



America and the Six Nations: Native Americans after the Revolution

Advisor: Alan Taylor, Corcoran Department of History, University of Virginia, National Humanities Center Fellow
Copyright National Humanities Center, 2015

Framing Question

Through his 1790 speech, how does Seneca Chief Cornplanter reflect the shifting political landscape Native Americans faced following the American Revolution?

Understanding

Native Americans were not included in the Treaty of Paris (1783), which concluded the American Revolution. The end of fighting presented them with a difficult path as they struggled to protect their homelands from their growing insignificance within the shifting international politics of eighteenth-century America.

Text

["To George Washington from the Seneca Chiefs, 1 December 1790"](#)

Background

This lesson analyses a speech delivered on December 1, 1790, by Cornplanter (1746?–1836), a chief of the Seneca tribe, to President George Washington. The speech tells a story of trust and betrayal, weakness and power. To understand it, we must understand how the relationship between Indians and European newcomers evolved over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.



*Ki-On-Twog-Ky (also known as Cornplanter),
1732/40–1836*

The Seneca were part of the Five Nations (later to become the Six Nations after the Tuscarora joined), also called the Iroquois Confederacy. The Confederacy held what is today upstate New York. The Seneca occupied the western part of that area. Extremely powerful, the Six Nations controlled transportation and trade routes into the Ohio Valley. When Europeans arrived in America, the tribes considered their presence an opportunity to expand their trade and influence, and they established relationships with the Dutch, the British, and the French. During the French and Indian War (1754–63) the Confederacy allied with the victorious British. Before the War British settlers had been pushing into Indian territory. With the conclusion of fighting the Proclamation of 1763 forbade such intrusions, but settlers ignored it and continued to claim Indian lands. In 1768 colonial and Six Nation leaders met at Fort Stanwix

in New York to draw up a treaty that would establish boundaries and keep settlers out of Indian territory. The treaty proved no more effective than the earlier Proclamation. The settlers kept coming.

As the American Revolution began, the Six Nations attempted to remain neutral; they considered the conflict a civil war and had no desire to become involved. As pressure from both sides increased, the British, in particular, insisted that the Six Nations ally with them. The tribes could not agree on which side to support, and the Confederacy split. The Oneida and Tuscarora supported the Americans; the Seneca, Mohawks, Onondagas, and Cayugas joined the British.

Even though they fought on both sides in the American Revolution and inhabited territories negotiated between Great Britain and the United States, the Six Nations were ignored in the Treaty of Paris of 1783, which ended the war. Nonetheless, they hoped to retain both influence and control of their lands. The Six Nations maintained trade relations with the British, and their territory constituted a buffer between British forts in the Ohio Valley and what was then the northwest border of the United States.

As strategic as that buffer was, Indian ownership of it represented an obstacle to the westward expansion of the United States. During the colonial period Native Americans would often lease land to settlers but retain the right to hunt on it or ask for food from the settlers. After the Revolution American leaders ended this practice and claimed the right to purchase Indian land. In the deals that followed, precise boundaries were difficult to determine because Indians did not survey their lands, marking them instead with pictographs, burial mounds, stones, or natural features. To settle various boundary disputes, Seneca chiefs, in 1784, returned to Fort Stanwix for a replay of the 1768 negotiations. This time they did not face representatives of a British colony but rather officials of a new, independent nation. While the treaty they signed drew boundaries, it also forced them to give up significant amounts of territory. In return, however, the treaty guaranteed that they would be secure in the possession of their remaining lands.

However, even with the Fort Stanwix agreement in place, Indian land holding continued to shrink as speculators and government agents, both federal and state, laid claim to more and more territory. This relentless pressure on Indian land brought Cornplanter to Philadelphia, which had replaced New York as the national capitol in 1790, to ask Washington to confirm that the Seneca lands belong to the Seneca and could not be taken from them.

Did Cornplanter succeed? In his response Washington stated that he could not enforce the land-protecting provisions of the 1784 Fort Stanwix treaty because it was made under the Articles of Confederation, which were no longer in effect. However, he assured Cornplanter that the United States would honor future treaties. Despite this, speculators and state governments continued to take Indian lands.

By examining several key passages from Cornplanter's speech, we will discover the arguments he deployed in his appeal to Washington, and we will get a sense of the plight of the tribes in the wake of the American Revolution.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?



The United States of America, with the British possessions of Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland, 1794 (detail).

Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



Text Analysis

Excerpt 1

Cornplanter sets the tone of his argument.

To the great Councillor of the thirteen fires.

The Speech of the Corn-planter, Half-town and the Great-Tree chiefs of the Seneca Nation.

(1) ...The voice of the Seneca Nation speaks to you the great Councillor, in whose heart, the wise men of the thirteen fires, have placed their wisdom. (2) It may be very small in your ears, & we therefore entreat you to hearken with attention. (3) For we are about to speak of things which are to us very great. (4) When your army entered the Country of the Six Nations, we called you the Town-destroyer and to this day, when that name is heard, our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling close to the neck of their mothers. (5) Our Councillors and warriors are men, and can not be afraid; but their hearts are grieved with the fears of our women & children, and desire, that it may be buried so deep, as to be heard no more. (6) When you gave us peace we called you father, because you promised to secure us in the possession of our Land. (7) Do this and so long as the Land shall remain that beloved name shall live in the heart of every Seneca....

(8) We mean to open our hearts before you, and we earnestly desire, that you will let us clearly understand, what you resolve to do. (9) When our chiefs returned from the treaty of fort Stanwix, and laid before our Council what had been done there our Nation was surprized to hear, how great a Country you had compelled them to give up, to you, without paying us any thing for it. (10) Every one said your hearts were yet swelled with resentment against us for what had happened during the war: but that one day you would reconsider it with more kindness. (11) We asked each other what we had done to deserve such severe chastisement.

1. In sentence 1 when Cornplanter refers to Washington as “the great counselor in whose heart the wise men of the thirteen fires have placed their wisdom,” to what is he referring?

2. In sentence 4 Cornplanter’s reference to Washington as “the Town-destroyer” recalls a time during the American Revolution (1779) when he ordered the burning of Seneca villages. Why does Cornplanter bring this up?

3. In sentence 6 Cornplanter contrasts Washington’s role as soldier with his role as peace maker. What is the effect of this contrast?

4. What is the importance of the use of the word “father” in sentence 6?

5. In sentences 9 and 10 Cornplanter refers to the 1784 Treaty of Fort Stanwix. According to Cornplanter what happened there? Why?

6. In sentence 10 what hope does Cornplanter raise?

Excerpt 2

Cornplanter explains why the Seneca fought against the Americans during the Revolution.

(12) ...When you kindled your thirteen fires separately, the wise men that assembled at them told us you were all brothers, the children of one great Father who regarded also the red people as his children. (13) They called us brothers and invited us to his protection. (14) They told us he resided beyond the great waters where the sun first rises: That he was a King whose power no people could resist, and that his goodness was bright as that sun. (15) What they said went to the bottom of our hearts: We accepted the invitation and promised to obey him. (16) What the Seneca Nation promise they faithfully perform; and when you refused obedience to that King he ordered us to assist his beloved men in making you sober. (17) In obeying him we did no more than you yourselves had lead us to promise. (18) The men who claimed this promise said that you were children and had no Guns that when they had shaken you, you would submit. (19) We hearkened to them and were deceived until your army approached our towns. (20) We were deceived by your people in teaching us to confide in that King, had helped to deceive us and wnow [we now] appeal to your hearts. (21) Is the blame all ours?...

7. In sentence 12, to what time is Cornplanter referring? How do you know? Cite evidence from the text.

8. According to Cornplanter, what was the relationship before the American Revolution between the Seneca and the colonists?

9. Cornplanter offers a reason to explain why the Seneca supported the British during the American Revolution. What is the reason?

10. How does Cornplanter argue that in some ways the colonists were to blame for the Seneca supporting Britain?

11. Why does he make this argument?

Excerpt 3

Cornplanter maintains that the Americans took advantage of the Seneca's weakness.

(22) When we saw we were deceived and heard the invitation which you gave us to draw near to the fire you had kindled and talk with you concerning peace we made haste towards it. (23) You then told us we were in your hand & that by closing it you could crush us to nothing; and you demanded of us a great Country as the price of that peace you had offered us; as if our want of strength

had destroyed our rights. (24) Our Chiefs had felt your power & were unable to contend against you and they therefore gave up that Country. (25) What they agreed to has bound our nation. (26) But your anger against us must by this time be cooled, and altho' our Strength has not increased nor your power become less we ask you to consider calmly were the terms dictated to us reasonable and just?

12. In sentence 22 Cornplanter refers to the American's invitation to negotiate at Fort Stanwix. According to Cornplanter, how did the Americans persuade the Seneca to give up territory once the negotiations began?

13. Cornplanter closes sentence 23 by saying "as if our want of strength had destroyed our rights." What does he mean by this statement?

14. Cornplanter closes this paragraph with a question, using it to encourage Washington to think about the situation in another way. What exactly is Cornplanter asking Washington to do?

Excerpt 4

Cornplanter cites an argument Americans have used to claim Indian lands.

(27) ...Your commissioners when they drew the line which separated the land then given up to you, from that which you agreed should remain to be ours did, most solemnly promise, that we should be secured in the peaceable possession of the lands which we inhabited, East, & North, of that line. (28) Does this promise bind you?

(29) Hear now we entreat you, what has since happened, concerning that Land. (30) On the day on which we finished the treaty at fort Stanwix, commissioners from Pennsylvania, told our chiefs, that they had come there to purchase from us, all the Lands belonging to us within the lines of their State, and they told us that their line would strike the river Susquehanna below Tioga branch. (31) They then left us to consider the bargain 'till the next day. (32) On the next day we let them know, that we were unwilling to sell all the Lands within their State, and proposed to let them have a part of it which we pointed to them in their map.

(33) They told us they must have the whole: That it was already ceded to them by the great King at the time of making peace with you, and was *their own*. (34) But they said they would not take advantage of that, and were willing to pay us for it after the manner of their Ancestors. (35) Our chiefs were unable to contend at that time, & therefore they sold the Lands.... (36) Since that time we have heard so much of the right to our lands which the King gave when you made peace with him that it is our earnest desire you will tell us what they mean....

(37) For [a large piece of] Land Phelps [a land speculator] agreed to pay us Ten thousand dollars in hand [immediately] and one thousand dollars a year for ever. (38) He paid us two thousand & five hundred dollars in hand part of the Ten thousand, and he sent for us last Spring to come and receive our money; but instead of paying us the remainder of the Ten Thousand dollars, and the one thousand dollars due for the first year, he offered us no more than five hundred dollars, and insisted he had agreed with us for that sum only to be paid yearly. (39) We debated with him six days during all which time he persisted in refusing to pay us our just demand.... (40) The last reason he assigned for continuing to refuse paying us was, *that the King had ceded the lands to the thirteen fires* and that he had bought them from you and *paid you for them*.

(41) We could bear this confusion no longer, & determined to press thro' every difficulty, and lift up our voice that you might hear us, and to claim that security in the possession of our lands which your commissioners so solemnly promised us, and we now entreat you to enquire into our complaints and redress our wrongs....

15. Cornplanter ends the first paragraph of this excerpt with a question. What is he asking?

16. According to Cornplanter, what happened after the signing of the Treaty of Fort Stanwix?

17. How did the Seneca respond to the news that the King had the right to cede their lands to others?

18. Why does Seneca raise the Phelps incident to Washington?

19. What does the Phelps incident tell us about the situation of the Seneca?

20. What argument does Phelps make to claim the Seneca's land?

21. How do the Seneca respond to this use of the argument that the British king gave Indian lands to the Americans?

Excerpt 5

Cornplanter warns Washington of unrest on America's northwestern border.

(42) You have said we were in your hand, and that by closing it, you could crush us to nothing. Are you determined to crush us? (43) If you are, tell us so that those of

our nation who have become your children & are determined to die so, may know what to do: In this case one chief has said, he would ask you to put him out of pain: Another, who will not think of dying by the hand of his father, has said he will retire to the Chataughque, eat of the faral root, and sleep with his fathers in peace.

(44) Before you determine on a measure so unjust, look up to the God who made us, as well as you, we hope he will not permit you to destroy the whole of our nation...

Activity: Do You and Cornplanter Think Alike?

Compare your diplomacy skills with Cornplanter's by providing three arguments against America's claim to Six Nations territory.



(45) When that great Country was given up, there were but few Chiefs present, and they were compelled to give it up. (46) And it is not the Six nations only, that reproach those Chiefs, with having given up that Country; the Chipaways and all the nations who lived on those lands westward, call to us & ask us brothers of our fathers where is the place which you have reserved for us to lie down on.

(47) You have compelled us to do that which has made us ashamed. (48) We have nothing to answer to the children of the brothers of our fathers. (49) When last Spring they called on us to go to war to secure them a bed to lie upon, The Senecas entreated them to be quiet until we had spoken to you: but on our way down we heard, your army had gone to the Country which those nations inhabit: and if they meet together the best blood on both sides will stain the ground...

(50) We will not conceal from you, that the great God, and not man has preserved the Corn planter from his own nation: for they ask continually, where is the Land which our children and their children after them are to lie down on?....

22. What does the first paragraph tell us about the Seneca state of mind?

23. In paragraph 3 what arguments does Cornplanter make against the legitimacy of the 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix?

24. How did other tribes in the region react to the Treaty?

25. How did the Seneca respond when other tribes called on them to war against the Americans?

26. Why does Cornplanter tell Washington that the Seneca persuaded the tribes not to go to war?

27. In this excerpt what warning is Cornplanter delivering to Washington?

Excerpt 6

Cornplanter speaks of his personal sacrifice and the plight of his people.

(51) He loves peace, and all that he had in store he has given to those who have been robbed by your people, lest they should plunder the innocent to repay themselves: the whole season which others employed in providing for their families, he has spent in his endeavors to preserve peace. (52) And at this moment his wife and children are lying on the Ground in want of food. (53) His heart is in pain for them; but he perceives that the great God will try his firmness in doing what is right.

(54) The Game which the great Spirit sent into our Country for us to eat, is going from among us: We thought he intended we should till the ground as the white people do, and we talked to one another about it. (55) But before we speak to you of this, we must know from you, whether you mean to leave us, and our children, any land to till. (56) Speak plainly to us concerning this great

business. (57) All the Lands we have been speaking of belonged to the Six Nations: no part of it ever belonged to the King of England, and he could not give it to you. (58) The Land we live on our Fathers received from God, and they transmitted it to us, for our Children and we cannot part with it...

Activity: Review

Review the central arguments in Cornplanter's speech to Washington.



(59) These are to us very great things. (60) We know that you are strong and we have heard that you are wise; and we wait to hear your answer to what we have said that we may know that you are just.

28. Why has Cornplanter given "all that he had in store" to "those who have been robbed"?

29. How have Cornplanter's peace-making efforts affected his family?

30. According to Cornplanter, how have the Seneca interpreted the departure of game from their lands?

31. How does Cornplanter refute argument that the British king gave Indian lands to the Americans after the Revolution?

32. What finally does Cornplanter ask of Washington?

Glossary

entreat: earnestly request

hearken: listen

compelled: forced

chastisement: intense criticism

kindled: started burning

sober: self-controlled

want: lack of

solemnly: seriously

ceded: surrendered

contend: argue

redress: correct

plunder: rob

till: plow

Text

- “To George Washington from the Seneca Chiefs, 1 December 1790,” Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-07-02-0005>, ver. 2014-05-09). Source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 7, *1 December 1790 – 21 March 1791*, ed. Jack D. Warren, Jr. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998, pp. 7–16.

Images

- *Ki-On-Twog-Ky (also known as Cornplanter)*, 1732/40–1836, by F. Bartoli. Collection of the New-York Historical Society. Used with permission. <http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibit/ki-twog-ky-also-known-cornplanter-173240-1836>
- Laurie, Robert & Whittle, James. *The United States of America, with the British possessions of Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland*. Map, detail. London: Laurie & Whittle, 1794. From Library of Congress Geography and Map Division. <http://www.loc.gov/item/98685649/> (accessed November 2014).