

The Weekly Historical Note

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Samuel Kirkland

During the 18th century, a religious movement known as the “Great Awakening” was moving through Colonial America. One minister, Daniel Kirkland, and his wife Mary, were deeply moved by the spiritually charging wave that echoed through the colonies. It was no surprise then that their son Samuel shared his fathers conviction and likewise became a minister.


Samuel Kirkland was born in 1741 in Connecticut. When he had reached the age of 18, his father enrolled him in Eleazar Wheelock’s school which later became Dartmouth College. At the time, Wheelock’s school brought together colonial students and Indian students in an effort to enhance training while they studied to become missionaries for Indian communities. It was during his time at school that Samuel Kirkland first meet Joseph Bryant, a Mohawk who would ultimately be responsible for large number Mohawk and other Iroquois joining the side of the British during the American Revolution.



Samuel Kirkland Portrait
painted by Augustus Rockwell

Prior to graduating, Kirkland was sent to a school in New Jersey, and the assigned to minister to the Seneca who, after 18 months, rejected Kirkland. Wheelock convinced officials to graduate Kirkland anyway and then he was sent to the Oneida. It was during his time with the Oneida that Kirkland achieved his first successes in converting natives to the Christian faith.

Kirkland had a rough time beginning his missionary work to the Oneida. After a short time he did manage to begin to surround himself with a small but growing band of followers. Kirkland came to Oneida when the community was divided between the traditional chiefs and the younger warriors. Traditionally that chiefs held power through the matriarchal system, however, there was a shift in the power structure when the Fur Trade began. As the years passed, young warriors who did most of the hunting began to obtain more and more material wealth from the supplies they got through trading furs to the colonists. This subtle shift brought about a waves of contention into Oneida as the young warriors began to vie for more and more power which was only traditionally ceded to them during times of war.



Historians Joseph Glatthaar and James Martin explained that in spite of Kirkland’s seemingly genuine dedication in his desire to convert the Oneida, many Oneida warriors were likely to accept Christianity anyway. Noting strong parallels between the Christina and Oneida Creation Stories, they point out that each centralizes the creation of human beings. “Both spoke of the rapid establishment of the Earth, with animals, plants, and other objects placed there to serve humankind.” They also explain that each story focuses on the conflicts of good and evil, and that those conflicts continue in the world today. Noting specifically on Kirkland’s tendency to teach about battles from the Old Testament, the authors also draw connection to the military themes that Kirkland used to draw in his predominantly warrior-age congregation.

What Kirkland offered thus fit especially well with the need of the Oneida warrior class. Over the decades, clashes with the sachems had driven the warriors farther and farther away from tribal customs and beliefs that supported the traditional leadership. The tenets of Christianity helped fill the resulting vacuum while offering the warriors alternate but familiar-sounding precepts on which to construct their lives. Furthermore, a rejection of Christianity would have made villagers more susceptible to traditionalist tribal revivals. This possibility in turn would have threatened the status and influence of the warriors by offering openings for a resurgence of power by the sachems. From their point of view, the warriors had an abundance of reasons to support Kirkland’s Christian ministry.

Excerpt from: *Forgotten Allies* by Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), p 61.

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Sources:

Glatthaar, Joseph T. and James Kirby Martin, *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.

Samuel Kirkland Image from: www.historycooperative.org

