

# HILL FAMILY SAGA: ORIGINS TO THE BEGINNING OF THE REVOLUTION

By

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It would not be overstating the matter to assert that the leading family among the Mohawk Nation at Canajoharie (Indian Castle, NY) was those with the surname Brant; while their counterparts at Tiononderoge (Ft. Hunter, NY) were members of the family who adopted Hill as their surname. This is reflected in the land holdings and the personal effects owned by each individual with the surname Brant or Hill based on claims for losses at the time of the American Revolution. These families were in a category beyond any others, reflecting their high degree of acculturation including the predilection to marry members of the local Euro – American elite.

What follows is an overview of the story of the Hills from the 1600s to the early 1800s.

The earliest origins of the Mohawk Hill family blend mysteriously into the mists of time before the mid 1600s. However the Huron – Wyandot and European ancestry entered the Hill genome at various points, particularly via a later marriage of the focus of this saga, Aaron Hill Oseragheté, to Margaret Crine (Green).

**Aurie (Aria) Kanaghowende** (probably born circa 1660 in Ossernenon on the south side of the Mohawk River) was baptized 5 October 1700 at the Schenectady Reformed Dutch Church along with his mother **Maria**, and wife **Catharine** and her mother **Sarah**. The mothers would have been born perhaps 1635. Their not having been baptized in Canada suggests that they may have been “true” Mohawks (as opposed to captive Hurons). This appears to have been a three generation baptismal marathon in that Cornelius, the son of Arie and Catharine, was also recorded in the baptismal register in this family grouping.

Folklore of the Mohawk Valley records that Aurie’s Creek and Auriesville NY were named after an Indian who resided in a home on the flats near the hill of the Ossernenon Mohawk Castle. The specific location can be pinpointed based on the naming of the farm and owner of Aurie’s home in a County Atlas of 1853. In speaking of Aurie’s Creek, Simms, in his “History of Schoharie County” stated, *Aurie is the Dutch of Aaron, and the creek was so called after an old Indian warrior named Aaron, who lived many years in a hut which stood on the flats, now owned by J.C. Yost, on the east side of the creek.* Basically he resided at the other end of the Mohawk Flats, west of Ft. Hunter (the village of Tiononderoge). Interviews by Lyman Draper circa 1879 with the descendants of the Mohawks who fought in the American Revolution succeeded in obtaining an explanation of why the surname Hill (presently the most common surname on the Six Nations Reserve) was adopted (e.g., instead of the patronymic naming practiced by other Mohawk families). Two separate informants stated that the name arose due to the geographic circumstance of their having resided on a hillside at the time of the Revolution. It is not clear whether the surname emerged in relation to the hill as

Osserenon or further east, which is an extension of this hill, closer to Ft. Hunter where the Hills appear to have resided in 1777.

Aurie was an individual of some influence, although there is no evidence that he was a hereditary sachem. He does appear in the account books of Everett Wendell of Albany. In one entry Wendell heads the page, *Cornelis's wife Debit Aria's son*.

It appears that at least until 1717 Aurie was an active war captain, leading parties deep into the south to attack their ancient enemies the Catawbas (Flatheads) of the Carolinas. The editor of the Wendell Account Book includes the following entry for 28 May 1717 where Alida Schuyler Livingston of Livingston Manor wrote in a letter, *Arie de Wilt had just passed by with twelve or thirteen other American Indians, and that they carried three scalps and an Indian who they had captured in the Carolinas*. Furthermore, *A delegation from Virginia, that was sent to Albany to discuss with Iroquois leaders a series of recent violent clashes, found in June of that year that 'Aria, a Mohog that was Capt. Of that company that was lately in Virginia' denied any hand in the raids in that colony* (Waterman, p.242, #232). There is a sketch (used as a cover to the Wendell Account Book) that exactly matches the description in the first section above. It is presently located in a French archive. [Click here](#) to see this sketch.

In the continuing acrimony over the title to the lands of the Mohawk Flats (where the Mohawks resided), claimed by the Corporation of the City of Albany, the deed considered bogus by the Mohawks was produced by officials in Governor Crosby's administration, probably about 1733, it was *burnt by Aria one of our Sachems in the Govrs presence*. Aurie was still alive 28 December 1735, but drops off the radar at that point.

Aurie's son **Cornelius "of the Hill" Thannewanega** ("His Two Adjoining Swamps") was born about 1684, probably on the North Bank of the Mohawk River (e.g., perhaps Caughnawaga). On 4 October 1704 he married **Karagkwine** – in the bulk of the records her first name is **Catharine**, but also Mary and Mary Magdaline. There does not seem to be any sensible explanation for these inconsistencies. Catharine was alive 13 December 1729, but likely died soon thereafter since by 21 December 1733 Cornelius was married to an Anna, and continued having children. He had 4 recorded children (likely in fact double this number) via each wife. He was also a frequent witness to the baptism of children in the Dutch Reformed and Anglican churches. The many references to a Mohawk sachem Cornelius in sundry record sources of 1700 to 1714 all appear to be Cornelius Tirogaren a Turtle Clan sachem – not Cornelius, son of Aurie.

It seems that in his later years, Cornelius resided near Ft. Hunter and devoted himself to encouraging his people to be faithful to the church, and the children to attend school. On 17 November 1742, Reverend Henry Barclay wrote to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts that he had opened schools at both Mohawk Castles, and that he had, appointed two school-masters, each receiving 10 pounds per annum, *one Cornelius a Sachem at the Lower and one Daniel att the Upper Town. The former is very faithful and Diligent and vastly Successful* (SPG Letters 1701-1786, Vol.10, No.112). He

also noted that the Mohawks observe two hunting seasons when all participate, and so too the schoolmasters for two months at a time. On 4 November 1743 Barclay wrote that the Indian schools were a great success due to, for example, Cornelius instructing several young men in the faith, and *reads prayers in my Absence, and ----- much Beloved by his Countrymen* (Ibid, Vol.11, #115). Cornelius disappears from the records at this time, and it is supposed that he died, or went into retirement before Barclay left Fort Hunter in early 1746 (he was last a witness to a baptism 17 June 1744).

The second son of Cornelius and Catharine was **Aaron Oseraghete** (“He Carries a Knife”) “**of the Hill**”, baptized 3 March 1708 at the Albany Reformed Dutch Church. Aaron was of the Turtle Clan, indicating the clan affiliation of his mother. Later documents show that Aaron was well schooled in that he could compose letters in Mohawk and was able to speak English, Dutch and many Indian languages. He was to become the progenitor of a long and illustrious list of descendants. Aaron married **Margaret Tekonwanonronnih** (“Who Stands in the Midst of the People”) **Crine (Green)**, daughter of **Crine Anequendahonji** (“Dark Belly”) and **Anna Hazeankahha**, baptized with three brothers and sisters 21 January 1712 at the Schenectady Reformed Dutch Church. Margaret was a clan mother of the Astawenserontha Bear Clan / Tribe, and the sister of Johannes Crine Anequendahonji who was well known to Europeans and locals as White Hans (“a whitish Indian”). The father Crine may have been the son of Dutchman Crine Van Meter, and Anna’s father was also probably white. Hans was one of the few Mohawks who supported the Rebel (Patriot) cause, and returned to his home 330 yards from the Anglican parsonage at Ft. Hunter after the American Revolution. The family appears to have been extensively admixed with Europeans based on physical descriptions and the fact that during the War of 1812 one of Catharine Hill’s first cousins, son of “White Hans” was named John “Blue Eyed” Green.

Aaron and Margaret married about 1727 and had at least three children before the arrival of Rev. Henry Barclay as minister to the Mohawks of Ft. Hunter in 1735. Their names were Mary, **Margaret** and Cornelius. Five of their children were baptized by Rev. Barclay before his departure in 1746 – Aaron Jr., Catharine, John, Peter, and David. Aaron Jr., John, and David would become officers in the Indian Department during the American Revolution. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this family was the most prominent, wealthy and acculturated to European ways, by far, of any of the Ft. Hunter Mohawks with the possible exception of the related Crine (Green) family.

It appears that Aaron followed in his father’s footsteps on the warpath. On 8 April 1735, the Mohawk sachem Hendrick appeared before the Commissioners of Indian Affairs and reported to them that, *aron one of the Indians of yt Castle (Mohawks) had been taken prisoner by the Flatheads (Catawbas) while there with a number of Indians fighting. Hendrick stated that the Catawbas treated Aaron very barbariously Especially when he was first brought in. In other words he was subjected to the “standard” torture ritual at the stake. Hendrick continued, however a great Catawba Sachem interceded and demanded Aarons release. This being secured they then dressed his wounds. He asked Aaron to take a message back to the Six Nations that he wished to conclude a peace with them.*

Over the next 10 years Aaron rose to a very high degree of power in his community. Aaron was also not at all averse to using his status to secure the best deal for himself or his people. The year 1745 seems to have put Aaron into the spotlight, much of the activity being of interest to the Commissioners of Indian Affairs. In March, *Hendrick and Aaron two Sachims of the Mohawks* explained to the Commissioners that the “unease” has passed, and that they are no longer considering the offer of the Oneidas to join them and reside at the “great flats” or Oriskany. Aaron made another appearance on 17 April with the Commissioners saying, *you and Some of your Relations are Very uneasy and turbulent* and wished to know the reason. Aaron refused to elaborate but stated that he, *declined and refused to act any longer as Sachem ..... An Honour had been conferred upon me by the universall Consent to my nation to be held during good behaviour*, and further that the councils had always been held at his house. However after a series of rumors about a pending English attack on them (actually the residents of Albany), in which Aaron seems to have played a part, the councils were held in the houses of other Mohawks. Clearly Aaron felt slighted as he was not even consulted on any of these matters, and was not sure why this was the case. Therefore he gave the other sachems, *the belts of wampum belonging to that nation thereby resigning my office*. The Commissioners believed that this was not in the interests of “peace and harmony” and insisted that he resume his office, indicating that they would inform the other sachems of their decision. Aaron agreed, and then gave the Commissioners information about a war party sent to the Catawbas.

The concern felt by the Commissioners was due to the stated intent of some Mohawks, including Aaron, to move to Canada the next spring. Ten days later word arrived that the sachems had accepted the recommendation and that Aaron was reinstated as, *Ye Chief of ye Mohawks Sachims*. It seems apparent that Aaron was a “village chief”, and elected official, as opposed to a hereditary sachem.

The evidence does seem to point toward Aaron being one of the chief perpetrators of the rumors which had caused turmoil throughout the Mohawk Valley. The problem did not go away. Such rumors appear to have been almost constant, particularly as by this date the Mohawks were surrounded by settlements of Europeans, and there was a faction in Albany that claimed title to the very lands on which the Mohawks resided.

On 24 July of that year Conrad Weiser visited the Mohawk settlements and inquired as to the names of the chiefs at Tiononderoge (Ft. Hunter). *I was told that Aaron was ye Chief, & Brant, & Thomas; But the two latter being Jealous of Albany people, no matter of Notice was to be given, to what they said*. This seems to be a reversal of the situation only a few months earlier and now Aaron was seen to be part of the pro Albany faction – but that would not last. On the 27<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> of July there was a council and “Aaron Asaragehty” was the speaker and delivered the address. Basically he said that credible information came to their attention in the last fall to the effect that the people of both Albany and Schenectady were poised to attack the Mohawks at the first snow in order to get the Mohawk lands. He relayed that there are many in the community who feel that the Mohawks were cheated out of their lands. The matter was of sufficient consequence

that on 8 October “Aaron Asaragehty” appeared again before the Commissioners and the Six Nations – the subject being once again the above rumors. Aaron said that he heard Andries van Patten tell another sachem, Johannes, about the pending attack – it being noted that, *Arent understood Dutch*.

In 1746 the saga continued. Aaron was again before the Commissioners explaining that he with other Six Nations had been to Canada and had an audience with the French Governor at Montreal. While there a Caughnawaga Mohawk told him that after he (Aaron) left, there was to be a French expedition against Albany. Aaron was very much on the minds of people everywhere in the northeast it would appear. The New York establishment took particular note. Colden wrote in his book that Aaron, *a noted Mohawk Sachem* had been to Canada (basically recapitulating the above). However there is evidence reported that Aaron was negotiating with a Frenchman, one John Colan, explaining that he and many other Six Nations were in fact friends of the French. Governor Clinton of New York caught on and said directly that, *the reason why I send so positively for Aarion is because he has deceiv'd me, I hate Treachery*. Apparently Aaron agreed to stay put but escaped to, *deceive my Bretheren and friends the Mohawks, by deluding them with false Alarms, that a French Army of great force was coming against them*.

It seems clear that Aaron was playing off one side against the other in order to gain advantage. What appears to have turned the tables to the point that Aaron became firmly in the camp of the English was the arrival of Sir William Johnson in the Valley and his assuming a role in Indian Affairs. As with many Mohawks, Aaron appears to have seen Johnson as a worthy ally and it was not so much trusting the British, but his personal relationship with Johnson, that brought the Hills and Brants solidly into the English fold. None the less, Aaron still continued to be something of a problem for Johnson as he was frequently the source or rumors that served to agitate everyone. He was not at this time a trusted ally – more someone where trust was fragile, and at times had to be bought.

On 22 June 1747 Johnson provisioned, *Saushagehtey & party of 12 men a fortnight at my house and on their journey to Canada*. Presumably this individual was Aaron.

The same old problems were still present at the time though, and in October 1749 Johnson had to go to the Mohawk Castles to ease their fears about rumors that an attack by the French was immanent. Apparently Johnson met with considerable success until, *Aaron the Indian* arrived from Albany reporting that an army, consisting of many Indians, was coming from Crown Point. Aaron appears to have been backsliding here and was still a thorn in Johnson's side in 1755 when he made an entry in his account books of March that he gave presents, *to Aron whom I stopt from going to Canada*, and in June to, *Aron the Mohawk on promises to go with us*. It seems that Johnson needed to keep Aaron under a watchful eye.

Not only was Aaron taking favors from Johnson, but also from J Lydius who, according to the interpreter Arent Stevens in a letter of 26 July 1755, sent a string of wampum to the Mohawks with Captain Van Schaick, Blicher, and “Aaron the Indian” and Martinus

Lydius. This also became a problem since Lydius was acting against the interests of New York and Johnson in purchasing land and pedaling influence. Related to this issue, one Matthew Ferrall was sent to the Mohawk Castle at Ft. Hunter to attempt to counteract the influence of Lydius and his faction there. During his stay there he was invited to a war dance, *when Arren made me sit down and put hot Ashes upon my head*. It seems that Aaron was attempting to taunt Ferrall.

On 28 July 1756 William Johnson called a council and Aaron, *of the Turtle Tribe* spoke for the Mohawks. He did not deny that some Mohawks had agreed to go with Lydius and other “Albany people” on a scalping expedition to Canada – after Lydius had plyed them with liquor. However Aaron maintained that some were so drunk they did not remember what they had agreed to and decided to await the arrival of Johnson from Onondaga country. Presumably Aaron was among those with alleged alcohol induced black outs.

For the next three years Aaron appears in the account books kept by Johnson with entries such as the following: *To Aaron a Mohawk in lieu of a Gun; to buy fodder for his horses; to buy provisions for the Sick; to buy provs for his large Sick family; in lieu of Cloathing; for sundry Services*. On 24 December 1758 Johnson referred to “Aron of the Hill” for sundry expenses.

It was also during this time frame that Aaron’s name became associated with that of Daniel (Captain Daniel Oghnawera). More on this later.

It appears that during the mid 1750s Aaron adopted the role of ambassador and messenger on behalf of Sir William Johnson. This suggests that by that time there was a trust that had developed between the two since Johnson sent Aaron on some very “delicate” missions where only a most trusted associate could be relied upon. It appears that Aaron’s previous actions as a “spy” were to stand him in good stead for the tasks that were to follow.

The final showdown with France was approaching. During the Niagara campaign of 1759, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September Johnson reported, *Thomas, Aaron and his family left yesterday, and took one of the prisoners, taken from the vessel with them*. On 14 May 1760 Johnson wrote George Croghan noting that Aaron had been given a pass only for personal business that would take him to Pittsburg (one wonders what sort of business that might be). Croghan noted that he sent Aaron to Detroit to obtain intelligence about the French and their Indian connections. It does not appear that Aaron was among the large contingent of Mohawks who accompanied Johnson to Montreal to ultimately end the French menace. It appears that Aaron may have been assigned to the strategic region of Detroit to operate in that theater. For example, on 15 September 1761 Johnson, while at Detroit, noted that, *I had the three Huron interpreters here at my lodging, and Aaron, also St. Martin, when I thanked them kindly for their conduct in the affair of the war-belt offered by the Six Nations deputies this summer*.

On 3 October 1761 while at Detroit a group of Mohawks told Johnson that they planned to hunt during the upcoming winter at Cherahe Creek and return early in the spring, while

Aaron indicated that he may head to Sandusky (a Huron – Wyandot settlement). On 24 September 1762 Johnson wrote to Croghan had recently arrived at Johnson Hall from Detroit, bringing a message from the Hurons, and indicating his intention to return in the spring.

Apparently Aaron was to prove his worth during the Pontiac uprising. In August of 1763 “Daniel Oughnovra” and “Aron, or Aregheghtha” wrote Johnson that Major Wilkins at Niagara was angry because they would not allow him to open correspondence addressed to the Captain at Detroit – they heading to that fort. Wilkins’ views appear to have influenced DeCougne who wrote that, *most people give an indifferent Acct of Aron*. On 7 October 1763 Rogers wrote Johnson that after a council meeting, Aaron brought news as to where the various Indian nations were poised to strike.

On 1 December 1763, while at Fort Pitt, Aaron (if it was his writing) penned a letter in perfect English to Johnson saying that he had been, *sent express by Maj. Gladwin from De Troite to this Place, on arriving at Sandusky meeting with about 300 Shany and Delaware Indians*. He mentioned that he had discovered that the Seneca Indians were the cause of the troubles, and that the Shawnee, Delaware and Wyandots had asked him to arrange a meeting with Johnson. Aaron reported that he, *had the misfortune to be rob’d of 4000 of Wampum, A Tamihok and all the Powder and Ball I had by the Delawar’s, Shanees & the Five Nations*. *Sir, Remain with great Respect, Your Obedient Humble Servant. Aaron*. Other correspondence from various individuals indicate the role as messenger and ambassador that Aaron was playing on behalf of Johnson at this time. In January he was at Ft. Pitt. On 11 May 1764 from Detroit Gladwin wrote to Johnson commending two Mohawks, but adding, *I wish I could say as much for Aaron – the Hurons tell me he is doing all the Mischief he can by poisoning the Minds of the Indians*. From this point it seems that Aaron began spending more time at home.

Aaron was involved in the 20 September 1764 meeting at Johnson Hall about the contentious Kaydarosseras Grant. Over the next few years the decision was made to re-survey the grant, with the recommendation that Aaron should be in attendance.

On 20 September 1767 Alexander McKee wrote to Croghan that three days earlier Aaron and Mons Maisonville arrive at Fort Pitt from Detroit. This may have been Aaron’s last harrah in the diplomacy department. No further entries place him in the western territories. There is an entry in the 1768 account book of Jelles Fonda of Caughnawaga for one Ariegheghtee; and circa 1771 an Areguetus appears in the ledger relating to Aaron’s son in law Sadequoit, second husband of his daughter Mary.

Further references to Aaron are likely pertaining to Aaron Oseragheté’s son Aaron Kanonraron – such as the Aaron in attendance at the meeting with the Albany Committee 21 December 1773 (there being later references that Aaron Kanonraron attended councils with Sir William Johnson. It would appear that Aaron died between 30 August 1772 (Fonda Account Books) and 14 January 1784 (Claims for Losses as of 1777). His wife Margaret appears in the same account books for 3 October 1772.

The story of the Hill family (Mary and her three brothers Aaron, John and David, as well their uncle “White Hans”) during and after the Revolution will be the subject of subsequent studies.

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