

Chief Red Jacket during the War of 1812

Red Jacket (c. 1750-1839) was a Seneca chief and orator whose influence with Native Americans lasted throughout two wars and over fifty years. His birth place is believed to be around Geneva or Canoga in New York's Finger Lakes area. His mother was a member of the Wolf Clan. He lived most of his life in the Genesee River Valley and sided with the British during the American Revolution. His adult name, Sagoyewatha, translates as "he keeps them awake" and is attributed to his oratorical skills. The name Red Jacket refers to the red coat given him by the British during the Revolution. After supporting the British in the war the Seneca ceded most of their lands to the United States, a cession Red Jacket opposed. He earned his reputation as an orator in opposition to the loss of Seneca lands and even addressed the U. S. Senate in 1805 over the issue. By the time of the War of 1812, Red Jacket was still a Seneca spokesman and stressed Indian desire for neutrality, a view initially supported by the American War Department. He spoke at a council at Buffalo, New York, in May, 1812, urging neutrality, recalling the failure of the British to keep their promises regarding the protection of Indian lands. When the United States declared war a month later, Red Jacket reiterated his neutral stance and urged the Seneca retain and defend their lands. He asked the Americans to reject any Indians who offered to fight on their side and chided the British over attempts to enlist Seneca aid.

Red Jacket was no great warrior, no great chief. During the Revolution he was branded a coward and given the name "cow killer" when he reportedly killed a cow and smeared himself with blood, claiming to have killed Americans in battle. Although Red Jacket urged neutrality, a small number of Seneca joined the military action when the British raided Black Rock (north of Buffalo) in July 1813. Some forty Seneca were formed into a company and Red Jacket was named a second lieutenant. At a council at Buffalo Creek on July 25, Red Jacket stated the Seneca would defend their lands, but American commander General Peter B. Porter induced them to join American forces. Red Jacket then insisted that Indian troops be paid but agreed to join the battle against the British. After British aggressions captured Fort Niagara in December 1813, Red Jacket assisted Porter in recruiting 500 warriors. In July 1814 American forces, including some 500-600 Iroquois, took Fort Erie. At the Battle of Chippawa (July 5), Porter's force engaged the British in a back and forth battle which ended in an American victory. Red Jacket played a military role with distinction and drew Porter's approval. But after the battle Red Jacket proposed Seneca (and Iroquois) withdrawal from battle to preserve their lands. Despite initial American opposition, the Iroquois played no further role in the war after Chippawa on either the American or British side. Red Jacket successfully negotiated neutrality and peace, his true legacy of the War of 1812.

In ensuing years Red Jacket remained a Seneca diplomat, an orator who championed Native American causes including protection of their lands and especially religious freedom—he detested missionaries among his people. His speeches were printed and reprinted as examples of Indian oratory. His portrait was the first of a Native American to be exhibited at the National Academy of Design (now the National Academy in New York) and he was celebrated in several other portraits by noted artists Robert Weir (1828), George Catlin (1826), Charles Bird King (circa 1828-30), Henry Inman (1822), and others. Beset by alcoholism in his later years, Red Jacket died in Buffalo on January 30, 1830. Initially buried on Indian grounds, his remains were removed to Forest Lawn Cemetery in 1884.

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FURTHER READING:

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