



The Weekly Historical Note

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Alcohol and the Oneida

On July 4th, 1831, a group of Oneida were preparing to travel from Buffalo New York to Green Bay, Wisconsin. Another traveler observed the following: *"...On the wharf at Buffalo we saw a number of the Oneida tribe of Indians, on their way to Greenbay[sic], a branch of Lake Michigan. This tribe having sold their lands in the state of New York, government was conveying them to their new possessions. The poor creatures were standing in groups, dressed in their best attire, and many young and old of both sexes stupefied by intoxication."*


It is a bone chilling image to imagine a number of Oneidas standing in a stupor of drunkenness while they waited for the vessel that would carry them far from their ancestral homelands, many of them bound by fate to never return. Yet, alcohol was not always a source of escape for Oneidas when they were dealing with hardships. In the perspective of time, alcohol was still a relatively new trade item to them, but had contributed to drastic changes in their society.

Alcohol was introduced to the Oneida as one of the negative aspects of The Great North American Fur Trade. In the earliest centuries of trade, Alcohol was not in abundant supply and therefore had a limited impact upon the Oneida. However, over time, the availability of Alcohol continued to grow and problems worsened.

Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin, authors of *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution*, wrote *"Alcohol, another commodity unfamiliar to the Oneidas and other Native Americans, sparked additional interest in European trade. As with tobacco, Indians savored the mind-altering sensation that liquor offered, which enabled them to communicate better with the spirits."* The authors continue by saying that it *"even....found its place in traditional functions."*

Glatthaar and Martin explained that *"potentially ruinous behavior such as binge drinking produced acts of violence, illness, and general mayhem."* The negative effects of Alcohol are all too well known in today's society; however, the reality is that the Oneida had never seen alcohol before and experienced such adverse effects within the community. Tribal leaders did what they could to curb the use of alcohol, but as time wore on it became a part of reservation life.

In time, different missionaries who came to the Oneida homelands took bold stances to prevent the use of alcohol among the community. Samuel Kirkland, missionary to the Oneidas before and during the American Revolution put a great deal of effort into the prevention of the use of alcohol. In October of 1767, it was reported to Kirkland that *"several women were drinking heavily just outside the*



village. He reproached them for their misconduct and destroyed their rum.” The husband of one of the women confronted Kirkland two days in a row. The second day he was drunk and tried to attack Kirkland, grabbing him by the throat. *“Kirkland managed to wrestle the fellow to the ground, and with some assistance, bound an gagged him.”* His wife then *“assailed Kirkland, and he tied her up as well.”*

Whether Kirkland’s actions were becoming of a minister or not, he continued to speak out against the use of alcohol, facing everything from general discontent to death threats. The trade economy of the colonial era lingered on in early American History, however, in due time alcohol ceased to be a trade good and became a easily accessible purchase good. The U.S. government tried to slow the influx of alcohol onto Indian reservations by passing legislation known as the Indian Liquor Laws. Although it is not as widespread as it used to be, the Oneida and many other tribes continue today to battle the effects of alcoholism and eradicate its negative side effects from their communities (see graph below).

Sources:

1. Hauptman, Laurence M. and L. Gordon McLester III, eds. *The Oneida Indian Journey: From New York to Wisconsin, 1784-1860*. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1999) 12-13
2. Glatthaar, Joseph T. and James Kirby Martin. *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 28-29.
3. Graph Image, accessed from: <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5734a3.htm>, accessed on August 19, 2009.

FIGURE 1. Average annual number of alcohol-attributable deaths among American Indians/Alaska Natives, by sex and age group — CDC Alcohol-Related Disease Impact software, United States, 2001–2005

