

FORT PITT MUSEUM

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A “Chief of much Capacity and vast Influence”: Guyasuta’s Mission in the Ohio Country

Few American Indian leaders were more engaged in what is now Western Pennsylvania than the Seneca chief Guyasuta. He was known for his leadership on the battlefield during the French & Indian War, and for the 1763 rebellion against British occupation that he incited along with the Ottawa chief Pontiac. However, it was after these conflicts that Guyasuta honed the diplomatic skills for which he became even more widely known. He gained broad respect among both Indians and Europeans through his singular attachment to the Ohio Country and its people, his tireless quest for diplomacy in the region, and his pragmatic approach to missionaries and settlers.

Looking to end the war of 1763 on good terms, Guyasuta was among several chiefs of the Delaware, Shawnee, and largely Seneca *Mingo* who signed peace treaties with the British in 1764. From then on, as the main Haudenosaunee (Iroquois or Six Nations) representative in the region, he pursued equity for the Ohio Country tribes and peace in the region with equal vigor. Beginning in spring 1765, periodic meetings at Fort Pitt became a key part of that process and a good excuse to visit his relations in the area. Before departing as a guide for a trading expedition

in 1766, he told the agent “he must first go and see his family” at a neighboring village and “warm the hearts of his nation, and know how things stood with them.”¹

Over the next several years, he ventured far beyond Fort Pitt to fulfill his diplomatic obligations. In 1772 alone, he traveled from Ligonier to Philadelphia to represent the Six Nations, and from there, nearly 300 miles north to the home of Sir William Johnson, British superintendent of Indian affairs. Making time for a rare diversion, he returned to Philadelphia to witness an electrical experiment that had previously “engaged his Attention and Admiration.”² In a letter to General Thomas Gage, commander of British forces in North America, Johnson praised Guyasuta as “a great Chief of much Capacity and vast Influence amongst all the Nations.”³

Though he carried out his diplomatic duties with precision, a seemingly more casual approach toward outsiders in the region reflected a corresponding degree of pragmatism. Evaluating the mission of the Congregationalist minister David McClure in 1772, Guyasuta “paused a few moments, & replied that he was afraid it would not succeed; for said he, ‘the Indians are a roving people, & they will not attend to your instructions; but take courage & make trial.’”⁴ Though missionaries like McClure came with the express purpose of replacing Native spiritual beliefs with their own, Guyasuta was



Jacques Grasset de Saint-Sauveur's supremely confident Iroquois war chief typifies Guyasuta's early career through 1763, when the rebellion against British authority he co-led with the Ottawa chief Pontiac collapsed.

Private collection.

unconcerned that their words would have much effect. Knowing that traders, whatever their faults, kept the tribes supplied with the goods they depended on, he was also willing to smooth the way for commerce, occasionally serving as a guide and interpreter on trading expeditions. Weighing the issue of illegal European settlements near Redstone Creek in 1766, Guyasuta and his fellow Six Nations chiefs agreed to join British officials in evicting the squatters, “only four houses excepted, which the Indians desire may remain, to furnish their young men and warriors with corn as they pass and repass.”⁵



Above: Among the many outsiders with whom Guyasuta was friendly were land speculators like George Washington, an old acquaintance from the latter's mission to Fort LeBoeuf in 1753. Artist Jim West's bronze maquette for his larger sculpture, *Point of View*, shows the pair locked in conversation during a 1770 meeting. It is on display as part of the Fort Pitt Museum exhibition *Guyasuta: The Life and Legend of a Seneca Chief* through December 31, 2022.


Private collection.

Left: Benjamin West's engraving *The American* showing a Native leader on the move with wampum belt in hand, evokes Guyasuta's efforts in this period. Brilliantly negotiating a pair of peace treaties with the British in 1764, Guyasuta successfully pivoted from warfare to diplomacy, a stance he maintained for more than a decade.

Photo by Mike Burke.

As the most prominent American Indian leader in the region, Guyasuta was sometimes insulated from the worst effects of the policies he helped to facilitate, including the wholesale invasion of Shawnee hunting grounds by British settlers following the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1768. Despite his shortcomings, the Seneca leader helped to deliver a decade of relative peace in a region that had been ravaged by warfare since 1754. His seemingly endless quest to maintain good relations among the disparate peoples of the Ohio Country brought him the respect of many British and Native leaders, while his pragmatic approach to outsiders reinforced the idea that trade, settlement, and missionary activity in the Ohio Country, though perhaps inevitable, would, for a time at least, play out on Native terms.

By the mid-1770s, pressure on Native communities in the region reached a new high as settlers poured in, and Virginians, led by Royal Governor Lord Dunmore, waged a short, but destructive, campaign against the Shawnee. This war of aggression against American Indians was, in many ways, a harbinger of the American Revolution. Though he initially stood neutral in that conflict, Guyasuta was eventually forced, like so many other Ohio Country Indians, to abandon the diplomacy he had relied on for more than a decade to combat yet another existential threat to his people.

Thanks to Fort Pitt Museum intern Linda Washburn for her assistance researching this fascinating period in Guyasuta's life. 

¹ Journal of Matthew Clarkson, printed in Clarence Walworth Alvord and Clarence Edwin Carter, eds. *The New Regime, 1765-1767, British Series, Vol. II* (Springfield: Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library, 1916), 355.

² The missionary David McClure encountered Guyasuta in Ligonier in August 1772. McClure, David, D.D. *Diary of David McClure, Doctor of Divinity, 1748-1820* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1899), 42. From there, his travels that year are described in *The Virginia Gazette*, December 3, 1772. Williamsburg, VA: published by Alexander Purdie and John Dixon. Accessed at <https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/DigitalLibrary/va-gazettes/VGSinglePage.cfm?issueIDNo=72.PD.55/>, 9/1/2022.

³ William Johnson to Thomas Gage, October 12, 1772. Printed in Alexander Flick, ed. *The Papers of Sir William Johnson, Vol. VIII* (Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1933), 615-616.

⁴ McClure, *Diary*, 42.

⁵ Clarkson diary, *New Regime*, 357.