

Hendrick Aupaumut (Mahican) (1757-1830)

A native diplomat and grand sachem of the Mahicans, Hendrick Aupaumut was an important leader of the Stockbridge Indians during the last forty years of his life. He was described by Timothy Pickering, a special peace agent to the western tribes, as an intelligent man, fluent in English (which he wrote legibly). His elevation to leadership came at a critical time in Stockbridge history.

That history had been remarkable as an example of racial and cultural survival. The Stockbridges, of which the Mahicans formed the largest part, included remnants of tribal groups that had once inhabited the entire Hudson River Valley. At first contact, the Mahicans had controlled the territory on both sides of the river from the Catskills north to Lake Champlain. To the south were other Munsee groups with whom the Mahicans had close relations and with whom they controlled the valley down to Manhattan. By 1700, however, they had been reduced from an estimated 4,000 to about 500 as a result of epidemic diseases, warfare, displacement, and amalgamation with other groups. Their decline continued in the eighteenth century. In 1735, missionaries were sent to the Mahicans and others on the Housatonic River in western Massachusetts, where they established a mission town at Stockbridge, to which were gathered the remnant tribes of the region. In 1740 Moravians established a mission for the Mahicans in New York; when New York officials ordered the Moravians to cease their efforts a few years later, the Mahicans dispersed to Pennsylvania, Canada, and elsewhere, including Stockbridge.

Aupaumut, born at Stockbridge, had been educated by the Moravians. At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, he and many other Stockbridges enlisted in the Continental Army.

Following the battle of White Plains in 1778, he was commissioned captain and saw extensive service during the remainder of the war. After the war, the Stockbridges decided to move because of terrible losses during the war, the takeover of Stockbridge by whites, and the Stockbridges' susceptibility to the vices of their white neighbors. At the invitation of the Oneidas, they moved to Oneida Creek, New York, in the mid-1780s and established New Stockbridge.

Aupaumut became influential after the removal. By virtue of his loyalty to the United States, he served as an important go-between for the government and the Indians during the early 1790s. When the native groups of the Northwest Territory, encouraged by British intrigue, made war against the frontier settlements, Aupaumut was sent by General Arthur St. Clair in 1791 with a proclamation and offer of peace. At the request of Secretary of War Henry Knox in 1792, he traveled for eleven months among the Delawares, Miamis, Shawnees, and others. After this journey Aupaumut wrote "A Short Narration of My Last Journey to the Western Country," a detailed account of his journey and negotiations with the various peoples. In 1794, he was at the Battle of Fallen Timbers with General Wayne and attended a session of the treaty negotiation with the Six Nations and others at Canandaigua; he signed the treaty that was drafted and continued to work as a negotiator for a number of years. In 1808 or 1809 he was seen in Washington with Nicholas Cusick, a Tuscarora, on their way

to North Carolina to try to obtain reparations from the North Carolinians for lands that the Tuscaroras had been forced to abandon in the eighteenth century.

By the time of his travels to the Western country, Aupaumut was convinced that the Stockbridges must move farther west. He was afraid of the influence of not only the local whites but the Oneidas, who discouraged farming by the Stockbridge men. When the Oneidas attempted to introduce the religion of Handsome Lake to the Stockbridges, Aupaumut stopped them. In his search for a new home, Aupaumut sought out the Munsees and Delawares who had settled on the White River in Indiana, to whom he was appointed agent in 1808. Attempts of the Stockbridges to find a new home in the West were disrupted by the War of 1812, during which he adamantly opposed the efforts of Tecumseh to organize tribes on the frontier. In 1818 a group migrated to the White River to join the Munsees and Delawares, only to find that the lands had been sold. In 1821, Aupaumut's son Soloman took a small group to Wisconsin, where they settled on Menominee lands and were joined by others from Indiana and New York. In 1828, land was purchased for them on the Fox River, and in 1829, the year before Aupaumut's death, the last Stockbridges, including Aupaumut himself, removed to the West.

Aupaumut's "Narration," sprinkled with flaws in English idioms, attests to the struggle of a Native American, working in a second language, to record an Indian history full of speeches and dramatic episodes. The "Narration" provides the reader with rare insights into Indian manners, diplomacy, and protocol. Aupaumut himself takes on complex dimensions through his narrative. Despite what the colonists had done to his own people, Aupaumut was fiercely loyal to the United States. He had faith that the new nation would treat the Indians fairly. Always the diplomat, he carefully avoided discussing topics that might alienate the Indians, and he presented his hearers with logical arguments, stressing a preference of negotiation over warfare. Written about 1794, the manuscript went unpublished until 1827, after it was found among the papers of Isaac Zane of Philadelphia. Besides this piece, Aupaumut also recorded Mahican tribal traditions in 1791 and was author of a number of speeches and letters published during his lifetime.

In the early 1700's, Hendrick Aupaumut, Mohican Historian, wrote that a great people traveled from north and west. They crossed waters where the land almost touched. (According the John Quinney, Hendrick Aupaumut committed the oral history of the Mohicans to writing, in the mid 1700's, a non-Indian took the manuscript to be published and it was reportedly lost. When found, the manuscript's first page was missing. Two versions of the manuscript exist: one is the Massachusetts Historical Collections and one in Electa Jones' book Stockbridge Past and Present.

[A web search did not produce a source for this document. The mention in the previous paragraph about his work in the early- and mid-1700's is incorrect, since he was born in Stockbridge in 1757. I did find a reference to some writing he had done in 1790. *Michael F. Wilcox May 27, 2020*]