

Historical Background

Dispossession of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Lands

1142

- Prior to 1142, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca nations fought against themselves and became weaker because of loss of human lives and crops.
- Date of the formation of the Confederacy where the 5 nations formed a union because of the work of Peacemaker, Hiawatha and Jigonsaseh.
http://www.ratical.org/many_worlds/6Nations/DatingIC.html
- Confederacy gave the nations peace, power and unity
- Great Law of Peace set up the government of the nations with clan mothers and the Council of Chiefs <http://www.iroquoisdemocracy.pdx.edu/html/greatlaw.html>
- Haudenosaunee means People of the Longhouse. The traditional land of the Haudenosaunee stretched across NYS like a longhouse with the Mohawk, the Keepers of the Eastern Door and the Seneca, the Keepers of the Western Door. The Onondaga were in the center as the Keepers of the Council Fire. The Cayuga and Oneida were on either side of the Onondaga and were called the Younger Brothers.
- Due to the strength of the Confederacy, the Haudenosaunee spread their land holdings west and south.

Late 1500 and 1600s

- French, British and Dutch start settlements in or near the Haudenosaunee
- Many treaties are made to encourage trade and to end hostilities.
<http://www.onondagation.org/culture/wampum/two-row-wampum-belt-guswenta/>
- Every day life becomes easier due to metal trade items, cloth and muskets
- Diseases start to decrease the population

1700s

- New settlers start encroaching on Mohawk traditional land, many breaking the Proclamation Line over which colonists are not to cross in order to start new homes.
- 1722- The Tuscarora join the Confederacy after losing all their land around the Carolinas and settle in Oneida Territory

- Sir William Johnson, as Native American Commissioner for the British, entreats the Haudenosaunee in their traditional manner for discussions and problem solving.
<http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/fall96/johnson.html>
- During French and Indian War, Haudenosaunee ally with the British.
- 1777- The Haudenosaunee try to stay neutral during the start of the war but finally are pressured into taking sides. The Council Fire at Onondaga was extinguished so each nation can follow their own thinking about which side to join. The Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga and Mohawk ally with the British, and Oneida and Tuscarora join the Americans, although individuals from each nation join the opposing side. The British who seem to have the most chance of winning also promised to keep the colonists confined to the east coast so as to not take any more Native American land.
- 1777- Battle of Oriskany: During the Siege of Fort Schuyler (Stanwix) a British ambush took place as the Americans were marching from the east to help the fort. Each side had a contingent of their Haudenosaunee allies. The battle was fierce and this was the first time that the Haudenosaunee nations had fought one another since the formation of the confederacy in 1142.
http://www.oneidanation.org/uploadedFiles/Departments/Cultural_Heritage/Sub_Pages/09.08.10%20The%20Battle%20at%20Oriskany.pdf
- 1779- The NY frontier farms and citizens were targeted by British, Canadian, Loyalists and Haudenosaunee groups lead by Mohawk Joseph Brant. George Washington ordered Generals Sullivan and Clinton to lead campaign against the Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca burning villages and crops and capturing prisoners. Close to 50 villages including stored food and crop fields were totally destroyed but the residents flee to Fort Niagara ahead of the army. <http://www.nps.gov/fost/historyculture/the-western-expedition-against-the-six-nations-1779.htm>
- 1780- It was the time of the Little Ice Age and winter at Fort Niagara was brutal. Over 5,000 Haudenosaunee refugees had fled there to escape the devastation of their homes and food by the Sullivan Clinton Scorched Earth Campaign. There was inadequate food, and shelter so many Haudenosaunee died of the cold, starvation or disease. The loss of traditional homelands and loss of population forever changed the culture of the Haudenosaunee and the autonomy of each of the six nations who now co-existed in small reservations.

- 1784- on Land dispossession. Many people ask, “Why did the Haudenosaunee sell their lands?”

Some of my personal reflections about the land dispossession.

- ✓ Due to the American Revolution, the Haudenosaunee governmental structure circa 1142 was devastated by the loss of many chiefs and clan mothers due to injuries or illness. Prior, all decisions were brought to the Council of 50 Chiefs, discussed in a “checks and balance way” with input from clan mothers, and all decisions were made by consensus.
- ✓ Many land deals by-passed the Council of Chiefs and dealt with individuals who had no rights to negotiate for the nations. Often, NYS accepted these deals.
http://www.oneidanation.org/uploadedFiles/Departments/Cultural_Heritage/Sub_Pages/09.10.26%20Illegal%20Treaties.pdf
- ✓ Since the Haudenosaunee were burned off their traditional lands, most of the population was living together in western NY where hunting was difficult and establishing new gardens took a while so people were very hungry and needed supplies. For a while, they relied on the British who had meager rations and supplies themselves. After the Paris Peace Treaty, most of the land in western NY became part of the USA so Britain did not support the Haudenosaunee refugees living in this area.
- ✓ Many unscrupulous land agents took advantage of the Haudenosaunee population in dire straits who looked at an annuity payment of money and goods in exchange for land as the salvation for the population.
http://www.oneidanation.org/uploadedFiles/Departments/Cultural_Heritage/Sub_Pages/09.10.19%20Treaty%20of%201794%20and%20Annuities%20New%20Format.pdf
- ✓ Language barriers where translators could change the meanings of words like lease versus buy as well as the different cultural understandings of the concepts of the land dealings.
- ✓ The new nation believed in manifest destiny and no one was going to get in the way. A canal built across the only opening in the Appalachian Mountain Chain would ensure this expansion of the new United States of America to the land by the Mississippi.

In conclusion, there were many more land deals than were included in the timeline. I hope the maps showing the change in land holdings and the page with the population changes will have an impact on your students. I had personally never thought about how NYS got the land upon which to build the Erie Canal until I participated in a three

year seminar called “Teaching American History through Haudenosaunee Eyes”. My unit project for the third year was “The impact of the Erie Canal on the Haudenosaunee, Immigrants and New Yorkers”. The timeline and photostory were part of my project inspired by an excellent book, *Conspiracy of Interests: Iroquois Dispossession and the Rise of NYS* by Laurence M. Hauptman, who was a guest lecturer at the seminar. He has supported the Haudenosaunee during present day land claim court battles.

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Camillus Erie Canal Park