

QUEEN CATHARINE MONTOUR

by Andrew E. Tompkins

Queen Catharine Montour (1710-1804), after whom Montour Falls is named, was the great-granddaughter of a French settler to Canada named Montour and a Huron woman he took as his wife. Little is truly known about Catharine Montour. There are varying accounts of her life and the myths and legends that have surrounded the influential “Queen.” What we do know is that her grandmother, Madam Catharine Montour, married an Oneida Indian chief named Robert (Carondowana) Hunter and served as an interpreter between her tribe and the early settlers. Their daughter, known as French Margaret, married a Mohawk named Peter Quebec. Among their children they were to have two daughters, Catharine and Esther, who were to figure prominently in the early history and legend of the region.

Catharine married a Seneca Indian chief named Telenemut, also known as Thomas Hudson, who was killed in 1760 in a raid on a rival Catawba tribe. His hunting lands encompassed the southern tip of Seneca Lake and the village known as She-qua-ga. After his death Catharine assumed leadership of the village and it's close to 300 inhabitants. The village was soon to become known as Catharine's Town to early travelers and soldiers passing through. It consisted of some 30 to 50 houses situated in a fertile valley, later named Catharine Valley, which produced abundant game, corn, beans, cucumbers, squash, and orchards of apples and peaches. Catharine's Town was also situated along a creek, known later as Catharine Creek, where fishing is still enjoyed today.

Unfortunately the abundance of food that Catharine's valley produced, and the allegiances she and her sister Esther made, were to be their undoing. The Seneca under Chief Red Jacket and Joseph Brandt, and as part of the six tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy, had allied themselves with the British during the Revolutionary War. It is believed that Red Jacket and Joseph Brandt visited Queen Catharine in Catharine's Town around this time, recognizing her as the leader of the local She-qua-ga Seneca. The abundance of food in and around Catharine's Town would help sustain the Seneca on their raiding parties against settlers sympathetic to the revolution and General George Washington's Continental Army.

While Queen Catharine may have been helping to feed the enemies of fledgling America, her sister, Queen Esther Montour, was taking a much more active role. After her village at Tioga Point, Pennsylvania was destroyed by the Continental Army in 1778, Queen Esther was rumored to have vented her wrath on prisoners taken at Wyoming, Pennsylvania by putting them to death. She became known as the “Butcher of Wyoming” and is believed to have been killed at the Battle of Newtown (Elmira) in 1779, which initiated the Sullivan-Clinton Expedition against the six tribes of that same year.

The Sullivan-Clinton Expedition, ordered by General George Washington, would clear out the British-allied tribes in the region and destroy the settlement of Catharine's Town, forcing Queen Catharine and her people to flee for the safety of the British at Fort Niagara in Canada. After the war some of the displaced people of Queen Catharine's tribe began to trickle back to the region. Some, like early settler George Mills, believe that Queen Catharine herself came back to live out her days in Catharine's Town. Others believe she stayed in Canada and died there. Either way Queen Catharine Montour remains an important and prominent woman in the early history of America and New York State. There is a memorial honoring the Seneca and Queen Catharine Montour on the grounds of Cook Cemetery Memorial Park in Montour Falls. It is inscribed:

Ga Gwe Goh

Ju Gon

Ens Swa Se Seck

“Every one of you always remember this.”