The Sullivan Expedition of 1779

On the summit of a lofty hill overlooking wide stretches of the beautiful Chemung valley, stands a noble monument of Vermont granite erected to commemorate an important battle of the American Revolution. The monument as it stands today takes the place of an earlier monument of native stone dedicated in 1879 to commemorate the battle of Newtown. It was fondly hoped by those who erected this earlier monument that it would last at least a century, but the action of the elements and the depredations of relic hunters so weakened the structure that it collapsed on August 29, 1911, thirty-two years after its erection. The present shaft was dedicated on August 29, 1912, seventeen years ago, the principal speaker being Governor Dix of New York. Among the other notable speakers on that occasion were Judge Frederick Collin General Mills, Jobe Hedges, and Lieutenant Governor Conway.

Set into one side of the original monument was a marble tablet bearing the following legend:

"Near this spot on Sunday, the 29th day of August, 1779, the forces of the Six Nations, under the leadership of Joseph Brant, assisted by British regulars and Tories, were met and defeated by the Americans under the command of Major General John Sullivan of New Hampshire, whose soldiers led by Brig. Gen. James Clinton of N. Y., Brig. Gen. Enoch Poor of N. H., Brig. Gen. Edward Hand of Pa., and Brig. Gen. Wm. Maxwell of N. J., completely routed the enemy and accelerated the advent of the day which assured to the United States their existence as an Independent Nation."
Some have regarded the campaign which this monument commemorates as a great stroke of military genius; others have looked upon it as a deliberate and unjustified attempt on the part of a stronger race to destroy the greatest confederacy ever formed by a savage people. To take Sullivan's campaign out of its historical setting and judge it as an isolated event in the struggle for American independence would be manifestly unfair. It is only as one views the campaign in the light of events which preceded it that the real significance of the movement stands forth and the apparently wanton destruction which characterized his operations becomes comprehensible. Permit me to sketch this background of events before attempting to discuss in detail the movements of Sullivan and his associates.
The years immediately following the capture of Quebec by Wolfe and the consequent downfall of French power in North America were marked by a fierce border warfare carried on between the Indians and the colonists. That inimitable leader, Pontiac, chief of the Ottawas, formed a union of the tribes from the western borders of Pennsylvania to the Mississippi River and from the Ohio River to the great lakes besides tribes from Canada; and so formidable was his power that he threatened for a time to destroy not only all the British forts in the Northwest Territory but the frontier settlements of Pennsylvania and Virginia as well. When, at length, in 1766 Pontiac met Sir William Johnson at Fort Oswego and negotiated a formal peace, hundreds of settlers' cabins were in ashes, hundreds of men, women, and children had been murdered, and a spirit of hatred had been engendered between the settlers and the Indians which did not die out for generations.

Owing to the restraining influence of Sir William Johnson, the Iroquois took little part in Pontiac's war, although the steady encroachment of white settlers upon their territory was a source of great irritation and many of the leaders believed with Pontiac that the Indians must unite and crush the whites or eventually be crushed by them.

The surrender of Pontiac brought a temporary lull in Indian hostilities. Mary Jemison, who was living as a captive among the Senecas at this time, says in her autobiography, "After the conclusion of the French war, our tribe had nothing to do till the commencement of the American Revolution. For twelve or fifteen years, the use of the implements of war was not known, nor the warwhoop heard, save on days of festivity, when the achievements of former times were commemorated
in a kind of mimic warfare. Thus, at peace among themselves and with the neighboring whites—though there were none at that time very near—our Indians lived quietly and peaceably at home, till a little before the breaking out of the Revolutionary War.

But this idyllic condition pictured by Mary Jemison was not long to endure. On August 15 and 16, 1775 there was convened at German Flats a council of the Six Nations, called by General Philip Schuyler and other American patriots for the purpose of counteracting, if possible, the influence of Col. Guy Johnson over the Iroquois, and for the purpose of securing the neutrality of the Indians in the struggle between Great Britain and her colonies. The conference was concluded at Albany, September first. Here, presents of goods valued at 150 pounds sterling were distributed and the Indians solemnly promised not to take up arms on either side. But the name of Johnson was one to conjure with in the Mohawk valley, and the intrigues of British royal agents were extremely difficult to combat. At a council called by the British at Oswego a few months after the council at Albany, the British royal agents said in effect to the Iroquois, "The people of the states are few in number and can easily be subdued. Because of their disobedience to the King, they justly merit all the punishment it is possible for white men and Indians to inflict upon them. The King, on the other hand, is rich in money and in men. His rum is as plenty as the water in Lake Ontario; his men are as numerous as the sands on its shore. If you warriors will assist in this fight and persevere in your friendship for the King, you shall never want money or goods."

In the deliberations which followed, the warriors at first refused to break the promise given at the Albany conference; but finally cupidity prevailed, and the delegates with the exception of the Oneidas voted to support the British. Inasmuch as the law of the Confederacy
required a unanimous vote, the action of the Oneidas prevented the Iroquois from joining as a body. Under such circumstances each tribe was left free to follow its own inclination, so the individual tribes with the exception of the Oneidas joined the British cause. Loaded with substantial presents, the warriors departed to their respective villages, eager for the fighting to begin.

It was no mean ally that the British gained when they annexed the Iroquois. This highly organized Indian confederacy controlled a territory 1200 miles long and 600 miles wide,—an area ten times as large as the State of New York. In war they had made their name a terror in the forests of Canada and in regions as far west as the Mississippi River and their war-whoop had resounded even under the walls of Quebec. They were implacable enemies who neither asked nor gave quarter. It was this band of savages which the British now proceeded to equip and turn loose upon the colonies of New York and Pennsylvania.

Under the able leadership of Joseph Brant, assisted by Col. William Butler and the notorious Walter Butler, the Indians began a systematic attempt to wipe out the frontier settlements of these two colonies and to destroy the crops and cattle upon which the Continental army was depending for supplies. Beginning in the latter part of May, 1778, the Indians destroyed Cobleskill, Andrustown, Springfield, Wyoming, Pa., Cherry Valley, and many remote cabins.

So serious had the depredations become by the end of 1778 that Congress ordered drastic measures to be taken against these marauders. Accordingly Washington determined to send a force of 5000 men against the Iroquois and their British and Tory supporters, well-knowing that only by sending an overwhelming force and inflicting a crushing defeat could he hope to secure safety for the frontier. The command of the expedition was offered to Gates on account of his rank, but the rigors
of an Indian campaign in an unknown wilderness did not appeal to this
ease-loving general. When Gates refused the command, in terms which
greatly irritated Washington, it was offered to Major General John
Sullivan, a New Hampshire lawyer, whose loyalty and zeal in the American
cause had been proved on numerous occasions. Sullivan gladly accepted
the command and at once began vigorous preparations for the campaign.

In appointing Sullivan to this command, Washington explained the
purpose of the expedition in the following note: "Sir: The expedition
you are appointed to command is to be directed against the hostile
tribes of the Six Nations of Indians with their associates and adherents.
The immediate object is their total destruction and devastation, and
the capture of as many persons of every age and sex as possible. It
will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent
their planting more."

The plan of the campaign was worked out on a comprehensive scale.
Sullivan was to assemble his forces at Wyoming on the Susquehanna and
proceed up the Susquehanna valley to Tioga Point. Clinton was to pass
up the Mohawk valley, punish the Onondagas, and then proceed to Otsego
Lake. From this point he was to make his way down the Susquehanna and
join Sullivan at Tioga Point. In order to make the plan complete, Col.
Broadhead was to start from Pittsburg, proceed against the Senecas on
the Allegheny River, and join Sullivan in the Genessee valley. After
subjugating the Indians of central New York, the entire force was to
march against Fort Niagara and capture that important post.

At the beginning of the campaign everything proceeded as planned.
Sullivan made his way up the Susquehanna without molestation from the
Indians; and Clinton, after inflicting severe punishment upon the
Onondagas, proceeded to Otsego Lake, and, damming up the waters of the
lake, created a flood which floated his barges down to Tioga Point,
much to the consternation of the Indians, who could not account for such high water in time of drought. Col. Broadhead marched his force of 605 men up the Allegheny valley, destroying Indian villages and corn fields as he went, and probably reached Clean Point. He was prevented from joining Sullivan owing to the fact that many of his soldiers by that time were without shoes and some of them almost without clothing.

While these movements of the army were in progress, the Indians were not idle. In order to divert a part of Sullivan's forces, Joseph Brant led a band of his Indians and Tories into Orange County and on July 20 destroyed the village of Minisink, burning ten houses, twelve barns, and a church besides the plunder which they could not carry with them. They also killed several of the inhabitants and carried others away prisoners. Finding that this move had failed of its purpose, Brant returned to Newtown on the Chemung River where with some 800 Indians and 300 British regulars and Tories he constructed breastworks and awaited the coming of Sullivan.

Upon the arrival of Clinton and his forces from Otsego Lake, Sullivan at once got underway and advanced up the Chemung valley. Knowing that he was now in the enemy's county and might expect an attack any moment, he moved with caution and sent out scouting parties to keep him informed of the Indians' movements. According to Sullivan's official report to General Washington, a messenger arrived from Major Parr about eleven o'clock on the morning of August 29th, with the information that the enemy had thrown up a very extensive breastwork on rising ground about a mile in front of their village of Chemung and had concealed themselves in very large numbers behind it. The breastwork was so situated that it commanded the road over which Sullivan would have to march with his artillery and would enable the enemy to fire upon Sullivan's front and flank at the same time.
When Sullivan arrived in the vicinity of these works, he sent certain divisions of his army to occupy the neighboring hills and stationed others along the river to cut off if possible the retreat of the enemy. He then opened fire on the breastwork with his artillery. The engagement lasted about six hours and resulted as might have been expected, in the complete overthrow of the enemy.

In his official report of the battle, Sullivan states that the enemy "fled in the greatest disorder, leaving eleven of their Indian warriors and one female dead on the ground, with a great number of packs, blankets, arms, camp equipage, and a variety of their jewels, some of which are of considerable value." A little farther on in the report he states, "Many of their dead must have been carried off or concealed, as we found many bloody packs, coats, shirts, and blankets, and, in short, every appearance not only of havoc but of flight and confusion was left behind them."

Sullivan reports his own loss as three killed and thirty-nine wounded.

The battle of Newtown virtually ended Sullivan's campaign so far as fighting was concerned. The Iroquois having staked their hopes on this one battle and having been defeated with great loss, could not be persuaded to make another stand against the enemy. Occasional small skirmishes are recorded, but no battle of importance is mentioned in the reports after the battle of Newtown. Wherever Sullivan advanced, he found the villages deserted and the Indians in retreat. His work during the remainder of the campaign was the work of destruction.

Fortunately for the historian, a number of Sullivan's officers kept journals, and from these records it is possible to construct a fairly accurate picture of the campaign of devastation which followed
the battle of Newtown. Lieutenant Beatty's journal under date of August 30th reads, "Our brigade destroyed about 150 acres of the best corn that ever I saw (some of the stalks grew 16 feet high) besides great quantities of beans, potatoes, pumpkins, cucumbers, squashes, and watermelons, and the enemy looking at us from the hills but did not fire on us." His entry of September 1st states "At dark we arrived within ½ mile of Catharine's town where we made a halt, got our troops in good order, as we expected the enemy was yet in the town, - - - but we proceeded into the town without any interruption - - - and encamped. Pulled down the houses for firewood." On September 2nd he records, "This morning rose up and found our Brigade lying in the lower part of the town which consisted of between 30 and 40 houses on each side of the river very well built and on good land." On September 7th the journal records that the army reached the chief town of the Seneca nation consisting of "70 or 80 houses and built very compact and the chief of the houses very good.-- -- --When we came in, the men began immediately to pull down the houses for firewood."

The entry for Tuesday, Sept. 14 reads, "The whole army was under arms this morning an hour before day and remained so till sunrise; about 7 o'clock fatigue parties were sent out to destroy corn which was there in great abundance and beans. About 12 o'clock we marched, crossed over a branch of the Jinesee River and came upon a very beautiful flat of great extent growing up with wild grass higher in some places than our heads. We marched on this flat 2 miles and crossed the Jinesee River which is about as big as the Tyoga but very crooked. Left the flats and marched through the woods 3 mile and arrived at Chenesee Town which is the largest we have yet seen; it lies in a crook of the river on extraordinary good land about 70 houses very compact and very well built and about the same number of
outhouses in cornfields, etc." He also records that on the following morning, "The whole army went out at 6 o'clock to destroy corn and was out till 12 o'clock. There was here the greatest quantity of corn and beans of any of the towns. Some of it we husked and threw into the river, the rest we carried to the houses and burned, the whole we totally destroyed. About 10 o'clock we received orders to begin our march home which we did leaving the town in flames."

The records in the other journals read much the same. Wherever a village, a cornfield, an orchard, a bean field, a garden, or anything capable of supporting life was found it was utterly destroyed.

Colonel Broadhead's report is of the same tenor. He recounts that after following an Indian trail some twenty miles up into the hills on the west bank of the Allegheny River, he came out on a high bluff overlooking the present village of Kinzua. Here in a broad valley lay the principal villages of the Senecas on the Allegheny. It was the home of some of the most famous Seneca chiefs, Cornplanter, Farmer's Brother and Blacksnake, but these great leaders had gone with their warriors to help check Sullivan's advance at Newtown. On the rich bottom lands were more than five hundred acres of corn nearly ready for harvest. Finer corn, Broadhead declares, he had never seen. All this was cut, piled, and burned. The substantial log houses were likewise burned, and when Broadhead marched on, the valley presented a scene of utter desolation.

Throughout their journals the soldiers constantly express wonder at the remarkable fertility of the soil and at the skill with which the Indians cultivated their crops. The Genesee Flats, where grass grew from five to eight feet in height and where there were neither stumps nor stones, are mentioned repeatedly. It is not strange that men from the hills of Pennsylvania and from the rocky soil of New England should be delighted with the rich river bottoms of central and western New York.
When the war ended and these lands were thrown open for settlement, many of the soldiers who had been with Sullivan returned to establish homes in these fertile regions.

So far in this paper we have been looking at Sullivan's campaign through the eyes of the conqueror. It will be interesting to pause long enough to glance at the expedition through the eyes of the conquered.

At the time of Sullivan's raid, Mary Jemison was living in the Genesee valley and in her autobiography has left an account of the expedition from the Indian's point of view. I quote from chapter VIII. "At length in the fall of 1779, intelligence was received that a large and powerful army of the rebels, under the command of General Sullivan, was making rapid progress toward our settlement; burning and destroying the huts and cornfields; killing the cattle, hogs, and horses; and cutting down the fruit trees belonging to the Indians throughout the country.

"Our Indians immediately became alarmed and suffered everything but death, from fear that they should be taken by surprise and totally destroyed at a single blow. But in order to prevent so great a catastrophe, they sent out a few spies, who were to keep themselves at a short distance in front of the invading army in order to watch its operations and give information of its advances and success.

"Sullivan arrived at Canandaigua Lake and had finished his work of destruction there, and it was ascertained that he was about to march to our flats, when our Indians resolved to give him battle on the way and prevent, if possible, the distress to which they knew we should be subjected if he should succeed in reaching our town. Accordingly they sent all their women and children into the woods a little west of Little Beard's Town, in order that we might make a
good retreat if it should be necessary; and then, well armed, set out to face the conquering enemy. The place which they fixed upon for their battle ground, lay between Honeoye creek and Conesus Lake. At length a scouting party from Sullivan's army arrived at the spot selected, when the Indians arose from their ambush with all the fierceness and terror it was possible for them to exercise, and directly put the party upon a retreat. Two Oneida Indians were all the prisoners that were taken in that skirmish."

One of these Indians was killed on the spot. The other escaped from his guards and fled toward Sullivan's army. "The Indians pursued him without success; but in their absence they fell in with a small detachment of Sullivan's men, with whom they had a short but severe skirmish, in which they killed a number of the enemy and took Lieutenant Boyd and one private prisoners and brought them to Little Beard's Town where they were soon after put to death in the most shocking and cruel manner, - - - - -

"This tragedy being finished, our Indians again held a short council on the expediency of giving Sullivan battle if he should continue to advance; and finally came to the conclusion that they were not strong enough to drive him, nor to prevent his taking possession of their fields; but that, if it was possible, they would escape with their own lives, preserve their families, and leave their possessions to be overrun by the invading army.

"The women and children were then sent on still farther toward Buffalo, to a large creek which was called by the Indians Catawba (Stony creek, which empties into the Tonawanda creek at Varysburg, Wyoming county,) accompanied by a part of the Indians, while the remainder secreted themselves in the woods back of Little Beard's Town to watch the movements of the army. - - - - -

"Our corn was good that year, a part of which we had gathered and secured for winter."
"In one or two days after the skirmish at Conesus Lake, Sullivan and his army arrived at Genesee River, where they destroyed every article of the food kind that they could lay their hands on. A part of our corn they burnt, and threw the remainder into the river. They burnt our houses, killed what few cattle and horses they could find, destroyed our fruit trees and left nothing but the bare soil and timber."

"Having crossed and recrossed the river and finished the work of destruction, the army marched off to the east. Our Indians saw them move off, but, suspecting it was Sullivan's intention to watch our return and then to take us by surprise, resolved that the main body of our tribe should hunt where we then were, till Sullivan had gone so far that there would be no danger of his returning to molest us.

"This being agreed to, we hunted continually till the Indians concluded that there could be no risk in our once more taking possession of our land. Accordingly, we all returned; but what were our feelings when we found that there was not a mouthful of any kind of sustenance left—not even enough to keep a child one day from perishing with hunger."

The description bears a close resemblance to a passage in Caesar's Gallic War in which the Allabroges complain that after the passage of the Helvetians across their territory nothing remained but the soil of the fields.

Little Beard's Town, or Chenese Town as Sullivan called it, marks the western limit of Sullivan's raid. It was the most important village of the Senecas and the place where most of the expeditions against the white settlements were planned. It was located within the eastern limits of the present village of Cuylerville on the west side of the Genesee River and about three miles from Geneseo. It contained one hundred twenty-eight houses built of logs and very commodious. From this point Sullivan retraced his course, arriving at Wyoming October 7th. He left Wyoming
October 10th and arrived at Easton on the 15th where thanksgiving services were held to express gratitude for the safe return of the army. The army then hastened to join the army of Washington.

In his official report to Congress, Sullivan states that the army destroyed forty towns besides scattering houses. He estimates the corn destroyed at 160,000 bushels besides a vast quantity of vegetables of every kind. In one orchard alone there were 1500 fruit trees, and many similar orchards were destroyed.

This systematic destruction by Sullivan of houses and provisions left the Indians in a well-nigh hopeless condition. Winter was upon them and the food upon which they had depended was gone. Their only recourse was to the British, who had persuaded them to make war upon the colonists. Accordingly many of them went to Fort Niagara and wintered in its vicinity. The winter was one of the most severe ever experienced in Western New York. Snow fell to great depths and the cold was intense so that many game animals upon which the Indians depended for sustenance perished from cold and hunger. The Indians, poorly housed and poorly nourished, soon became ill and died in large numbers.

Sullivan's expedition had destroyed the homes of the Iroquois but it had not destroyed the Iroquois themselves. The spring of 1780 found these haughty warriors, though poor and disorganized, eager to avenge their wrongs. Under the leadership of Brant and Cornplanter and aided and encouraged by the British and Tories they had organized formidable war parties even before the coming of spring and lost no time in launching their campaign of devastation.

By this time the regions around the headwaters of the Susquehanna had been reduced almost to a wilderness. Practically all the settlements had been burned, and the inhabitants had either been killed or had fled to safer regions. But the rich valleys of the Mohawk and Schoharie
offered an inviting field to these bands of marauders. Raid after raid was conducted in these regions and one by one the settlements and farm houses were reduced to ashes. Harpersfield, Little Falls, Canajoharie, and the rich farms in these regions in turn fell a prey to the savages until the valleys of the Mohawk and Schoharie looked not unlike the Genesee country after Sullivan's forces retired. Not, indeed, until that dauntless fighter, Col. Marinus Willett took command of the frontier forces, were the Indians and Tories finally driven out of these valleys and peace brought to the harassed frontier.

You will recall that when Washington appointed Sullivan to command the punitive expedition against the Six Nations, he specified certain objectives that were to be accomplished. A subsequent letter written from West Point, Sept. 15th reinforces the general instructions contained in his first letter. After congratulating Sullivan on the success of his enterprise to date he continues, "The advantages we have already gained over the Indians, in the destruction of so many of their settlements, is very flattering to the expedition. But to make it as conclusive as the state of your provisions and the safety of your army will countenance, I would mention two points which I may not have sufficiently expressed in my general instructions, or if I have, which I wish to repeat. The one is the necessity of pushing the Indians to the greatest practicable distance from their own settlements and our frontiers; to the throwing them wholly on the British enemy. The other is the making the destruction of their settlements so final and complete as to put it out of their power to derive the smallest succor from them in case they should attempt to return this season."

The objectives of the expedition, then, as stated in Washington's two letters were, First, to destroy the Six Nations; second, to destroy their crops and prevent the planting of others; third, to make the
Iroquois as dependent as possible upon the British.

All of these objectives were accomplished. Sullivan's official report to Congress, the statement of Mary Jemison, and the journals kept by Sullivan's soldiers furnish abundant evidence of the destruction of crops and of houses and of the consequent appeal for succor which the Indians were forced to make to the British.

Although the Iroquois still retained considerable fighting strength and were capable of making themselves felt in the field, nevertheless, the Confederacy had received its death blow. The terrible destruction of property wrought by Sullivan could not be made good in generations. The fair promises made by the British at Oswego were not fulfilled, for in the treaty of Paris which formally closed the American Revolution, the British entirely neglected to make provision for their Indian allies. Therefore the ancestral home of the Iroquois which Sullivan had conquered and overrun became subject to the will of the conqueror.

The terms imposed upon the Six Nations were intolerable to a proud people, so that the majority of the Iroquois migrated to Canada. The severity of their punishment may be gathered from the picturesque words of Cornplanter in a speech delivered before President Washington at Philadelphia in 1790 after the Six Nations realized that they had been deceived by the British and had been compelled to surrender the greater part of their land. He says, "When your army entered the country of the Six Nations, we called you the Town Destroyer; to this day when this name is heard, our women look behind and turn pale, and our children cling close to the necks of their mothers.

"Father: when we saw that we had been deceived, and heard the invitation which you gave us to draw near to the fire you had kindled and talk with you concerning peace, we made haste toward it; you told us you could crush us to nothing; and you demanded from us a great country as the price of that peace which you had offered to us, as if our want of strength had destroyed our
rights. Our chiefs had felt your power and were unable to contend against you, and they therefore gave up that country. What they agreed has bound our nation, but your anger against us must by this time be cooled; and although our strength has not increased nor your power become less, we ask you to consider calmly—Were the terms dictated to us by your commissioners reasonable and just?"

Sullivan has been criticised for the severity with which he treated the Iroquois, but the criticism is unjust. Throughout this campaign he was following to the best of his ability the definite orders of his commander in chief. As a war measure these orders were undoubtedly justified. The Iroquois voluntarily espoused the cause of the British after promising the colonists to maintain strict neutrality during the war. The British lost, and the Iroquois went down in the same ruin which overwhelmed their masters. It is idle to lament their fate for their expulsion from their ancestral hunting grounds was inevitable. No one can imagine that the heart of the Empire State would be held permanently by a race of savages. Sullivan's expedition merely hastened the day that was bound to come.

All honor is due Major General John Sullivan for the masterly way in which he conducted this campaign. With meager resources, in some instances grudgingly given; in a wilderness which presented almost insurmountable difficulties; with practically no roads and with few trustworthy guides; against an enemy concerning whose strength and resources he could only conjecture; he went about his task in a soldier-like manner, and with the loss of only forty men brought to a successful conclusion a campaign, the far-reaching effects of which, historians have been slow to recognize.