

HONORING THE ONONDAGA NATION

The Center of an Empire

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy began over seven hundred years before LeMoyne arrived at the very shores of Onondaga Lake at which the Confederacy had been founded. The Peacemaker brought the five formerly warring nations together there, and to this day, the Grand Council meetings are held at the Onondaga Nation, the “capitol” of the Confederacy.

Long before white men were invited to visit the heart of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, their influence was being felt. The European demand for furs placed stress on the extensive trade system that existed between native nations and fueled complex struggles for power. In over a century of sophisticated political and military strategy, such as a blockade of the Huron-French fur trade route along the St. Lawrence river in 1642, the Haudenosaunee extended their influence as far west as the Mississippi, well into Canada, and far into Pennsylvania in the south, bringing the Fox, Neutrals, Eries, Susquehannocks, and Illinois under the Great Tree of Peace. At the time of LeMoyne, the Haudenosaunee rivaled the power of the French, Dutch, and English.

Jesuit Relations

Repeated attempts to negotiate peace and trade deals between the Haudenosaunee and the Huron were interfered with by the French. The Jesuit, for their role in this and

other politics, were named “Chief Clerks of the Fur Trade” by the Haudenosaunee.

“French Jesuits had time and time again persuaded the Hurons to continue fighting the Haudenosaunee. However, although they were allies of the Hurons, the French never gave them substantial military aid or protection.” (Venables, 2004)

In the 1650s, the French abandoned their prior trading partners for an alliance with the Haudenosaunee. It was during this time that LeMoyne came to the shores of Onondaga Lake.

Onondaga Nation’s Use of Salt

The Onondaga Nation always knew that the salt springs existed, and they used the salt for medicine. But because the Onondaga Nation smoked or dried their foods, they did not use salt as a preservative. The “demon” in the water is probably a mis-translation of an Onondaga warning that salt water is not good to drink.

Father LeMoyne was eager to share the knowledge of this salt resource with the French authorities in Canada because he knew that the French needed salt to preserve the cod and other fish they caught in Atlantic Ocean’s Grand Banks and which they shipped back to France. He saw a commercially unexploited resource, but his knowledge was not used until much later.

If it is accepted that Father LeMoyne discovered the salt springs, one might say that he is, in a historical sense, responsible as the initiator of the whole chain of events for the future exploitation and usurpation of the Onondaga land.

Washington Square Park’s History: Invasions and the Salt Industry

Frontenac’s 1696 invasion camped near what was to become Washington Square Park on his way to attack the capitol of the Haudenosaunee. However, it wasn’t until after the chaos of the American Revolution (in which the Haudenosaunee Confederacy was neutral) and the scorched earth Clinton-Sullivan Campaign in 1779 that white settlers were able to make inroads. Washington Square itself was one of the first white settlements in the 1790s, probably named for George Washington soon after the land was illegally taken from the Onondaga Nation by New York State. Washington is called *Hanadahguyus* or “Town Destroyer” by the Haudenosaunee for his authorization of the 1779 campaign.

The mansions of the salt barons around the park, the City of Syracuse and the Erie Canal were all built from the profits from Onondaga Lake’s salt. In the 1890s, the availability of salt attracted the Solvay Process. Its industrial plants along Onondaga Lake are responsible for the toxic pollution of the Lake which still exists today.

There are few better places in the City of Syracuse to stand and contemplate the area’s history over the last 400 years, not only to honor, but to apologize to the Onondaga Nation.

The Monument

In 1889, William Kirkpatrick Jr., son of salt baron Dr. William Kirkpatrick, left directions in his will for a memorial fountain to be erected in Washington Square Park on Syracuse's Northside in honor of his father. He directed that the monument depict

“the Onondaga Indians discovering to the white men the salt springs as related in the historical narrative of the relations of the Jesuits.”

Two other monuments paying tribute to the Onondaga Nation were also provided for by the will; they are no longer standing. Kirkpatrick's reasons are unknown, but it is clear that he recognized the connection between his family's prosperity, the prosperity of the area, and the Onondaga Nation's displacement as the salt industry boomed.

The monument falls somewhat short of the initial goal of honoring the Onondaga Nation, as it only depicts history from one side; that of the writings of a Jesuit who resided only briefly at Onondaga Lake in the late 1650s, left under duress, and was deeply involved in the political machinations of his time. This brochure is intended to truly honor the Onondaga Nation by grounding the history depicted on the Washington Square Park Monument in the broader history of the time.

Sources:

Chief Irving Powless, Jr., Beaver Clan, Onondaga Nation
Venables, Robert W. "American Indian History: Five Centuries of Conflict & Coexistence" Clear Light Publishing, Santa Fe, NM. 2004. Vol. 1 pp. 137-164

Wallace, David. "Kirkpatrick Memorials Victims of Vandalism." Herald American, Nov. 24 1946



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Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation

Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation (NOON) is a grassroots organization of Central New Yorkers which recognizes and supports the sovereignty of the traditional government of the Onondaga Nation. NOON supports and advocates for fair settlement of the Land Rights Action filed by the Onondaga Nation in 2005.

The goals of NOON are to:

- Promote understanding of and respect for the Onondaga people and culture within the broader Central New York community
- Educate ourselves and others about the history of the relations between the US and the Onondaga Nation
- Challenge racism towards native peoples
- Work with the Onondaga Nation on matters of mutual concern

For more information, or to join in our efforts, contact:

NOON

2013 East Genesee St., Syracuse, NY 13210
(315) 472-5478, noon@peacecouncil.net
www.peacecouncil.net/noon

Honoring the Onondaga Nation



The History and Context of the
Washington Square Park
Monument