

Sigenauk's War of Independence: Anishinaabe Resurgence and the Making of Indigenous Authority in the Borderlands of Revolution

*By John William Nelson*

During the upheaval of the American Revolution, Indigenous peoples in the Great Lakes harnessed the uncertain geopolitics of the era to advance their own objectives in the region. Sigenauk, a leader from the Anishinaabe towns southwest of Lake Michigan, navigated these changing dynamics to defend and expand his faction's autonomy while simultaneously enhancing his individual influence in the wider borderland. Tracing Sigenauk's rise to prominence highlights how such headmen blended traditional elements of Native leadership with novel innovations to address the new opportunities and challenges posed by the conflict. Sigenauk's machinations during the war culminated in leading a joint expedition with the Spanish against the British at Saint Joseph. Sigenauk's successful navigation of internal dynamics within Anishinaabewaki and the wider turmoil of the revolutionary borderlands strengthened his southwestern faction's bid to reconstitute power in the region. Following the war, the southwestern Anishinaabeg under Sigenauk continued to flourish as a separate and sovereign force in their homeland. The ascension of Sigenauk and the southwestern Anishinaabeg at this moment challenges common assumptions that the American Revolution ushered in an era of decline for Native peoples.