



FORT PITT

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Liberty and Sovereignty: The 1778 Treaty with the Delaware Nation

The American Revolution forever altered the political landscape of Western Pennsylvania and created new challenges for the region's many inhabitants, regardless of their ethnicity. In the East, American colonists engaged in a more straightforward fight against the British empire for political liberty. In the West, factional divisions between the former colonies — now states — of Virginia and Pennsylvania, and a widespread thirst for American Indian lands in the Ohio Country, muddled the high ideals of the Revolution. When news of the war arrived at Fort Pitt in the spring of 1775, rival commissioners from Virginia and Pennsylvania soon recognized that their only option was to implore the region's Indians — Seneca, Delaware, Shawnee, and Wyandot — to remain neutral.¹

For their part, Indians in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley were also divided. Many saw the war as a conflict between a parent (the King of England) and his children (the American colonists), in which they had no part. Though American settlers' encroachment on Indian lands angered them, many failed to see the logic in fighting on behalf the British. If the Crown was so strong, the Seneca chief Flying Crow argued, then the British should not need

the Indians' help to punish the Americans.²

Despite some initial success, American diplomats' efforts at peace were constantly undermined by their own people. From the beginning of the war, and arguably much of the preceding decade, a string of attacks and insults by American settlers and soldiers contributed to the alienation of most of the region's Indians. Native leaders, who initially blamed retaliations on their own "foolish Young Men," were increasingly faced with consensus regarding the Americans.³

This inability to control their own people, coupled with a crippling lack of Continental authority on the frontier, created an increasingly dire situation in the West. The growing number of disaffected tribes were welcomed by British

officials at Fort Detroit and their warriors deployed against border settlements. It was these settlements — often perched on recently-ceded, or disputed, lands — that most Indians came to view as the greatest threat to their territory and sovereignty. As diplomatic efforts failed, the American army at Fort Pitt began plotting destructive campaigns against the Indians they had once welcomed as friends. In the wake of a particularly heinous episode — dubbed the "squaw campaign" for the murder of several women and children by American militiamen — several prominent Indian agents and interpreters, including Alexander McKee and Simon Girty, quietly left Pittsburgh to join the British at Fort Detroit.⁴

By the summer of 1778, with most of their allies gone, and their frontiers dangerously exposed, the Continental command at Fort Pitt realized that their survival depended on a direct strike against Fort Detroit. For this they turned



ABOVE: Henry Dawkins, detail from *Sir William Johnson's Indian Testimonial*, c. 1770. Though it predates the Revolution by several years, this engraving shows the symbolism inherent in American Indian diplomacy. With representatives from both sides in attendance, the Indian leader accepts a peace medal from his European counterpart. Also present in the image are a calumet, or ceremonial pipe, and the symbolic "chain of friendship" that bound each side to the other.

RIGHT: During the Revolution, Americans on the western frontier succeeded in alienating most of their Indian neighbors. One by one, Ohio Country and Great Lakes tribes opted to join the war on the side of the British.

J. Hall, *Sachem of North America Exhorting His Tribe of Indians to War*, from *Payne's Universal Geography*, Vol. II, 1789.





George Heriot, *Costume of Domiciliated Indians of North America*, c. 1810. While a later image, this engraving accurately depicts many aspects of village life for Ohio Country and Great Lakes Indians. Just as in colonial society, daily life in Indian country revolved not around warfare, but around food, family, and social interaction.



John Sumpter, a member of the Delaware Tribe of Indians in Oklahoma, wearing the clothing and accoutrements of his 18th-century ancestors.

Courtesy of John Sumpter.

to the Delaware nation, whose lands covered much of the vast territory between the two posts. Up to that point, the Delaware had, with great difficulty, maintained a pledge of neutrality, even as attacks and insults by the Americans increased. Now they were asked to choose sides at the risk of permanently alienating their Indian and British neighbors, all of whom had the willingness and capacity to retaliate. To hammer out the details of the arrangement, Delaware leaders including White Eyes, John Killbuck, Jr., and Captain Pipe traveled to Fort Pitt in September 1778.⁵

The 1778 treaty with the Delaware was the fourth held at Fort Pitt since the commencement of hostilities in 1775. This time, however, the appeal was made by Continental, as opposed to state, commissioners. The terms were also different. The Americans sought permission to march an army through Delaware territory and asked the Delaware to join them as formal allies against the British, a move which placed them at odds with their Shawnee, Seneca, and Wyandot neighbors, as well as more militant factions within their own tribe. In exchange, the Americans offered to build a fort, ostensibly for the protection of the tribe's "old men, women, and children ...

whilst their warriors are engaged against the common enemy." In a somewhat surprising gesture, the Americans also proposed the creation of a 14th state composed of tribes friendly to the United States, "whereof the Delaware nation shall be the head, and have a representation in Congress."⁶

More surprising was that the concept for this Indian commonwealth was likely advanced by the Delaware themselves, and White Eyes in particular. For years, the chief had sought to free his people from the nominal subjugation by the Iroquois that they had suffered since the late 17th century. Voicing their sovereignty with the stroke of a pen, the Delaware revolutionaries also hoped to shield their lands from the onslaught of settlers sure to follow on the heels of an American victory. It was a critical gamble for a tribe that felt increasingly threatened by its Indian and American neighbors, and the consequences of failure would surely be disastrous. Though White Eyes himself would not live to see the promises of the treaty unravel, in the late summer of 1778, there was a glimmer of hope for a people caught up in a war for liberty that threatened to consume them.⁷

This September, Delaware descendants from the federally recognized Delaware, Seneca, and Shawnee tribes will join living historians at Fort Pitt to commemorate the 240th anniversary of the first treaty between the United States and a sovereign Indian nation. Part of a larger effort to work with the historic tribes that once occupied the Ohio Valley, the event will help to ensure that native peoples have an active role in the portrayal of their history. It also represents a commitment on the part of all involved to address tough or controversial topics together, in hopes of brightening the chain of friendship that connects us. Join us at the Fort Pitt Museum to witness this historic event on Saturday, September 29, from 11 a.m. - 5 p.m.

¹ Edward G. Williams. *Fort Pitt and the Revolution on the Western Frontier* (Pittsburgh: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1978), pp. 42, 52-53.

² Colin G. Calloway. *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 28-30.

³ Reuben Gold Thwaites and Louise Phelps Kellogg, eds. *The Revolution on the Upper Ohio, 1775-1777* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1908), pp. 93, 110, 115.

⁴ Randolph C. Downes. *Council Fires on the Upper Ohio: A Narrative of Indian Affairs in the Upper Ohio Valley until 1795* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1940), pp. 204-211.

⁵ Hermann Wellenreuther, "White Eyes and the Delawares' Vision of an Indian State," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, vol. 68, no. 2, Spring 2001, p. 158 accessed online at: <https://journals.psu.edu/phj/article/viewFile/25676/25445>.

⁶ Williams, *Fort Pitt*, pp. 105-107.

⁷ Wellenreuther, "White Eyes," pp. 157-161.