

## *The Weekly Historical Note*

By: Nicolas Reynolds  
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### *Valley Forge and the Oneida*

It is a long standing oral tradition with the Oneida Nation that during the American Revolution, Oneida warriors traveled from New York to Valley Forge Pennsylvania and brought corn to the starving troops in George Washington's Army. In more recent times, several historians have shared this story, but none have explained it as clearly as Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin, authors of *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and The American Revolution*.

After gathering at Fort Schuyler, 47 warriors from the Oneida Nation decided that they would aid George Washington's Army. "The next morning, April 25, the party began the lengthy land journey of more than 250 mile to Valley Forge. They took very few horses with them and, according to Oneida tradition, they also brought along some quantity of corn." It is not exactly clear how much corn they brought, but estimates passed down by tradition have been as high as 600 bushels.

The journey required that the Oneidas travel through colonial settlements and villages creating concern for some. "About a day's journey from Valley Forge, the party settled into a small Pennsylvania farming community for the night. With nearly fifty fully armed Indians in their midst, the local European American settlers were apprehensive... Before Sunset, the Oneida took to the woods to hunt game, mainly squirrels and birds, for their evening meal. 'these they cooked over a fire in the evening and devoured without any European ceremony,' a witness recorded. In search of fresh milk, one Oneida visited a home. The woman who answered the door stunned the warrior by speaking some Iroquois phrases to him. She had spent her childhood days in central New York and knew a modest amount of Mohawk, which is very similar to the Oneida language."

"On may 15<sup>th</sup>, 1778 the Oneidas passed through the army's pickets. As they approached the massive encampment, the sight of thousands of troops



impressed the warriors, if they did not look too closely at the soldiers' tattered appearance. They also observed wooden shanties speckled throughout a sea of mud. Everywhere their eyes gazed, three stumps reminded them that this was once an elegant land."

"While the Oneida warriors familiarized themselves with Washington and his army, Polly Cooper went to work preparing hulled corn soup for the hungry soldiers. Although the Oneidas lacked the corn and transportation capacity to feed the entire army in Pennsylvania, and little bit helped in a time of need....Polly shelled the ears,



ground the kernels into meal, boiled the corn soup, and mixed these items with available fruits and nuts, all with the intent of showing the soldiers how to improve the nutritional quality and taste of their sparse diets."

"As with the Oneida warriors, Polly Cooper would accept no payment for her services. Word of her generous deeds so impressed Washington and his staff that according to oral tradition, the commanding general's wife, Martha, gave Polly a shawl, a gift that the Oneida people still cherish." It is believed that the shawl eventually passed down through the generations to Louella Derrick, an Onondaga woman. Polly Cooper was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the Oneida County Historical Society in Utica, New York in the 2005.

To see a picture of Louella Derrick with the shawl, visit the following website:  
<http://www.oneidaindiannation.com/home/content/39567117.html>

### Sources:

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

"Polly Cooper: Oneida Heroine." Accessed from <http://www.oneidaindiannation.com>.