

The origin of the aboriginal people in North and South America has always been a contentious issue for both Natives and non-natives alike. The non-native theorists contend that Indians came from a hunting culture located in Asia. The belief is that when the large animals, which were being sought for survival purposes crossed from Asia to this continent at the Bering Strait the Indian people followed them.

Although there are many ideas put forth by the non-native people to explain the presence of Indians on this land there are just as many stories provided by the native population to account for their existence.

Iroquois oral traditionalists have also related the story of the origin of Native people. This is the way they say it happened.

"Many, many years ago on the banks of the Oswego River, near its mouth our people, the People of the Longhouse, 'sprang from the earth'."
(The Conservationist 2 - 1976)

Looking at these origin stories we can see that truth was spoken when a wise elder once said, "There are as many ways to look upon something as there are men to look upon it". There is much dispute among the white men about the truth of the histories of the world, as is also among the Indians. There are many different ways to view things. There are those who believe in the ancient ways and those who believe in the new.

THE ONEIDA NATION AS PART OF THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY

Although there is no way to prove the Iroquois people wandered across the Bering Strait or that they sprang from the earth, it is known that they had occupied the New York State region for generations.

For a time all the nations dwelt together. Eventually they divided into bands and spread abroad to establish new villages. One group moved to the banks of the Mohawk River and they became known as the Mohawk Nation. A second group of these aboriginal people settled in the region around Oneida Creek, a stream that flows into Oneida Lake. These people became the Oneida Nation. Their hunting territory extended north of this region to the St. Lawrence River and south to the Susquehanna River. (Campisi, Handbook of North American Indians) A third group of Iroquois established themselves in the Onondaga Valley to become the Onondaga Nation. The Cayugas and Senecas were united as one group and lived along the Seneca River. Eventually one part located themselves along the Cayuga Lake and became the Cayuga Nation.

Once these five nations became fully established in their own separate locations they became bitter enemies to one another. This resulted in a continual state of open warfare with

each other as well as the other tribes around them. The Iroquois people were in great danger of complete extermination.

At this time a wise man, the Peacemaker and his spokesman Hiawatha, who had renowned oratorical skills, joined together to establish peace among the warring nations as well as all Indian Peoples. The Five Iroquois Nations, Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas finally agreed to bury their differences and join the League of Peace. The 'Tree of Peace' was planted at this time to commemorate this great event.

The Iroquois Confederacy which was formed from this Great Peace pact made the Five Nations masters of a territory larger than the whole of Europe. (History of the Oneida Nation, Aren Akweks Ray Fadden)

After this peace agreement the Five Iroquois Nations called themselves the People of the Longhouse. In this longhouse the Mohawks who resided at the eastern end were appointed keepers of the Eastern Door and the Senecas who were at the west were designated the keepers of the Western Door. The other three were arranged in a line between them. The Onondagas became the firekeepers of the League which meant the great councils of the Confederacy would be held at Onondaga, the most central of the five nations. (Elizabeth Tooker - The League of the Iroquois; Its History Politics and Rituals, p422)

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

After the arrival of the white man the Iroquois became involved in the fur trade and the resulting armed conflict between the European powers. For many years the British and French recognized the power of the Confederacy and both rivaled for the support of the Iroquois in the fur trade. These two European nations cast greedy eyes on the fertile land of the Iroquois and they both claimed Iroquois Country as their own. The Iroquois never admitted that either the French or English had any claim over them or their land.

The Iroquois Confederacy, which was formed to bring peace to all nations tried to bring the French and British under the protective branches of the Tree of Peace. This action was to no avail and because of the continued war of the white races, the Iroquois population declined drastically. (R. Fadden, p51) Finally in 1713, the members of the Five Nations Confederacy were acknowledged to be British subjects by the French in the Treaty of Utrecht. In this treaty the French were not to hinder or molest the Five Nations of Indians subject to the Dominion of Great Britain and on the other hand British subjects were to behave themselves peaceably towards Americans who were subjects or friends of France. (Treaty of Utrecht, Article XV)

Now that the French and British resolved their conflict of who had control of what, the Iroquois tried to continue on their course as middlemen between the Indians of the west and the fur buyers in the east. The white people were of a different opinion. They decided they

wanted the Indian land for settlement instead of just the furs which could be found there. It was because of the pressure of white settlement across the Appalachians and into Ohio that the Oneidas got the opportunity to show their great kindness and hospitality to the Tuscarora Nation. In 1712, the Oneidas gave the Tuscaroras lands between the Undilla and Chenango Rivers and about 1722 the Tuscaroras were adopted into the League of the Iroquois making them the sixth nation of the Confederacy. This nation was admitted as a 'junior' member of the League and did not have its chiefs counted among the League chiefs.

At a later date survivors of the New England Indians, the Brotherton and Stockbridge (1785) also settled on Oneida lands. The Tutelo, too shared Oneida hospitality. Other tribes that were conquered such as the Algonkian, Delaware, Nanticoke and Shawnee were represented by the Oneida Chief Shilkemy in the affairs of the League. Tutelos along with the Tuscaroras were classed with the Oneidas and Cayugas as the four brothers, but they received no sachemship or voting rights. (J. Campisi, 1972, p12)

In the League, the Oneidas had nine chiefs representing the three clans and nine matrilineages. In the Oneida council, the Wolf clan was in charge of the assembly. When it came to voting, the Wolf and Turtle clans voted separately, from their "cousins" the Bear Clan. Although they voted separately, agreement of the three was necessary for the Oneida Nation's approval on any matter.

All during the middle 1700's the Iroquois tried to remain in a neutral position concerning any major wars or power struggles. Throughout this time they always considered the English Government and the English people as their friends. When the rumblings of the Revolutionary War began, the Iroquois people were quite unprepared for it. They could not comprehend the idea that there were uprisings against the Mother country who had been their protectorate. As the rebellion grew the Iroquois were pulled in opposite directions by the pro-colonial influence of Sir William Johnson, Commissioner of Indian Affairs and Samuel Kirkland, a New England Puritan fundamentalist missionary who began his work among the Oneidas in 1766. After Kirkland settled into his routine, his ministry soon involved more than the salvation of the Indian soul. He settled family disputes, treated illnesses, often gave of his meagre resources, and collected supplies for the needy. (Campisi, 1974, p69) Despite the conflicting influence of these two dominant personalities, the Iroquois Confederacy tried hard to remain neutral, thinking that in time the quarrel between the American colonies and their mother country would be settled peaceably.

As the discontentment between the two groups reached a higher frenzy the Iroquois soon realized that both white groups did not intend to leave their country out of the war. Their land lay in the path of the two feuding peoples and an invading army would have to travel over it to get to the enemy. By this time they had also become highly dependent on the gun and gun powder, and other European commodities for their very existence. They knew that if these things were cut off from them, from either the American source or the British source, they would not be long for this world. The final ultimatum was - Fight for one side or the other, or

die.

What to do? - That was the big question. The Iroquois held a great council at Onondaga, the capital of the Six Nations, to try and resolve the dilemma they found themselves in. Try as they might, they could not come to a unanimous decision about the situation. The Mohawks were for war. The Onondagas were for being neutral. The Senecas and Cayugas were luke-warm to either side. The Oneidas and Tuscaroras were sympathetic to the American. In 1777, unable to come to an agreement, they covered the fire of the League. Each Nation was left to pursue its own course of action regarding the war.

The Oneidas not only contributed their wit and physical strength to the American cause but, they also reputedly drew from their meagre resources to provision Washington's army. These people paid a high price for their loyalty to the revolutionaries. In 1779, British troops burnt their homes, destroyed their fields of grain and cut down their orchards. The Oneida people were reduced to poverty through this attack and were forced to flee down the Mohawk Valley to the vicinity of Schenectady. Here they lived in squalor and misery, with little food or clothing, and dependent upon handouts until the end of the war. (Campisi, 1974, p74)

Although peace was proclaimed in 1783 between the British and the Americans, and the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783, no mention or provision was made for the Indian people who fought so gallantly with their allies. From the Revolutionary period on, all Iroquois Indians were to experience bitter times. Their lands and everything they cherished, even the graves of their fathers, were to be taken from them until they hardly had a place they could call their own. (Fadden, p12)

In 1784, the Continental Congress negotiated the Treaty of Fort Stanwix. The Oneidas and Tuscaroras were singled out in this treaty because they supported the Americans during the revolution. Article II of the Treaty states that:

"The Oneida and Tuscarora Nation shall be secure in the possession of the lands on which they are settled." (Campisi, 1972,p 21)

The Oneidas and Tuscaroras responded enthusiastically to these words of friendship and spoke appreciatively of the commissioners' concern for the preservation of their lands nearly six million acres.

In addition to the preservation of the Oneida territory the national government by the Treaty of 1794 reimbursed the Oneidas for losses incurred in the war awarding \$5000.00 in compensation and promises of a gristmill, church and sawmill. The Oneidas were also to share in a perpetual annuity. (Campisi, 1972, p22) The Oneidas and Tuscaroras were not to enjoy the provisions of the Treaty of Fort Stanwix for very long. Greedy land speculation was the downfall of the Oneida Nation in New York State.