the Senecas thought of him.

Farmers Brother, who had been sitting at Captain Worth's bedside, heard the commotion and came out to ascertain the cause. He listened a moment and then, stepping up to the spy, gave him a blow upon the head with his war club. The Chippewa staggered and fell; he lay stunned. Then suddenly leaping up, he burst through the circle and took mad flight.

The Senecas then jeered at him calling him a coward and a man afraid to die. The taunts struck home. Not even in this crisis would he allow any man to call him a coward. Though he was a spy he was not that. He turned and walked back to the circle. Drawing his blanket over his head he stood facing his foes. Then conscious of his crime he lay down on a log near one of the burned buildings near Main and Swan streets and covered his face. He knew that his punishment was but a question of a few moments. Farmers Brother lifted his rifle, pressed it against the culprit's head and shot him dead. This was the Indian way and it left every man's honor clear.

It has been stated that there were 1200 Iroquois allies of the Americans in the war. The Parker record book gives the names of only 600, and records their tribe clan, the Indian name, as well as giving the place of enlistment and discharge. It is certain in any event that the Senecas supplied two-thirds of the total number engaged. In the old battles of the league they had done the same.

The names of the gallant Iroquois allies of the United States do not appear on the regular muster rolls of the army or even upon its pay rolls. These facts made it difficult in later years to obtain pensions and land bounty warrants.

The home country was preserved. The mouth of the Tonawanda creek opened out safely to an American Niagara. The mysterious island was saved, but only later to be relinquished. The passing years make newer generations forget. And so from the minds of the Senecas with the passing of the old sages, passed the knowledge of the graves of the forgotten Neuter villagers.

Though the entire Niagara frontier was ceded to private land owners by the Senecas, one long-forgotten fact remains. The Seneca Nation never gave up their title to the bed of the Niagara river! Today they own it and a strip along the shore. It is theirs, and some day the State of New York must reckon for its payments. The State may wiggle and squirm, it may balk and prune down, as it did in the tardy justice it has given the Cayugas, but even as the 118 year fight was won by the Cayugas and the 60 year fight of the Six Nations for payment of their Kansas lands, so, some day must the land and the river defended by the Senecas in 1812-15 be paid for by the sovereign state.

The war of 1812 estranged the two branches of the Iroquois. For many years there was a bitter feeling between them. The Canadian branch, uniting all their tribes in a general council, continued to govern themselves in the ancient way and under the laws of Di-ga-no-we-do, and Hiawatha. They claimed to be the true confederacy and to have shown the right spirit in clinging to their British allies. The Iroquois that remained, they pointed out were broken, scattered bands without coherence or spirit. On the other hand, the New York Iroquois claimed that the Canadian branch had succeeded, thereby violating the Constitution of the Confederacy and automatically cutting themselves off from its forms and rights. They accused them of abandoning their ancestral domain, of allowing their "heads to roll away." There had been no actual break until the War of 1812, but when arraigned against one another and fighting on opposite sides, then bitterness was gall indeed! Cordial relations were not soon again established although there were journeys to and fro soon after the close of the war.

The lingering prejudice manifested itself at the last council on the Genesee in 1879, when William Prior Letchworth dedicated the old Canadea council house. Representatives of all Six Nations



OLD CHAPEL ON OLD SITE (above) ON PRESENT SITE NEAR
CEMETERY (below)

were there, among them Colonel Sincoe Kerr, a Mohawk of the Canadian army, and his sister, Kate Osborn. The colonel refused an introduction to the Seneca chiefs, Parker, Obail and Jacket, but later at his sister's entreaties, grasped their hands and pledged his friendship. Thus was that council a memorable one.

For the sake of historical accuracy, it will be interesting to record a description of the uniforms and clothing worn by the Iroquois allies. Many of them took the regular uniforms of the army but others clung to the Indian attire of the day. Some wore buckskin leggins and fringed leather hunting shirts. Others used broadcloth leggins neatly beaded in designs of various patterns. The shirt was always worn outside like a coat and was never "tucked in." Sashes of native weaves were worn by the chiefs or captains. These were strung across the shoulder and over the chest diagonally to the left hip where the long fringed ends were tied. Most of them were woven of red worsted but a few were of buckskin with moose hair or quilled-in porcupine. The Seneca moccasin was made of one piece of leather with a seam in the heel and over the top of the foot.

The Iroquois did not wear the plumed feather bonnet of the Sioux but wore round caps that covered the head. From the middle of the crown was suspended a cluster of downy feathers five or six inches long and from a spindle in the center arose an eagle plume that whirled as the wearer moved. A decorated band or a silver crown encircled the cap, which was of leather, fur or cloth. Sometimes the entire breast was bare and only leggins, breech clout and moccasins worn. Some of the older men, conforming to the ancient custom, "shaved" their heads by burning off all the hair except the scalp locks at the crown. Many too had slit the rims of their ears and wound silver foil around them. In the small socket in the top was placed a fluffy plume or a woodpecker's feather. Between the Indian costume and the military uniforms were all gradations, but in most cases every Indian carried or wore a "match coat" or blanket. Sometimes these blankets were only cotton sheets. The leaders often wore military coats and carried sabers, but one can readily imagine that their feet were moccasin shod. It is a belief that the moccasin on the feet of the dead helps find the way to the Indian

heaven. In this manner appeared the Iroquois army, the last time it was ever called as a unit to the front. We need not smile at their garments or deplore the fact that they knew nothing of the "Macedonian phalanx" or of forming hollow squares. This knowledge does not make a soldier. A half-starved, sick and vagabond army in tattered raiment eventually won the independence of this nation. The Iroquois were loyal and good shots. Those facts helped maintain the gloried independence of this nation.

Nearly all the Senecas who fought in the war took the oath of allegiance to the United States. This circumstance, coupled with the fact that they felt that they were actually resisting an invasion of their own territory, did much to estrange the Senecas from the English and to render void the overtures of the British agents that had been made continually since the close of the Revolution. More than anything else the War of 1812 cemented the Iroquois of the United States and left them loyal people, confident in the integrity and justice of the nation. Their hopes were high and they believed that a new era of good fellowship had dawned. Alas, how falsely they were deceived! In fifteen years this hope snapped like a bubble. By a fraudulent treaty signed by chiefs elected by a land company, all the Buffalo creek tract owned by the Senecas was taken by the whites. Congress ratified the treaty and even though the President afterward was given the facts, the Senecas were given no relief. The moral forces of the country were aroused to such an extent that even the Quakers denounced the steal as the most heartless fraud and invasion of natural rights ever committed upon a defenseless people. The Senecas were broken hearted, but ever remained loyal to the new country that had absorbed their own.