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The enduring mystery of a Mohawk warrior bust at the Capitol

Thayendanegea — aka Joseph Brant — inspired such terror among American colonists that he was known as ‘Monster Brant.’ His legacy remains complicated today.

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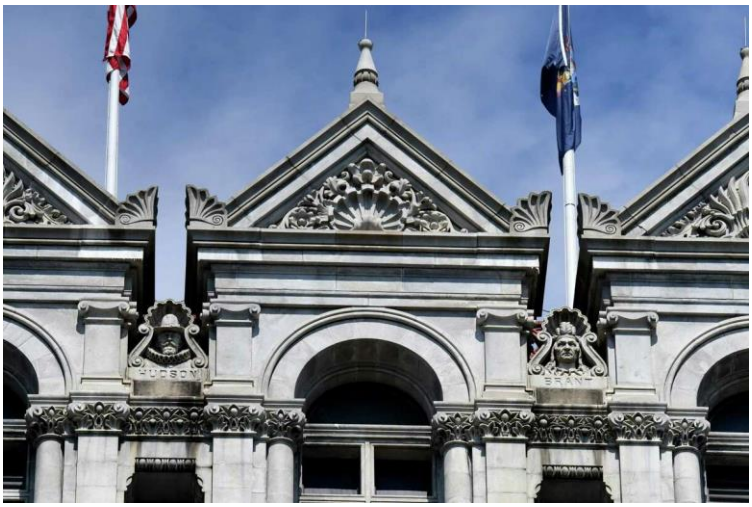


Busts of Henry Hudson, left, and Joseph Brant, right, face down State Street from the Capitol looking east on Friday, July 22, 2022, in Albany, N.Y.Will Waldron/Times Union

ALBANY — On July 22, 1779, four years into the Revolutionary War, a raiding force of about 85 Mohawk warriors and loyalists was ambushed by 120 American militiamen at a ford in a bend in the Delaware River on the New York-Pennsylvania border.

Though they got the drop on the raiders, the Americans came out on the wrong end of what became known as the Battle of Minisink. Most who survived fled the scene, while dozens of other militiamen retreated through the forest to make a last stand on a craggy hilltop in what is now the town of Highland in Sullivan County.

All the militiamen were killed. Due to the remote, rugged location, it would be decades before anyone ventured to the battle

site to collect any skeletal remains that could be found and buried.

The man who led the victors that day 243 years ago was Thayendanegea, a Mohawk war chief and British army officer known more commonly as Joseph Brant. It wasn't his first victory over the rebellious colonials and it wouldn't be his last.

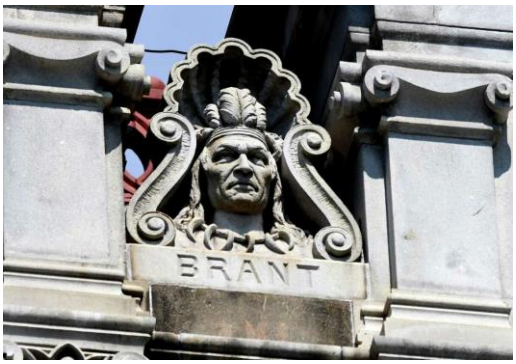
So why is a sculpture of him perched in a prominent place on the exterior of the New York state Capitol?

"That's my question," said Stuart Lehman, curatorial and visitor services specialist at the Capitol for the state Office of General Services, the agency that operates and maintains state properties across New York.

More than a warrior

The sculpture in question is a granite bust nestled between fifth-floor peaked dormers on the building's east side facing downtown Albany. The stonework depicts a Native American man with braided hair and a feathered headdress. The name "BRANT" is carved into the base. Nearby is a sculpture in the same style depicting a goateed European man wearing a hat and Elizabethan collar. "HUDSON" is carved into its base.

Giving English explorer Henry Hudson a place of honor facing the river that bears his name makes some sense, historically. Brant? Not so much, or at least not when considering his wartime exploits for his fellow Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), who remained loyal to the British Crown. During a four-year period starting in 1778, Brant led raids along the New York and Pennsylvania frontiers that brought such terror and bloodshed to so many settlements that he was deemed "Monster Brant" even though, in some cases, he was nowhere in the vicinity when atrocities were committed against civilians.



A bust of Joseph Brant faces down State Street from the Capitol looking east on Friday, July 22, 2022, in Albany, N.Y.Will Waldron/Times Union

Brant, however, was more than a prominent military figure from the nation's violent founding. He was the leading Native American diplomat of his era, traveling to Philadelphia after the war to negotiate treaties with George Washington and other Founding Fathers while seeking redress for the New York lands his people were forced to abandon at musket point.

The British, at Brant's urging, eventually granted the Mohawks and other Iroquois loyalists land along the Grand River in Ontario, Canada, where he founded the settlement of Brantford, adjacent to what is now the Six Nations Reserve, 55 miles southwest of Toronto. Brant died at his home in nearby Burlington in 1807 at 64.

Missing records

By the time the New York state Capitol was under construction in the 1870s, the people who had survived the horrors of frontier warfare during the American Revolution were dead. The nation was waging wars out west against tribes resisting forced relocations to reservations, giving Americans new tribal leaders to vilify. By the end of the 19th century, Brant's reputation had been rehabilitated as contemporary historians softened their views of him.

Lehman, the Capitol curator, theorizes that by the time the building was completed in 1899, Brant was remembered more for his peaceful advocacy on behalf of Native Americans than for his wartime notoriety.

“If they were looking for a recognizable Native American from New York to put on the building, Joseph Brant would probably be one of the first people they would think of,” Lehman said.

Plenty of records in the state archives detail nearly every aspect of the Capitol’s construction, from architectural designs to contractor payments. Yet despite years of searching, Lehman has been unable to turn up anything that would shed light on the origins of the Hudson and Brant busts. If there’s a paper trail detailing exactly who came up with the idea to honor the two historical figures, who designed the sculptures and whose hands created the stonework, Lehman hasn’t found it. Based on two photographs of the Capitol’s east side taken in 1895 and 1905, he believes the Hudson and Brant sculptures likely were installed between those years.

“If I had to make a bet, it would be 1897,” he said.

The two busts, perched high above the Grand Staircase on the building’s east side, can be difficult to see from the ground, which explains why most people, including historians, are unaware of their existence.

The state Capitol in 1905. Stuart Lehman, curator and visitor services specialist at the Capitol, believes the Grant and Hudson busts were installed between 1895 and 1905.
Courtesy of the New York State Office of General Services

Scott Haefner was among those surprised to learn about the Brant sculpture. He is the site director at Old Fort Johnson, a Montgomery County historic site and museum just west of Amsterdam. From 1749 to 1763, the two-story limestone house was the fortified home of Sir William Johnson, Britain's superintendent of Indian Affairs before the Revolutionary War and the wealthy mentor of a young Joseph Brant, whose sister, Molly Brant, was Johnson's wife and mother of the couple's eight children.

It was Johnson who made sure Joseph got educated at English schools to prepare him for a leadership role among the Iroquois after the French and Indian War (1754-63), Haefner said. Brant, a convert to Christianity who translated portions of the Bible into Mohawk, traveled to England in 1775 and had an audience with King George III in London.

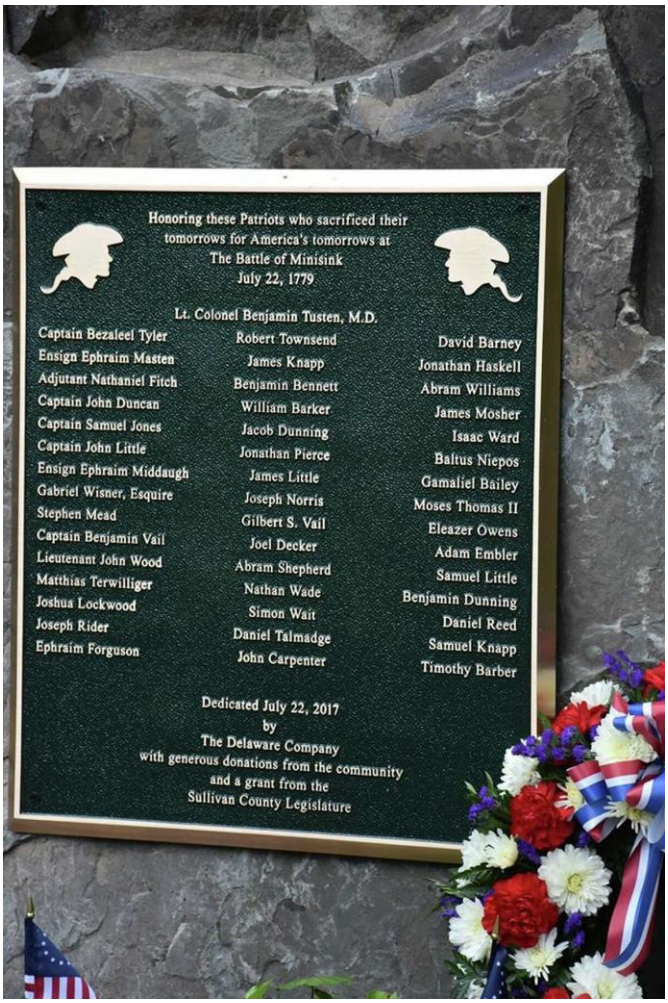
"Brant before the Revolution is essentially the new generation of Natives who are coming to prominence," Haefner said. "The fur trade is dying, so Johnson says education is the way to go. Joseph Brant is being groomed to be the new 18th century Native who is going to lead the Iroquois into the modern era."

Mike Tarbell, the Mohawk cultural interpreter at the Iroquois Museum in Howes Cave, in Schoharie County, also was surprised to find out a Brant sculpture has been on the Capitol for more than a century.

"That's the first time somebody told me it was there," he said. "It's curious. I'd like to know why, too."

A complicated legacy

While the sculpture hides in plain sight in Albany, Brant's name adorns scores of roadside blue-and-yellow New York state historical markers and historic site signage from the Mohawk and Schoharie valleys to the Southern Tier and Catskills, including several near the site of the Minisink battle.



A historical marker lists the names of the nearly 50 American militiamen who died in the Battle of Minisink on July 22, 1779.

There is another series of historical markers and monuments that don't bear Brant's name, yet are linked directly to him. They trace the route through the Finger Lakes region taken by the Sullivan-Clinton expedition, ordered by Gen. George Washington in 1779 in response to the frontier raids led by Brant and other loyalists.

Over a two-month period, some 4,000 Continental soldiers destroyed dozens of Iroquois villages and burned vast acreages of crops and orchards. While most Iroquois were able to flee ahead of the slow-moving army, hundreds of the approximately 5,000 who sought refuge at the British fort at Niagara wound up dying of starvation, disease or exposure during the harsh winter that followed.

Today, the Sullivan-Clinton historical markers serve as melancholy reminders of a culture pushed to the brink of destruction. Chemung: “Indian Village Destroyed by Gen. Sullivan August 13, 1779.” Union Springs: “Site Two Miles East Cayuga Village Destroyed in Sullivan Campaign September 1779.” Canandaigua: “Indian Village Destroyed by Sullivan 1779.”

Washington’s effort to knock the Iroquois out of the war failed. Instead, Brant and other loyalist officers resumed their attacks with renewed ferocity, sending many Mohawk Valley settlers fleeing to Schenectady for refuge. The attacks in New York didn’t end until the summer of 1782, months after the British surrendered at Yorktown in October of 1781.

Brant remains a controversial figure among the Mohawks and other Iroquois to this day, according to Jamie Paxton, an associate professor of history at Moravian University in Pennsylvania and author of the 2008 book, “Joseph Brant and His World: Eighteenth-Century Statesman and Warrior.” While Brant obtained a new homeland in Ontario for the Haudenosaunee, he wound up selling off vast tracts to white settlers, creating disputes that linger today, Paxton said.

“Brant’s strategy was geared toward Haudenosaunee sovereignty in a world that was hostile to Indigenous sovereignty,” Paxton said. “He engenders a lot of different emotions. His legacy is particularly complex, and it’s complex for Americans, Canadians and Indigenous people.”