Oneida heroine Polly Cooper featured at the Smithsonian

Amy Neff Roth
Utica Observer Dispatch
USA TODAY NETWORK

A Native American hero's contributions to the Revolutionary War were recognized at the Smithsonian Institution on July 22 as part of the museum's festivities to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

This hero stands out among 19th century heroes; she's a woman and an Oneida Indian.

The Oneida Indian Nation were among America's first allies, fighting side by side with American soldiers, including in the battles of Oriskany, Saratoga and Barren Hill.

Polly Cooper traveled more than 200 miles to Valley Forge in April and May, 1778, with a group of 47 Oneida warriors recruited to act as scouts for General George Washington by the Marquis de Lafayette, according to the Oneida Indian National website.

They also brought corn for the cold and hungry troops.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and the Oneida Indian Nation partnered to present the program 'First Allies: Polly Cooper and the Oneida Indian Nation.'

'As we celebrate the 250th anniversary, it is important that we recognize the full spectrum of those who made possible the United States' founding, honoring the sacrifices made to achieve our enduring freedoms,' said Oneida Indian Nation Representative Ray Halbritter in a statement. 'Oneida ancestors were America's first allies because they believed then, as we do now, that all people have an inherent right to sovereignty and self-determination.'

The program looked at the Oneida Indian Nation' contributions to the birth of the nation and featured indigenous perspectives on American history. Oneida elders performed traditional social dances and gave food demonstrations.

The Oneida Indian Nation online history of Cooper's trip included a story that the soldiers at Valley Forge were so hungry that they tried to eat the white Indian corn raw. But Cooper stopped them, knowing that the corn required significantly longer cooking than sweet corn, as well as rinsing and cleaning.

It's believed that she spent her time at Valley Forge cooking for the troops, perhaps making corn soup, corn bread and mush. She also taught the men how to cook the corn and refused the payment she was offered for her services.

Oneida oral history continues Cooper's story beyond her work at Valley Forge. It includes the story of a shopping trip to Philadelphia with soldiers' wives, including Martha Washington.

The wives bought Cooper a bonnet and a shawl she had admired in a shop window; her descendants still have and treasure the shawl.

Cooper has also been recognized this year on the 2026 Native American $1 coin.



The U.S. Mint's 2026 Native American $1 Coin. provided by Oneida Indian Nation

© 2016 www.democratandchronicle.com. All rights reserved.

Powered by TECNAVIA