

Indians, Objects, and Revolution



Not all roads lead to the Mohawk Valley, but they used to.

It was pouring as I made my way towards Albany, some 194 miles along Interstates 91 and 90. The trip took about four hours all together, thirty minutes more than I'd anticipated. I arrived late: it must have been four o'clock as I wound my way along the Mohawk River's south side, past a shabby motel, a restaurant or two, decaying storefronts (one sign read "Sir William's Antiques"), and up a winding incline through one small neighborhood and then another. At last I could see him standing above me as I approached, a twentieth-century statue that might have commemorated Washington or Jefferson, so conventionally "colonial" did he look from a distance. Beyond the statue now, and up the drive and to the house itself: Johnson Hall, the largest and most stylish place for miles.

In its current setting, the house overwhelmed me with its remoteness. But if today it stands apart from the world, in a dying industrial town, Johnson Hall once stood at the center of much that was worldly about early America. For much of the seventeenth century and three-quarters of the eighteenth, the Mohawk Valley occupied one of the busiest trade corridors in North America. Furs and foods of all sorts; the spiritual paraphernalia of Protestantism and Catholicism; weapons; the stuff of everyday life (pots, pans, hoes); European "luxury items" (tea, sugar, cloth); Indian and white captives en route to fates as various as they were unsettling—all of these made their way up and down the Mohawk River, along its connecting tributaries and thence to Canada, Albany, New York City, or to Britain, or France, or the West Indies. And most of them passed through Johnson Hall.

The house is pleasing enough from the outside, but its interior really

captivates. I had read various eighteenth-century accounts and knew that within the hall's eight rooms, scattered across its horizontal surfaces and upon its walls, the man depicted in the statue had displayed English silver and ceramics, tomahawks and moccasins, wampum of every shade and ritualistic function, and Mohawk-language editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*, among further wonders. But for whom, and to what end? Once upon a time, I knew, there might have been seven hundred natives in evidence at any given moment, sometimes as many nine hundred—in the cobblestone courtyard, in the garden, in the house; at dinner, over tea, playing billiards on the second floor; talking among themselves or with any number of British aristocrats who made the house a stopover on their whirlwind tours of North America.

I stayed on in Mohawk country for two days. My conversation that first night with the curator, Wanda Burch, and her husband, over wine in the warmth of their late-Victorian, seems in retrospect to have resembled any number of Mohawk Valley nights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when people gathered to gossip and rehearse the many stories they had heard about scurrilous happenings at the house itself. Our surroundings merely enhanced this sense of continuity between the centuries. Outside darkness reigned: no streetlights to speak of, no traffic, the wind gathering force. My hosts, I discovered, had been living with the house for two decades. They had much to tell; and as the midnight hour drew near, I began to despair of knowing the place in full, if at all. Where would the story begin, and with whom? With a blind man imported from Ireland to regale Johnson's guests with the sound of his harp? A swashbuckling Dutchman who plied Mohawks with rum, only to kidnap and exhibit them in London's alleyways and gin houses? A sword-wielding bastard son called "Wild William"? The cast of characters grew as the evening progressed.

But always in my mind I returned to the house—the long shadow it had cast not only in Mohawk country, but also in London and Paris. It struck me as the perfect vantage point from which to survey all that had led its owner there, and all that had followed. So it would be a house story, a book about the domestic and diplomatic worlds that coexisted side by side within Johnson Hall. Few places in American history have been so much to so many: a house for parents and children; a workplace for slaves and servants; and, for the Indians who journeyed there from as far as Nova Scotia and South Carolina, an embassy, a store, and a clearinghouse for news. With the possible exception of Monticello, no early American house offers such an extraordinary perspective on racial mingling over time. The questions came fast and furious, the answers less so. But the point of my project became apparent soon enough. I would repopulate this historic site as best I could; I would write a dissertation about family ties forged across the so-called "cultural divide."

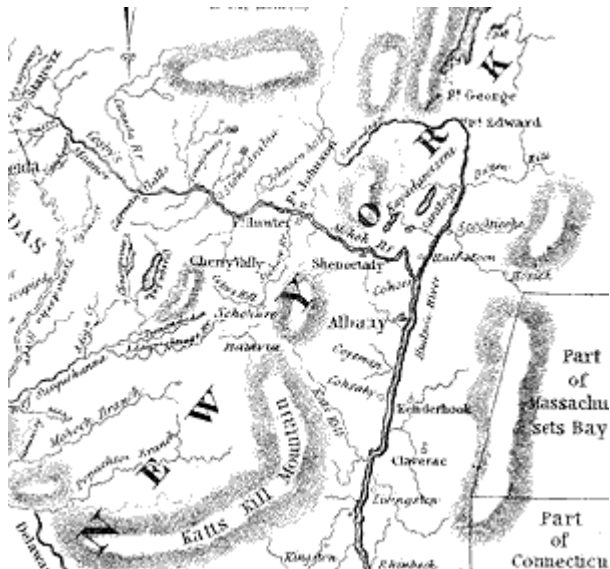


Fig. 1. Guy Johnson's 1771 map shows the location of Johnson Hall, in the heart of Mohawk country. Map by Guy Johnson to his excellency William Tryon Esqr. From E.B. O'Callaghan, *The Documentary History of the State of New York* (1851). Courtesy of the New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections Branch.

Johnson Hall still stands, forty-five miles northwest of Albany, in the easternmost corner of what used to be Iroquoia, on an elevation that descends southward to the northern bank of the Mohawk River, four miles below. It belongs now to the state of New York. But for eleven years between 1763 and 1774 it occupied a state unto itself: at Johnson Hall, "shelter" and "civilization" assumed forms never before taken. Indians wandered constantly through its rooms, and so did Europeans and their descendants. And if what came of all that wandering has been notoriously difficult to fix upon the page, this much is transparent: always centermost (indeed, center stage) was Sir William Johnson (1715-74)—immigrant Irishman turned English gentleman, His Majesty's Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Mohawk sachem; collector of Indian "curiosities," cultivator of plants and persons, founder of a *métis* dynasty. And, not least, builder of the hall.

Historians of architecture would call the house "late Georgian," for on its face it resembles any number of mid-eighteenth-century British and North American houses with balanced facades and symmetrical floor plans arranged around an axial hall. But the history of Johnson Hall's rooms, and of their use, is anything but typical. Built in 1763 (at the end of one war) and abandoned in 1777 (during another), Johnson Hall may well have been the most notorious late-Georgian structure in British North America—a house known to Washington and Jefferson and Franklin, a house familiar to Londoners and Parisians too. Here, it was said, there lived a freewheeling war hero and adventurer who mixed so easily with the Indians that he dressed and painted his face as they did, revered their traditions, spoke in their tongue, and bedded their women. How peculiar to white outsiders it must have seemed—and how bewitching—this decorative and diplomatic universe inhabited by Sir William

Johnson, his Mohawk “paramour” Molly Brant, their eight children, and by the large native population that sought companionship within the house, as in its surrounding garden and fields.

Those approaching from the river, or the south, would have arrived at the front door; those approaching from the woods, or the north, would have arrived at the back—and found themselves standing in a small cobblestone courtyard. A Palladian window still dominates this rear view; it is Johnson Hall’s single most conspicuous concession to formal British architectural style. From the second floor, where Johnson and his friends drank and played billiards late into the night, you can look through the window onto an empty cobblestone courtyard in which hundreds of Indians used to gather.

Rather than the attached dependencies traditionally seen on similar houses in Britain (and elsewhere in British North America), this house has flanking dependencies: free-floating stone “wings” detached from either side of the main structure. Although not unattractive, and certainly not uncommon in Indian country, these miniature fortresses with their multiple gun portals hew closely to a siege aesthetic, designed as they were for the family’s defense in case of attack. They remain today, unsettling reminders that desperate measures and sturdier shelter were sometimes called for far from Britain’s familiar shores.



Fig. 2. Edward Lamson Henry. The Council Fire at Johnson Hall, oil on canvas, 1903. Courtesy Albany Institute of History & Art. Henry’s painting depicts the house in its heyday as Britain’s foremost diplomatic site for negotiating with the Indians. Note the stone dependencies, Palladian window, and cobblestone courtyard.

In the eighteenth century, the phrase “Johnson Hall” designated a seven-hundred-acre estate, not merely the house that was its cultural hub. William Johnson had begun settling Palatine German families there as early as 1754, on an eighteen-thousand-acre tract acquired from the Mohawks. To satisfy their needs, and to fulfill his obligations as their protector and landlord, he built for them a town in 1763. He called it Johnstown. Early travelers through the place would have seen various outbuildings already standing or, if not, in various stages of construction: barns, a blacksmith’s shop, kilns for brick making, a caretaker’s house, an Anglican church, a graveyard, a grist mill, a small island in the nearby creek, a jail (or “gaol”), a parsonage, a potash

factory, a sawmill, a school, slaves' quarters, a wash house. A two-and-a-half-acre garden was always the object of favorable comment. The list of "improvements" goes on, and the overall effect would have been impressive—one of sound, motion, expansion, *civilization*. A far cry, to be sure, from the scenes of primitive living glimpsed here and there along the way: a fitting manifestation of Britain's reach—an empire within the Empire.

But no matter. To any white person traveling there from Britain by way of Manhattan, and from Manhattan by way of the Hudson and Mohawk rivers, Johnson Hall stood at the margin of Britain's empire, an outpost of civilization, or so it seemed, in a landscape seemingly bereft of all that civil people held dear. However well traversed and densely populated, the Mohawk Valley scarcely qualified as urban. Objects reflecting the tastes of London, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston may have meandered their way to Mohawk country, courtesy of the sailing vessels that linked Albany to the wider Atlantic world; yet despite its well-deserved reputation as one of North America's busiest trade corridors, the Valley remained a backwater to most who hailed from anywhere vaguely refined. If the journey had been long and difficult at times to bear, so much the better: several nights in the North American outdoors—on pine needles beneath a forest canopy or, if you were lucky, in an Indian's house—could make castles of cottages.

To the builders of Britain's brick and stone palaces, the country houses that extended for miles across the countryside of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, it couldn't have looked like much. By their ostentatious standards, Johnson Hall was indeed a modest house. There were no ballrooms here, no antechambers upon antechambers, no retinues of servants and footmen. Even if he could have afforded one, such a vast house would not have suited Johnson's needs or tastes. But in the end, the contours of the house itself are much beside the point, because what made Johnson Hall grand and unforgettable in the eyes and minds of its British visitors was precisely what put them off—its setting. Even Sir William Johnson, a man devoted to publicizing the Mohawk Valley as stable, populous, and economically viable, insisted on welcoming his guests "to this Wild place."

The power of place is a difficult concept to take stock of, especially when the place in question is 250 years old and its original occupants long since dead. But the affectionate place that Indians reserved in their heart for Johnson Hall is not in doubt. From the hands of its master and mistress, and from its many storehouses, native peoples took what they needed to survive and craved to be seen with: frying pans, razors, and "Fine Wrought Pens," among other wonders of the British marketplace. They came for food, shelter, smallpox inoculations, and, for those who required one, a decent burial. Warren Johnson observed in 1760 that his brother's establishment at Fort Johnson (the predecessor to Johnson Hall) boasted "More Custom . . . than any Inn in England."

Johnson Hall did better, because it was grander. And for the Indians that meant regular exposure and physical proximity to a parade of worldly goods. It meant

participation in an expanding repertoire of domestic rituals made possible by creamware teacups and saucers, decanters, wineglasses, pickle plates, and forks of all sorts. Far from being worthless "trinkets," these objects carried a great deal of symbolic weight for those who used and owned them; they fostered among some Indians a genuine, continually evolving sense of membership in the empire.

Where that sense of belonging originated, and how it was nurtured, remains for me the biggest question of all, as well as the toughest one to answer. But amid a dense tangle of motives that bound some native peoples to the struggles of their oppressors, the power of this place loomed large. The sort of *amalgamation* of British and native styles of life first glimpsed at Johnson Hall guided the course of Mohawk aspirations long after Johnson's death in 1774. Trapped, historians have argued, between a rock and a hard place, the Mohawks and most of their Iroquois brethren chose the more familiar of two evils; they gambled in aligning themselves with Britain, only to pay with their lives and their land.

Those with intimate ties to Sir William Johnson and to the biracial establishment he maintained at Johnson Hall saw it differently. For them—a special group, a gentry class of sorts—the American Revolution more nearly resembled an assault on their (predominantly British) style of living than the white man's war it has been made it out to be. The War of Independence looks rather different from the threshold of Johnson Hall than it would from, say, Mount Vernon or Monticello, especially when we place Johnson and the Mohawks at the front door. These were the lords of the manor. Indeed, the great irony here is that certain Iroquois peoples living in what is now upstate New York were not only unapologetic Loyalists, but also richer and more polished than many of their white neighbors. In Mohawk country, "patriotic" zeal and white rage were not merely the consequences of land scarcity among settlers; they were a violent reaction against the Indians' obvious material fortune. Which is to say that class resentment may well have been a more potent catalyst to violence than ethnic hatred.

How anyone might go about recovering for a wide readership the Loyalist sentiments of Indians who left few written records requires serendipity and imagination, frequently in heavy doses. The more time I have spent wandering the rooms of Johnson Hall and standing in the Mohawks' clapboard Anglican chapel (built for them by Johnson in 1767), the less I have become convinced of the written record's ability to shoulder the full burden of my interpretive and explanatory tasks. Because Johnson's capacity for self-reflection was less developed than we of the early twenty-first century would prefer, his correspondence sometimes obscures more than it reveals about how he perceived himself, much less his feelings for all the Indians in his life. In the absence of any word from Johnson or the Indians, I have found myself turning again and again to the house itself—and to the objects that fostered and sustained conviviality therein.

Johnson Hall was more than just a funky place to visit with Indians who sometimes dressed as well, and sometimes better, than Anglo-Europeans. It was a place where the idea of what it meant to be a British subject was tried, tested, and ultimately enlarged to accommodate native peoples. If it is true that being British in the eighteenth century required a great deal more than a fancy suit of clothes and a certain facility with the king's tongue, then just how, exactly, might one go about becoming British? This is not a simple question, yet for some Indians it was an urgent one. Britons living in North America (as elsewhere in the expanding Empire) demonstrated their allegiance to the Crown in ways as mundane as they were various. They fought wars, they built houses of stone and mill-sawn lumber, they tended livestock, they fenced and defended the acres they farmed, they prayed in Anglican churches and read from Anglican prayer books, they toasted the king's health, they drank tea from British ceramics and Chinese porcelain, and they wore British fabrics.

Some Mohawks did too. They participated as exuberantly in the spiritual, martial, and domestic rituals of empire as did their British neighbors. Often they participated more exuberantly, and with an ardor that surprised Britons and Indians alike.

Unless they are also archaeologists, or simply collectors, historians of early America rarely find themselves in the company of objects; and this is too bad. To ask readers to contemplate the symbolic and social value that accrues to material possessions in any culture is to make the past tangible—and vibrant, and relevant, and *interesting* to wrestle with. In the silver communion vessels sought by the Mohawks and sent to them by Queen Anne in the 1710s, we have just one instance of a native population finding in the British much to admire and emulate. Indeed, Sir William Johnson merely elaborated on a tradition of collaboration and mutual affection established long before his own appearance in the New World. If not for Molly Brant's grandfather, celebrated in his day as one of "four Indian kings" to meet with Queen Anne on a highly sensitive diplomatic mission in 1710, the silver never would have come. After his London journey, things were never the same in Mohawk country. He and his three compatriots returned from their audience with Queen Anne to inaugurate one of the most extraordinary alliances ever forged between native peoples and a colonizing power, an alliance as spiritual and cultural as it was martial.

The silver communion vessels given to the Mohawks by the Queen remain in Iroquois hands today, saved as they were from rebel thieves during the Revolution and taken to what is now Six Nations Reserve in Canada, home to the only royal chapel in North America. The church that became the chapel was founded by none other than Molly Brant and her son George, her second son by Sir William Johnson. But we can look elsewhere, far from Canada, for evidence of Britain's lingering influence upon the landscapes and peoples it once ruled. The world of Johnson Hall did not die with Johnson's death, or with the Revolution, or with the exile of Loyalist Indians to the reservations that haunt our country still. While the founding generation haggled over the Treaty of Paris and began building a country, another generation of British

colonial administrators, cultural chameleons all, could be found adapting the hybrid spirit of Johnson Hall to another part of the empire—India.

Further Reading: Much of Sir William Johnson's correspondence is collected in Milton W. Hamilton et al., eds., *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, 14 vols. (Albany, N.Y., 1921-65).

Among the best secondary sources are Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge, 1995); John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York, 1994); Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Indians and English: Facing Off in Early America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000); Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992) and *Looking East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, 1991).

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Kirk Davis Swinehart, a doctoral candidate in American studies at Yale, currently holds the Mellon Research Fellowship in American history at the University of Cambridge. This essay derives from his dissertation, "This Wild Place: Sir William Johnson among the Mohawks." In the fall, he will join the history department at Wesleyan University.