The Iroquois as “Geographic” Middlemen: A Research Note

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The Iroquois middleman theory has long been a source of contention for historians. Proponents of this hypothesis believe that the Iroquois, or Five Nations, of colonial New York acted as "economic" middlemen between English merchants and Indians of the upper Great Lakes country. According to the theory, seventeenth-century Iroquois traders obtained manufactured goods at Albany and carried them westward, where they were exchanged for furs trapped by western Indians. Opponents of the idea argue that the Iroquois never became effective economic middlemen.

Charles H. McIlwain was the first modern historian to emphasize the Iroquois' role in carrying English goods westward to trade among the Great Lakes tribes. "The great rôle of the Iroquois," wrote McIlwain in 1915, "was that of middlemen between the 'Far Indians' and the English, a rôle which enabled them . . . to retain that position of superiority over the Indians of the eastern half of the United States." In 1940 George T. Hunt elaborated upon McIlwain's ideas in his widely acclaimed The Wars of the Iroquois: A Study in Intertribal Trade Relations. Hunt's work detailing the Iroquois' economic motives for warfare against their Indian neighbors brought about a general acceptance of the economic middleman theory, which remained unchallenged for the next twenty years.1

The flaws in the McIlwain-Hunt thesis were exposed in 1962 by Allen W. Trelease in an article entitled "The Iroquois and the Western Fur Trade: A Problem in Interpretation." While admitting that the Iroquois might have had ambitions to become middlemen and might even have served as middlemen on occasion,

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1 Peter Wraxall, An Abridgement of the Indian Affairs . . . Transacted in the Colony of New York from the Year 1678 to the Year 1751, ed. Charles H. McIlwain (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), xlii.
2 George T. Hunt, The Wars of the Iroquois: A Study in Intertribal Trade Relations (Madison, 1940).
Trelease proved that the evidence behind the McIlwain-Hunt theory was doubtful at best. Trelease's more weighty evidence showed that the Iroquois never played a major role as middlemen carrying English goods westward to trade for furs trapped by Far Indians of the upper Great Lakes country. Most historians today generally accept Trelease's conclusion that Iroquois middleman activity in the western fur trade was "sporadic and of slight importance." They believe, as Bruce G. Trigger states in the Handbook of North American Indians, that "there is . . . no convincing evidence that prior to 1673 the Iroquois were interested in exploiting their central location in relationship to other tribes in order to play the role of middlemen."4

Unfortunately, this controversy over whether the Five Nations were economic middlemen in the seventeenth century has obscured another type of middleman position developed by the Iroquois in the eighteenth century. The Iroquois might not have been middlemen in the manner described by Trelease, Hunt, and others, but after 1700 they were middlemen in another sense. Instead of functioning as "economic" middlemen who transported goods westward, the Five Nations became "geographic" middlemen by inviting western Indians to travel through Iroquoia to the English trade at Albany and Oswego. This strategy was an excellent blend of geopolitics and economic diplomacy, for it enabled the Iroquois to use their geographic location between the Indians of the upper Great Lakes region and the traders of New York as a lever to obtain peace with the western tribes, hunting and trading privileges in the Ohio Country, trade with Indian travelers who came into Iroquoia, and additional political and economic concessions from both Indians and whites.

The Iroquois needed to develop the geographic middleman role because of their weakened economic and military position after 1701. Having trapped out their homelands of beaver by 1640,

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1 Allen W. Trelease, "The Iroquois and the Western Fur Trade: A Problem in Interpretation," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XLIX (June, 1962), 48-51.
they had turned to the Western Country (i.e., the lands of the upper Great Lakes region) as their primary source of furs for the valuable Albany trade. The Five Nations had won the right to hunt in the West by defeating the Hurons, Neutrals, Eries, and other western tribes in a series of beaver wars in the mid-seventeenth century, but their hegemony in the area was short-lived. By the turn of the century the Iroquois, who had lost nearly half their warriors in bloody fighting against the French and western tribes during King William’s War, were no longer able to defend by force hunting rights in the West. The Five Nations realized, however, that their economic well-being, and perhaps their very existence, depended on their being able to hunt safely in the Western Country. The Iroquois also were aware that they would suffer many casualties in the event of renewed hostilities with the numerous and powerful western tribes. These realizations set the stage for the shift in Iroquois policy toward rapprochement with the western Indians in the early eighteenth century. The Five Nations hoped that where a policy of war had failed to provide them with a source of furs from the Western Country a policy of peace would succeed. They also hoped that whereas warfare had failed to give them dominance and influence over the western Indians diplomacy would succeed. In addition, the Iroquois soon recognized that benefits other than safety and hunting privileges could accrue from a policy of peace toward their western neighbors. At that point choice replaced necessity as the mother of the Iroquois’ rapprochement strategy.

The first step toward improved relations with western Indians came in 1701 when Iroquois deputies journeyed to Montreal to treat with the French and their Indian allies. The Five Nations hoped that French mediation and protection would improve their relations with the western tribes. The Grand Settlement of 1701 established the Five Nations’ neutrality in any future wars between England and France, a peace between the Iroquois and New France’s northern and western Indian allies, and the right of all Indians to hunt safely in the Western Country. At the conference New France’s Governor Louis Hector de Callières Bonnevue stated confidently that peace and the right to hunt were

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assured. He added that should the peace be broken the aggrieved party should not take revenge but should come to him for justice.\(^7\) Calièrè's words were exactly what the Iroquois wanted to hear. Even though skirmishes and battles might, and did, occur from time to time thereafter, the Five Nations had a French ally who promised to punish any Indians who violated the cease-fire and from whom they could seek justice and protection.\(^8\)

Not only did the Settlement of 1701 allow the Iroquois to hunt and travel throughout the West in relative safety, it also provided them with the chance to visit the villages of the western tribes to peddle their most important asset: their willingness to allow the western Indians to cross Iroquoia to obtain English trade goods. Since the 1680s New York officials and traders had been trying to convince the Iroquois that trade with the tribes of the Great Lakes country would benefit the Five Nations as well as the English. The great losses suffered in King William's War forced the Iroquois to consider the New Yorkers' proposal seriously. In 1700 New York's governor, the Earl of Bellomont, had stated: "you must needs be sensible that the Dowagenhaws, Twichtwees, Ottowawas & Dionedees [Dowagenhaes, Miamis, Ottawas, and Tobaccos] and the other Remote Indians are vastly more numerous than you 5 Nations, and that by their continued Warring upon you they will in a few years totally destroy you . . . ." Bellomont suggested that the Iroquois "try all possible Means to fix a Trade & correspondence with all those Nations, by which you would retain them to yourselves, and," he added, "with my Assistance I am in hopes in a short time they might be brought to be united with us in the Covenant Chain, and then you might at all times go a hunting into their Country without any sort . . . of hazzard which I understand is much the best for Bever hunting."\(^9\)

The Five Nations had listened carefully and apparently agreed with Bellomont. Hoping to establish a geographic middleman po-


\(^8\) Charlevoix, History and General Description of New France, V, 165, 179, 225; Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York, IX, 765, 767, 768, 848, 1088, V, 243; "Cadillac Papers" (Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, Vol. XXXII; Lansing, 1904), 285, 592; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., The French Regime in Wisconsin—I, 1634-1727 (Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Vol. XVI; Madison, 1902), 230; Wraxall, Abridgement of the Indian Affairs, 78.

\(^9\) Wraxall, Abridgement of the Indian Affairs, 34. The "Covenant Chain" to which Bellomont referred was an alliance which joined together the British, Iroquois, and other pro-English tribes.
sition by offering free and safe passage through Iroquoia to Albany and later Oswego, they dangled before the western Indians the opportunity to obtain English manufactured goods, which were better quality yet less expensive than French products. In return, the western tribes had to remain at peace with the Iroquois and not molest Iroquois hunters in the West. Many western Indians, wanting English trade goods, quickly accepted the Iroquois' proposal.

In 1710 English observers were able to record the proceedings of a conference between the Iroquois and one western tribe. Cadwallader Colden, who served as New York's lieutenant governor, reported that the Five Nations prepared for their talks with the Waganhas (Ottawas) by soliciting English support. Colden noted that the Iroquois sent messengers to Albany "to tell that they design'd to meet some Waganha Sachems in the General Meeting to be held at Onondaga & therefore desir'd their Bretheren to send some persons of Note . . . to represent their Brother Corlaer & to bring some of the River Indian Sachems along with them. Captain Evert Banker & Mr. David Schuyler were sent." The conference between the Waganhas, Iroquois, River Indians (i.e., remnant bands of Algonquian-speaking Indians living along the Hudson River), and English convened during the first week in June. According to Colden, the Senecas first met privately with the rest of the Iroquois and told them "that when the Waganha Ambassadors came this last time to them they spoke to the Ambassadors as follows We take you by the hand to conduct you to our Brother Corlaer & Quieder The Doors stand every where open for you Your lodgings are prepared from the Senneka's Country to that of our Brother Corlaer & Quieder The Path is made plain & easy & there is no evil in our Country."12

On June 7 the Iroquois, in conjunction with the New York government and the River Indians, presented the following wampum belts to the Waganhas:

10 Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York, V, 728-29, 730.
12 Colden, "Continuation of Colden's History," 381-83. Arent Van Curler was the Dutch governor of colonial New York during the mid-1660s. He and Peter Schuyler, longtime mayor of Albany and member of the New York Council, had been so successful in winning the friendship of the Iroquois that the Five Nations continued to address themselves to "Corlaer" and "Quieder" long after the deaths of the two men. Norton, Fur Trade in Colonial New York, 70.
1st Belt Bretheren I Desire a firm & everlasting peace to be kept inviolably not only by us but our children likewise. If you shall preserve this Peace our children will grow up in Joy but if you do the Contrary either you or I will repent it.

2nd Belt Bretheren by this we cleanse your minds & wash away all evil thoughts.

3rd Belt By this we reconcile the young men our Soldiers to yours that if any nation should after this attack either of us we may jointly defend ourselves & Destroy our Enemies Bretheren if any of our People fall into your Country naked & hungry supply them with Victuals & Cloathing.

4th Belt Bretheren if any Difference should hereafter happen between any of your people & any of this house [i.e., the Iroquois, River Indians, or English] let no revenge be taken till enquiry make of the Occasion of such Injury. Come first to us here if any harm happen to be done by any of our people before you take revenge for you may safely do it & we shall do in like manner with you.

5th Belt Bretheren I desire that we may walk & travel safely & trade freely.

6th Belt Bretheren Corlaer and Quieder and the River Indians speak to you by this Belt as well as the five Nations who altogether make one house here. The Path from the place where you live to Albany is beaten & made plain by this Belt and all molestation or trouble removed out of the way. If any other Nation would walk in this path who is not acquainted with it help him forward. You have a free & safe passage to my Brother Corlaer to walk in it as you please without Molestation.

7th Belt Bretheren We hear that one of your Great Sachems who allways inclined to our Brother Corlaer and Quieder is Dead. We desire you may put another good man in his room.

As soon as the Iroquois sachem completed his speech, Albany agents presented two strowd blankets and other gifts to clothe the new Waganha sachem. The following day the Waganhas gave their reply:

[Belt 1] Bretheren Corlaer & Quieder You have accepted me for your child I have last summer sucked one of your Breasts but now I am come to suck them both. Have compassion on us as a Father hath on his Children. Father I take the hatchet out of your hands because you have spoken of Peace that you may have Peace every where.

[Belt 2] Father you have taken me into your Covenant Chain which shall be preserved so firmly that no ax shall be able to cut it asunder.

[Belt 3] Father Corlaer & Quieder I am resolved to go to your house to see how the Trade is there & if you use us well we will return next Spring.

[Belt 4] Now Father & Bretheren We accept of the Peace as it is offer'd to us & thank the whole house for it. We promis to observe it for ever in token whereof we give these two calumets.

The conference in 1710 was probably typical of the treaty settlements that occurred between the Iroquois and the western tribes. The Five Nations gave wampum belts to show off their

13 Colden, "Continuation of Colden's History," 381-83, 384-86.
14 Ibid., 384-86.
close English alliance to the Waganhas (belts 6 and 7); to establish peace and an alliance with the Waganhas (belts 1, 2, 3, and 4); to obtain the right to travel and hunt safely in the Western Country (belts 3 and 5); and to offer in exchange to the Waganhas a free and safe passage to the Albany trade (belt 6). The Waganhas accepted the Iroquois' proposals and presented their own wampum belts to show that they would uphold peace and the Covenant Chain (belts 1 and 2) and that they looked forward to trading at Albany (belt 3). After 1710 the Iroquois continued their strategy of offering the western tribes free and safe passage to the Albany trade in return for peace and the right to hunt and travel in the West. As a result, right up until midcentury western Indians regularly traveled through Iroquoia to trade in New York.15

Although not all Iroquois were eager to have the western Indians passing through their country en route to Albany or Oswego,16 most members of the Five Nations were pleased by the opportunities afforded by the traffic. In addition to peace and the right to hunt and travel safely in the Western Country, many Iroquois were able to develop a lucrative trade with western Indians passing through Iroquoia. The Iroquois provided travelers with the goods and services needed for the journey; in exchange, the Iroquois received furs which they resold to English traders for a substantial profit.17 Many members of the Five Nations also believed that the western tribes' traffic would result in better trade values for all Indians. These Iroquois had been convinced by New Yorkers, who were eager to trade with western tribes,
that the increase in business at Albany would cause goods to become more plentiful and less expensive. Indeed, the Five Nations were so convinced that the English-western Indian trade was beneficial to them that they frequently asked the English to improve trade conditions so that even more western Indians would be drawn to Albany. The Iroquois argued that they could be more successful in building good relations with the western tribes if the British would lower retail prices. Cheaper goods, they argued, would be more of an inducement to draw the western Indians to the English trading centers. The Iroquois were even willing to pay higher prices for trade goods than the western Indians if it meant an increase in trade and better relations with those tribes.

The Iroquois also asked the English to curb unfair trade practices. Sachems pointed out that the Far Indians came to trade once, but after being cheated they never came back again. Apparently, the Five Nations told the western Indians that they could find cheap prices for manufactured goods and quality rum if they journeyed through Iroquoia and traded at Albany or Oswego. The use of such a sales pitch by the Iroquois would explain their comments made to Governor William Cosby at a conference in 1735. They complained that at Oswego the prices were too high and the rum was diluted, both of which made the Iroquois look like liars in the eyes of the western tribes.

Along with asking for better prices and trade practices, the Iroquois frequently sought prohibition of the Montreal-Albany trade, which had been conducted between the merchants of those two cities from the turn of the century. By enabling French merchants to obtain highly valued English manufactured goods that they then used in trade with western tribes, the Montreal-Albany traffic undermined the efforts of the Five Nations to draw the western tribes to Albany through Iroquoia. If, however, the English outlawed the Montreal-Albany trade, the western tribes would have no other choice but to bring their business through the Iroquois homeland. In the early 1720s Governor William Burnet

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19 Colden, “Continuation of Colden’s History,” 426, 392, 393, Wraxall, Abridgement of the Indian Affairs, 204, 205; Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York, V, 225, 659; Trelease, “Iroquois and the Western Fur Trade,” 45.

20 Wraxall, Abridgement of the Indian Affairs, 111, 188, 195.

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did shut down the commerce between Montreal and Albany, and, as the Iroquois predicted, many Far Indians began coming to New York to obtain goods they could no longer get from the French. The Iroquois' satisfaction was short-lived. On June 16, 1725, Britain's Board of Trade, spurred on by merchant interests, repealed the acts banning the Montreal-Albany trade on the grounds that they violated New York traders' civil rights. Soon thereafter the Iroquois were again complaining about New York's trade with Canada.22

The Five Nations' continued concern with the commerce between Albany and Montreal illustrates the importance of their geographic location between the English and the western tribes. Although the Iroquois very seldom acted as seventeenth-century "economic" middlemen in the manner described by McIlwain and Hunt, their eighteenth-century "geographic" middleman position benefited them in numerous ways. The Five Nations, in return for granting the western Indians free and safe passage through Iroquoia, received a guarantee of peace and safety for Iroquois hunters in the Western Country. As an added dividend, some Iroquois profited by trading with western Indians as they passed through Iroquoia to and from Albany. Further, the Iroquois geographic middleman position forced the English to remain on good political and economic terms with the Iroquois in exchange for the Five Nations' consent to allow the western tribes a free and safe passage to the New York trade. The western Indians were also cognizant of the Iroquois' geographic importance. In order to obtain safe passage through Iroquoia and thus access to English trade goods, which were a better quality than the higher-priced French products, the western Indians had to remain at peace with the Five Nations, a peace that the war-weakened Iroquois desperately needed. Not only did the Iroquois' geographic middleman position help to neutralize a potentially dangerous enemy, it also helped transform that enemy into a friend. Furthermore, for every tribe that became an Iroquois ally, there was one less group willing to join the French in war against the Five Nations. The Iroquois' military position, therefore, improved with every Indian nation that agreed to journey through Iroquoia for trade with the English. In short, the Iroquois benefited economically, politically, diplomatically, and militarily by establishing themselves as geographic middlemen.

The Iroquois' success as geographic middlemen also had a significant impact on the development of the northern colonial

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frontier. Improved economic and political ties between the English and western tribes were important by-products of the Iroquois' efforts, and this alliance opened the way for English mercantile profits and English colonial expansion; ultimately it became a contributing factor in the English-French contest for control of the Ohio Country and North America. When the French realized that the balance of power in the Western Country was tipping toward the English as many tribes accepted Iroquois invitations to trade with the English, French leaders plotted a course of action that plunged them into the Seven Years' War. In the long run, the Iroquois' geographic middleman activities not only provided the Five Nations with economic, political, and military benefits, they also affected the English-French struggle to control the West, the fur trade, and western tribes.