

CONSOURCE



The Constitutional Sources Project

Revolutionary War Unit

Iroquois Council: Choosing Sides

TIME AND GRADE LEVEL

One 45 or 50 minute class period in Grade 4 through 8.

PURPOSE AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS

History is the chronicle of choices made by actors/agents/protagonists who, in very specific contexts, unearth opportunities and inevitably encounter impediments. During the Revolutionary War people of every stripe navigated turbulent waters. As individuals and groups struggled for their own survival, they also shaped the course of the nation. Whether a general or a private, male or female, free or enslaved, each became a player in a sweeping drama. The instructive sessions outlined here are tailored for upper elementary and middle school students, who encounter history most readily through the lives of individual historical players. Here, students actually *become* those players, confronted with tough and often heart-wrenching choices that have significant consequences. History in all its complexity comes alive. It is a convoluted, thorny business, far more so than streamlined timelines suggest, yet still accessible on a personal level to students at this level.

In this simulation, elementary or middle school students convene as an Iroquois council in upstate New York, 1777. British agents are trying to convince Iroquois nations to take their side in the Revolutionary War. They come with a lavish display of gifts. True to Iroquois tradition, women as well as men attend this council. Each student assumes the persona of a young warrior, mother, older sachem, etc. The class is presented with relevant factors to consider—the numbers, strength, and allegiances of nearby white settlers; the decisions that other Native nations have made; the British promise that Native people west of the Appalachian Mountains can keep their land. After staging a brief reenactment of arguments presented at the council, based on the historical record, students engage in their own council. Should they side with the British, side with the Americans, or attempt to stay neutral? The simulated council makes its decision. At the conclusion of this lesson, students then learn that four of the six Iroquois nations sided with the British and two with the Americans, leading to a destructive civil war that tore apart the League of Six Nations.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

*Students will be able to list the six Iroquois nations and give a brief account of the Iroquois Confederacy.

*Students will be able to cite the British effort, following the French and Indian War, to prevent colonial settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains.

*Students will be able to explain how and why both the British and the Americans courted the Iroquois during the Revolutionary War.

*Students will be able to present, from an Iroquois perspective, cogent arguments for and against each of the available alternatives: side with the British, side with the Americans, or attempt to stay neutral.

*Students will be able to state the historical decision made by each of the six nations.

*Students will be able to show how competing allegiances led to a civil war among the Iroquois.

*Students will be able to extrapolate, from the Iroquois example, how the Revolutionary War presented complications for all Native American nations within or contiguous to the rebelling colonies.

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

Prefatory homework:

Handout A: Iroquois in the Revolutionary War

In class:

1. Homework review and discussion: 10-15 minutes
2. Historical reenactment: 10 minutes
3. Student simulation of the Iroquois council: 15-20 minutes
4. Presentation of historical outcome: 10 minutes

Summary Homework / Extended Activities

MATERIALS

Background Handout (Students read.)

- A. Iroquois in the Revolutionary War

Classroom Handouts

- B. Reenactment of an Iroquois Council
- C. Historical Outcome: The Six Nations Choose Sides (Teacher presents or students read this material.)

Vocabulary List

PREFATORY HOMEWORK

Distribute **Handout A: Iroquois in the Revolutionary War**.

CLASS ACTIVITIES: 45-50 MINUTES

1. HOMEWORK REVIEW AND DISCUSSION: 10-15 minutes

Go over the homework questions. Students can announce briefly the characters they have chosen for themselves.

2. HISTORICAL REENACTMENT: 10 minutes

Distribute **Handout B. Reenactment of an Iroquois Council**. Students read their parts.

3. STUDENT SIMULATION OF THE IROQUOIS COUNCIL: 15-20 minutes

This would be more realistic with the full class rather than in breakout groups, although groups would facilitate greater participation. Teacher makes the call. Instruct students not to interrupt any speaker. This was a formal event, not a casual debate.

4. PRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL OUTCOME: 10 minutes

Teacher presents or students read **Handout C. Historical Outcome: The Six Nations Choose Sides**. Close with this:

*All Native American nations within the rebelling colonies or just west of the Appalachian Mountains faced a decision similar to that confronted by the Iroquois: join the British, join the Americans, or attempt to stay neutral. When considering what course to take, each asked: What is best for **us**? What will help us most in our major goal, which is to keep our own lands? This should not be a surprise. Imagine yourself a Native American in those times. Like any other people threatened by outside forces, they wanted to preserve the way of living that seemed right for them.*

SUMMARY HOMEWORK / EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Research and report on any of the people featured in this lesson. Mary Jamison's original book is called "*A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jamison.*" It is easy to find. There are several shorter versions intended for young readers. Chainbreaker's book is called "*Chainbreaker: The Revolutionary War Memoirs of Governor Blount, as told to Benjamin Williams.*" It is hard to find and difficult to read. Williams, a Native American who wrote down what Chainbreaker told him, had learned English but had not studied how to spell many English words.
2. Research and report on any of the six Iroquois nations during the Revolutionary War. Which side did it chose, and why? What happened to the people of that nation during and after the war?
3. Why did Iroquois women attend councils? One reason is that the Iroquois had a *matrilineal* society. "Mater," in Latin, means mother, and "lineal" represents the family line. "Matrilineal" means that when a man and woman marry, the couple joins the family line of the wife rather than the husband. By contrast, European-American societies are mostly "patrilineal." "Pater," in Latin, means father, so "patrilineal" means the couple joins the husband's family line. You have probably noticed that when a man and woman marry in our society, the wife and children usually take on the last name of the husband. (This has changed a bit in recent years, with some families taking both last names, separated by a hyphen.) Research and report on the role of women in Iroquois society.
4. Research and report on a different Native American nation. Which side did it chose, and why? How did those people fare?
5. The Cherokee actually split into two separate nations during the Revolutionary War. When leaders signed a peace deal with the United States that surrendered some Cherokee lands to the United States, a group of warriors rebelled against the leaders and formed a new nation, the Chickamauga, that continued to wage war against white Americans. Research this story, and then present the two sides of the Cherokee debate: Why did leaders feel they had to surrender lands? Why did the Chickamauga go against the will of Cherokee leaders?
6. Research the "hard winter" of 1779-1780, the winter that followed the destruction of Iroquois villages. This is discussed in the ConSource lesson "**Starving Soldiers: Joseph Plumb Martin.**" It is also discussed in chapter 5 of Ray Raphael, *Founding Myths: Stories that Hide our Patriotic Past*. Look at the footnotes there to get even more information.

Vocabulary for “Iroquois Council: Choosing Sides”

agent – someone who tries to gain support for a person or a group. An agent of a government tries to get others to support that government. In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, governments appointed “Indian agents” to talk with Native Americans. Sometimes those agents tried to get Indians to sign treaties that gave away their land. In the Revolutionary War, British and American agents tried to get Native Americans to support their side.

civil war (not just THE Civil War) – a war between people who belong to the same country but fight on opposite sides

confederacy – states or nations that come together for a common purpose, without losing their own identities

council – a group of people who meet together to consider important topics

England or Great Britain? England and Scotland were separate countries until 1707, when they joined to become Great Britain.

sachem – an Iroquois or Algonquin chief, considered very wise

treaty – an agreement that nations make to avoid a war or to end a war

Handout A: Iroquois in the Revolutionary War

Long before English and French colonists arrived in North America, five neighboring Native American tribes—the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk—joined together in a confederacy. Beforehand, these people had fought each other, but they agreed to be allies, not enemies. English colonists called this confederacy the “League of Five Nations.” The French called these five groups, now joined together, the “Iroquois.” That’s the name they are known by today, but at the time the Iroquois called themselves “people of the longhouse”—many families lived together in houses that were about 200 feet long and only 20 feet wide. (An average American house today is more like a square, much shorter but a bit wider.) In the early 1700s, a sixth group—the Tuscarora—joined the others, so the League of Five Nations became the League of Six nations.

The Iroquois were a powerful people who lived mostly in what is now western New York and western Pennsylvania. Their warriors often defeated warriors from other Native American nations. Respecting that strength, French, English, and Dutch colonists never tried to conquer the Iroquois. Instead, these European nations made treaties with them, as they would do with any other nation. The English and the Iroquois made a series of treaties, which were known as the “Covenant Chain.” A covenant is a very strong promise or bond, and a chain, of course, links things together.

In 1763, after losing what Americans call the French and Indian War, France surrendered all of the land it had claimed in North America to Great Britain. That included not only Canada, but also the territories that later became of the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, and the western parts of New York and Pennsylvania—Iroquois land. Thinking all this territory was now *theirs* because they had defeated the French, British colonists began to move westward, onto lands where Native Americans lived. Britain saw that this might lead to an all-out, costly Indian war. After years of fighting against the French, that was the last thing that Britain wanted, and so they declared that British colonists couldn’t settle anywhere west of the Appalachian Mountains. Later, in 1768, Britain also promised the Iroquois that white colonists would not settle on their lands “so long so long as grass shall grow or waters run.” But rules and promises didn’t keep those who wanted to move into this new, rich, promising territory away. Settlers kept on coming.

In 1775, war broke out between Great Britain and thirteen of its American colonies. Iroquois warriors were known to be great fighters, and they could be a great help to one side or the other. Rebel colonists, however, didn’t think many Iroquois would want to join their side, since colonists had been moving onto their lands. But the rebels certainly didn’t want bold Iroquois warriors to help the British. Rebels gathered a council of Iroquois and told them: “This is a family quarrel between us and Old England. You are not concerned in it. We desire you to remain at home, and not join on either side.” The Iroquois who were at that council agreed not to take sides: “As it is a family affair,” they would “sit still and see you fight it out.”

But Britain didn't want the Iroquois to "sit still." In 1777, British agents invited chiefs of six Iroquois nations to a special council on the banks of Lake Ontario. Iroquois councils, however, included not just the chiefs. Warriors and women, as well as chiefs, went to meet with the British. People from five nations attended; only the Oneida chose not to come. When the Iroquois arrived, British agents treated them to all the food they could eat and rum they could drink.

In class, you will be attending the Council. You will hear British agents present their case, and you will hear Iroquois leaders argue whether or not to "take up the hatchet" against the American rebels." Then, *you* will be asked to decide: As an Iroquois, do you think it is better for your people to join the British, join the Americans, or continue to "sit still" and watch the two sides "fight it out"?

For now, before you attend, create a character for yourself. You can be a woman or man, young or old, married or single, with or without children. If you are a man, you can be a warrior or a "sachem"—an older chief who has been through wars before. If you are a woman, do you have young children? Is your brother or one of your sons a warrior? Who you are might help shape how you respond at the council.

QUESTIONS:

Why did Iroquois form the League of Five Nations? When did a sixth nation join?

What happened after the French and Indian War that affected the Iroquois?

Women were included in Iroquois councils. Were women included in British or American "councils" at that time, like the Continental Congress or Parliament?

Handout B: Reenactment an Iroquois Council

Mary Jamison was captured by Indians at age 12 and given to a Seneca family who raised her. For the rest of her years she lived as a Seneca. When she was 34-years-old she attended this council, as did many other Seneca women. When Jamison later told the story of her life, she described what happened there. A Seneca warrior, Chainbreaker, was also at the council, and years later he too described what happened. This scene is based on these two primary sources: “*A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jamison*,” first published in 1824, and “*Chainbreaker: The Revolutionary War Memoirs of Governor Blacksnake, as told to Benjamin Williams*,” reprinted by the University of Nebraska Press in 1989.

Characters:

Redcoat Man (what the Iroquois called the British agents): Neither Jamison nor Chainbreaker recorded their names, but they did recall important things that they said.

Guyasuta: A Seneca war chief who had served as a guide for George Washington before the French and Indian War.

Cornplanter: The son of a white trader and a Seneca woman. He was Guyasuta’s nephew, and he too became a Seneca war chief. Both warriors had fought during the French and Indian War.

Thayendanegea, often called by his English name, Joseph Brant: A Mohawk leader who spoke perfect English, received a college education, and had traveled to London.

Redcoat Man: Our King is the Great Father, the headman of all nations of white people. He is very rich. His rum is as plentiful as the water in Lake Ontario. His men are as numerous as the sand upon the lake’s shore. His American children have been very bad and won’t obey their father. They are very poor and have nothing to offer Indians. The King invites all the Six Nations to join him and give the Americans a dressing and punishment for their disobedience.

The Americans mean to cheat you. Should you be so silly as to take their advice, and then they conquer the King’s Army, their intention is to take all your lands from you and destroy your people. They are all mad, foolish, crazy and full of deceit. Your Father the Great King has taken pity on you and is determined not to let the Americans deceive you any longer.

If you assist us in this war, you will never want for money or goods. Our Father the King will give you guns and powder and lead and tomahawks and sharp edges [swords] and any supplies you need. He will give you a butcher knife to take American scalps and pay you for each scalp you take. Come join us! Together, we can beat them!

After hearing what British agents had to say, the Iroquois held a council among themselves. Here is what some of them said.

Guyasuta: We are strong and can take care of ourselves if we are hurt. We don't need Redcoat Man to tell us what to do. Maybe he is the mad, foolish, crazy and deceitful person. He thinks we are fools and advises us to do what is not in our interest. Suppose the Americans conquer the Redcoats—what would Americans then say to us, who had helped the Redcoats?

Cornplanter: America says to us, not to lift our hands against either party. He got in this difficulty, but it is nothing to us. He says let him fight it out with his own brother for liberty. We the Indian nations of several different parts of this continent, we do not know what it is for. We are likely to make a mistake. We need to hear more from the two parties, then we won't be deceived. Then we can be clear and see where we are going.

Thayendanegea: The King of Great Britain is the Father. If we do nothing for him and nothing for American man, we look like we are sleeping. Both parties can cut our throats while we sleep, both the Redcoat Man and the American. There will be no peace for us. I say take up the Redcoat Man's offer!

Cornplanter: Warriors, you must all mark what I say and listen. War is war! Death is Death! A fight is hard business. Do not rush into this. We must listen more and think what might happen.

Thayendanegea: You are a coward man, Cornplanter. It isn't worth hearing what you say. Warriors can't be cowards!

A warrior: We must fight for somebody. We cannot bear to be called coward!

Cornplanter: I say again, a fight is hard business. We must not make a mistake. Wait!

Handout C. Historical Outcome: The Six Nations Choose Sides

Chainbreaker reported that after the speeches, the warriors were “split and also the female sect began to use their influence over the warriors.” As they argued, a ship arrived bearing numerous gifts; these, he said, were to “bribe” the Iroquois. There were jingling bells, ostrich feathers, and two impressive wampum belts, the mark of status and wealth for the Iroquois. One of these, the British said, was the original “Covenant Chain,” which had bonded the Iroquois and British a century earlier.

This impressive display showed that the British were indeed richer than the Americans, and they would probably win. The “majority of the Iroquois,” even “the mothers,” agreed to fight on the side of the King. Cornplanter went along with the majority, but he warned people what to expect:

“Every brave man must show himself now. We will meet many brave American soldiers with their sharp edges [swords]. Just as soon as he finds out you are against him, he shall show no mercy on you. You must stand your ground like a good soldier against your own white brother!”

Mary Jamison reported that the warriors “returned home full of the fire of war.”

In the end, the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Mohawk sided with the British, while the Tuscarora and most of the Oneida sided with the Americans. In several battles, Iroquois warriors wound up fighting on opposite sides. In the Battle of Oriskany, over thirty Seneca were killed, some by Oneida fighters. Seeking revenge, Senecas raided an Oneida village, burning houses and destroying crops. Some Oneida, in turn, raided Mohawk villages that were near their lands. Again in the Battles of Wyoming and Cherry Valley, Iroquois fought fiercely on each side. The white man’s war had become a *civil war*, tearing apart the League of Six Nations.

In 1779, George Washington instructed General John Sullivan and 4,500 soldiers in the Continental Army to “lay waste” and “destroy” Iroquois towns that sided with the British. Before departing, at a Fourth of July celebration, soldiers drank a toast and yelled, “Civilization or death to all American savages”—that showed what they thought of Native Americans. Officers on that expedition proudly reported exactly how many houses they burned and how many fruit orchards and bushels of corn they destroyed. The soldiers would harvest all the vegetables, put them inside a house, and then burn that house so Iroquois would have nothing to eat that winter. And that winter, it turned out, was the coldest winter ever recorded, before or since, in the Northeastern United States.

The Iroquois who survived were angrier than ever. The Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Mohawk continued to fight, even though they were losing. After the war, some moved to Canada, which the British still controlled. Those who stayed in the United States were no longer an independent people. Some tried to continue their traditional customs, but they had to obey the laws of that country.

In one story, Mary Jamison revealed how strange a civil war can be. Once, when Cornplanter raided an American village, he took a prisoner. When the man said his name, Cornplanter realized that his prisoner was his own father, a white trapper who he had barely known! What would he do to the man he had captured? Here is what Cornplanter said:

“I am your son! You are my father! I went to your cabin, and took you by force. You are now my prisoner, and subject to the customs of Indian warfare. But your life shall be spared. Indians love their friends and their kindred, and treat them with kindness. If now you choose to follow the fortune of your yellow son, and live with our people, I will cherish your old age with plenty of venison, and you shall live easy; but if it is your choice to return to your fields, and live with your white children, I will send a party of my trusty young men to conduct you back to safety. I respect you, my father; you have been friendly to Indians, and they are your friends.”

His father chose to live with whites, not with his son. True to his word, Cornplanter ordered an escort to take him safely home.