

SOME AMERICAN INDIAN FREEMASONS

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Joseph Brant

A colorful if somewhat enigmatic figure in the early days of Freemasonry in America was Joseph Brant. Brant was a Mohawk Indian chief whose Indian name was "Thayendanegea." He was born in 1742 in Ohio and was made a Mason in Falcon Lodge in London, England in 1776. Afterwards, he affiliated with Lodge No. 10, Hamilton, Canada.

Brant's fortunes seem to have been inextricably linked to those of the famous Sir William Johnson of New York. Johnson was an English fur trader who settled in the Mohawk Valley and became such a friend of the Iroquois that the English commissioned him "Colonel of the Six Nations" in 1746. Eventually, he was put in charge of all northern Indian affairs. His land holdings were vast and his influence considerable. His third wife was Molly Brant, the older sister of Joseph. Sir William took a special interest in his young brother-in-law and saw that he received an education.

Brant was sent to Moor's Indian Charity School in Connecticut. He developed a keen interest in Christianity and undertook the translation of the English prayer book and part of the New Testament into the Mohawk language. He was a participant on the English side, at age 13, in the battle of Lake George in the French and Indians War. Sir William had been instrumental in keeping the Six Nations allied with England when most of the other tribes were siding with the French. This fidelity was not forgotten by the crown and Sir William and the Iroquois both prospered after the war.

By the time of the Revolution Brant had become the most powerful Mohawk chief. Sir William had died, but the Johnson family, including the Brants, remained influential and loyal to the English. The Revolution split the Six Nations with the Mohawks, Onondaga, Cayuga and Senecas following Brant and joining the British, while the Tuscarora and Oneida pursued the rebel cause.

Brant was involved in several important engagements during the war, some of which earned him the infamous epithet, "The Monster Brant." Benedict Arnold, before his own treachery, referred to Brant and his Indians as, "a banditti of robbers, murderers and traitors." It was Brant who led the Cherry Valley, New York massacre and the Battle of Oriskany. He was also blamed for the bloody Wyoming, Pennsylvania, massacre of 1778, but historical research has shown that he actually had no hand in it.

After the war Brant and his troops fled to Canada and were given lands on the Grand River, Ontario. He again took up his translation of the Scriptures into Mohawk. Once more he journeyed to England where he had previously been made a Mason and became a close friend of the Prince of Wales. He died in 1807.

It is difficult for us to view Brant and his role in the Revolution with complete objectivity as our natural sympathies lie with the colonists who sought independence. Yet, there was much in this man that was admirable. He was a brilliant chief, a native American leader of uncommon ability. Moreover, he developed a fierce loyalty to England at an early age and remained steadfast in that loyalty throughout his life. Clearly, he was a man who was not afraid to risk his life in defense of his beliefs.

Red Jacket

Robert Morris, the great financier of the American Revolution, is a somewhat controversial figure of history. It is beyond question that Morris performed valuable services for the new nation. It is equally undeniable that many of those who did business with Morris found themselves on the short end of the deal. The Seneca Indians are a good example. The purchase of the Seneca's lands by Morris was a transaction in which a native born American Freemason had a leading role.

Red Jacket (1758-1830) was a chief and orator of the Seneca, one of the tribes of the Six Nations. A contemporary and ally of Brant during the Revolution, Red Jacket was, like Brant, a Mason. Despite his opposition to the American cause, his influence among his people was recognized in the inevitable peacemaking with the United States and he received a medal from his friend, George Washington, in 1791.

By 1797, the Six Nations had given up most of their lands in New York. Only the Seneca retained their vast territory west of the Genesee River. The legal right to purchase these lands was held by Robert Morris who hoped to make a fortune out of speculation on frontier real estate. Morris sold his rights to a consortium of Dutch bankers for a substantial sum, payment of which was to be delayed until he had negotiated a purchase from the Seneca owners.

Negotiations were scheduled to take place at the Treaty of Big Tree in the summer of 1797. Morris was then virtually a prisoner in his own home to avoid being hounded by creditors. He was forced to send his son, Thomas, to seduce the Indians---with food, clothing, hardware, powder and whiskey. Funds were set aside for the Seneca leaders. Red Jacket, Cornplanter, Little Billy, and Farmer's Brother were all offered life annuities. Morris combined high pressure tactics and bribery to win over the Seneca.

The Indians were suspicious at first. Red Jacket had previously urged Congress to deny Morris a license to purchase Indian lands, saying that he would be "too cunning and hard" for them. At the treaty conference he, as official speaker for the chiefs, opposed all efforts of Morris

to buy. A lot of this was bluster as Red Jacket, always eager to further his own self-interest, sent a private message to Morris stating that he did not personally oppose the sale.

The next day Morris exerted pressure of a different type. He spoke with the chief women of the tribe, telling them that the \$100,000 he was offering for the Seneca territory would relieve them of their drudgery; they would be able to buy good clothes and liquor and hire white men to till their fields. All of this was just too much for the Indians and they finally succumbed to the blandishments of Morris. The Holland Land Company, with Robert and Thomas Morris as their agents, acquired title to a sizable chunk of New York State. What did the sellers get? Red Jacket received \$600 and Cornplanter received \$300 in cash. Another \$1,000 was divided among the remaining Seneca sachems. In addition small annuities were given to Cornplanter, Red Jacket, Farmer's Brother, Young King, Little Billy, Pollard and Little Billy's mother. The Senecas as a whole received \$100,000 to be invested in bank stock. This resulted in an income of something less than four dollars per person annually.

The deed was signed by fifty Seneca on September 16, 1797. This document sounded the death knell for the Seneca as a nation and consigned them to a life as reservation Indians, a fate aptly described by Anthony F. C. Wallace in *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (Knopf, 1970), at page 184:

“The reservation system theoretically established small asylums where Indians who had lost their hunting grounds could remain peacefully apart from surrounding white communities until they became civilized. It actually resulted, however, in the creation of slums in the wilderness, where no traditional Indian culture could long survive and where only the least useful aspects of white culture could easily penetrate.”

Red Jacket, although a Freemason, was not always the most admirable of characters. Despite his shortcomings, there were times when he rose to the occasion and acquitted himself with distinction as the spokesman for his people. One such time came in 1805 when he was called upon to reply to The Reverend Mr. Cram who had come to Buffalo Creek to tell the Six Nations that there was but one true religion. Naturally, the one true religion was that espoused by The Reverend Mr. Cram.

It should be remembered that Red Jacket had little use for Christian missionaries. He never accepted Christianity himself, although he professed a belief in one God and in heaven and hell. His words to Cram have been preserved and are reproduced here as quoted in *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*. Red Jacket could neither read nor write, but his argument for religious tolerance was made with eloquence and clarity.

“Brother, our seats were once large, and yours were very small; you have now become a great people, and we have scarcely a place left to spread our blankets; you have got our country, but are not satisfied; you want to force your religion upon us.

“Brother, continue to listen. You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind, and if we do not take hold of the religion which you white

people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter; you say that you are right, and we are lost; how do we know this to be true? We understand that your religion is written in a book; if it was intended for us as well as you, why has not the Great Spirit given it to us, and not only to us, but why did he not give to our forefathers the knowledge of the book, with the means of understanding it rightly? We only know what you tell us about it; how shall we know when to believe, being so often deceived by the white people?

“Brother, you say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit; if there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why not all agree, as you can all read the book?

“Brother, we do not understand these things; we are told that your religion was given to your forefathers, and has been handed down from father to son. We also have a religion which was given to our forefathers, and has been handed down to us their children. We worship that way. It teacheth us to be thankful for all the favors we receive; to love one another, and to be united; we never quarrel about religion.

“Brother, the Great Spirit has made us all; but he has made a great difference between his white and red children; he has given us a different complexion, and different customs; to you he has given the arts; to these he has not opened our eyes; we know these things to be true. Since he has made so great a difference between us in other things, why may we not conclude that he has given us a great different religion according to our understanding; the Great Spirit does right; he knows what is best for his children: we are satisfied.

“Brother, we do not wish to destroy your religion, or take it from you, we only want to enjoy our own.

“Brother, you say you have not come to get our land or our money, but to enlighten our minds. I will now tell you that I have been at your meetings, and saw you collecting money from the meeting. I cannot tell what this money was intended for, but suppose it was for your minister, and if we should conform to your way of thinking, perhaps you may want some from us.

“Brother, we are told that you have been preaching to white people in this place: these people are our neighbors, we are acquainted with them: we will wait a little while and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest, and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again what you have said.”

Ely Samuel Parker

The grandson of Red Jacket was another notable American Indian who also happened to be a Mason. Ely Samuel Parker (1828-1895) was a Seneca chief, a U. S. Army officer and the first Indian to hold the office of Commissioner of Indian Affairs. He is probably best remembered as the scrivener of the agreement by which General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Confederate Army to General Ulysses S. Grant.

Parker was raised in Batavia Lodge No. 88, Batavia, New York, and later affiliated with Valley Lodge No. 109. He demitted and became a founder and first Worshipful Master of Akron Lodge No. 527 of New York. Ely Parker Lodge No. 1002 of Buffalo, New York was named in his honor.

Young Parker grew up on the Seneca reservation and was educated in the mission school and local academies. A bright student, he went on to study law but was refused admission to the bar because as an Indian he was not considered a United States citizen. He then studied engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and found employment with the federal government as a civil engineer. While he was in charge of the construction of government buildings in Galena, Illinois, he met a former Army Officer, Ulysses S. Grant. The two became warm friends and remained such until Grant's death.

When Civil War came, Parker immediately sought a commission in the Corps of Engineers. Despite his outstanding qualifications, racial prejudice again blocked his path. He persisted, however, and received a Captain's commission in 1863. Soon he found himself under the command of his friend Grant who had been recalled to the Army. It was not long before he was promoted to lieutenant general. Grant, well aware of Parker's education and excellent penmanship, appointed him as military secretary. It was in this capacity that he was called upon to prepare the surrender document at Appomattox Court House.

Parker remained in the Army after the war. He was elevated to brigadier general at the age of 39. President Grant appointed him Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1869. The Bureau of Indian Affairs at that time had a record that is best described as odious.

Parker sought to eliminate long-standing corruption and to administer the agency so as to insure justice for the Indians. Obviously, he tread on some powerful toes and in 1871 was brought to trial by a Committee of the House of Representatives on charges of defrauding the government. He was exonerated but the experience soured him on government service.

He returned to New York and attempted various business ventures over the next several years. These were largely unsuccessful and in 1876 he accepted a post as superintendent of buildings and supplies for the New York City Police Department. He held this post until his death in 1895. He was buried in the Red Jacket lot at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, New York.