

## Letter to President Washington (1790)

*To the Great Council of the Thirteen Fires. The Speech of Corn Plant, Half Town, and Big Tree, Chiefs and Counsellors of the Seneca Nation.*

*Father*; — The voice of the Seneca Nations speaks to you, the great counsellor, in whose heart wise men of all the Thirteen Fires have placed their wisdom; it may be very small in your ears, and we therefore entreat you to hearken with attention, for we are about to speak of things which are to us very great.

When your army entered the country of the Six Nations, we called you the town-destroyer; and to this day, when your name is heard, our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling close to the necks of their mothers. Our counsellors and warriors are men, and cannot be afraid; but their hearts are grieved with the fears of our women and children, and desire that it may be buried so deep as to be heard no more.

When you gave us peace we called you father, because you promised to secure us in the possession of our lauds. Do this, and so long as the land shall remain, that beloved name shall be in the heart of every Seneca.

*Father*; — We mean to open our hearts before you, and we earnestly desire that you will let us clearly understand what you resolve to do.

When our chiefs returned from the treaty at Fort Stanwix, and laid before our council what had been done there, our nation was surprised to hear how great a country you had compelled them to give up to you, without your paying to us any thing for it. Every one said, that your hearts were yet swelled with resentment against us for what had happened during the war, but that one day you would consider with more kindness. We asked each other, what have we done to deserve such severe chastisement?

*Father* — When you kindled your Thirteen Fires separately, the wise men assembled at them told us, that you were all brothers; the children of one great father, who regarded the red people as his children. They called us brothers, and invited us to his protection. They told us that he resided beyond the great water where the sun first rises; that he was a king whose power no people could resist, and that his goodness was as bright as the sun: what they said went to our hearts. We accepted the invitation, and promised to obey him. What the Seneca Nation promises they faithfully perform; and when you refused obedience to that king, he commanded us to assist his beloved men in making you sober. In obeying him, we did no more than yourselves had led us to promise. The men who claimed this promise told us, that you were children and had no guns; that when they had shaken you, you would submit. We hearkened unto them, and were deceived until your army approached our towns. We were deceived, but your people teaching us to confide in that king, had helped to deceive us, and we now appeal to your heart, is all the blame ours?

*Father;* — When we saw that we had been deceived, and heard the invitation which you gave us to draw near to the fire you had kindled and talk with you concerning peace, we made haste toward it. You then told us you could crush us to nothing, and you demanded from us a great country, as the price of that peace which you had offered to us; as if our want of strength had destroyed our rights. Our chiefs had felt your power and were unable to contend against you, and they therefore gave up that country. What they agreed to has bound our nation; but your anger against us must by this time be cooled, and although our strength is not increased, nor your power become less, we ask you to consider calmly: Were the terms dictated to us by your commissioners reasonable and just?

*Father;* — Your commissioners, when they drew the line which separated the land then given up to you, from that which you agreed should remain to be ours, did most solemnly promise, that we should be secured in the peaceable possession of the land which we inhabited, east and north of that line. — Does this promise bind you?

Hear now, we entreat you, what has since happened concerning that land. On the day we finished the treaty at Fort Stanwix, commissioners from Pennsylvania told our chiefs, that they had come there to purchase from lines of their state; and they told us that all the lands belonging to us within the line, would strike the river Susquehanna below Tioga branch. They then left us to consider of the bargain until next day. The next day we let them know, that we were unwilling to sell all the land within their state, and proposed to let them have a part of it, which we pointed out to them in their map. They told us that they must have the whole, that it was already ceded to them by the great king, at the time of making peace with you, and was then their own; but they said that they would not take advantage of that, and were willing to pay us for it, after the manner of their ancestors. Our chiefs were unable to contend at that time, and therefore they sold the lands up to the line, which was then shown them as the line of that state. What the commissioners had said about the land having been ceded to them at the peace, they considered as intended only to lessen the price, and they passed it by with very little notice; but since that time we have heard so much from others about the right to our lands which the king gave when you made peace with him, that it is our earnest desire that you will tell us what it means.

Our nation empowered J. L. to let out a part of our lands; he told us that he was sent by Congress to do this for us, and we fear he has deceived us in the writing he obtained from us; for since the time of our giving that power, a man named P—, has come and claimed our whole country northward of the line of Pennsylvania, under a purchase from that L. to whom he said he had paid twenty thousand dollars for it; he also said, that he had bought it from the council of the Thirteen Fires, and paid them twenty thousand more for the same; and he also said, that it did not belong to us, for that the great king had ceded the whole of it, when you made peace with him. Thus he claimed the whole country north of Pennsylvania, and west of the lands belonging to the Cayugas. He demanded it; he insisted on his demand, and declared to us that he would have it all. It was impossible for us to grant him this, and we immediately refused it. After some days he proposed to run a line a small distance eastward of our western boundary, which we also refused to agree to. He then threatened us with immediate war if we did not comply.

Upon this threat our chiefs held a council, and they agreed that no event of war could be worse than to be driven, with our wives and children, from the only country which we had any right to; and therefore, weak as our nation was, they determined to take the chance of war rather than submit to such unjust demands, which seemed to have no bounds. Mr. Street, the great trader at Niagara, was then with us, having come at

the request of P—; and as he had always professed to be our great friend, we consulted him on this subject. He also told us that our lands had been ceded by the king, and that we must give them up. Astonished at what we heard from every quarter, with hearts aching with compassion for our women and children, we were thus compelled to give up all our country north of the line of Pennsylvania, and east of the Chenessee river up to the great forks, and east of a south-line drawn up from that fork to the line of Pennsylvania. For this land P. agreed to pay us ten thousand dollars in hand, and one thousand dollars a year for ever. He paid us two thousand five hundred dollars, and he sent for us to come last spring and receive our money; but instead of paying us the residue (or remainder) of the ten thousand dollars, and the one thousand dollars due for the first year, he offered only five hundred dollars, and insisted that he had agreed with us for that sum to be paid yearly.

We debated with him for six days, during all which time he persisted in refusing to pay us our just demand; and he insisted that we should receive the five hundred dollars; and Street from Niagara also insisted on our receiving the money as it was offered us. The last reason which he assigned for continuing to refuse paying us was — that the king had ceded the land to the Thirteen Fires, and that he had bought them from you and paid you for them.

*Father;* — We could bear this confusion no longer and determined to press through every difficulty, and lift up our voice so that you might hear us, and to claim that security in the possession of our lands, which your commissioners so solemnly promised us; and we now entreat you to inquire into our complaints, and to redress our wrongs.

*Father;* — Our writings were lodged in the hands of S. of Niagara, as we supposed him to be our friend; but when we saw P. consulting S. on every occasion, we doubted of his honesty towards us; and we have since heard that he was to receive for his endeavours to deceive us, a piece of land ten miles in width west of the Chenessee river; and near forty miles in length extending to lake Ontario; and the lines of this tract have been run accordingly, although no part of it is within the bounds which limit this purchase.

*Father;* — You have said that we were in your hand, and that by closing it you could crush us to nothing. Are you then determined to crush us? If you are, tell us so, that those of our nation who have become your children, and have determined to die so, may know what to do. In this case one chief has said, he would ask you to put him out of his pain. Another, who will not think of dying by the hand of his father, or of his brother, has said he will retire to the Chataughque, eat of the fatal root, and sleep with his fathers in peace.

Before you determine a measure so unjust, look up to God, who made us as well as you; we hope he will not permit you to destroy the whole of our nation.

*Father;* — Hear our case: Many nations inhabited this country, but they had no wisdom, therefore they warred together; the Six Nations were powerful and compelled them to peace. The land for a great extent was given up to them, but the nations which were not destroyed all continued on those lands: and claimed the protection of the Six Nations, as brothers of their fathers. They were men, and when at peace had a right to live upon the earth.

The French came among us, and built Niagara; they became our fathers, and took care of us. Sir William Johnson came, and took that fort from the French; he became our father, and promised to take care of us,

and he did so until you were too strong for his king. To him we gave four miles round Niagara, as a place of trade. We have already said how we came to join against you; we saw that we were wrong, we wished for peace, you demanded a great country to be given up to you, it was surrendered to you as the price of peace, and we ought to have peace and possession of the little land which you then left us.

*Father* — When that great country was given up to you there were but few chiefs present, and they were compelled to give it up. And it is not the Six Nations only that reproach those chiefs with having given up that country. The Chipaways, and all the nations who lived on these lands westward, call to us, and ask us, "Brothers of our fathers, where is the place which you have reserved for us to lie down upon?"

*Father*; — You have compelled us to do that which makes us ashamed. We have nothing to answer to the children of the brothers of our fathers. When last spring they called upon us to go to war to secure them a bed to lie down upon, the Senecas entreated them to be quiet until we had spoken to you; but on our way down, we heard that your army had gone towards the country which those nations inhabited; and if they meet together, the best blood on both sides will stain the ground.

*Father*; — We will not conceal from you that the great God, and not men, has preserved the Corn Plant from the hands of his own nation. For they ask continually, "Where is the land on which our children, and their children after them, are to lie down upon? You told us," say they, "that the line drawn from Pennsylvania to Lake Ontario, would mark it forever on the east, and the line running from Beaver Creek to Pennsylvania, would mark it on the west, and we see that it is not so; for first one, and then another, come and take it away by order of that people which you tell us promised to secure it to us." He is silent, for he has nothing to answer. When the sun goes down he opens his heart before God; and earlier than the sun appears again upon the hills he gives thanks for his protection during the night; for he feels that among men, become desperate by the injuries they sustain, it is God only that can preserve him. He loves peace, and all he had in store he has given to those who have been robbed by your people, lest they should plunder the innocent to repay themselves. The whole season, which others have employed in providing for their families, he has spent in endeavours to preserve peace; and this moment his wife and children are lying on the ground, and in want of food: his heart is in pain for them, but he perceives that the Great Spirit will try his firmness in doing what is right.

*Father*; — The game which the Great Spirit sent into our country for us to eat, is going from among us. We thought he intended we should till the ground with the plough as the white people do, and we talked to one another about it. But before we speak to you concerning this, we must know from you whether you mean to leave us and our children any land to till. Speak plainly to us concerning this great business.

All the land we have been speaking of belonged to the Six Nations: no part of it ever belonged to the King of England, and he could not give it up to you. The land we live on our fathers received from God, and they transmitted it to us for our children, and we cannot part with it.

*Father*; — We told you that we would open our hearts to you: hear us once more. At Fort Stanwix we agreed to deliver up those of our people who should do you any wrong, and that you might try them and punish them according to your law. We delivered up two men accordingly; but instead of trying them according to your law, the lowest of your people took them from your magistrate, and put them

immediately to death. It is just to punish the murderer with death, but the Senecas will not deliver up their people to men who disregard the treaties of their own nation.

*Father*, — Innocent men of our nation are killed, one after another, and of our best families; but none of your people who have committed those murders have been punished. We recollect that you did promise to punish those who killed our people; and we ask, was it intended that your people should kill the Senecas, and not only remain unpunished, but be protected from the next of kin?

*Father*, — These are to us very great things; we know that you are very strong, and we have heard that you are wise, and we shall wait to hear your answer that we may know that you are just.

Signed at Philadelphia, December, 1790.

his

By the CORN + PLANT,

mark.

his

HALF + TOWN,

mark.

his

BIG + TREE,

mark.

In the presence of

JOSEPH NICHOLSON, Interpreter, and sundry others.