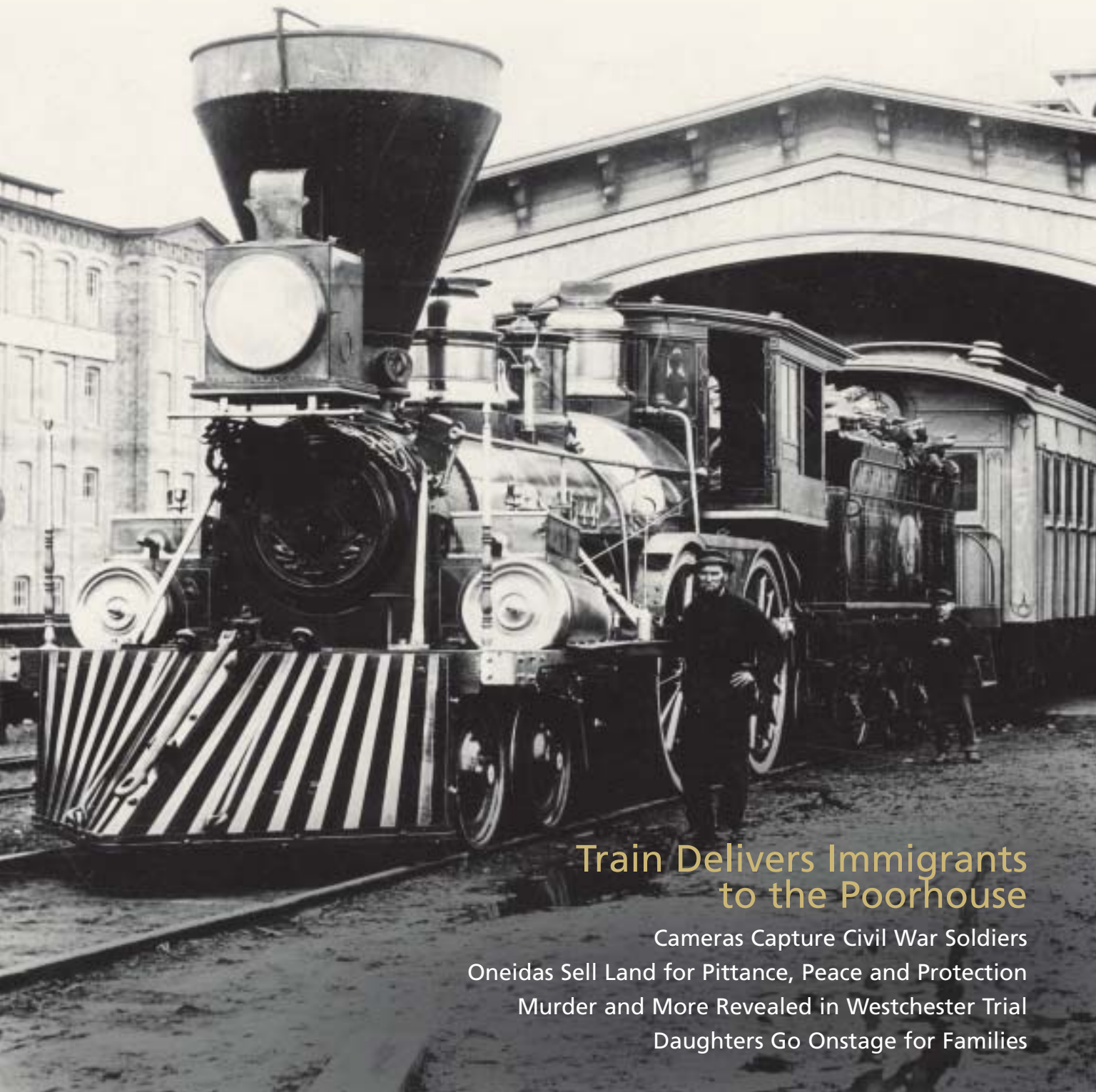


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Train Delivers Immigrants  
to the Poorhouse

Cameras Capture Civil War Soldiers  
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# Good Peter and the

BY ALAN TAYLOR

After the Revolution, New York desperately wanted Iroquois land. In the Mohawk Valley, a verbal faceoff between an eloquent warrior and the equally adept governor of the new state forever changed New York's history.

**D**uring the American Revolution, the Iroquois' Six Nations were divided: the Oneidas and most of the Tuscaroras assisted the Patriots, while the Cayugas, Mohawks, Onondagas, and Senecas supported the British. Yet no matter their alliance, all the Iroquois had suffered devastating raids that had destroyed almost all their villages by 1781. These violent dislocations promoted malnutrition and disease, which reduced Iroquois numbers by a third, from a pre-war 9,000 to a post-war 6,000. Whether they had become refugees at Schenectady on the American frontier, or at Montreal or Niagara within the British orbit, the Iroquois left behind a broad and bloody no-man's-land—a vacuum that American settlers and speculators began to fill after the war.

of this Iroquois land. Citing a colonial charter, Massachusetts competed with New York to claim the territory. Nearly bankrupted by the long, hard, expensive Revolution, both states' governments wanted the potential revenues from selling Indian land to speculators for development by farmers; a wary New York congressman worried in June 1784 that "the whole world seems to look on that W[estern] Country with a wishful eye." To strengthen claims and weaken its rival, each state plotted to secure Indian land cessions and to rush settlers into the contested region. The victor would reap public revenues when selling the land, collect taxes on the new farms, and consolidate authority by promoting speculation and settlement.

## Rivals for the Prize

During the 1780s, settler and speculator pressure was compounded by bitter competition among the Americans over who would win the prize

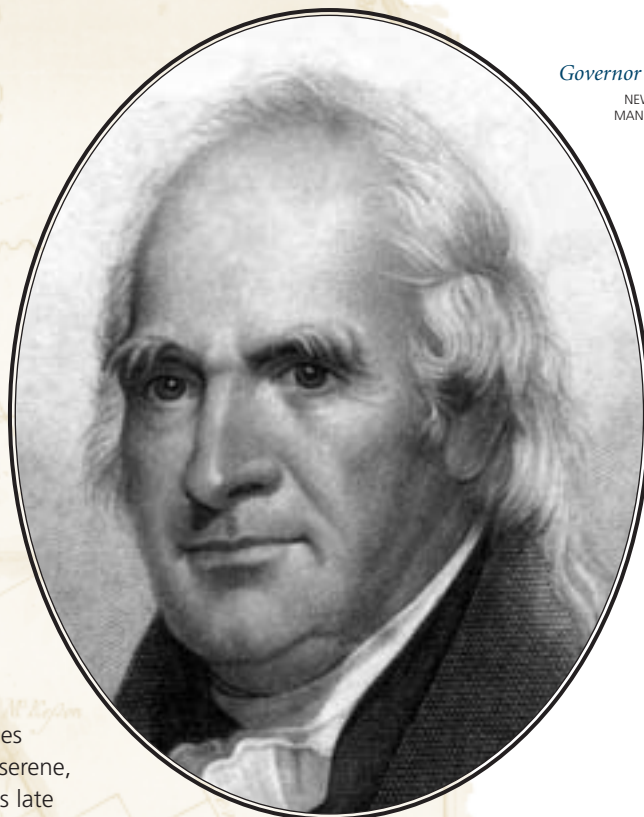
Measured by population and economic development, New York in the 1780s was relatively weak but possessed of immense potential. Thinly settled, it ranked a mediocre sixth in population and



*Gwedelhes Agwelondongwas,  
known to Americans as Good Peter.*

YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, TRUMBULL COLLECTION

# Governor



prosperity among the original thirteen states, lagging behind even little Connecticut. New York's political authority and its population remained virtually confined to the long, narrow corridors of the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys; for enhanced strength, the state needed more farms and more people. By expanding westward into Iroquois country, which contained resources that could either permanently endow the state or attract despoilers, New York might develop wealth and power—but only if it could overcome its initial vulnerability to rivals.

## Spokesmen for Both Sides

At the end of the Revolution, the most coveted and fertile Iroquois land belonged to the Oneidas, who lived at the head of the Mohawk Valley and along the upper reaches of the Susquehanna River—a domain in tempting, valuable proximity to New York's existing settlements. To defend their land, the Oneidas relied on their most perceptive and dignified

spokesman, Gwedelhes Agwelondongwas, a serene, grey-haired man in his late sixties. Americans called him "Good Peter" because of his Christian piety and morality; Philip Schuyler extolled him as "a man of sense and sobriety." As an orator, Good Peter impressed the Americans, even when they could not understand a word of his Oneida language. The missionary Samuel Kirkland praised him as the most powerful mind and best speaker among the entire Six Nations: "His exhortation far outdid my sermons; I have often thought that if I could speak with as much ease & fluency as he that I would preach every day of my life."

On the American side, New York's politics during the 1780s were dominated by George Clinton. A powerfully built man with bushy eyebrows and a penetrating gaze, Clinton came from a prosperous family of farmers and surveyors in Ulster County. During the 1760s, he had been a country lawyer and an

assembly representative.

An early critic of British rule, he had embraced the Revolution and performed with courage and zeal as a brigadier general; in 1777, he won a surprising electoral victory to become the state's first governor under the new Republican constitution. His stunned and defeated rival, Philip Schuyler, conceded that Clinton had "played his Cards better than was Expected," although the state's most prestigious and wealthy families—the Livingstons, Morrisises, Schuylers, and Van Rensselaers—disdained Clinton's modest origins and limited education as beneath the proper dignity of a governor. Often underestimated by elitists, Clinton repeatedly defeated them in elections and in the legislature with a cunning and insights unmatched in his generation in New York.

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Background image:  
*Map of Oneida lands, 1806.*

NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES



*Revolutionary War General Philip Schuyler (1733–1804) thought highly of Good Peter.*

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Clinton aggressively promoted the State of New York, which he regarded as embattled by powerful and greedy neighbors. In 1784, he urged the legislature to provide “the utmost encouragement to the speedy settlement of the country. The cultivation of our lands ought to be one of our first cares, since the riches of the state is [sic] to be found in the number of its people.” This relentless policy expressed both his anxiety and his optimism for New York’s future, and with his characteristic persistence Clinton worked to multiply New York’s farms and towns by obtaining Indian land.

#### **Faceoff at Fort Herkimer**

A quick study, he mastered the traditions of Iroquois diplomatic customs, including the conduct of formal

councils—mass gatherings with Indian nations—to renew their relationship with the state. With his bold manner, Governor Clinton commanded attention by his charisma and keen sense of timing and mood. Impressed, the Oneidas named him Aquilanda, which meant “Rising Sun.” In pleasing their chiefs, however, Clinton was working to soften their resistance to his agenda: the steady transfer of Iroquois lands into state possession for sale and settlement.

In 1785, Clinton faced off against Good Peter at a council at Fort Herkimer, near German Flatts on the Mohawk River. Missionary Samuel Kirkland was impressed that Good Peter held his own in debating Clinton: “There were

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some very smart, ingenious & really affecting speeches passed at this treaty between the Governor & Good Peter. Whether they were all put upon the Journals of the Treaty I do not know.” For his part,

Clinton proposed a radical scheme: that the Oneidas should cede all of their land along the Susquehanna River between its Unadilla and Chenango tributaries. According to Good Peter, Clinton “produced a heap of money & told some of our nation to take up a handful but they could not consent to do this; it was too heavy. He then...said all this shall be yours, on condition that you will follow my advice.”

The Oneidas countered with an innovative alternative: rather than cede their land, they would lease a buffer zone to the state. Good Peter explained:

We are however willing and ready to lease one Tier of Farms in the Manner they are done by the White People, along the Boundary Line throughout the Extent of our Country, and that People of Influence might be settled on these Farms to prevent Encroachments, and that a Person might be appointed to collect our Rents annually. Brothers! We shall be happy to find that the Proposals We now make will be accepted, as We cannot sell any more of our Lands and this Leasing may be an Income to our Children.

As landlords rather than sellers, the Oneidas would receive an annual income while retaining title to the land, thus preserving their power and enhancing their

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Research for this article relied on correspondence and council minutes found in *Proceedings of the Commissioners of Indian Affairs Appointed by Law for the Extinguishment of Indian Titles in the State of New York*, Franklin B. Hough, ed. (Albany: Joel Munsell, 1861), and in the New York State Archives' collection of Assembly Papers for Indian Affairs, 1783–1809.

Further information on the purchase and sale of Oneida lands can be found in *Records of the Surveyor General; Book of Land Sales, I*; and *Records of the Office of the Secretary of State, Indorsed Land Papers*, all located at the State Archives; and in a Commissioners of the Land Office notice in a 1785 issue of the newspaper *Albany Gazette*. Information on the Fort Herkimer Council can be found in the article "The End of the Iroquois Mystique: The Oneida Land Cession Treaties of the 1780s" by J. David Lehman in *William and Mary Quarterly* (1990).

wealth. But while beneficial to the Oneidas, the lease scheme would hurt New York's chance to beat Massachusetts in the race for additional land.

In blunt reply to Good Peter's "highly disagreeable" proposal, Clinton denounced it as demeaning to New York: "We are sorry that You made an Offer to lease [y]our Lands. We fear You have lost your good Opinion of Us, by making a Proposal which, if accepted, would make the Government of the State tributary to You." Since Clinton considered the Iroquois poor, ignorant, and primitive, he could never accept them as prospering landlords with economic power over the state's citizens.

### Trump Card

Ultimately Clinton held the winning card: 240,000 New Yorkers outnumbered the approximately 600 Oneidas. In addition, without state protection, the Oneidas would fall prey to invading settlers and conniving speculators. Clinton announced that, without a land cession, there would be no such protection, "and that if this is not now done, it is your Fault and not ours." Of course, the Oneidas regarded such protection as their due, given their exertions and suffering as wartime allies, the lands previously bestowed by them on New Yorkers in the upper Mohawk Valley, and the past promises of New York governors. But what could they do if the state

demanded more land as the price to renew those promises?

Alarmed, the Oneidas shifted their position overnight. On the morning of June 27, 1785, Good Peter abruptly withdrew as council spokesman in favor of a more pliant chief, Oneyanha,

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through whom the Oneidas agreed to sell outright to the Americans about 460,000 acres for a single payment of \$11,500. The shift apparently registered a swing in Oneida politics away from the warriors, represented by Good Peter, in favor of the chiefs; this meant that the clan mothers had taken initiative away from the warriors and given it to the chiefs. The clan mothers wanted peace and food relief, which hinged upon the state's goodwill, while the warriors cherished the contested tract for deer hunting.

Clinton returned to New York City in triumph, for

the Fort Herkimer purchase enabled New York to begin selling land in the region.

During the next two years, New York sold 343,594 acres in the cession for \$125,955. In addition to making money for the state, those sales spawned new farms and towns inhabited by thousands of settlers loyal to New York—which indeed weakened the claim by rival Massachusetts to the land. Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin begged Clinton to stop the sales, pending a legal resolution of the dispute.

At Hartford, Connecticut in December 1786, agents for New York and Massachusetts compromised. New York obtained political jurisdiction over the entire contested region, realizing its goal of a western boundary on Lake Erie and the Niagara River. But the two states agreed to split the title to the land—or, more accurately, to the "preemption right" to purchase land from the Indians. Massachusetts would obtain this supposed right to purchase six million acres at the far western end of New York beyond the Finger Lakes as far as Lake Erie, as well as 230,400 acres from Clinton's purchase from the Oneidas, but New York would get the right to buy and sell all the rest of the Iroquois land. Thus by outmaneuvering Good Peter at Fort Herkimer, Governor George Clinton ultimately secured an empire in land for the future Empire State. ■