

## *The Weekly Historical Note*

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### *The Battle at Oriskany*

On August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1777, one of the bloodiest battles of the American Revolution happened right in the middle of the homelands of the Oneida Indians. Situated just to the west of Oneida Lake, Fort Stanwix was garrisoned with approximately 500 troops and was meant to protect the portage between the Mohawk River and Wood Creek. Early in the American Revolution, the British Army turned its eyes on the portage known as The Oneida Carrying Place; they understood well the significance of the strategic point.

“For thousands of years the ancient trail that connects the Mohawk River and Wood Creek served as a vital link of people traveling between the Atlantic Ocean and Lake Ontario. Travelers used this well-worn route through Oneida Indian territory to carry trade goods and news...When Europeans arrived they called this trail the Oneida Carrying Place and inaugurated a significant period in American history—a period when nations fought for control of not only the Oneida Carrying Place, but the Mohawk Valley, the homelands of the Six Nations Confederacy, and the rich resources of North America as well.”

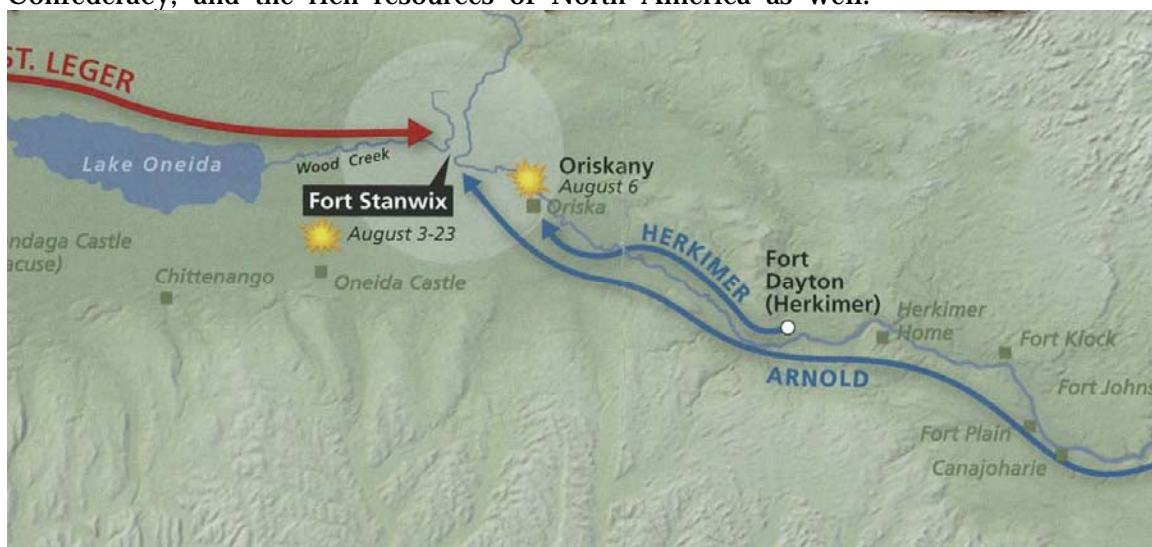


Image 1: Fort Stanwix was an important strategic location throughout the American Revolution and was located at the portage between Wood Creek and the Mohawk River. The village of Oriska, which was composed mostly of Oneida was close to the Fort and was destroyed by Iroquois that fought alongside the British during the war.

A series of waterways, beginning with Wood Creek and heading west, connected first to Oneida Lake, and then all the way to the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway. In the opposite direction, the Mohawk river carried travelers

to the Hudson River and eventually to the Atlantic Ocean. With ease and the Iroquois could strike at their enemies in any direction with great speed and then quickly return to the safety of their homelands.

When the British launched St. Leger's Campaign, they meant to capture the Fort and therefore obtain control of the portage. Laying siege to the fort on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1777, the British meant to starve the Continental soldiers into submission. Any attempts to destroy the fort by cannon fire were useless. Cannon fire may have managed to destroy the outer walls of the fort but the 12 feet of earth behind the timber walls was impenetrable.

General Nicholas Herkimer lead a contingent of Continental Soldiers to aid the garrison in the Fort. On the way, the Pro-British Iroquois sprung a trap and ambushed Herkimer's Army. By the summer of 1777 many Oneida Warriors had decided to show their support for the Colonial Army as independents. The Nation as a whole had not swayed from a neutral position to a declaration of war on the British.

During the battle, it is believed that more than 30 Oneida Warriors sacrificed their lives and more than 500 colonial troops died. General Herkimer was injured but requested to be propped up against a tree and continued to shout out battle orders for the duration of the fight. There was no clear victor in the battle. The British were unsuccessful in obtaining control of the portage, the Americans suffered heavy casualties, and the native allies lost large numbers of already depleted warrior base. Unable to linger in the area, the bodies of the soldiers lay on the battlefield for years and many were never properly buried.



Image 2: August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009, re-enactors dressed in time period clothing fire three musket shots in commemoration of those that perished during the Battle of Oriskany on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1777.

**Sources:**

Image 1:

<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/e-resources/ebooks/records/efh4968.html>

(After opening the page, click "View PDF Version.").

Glatthaar, Joseph T. and James Kirby Martin, *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 48-49, 176-177.