

Chapter One – Original Inhabitants and the Iroquois

The Original Inhabitants

Recent archaeology research, using the radiocarbon method of dating, developed by Willard F. Libby, shows there were people living in the area of New York State about 7000 B.C. According to William A. Ritchie, the state archaeologist, the history of human habitation in New York State and the Northeast began with the haphazard and unrestricted wanderings of tiny groups of hunters. The physical appearance of these people is still unknown because no skeletal remains have been found that can be definitely attributed to them.

The immediate area of Seneca County has a number of sites that have been explored by Ritchie and other archaeologists. Those classified in the Lamoka culture are at Tyrone in Schuyler County, Frontenac Island in Cayuga Lake and the Lawson Site in northern Seneca County. A major site, classified in the Woodland period, is on Kipp Island in Tyre.

The Lamoka period, classified in the archaic or hunting, fishing, gathering stage, can be traced back to 3500-1300 B.C.; the Woodland State, which deals with the development of ceramics, agriculture and village life, can be traced to 1000 B.C.-A.D. 1600.

Cultures of the Archaic stage in the Northeast give evidence of mobility, small-band organization, and simple social structuring. Most of the sites are small and show no trace of larger dwellings, fortifications, storage pits, and even graves.

The Lamoka culture became known through the excavations of the Rochester Museum, begun by Ritchie in 1925, on the Lamoka Lake site in Tyrone. The work continued with little assistance over a period of years. Investigations had to be halted when crops were planted and as the work of the excavations received more publicity it was hampered by the careless searchings of amateur archaeologists.

The Frontenac Island site, preserved for hundreds of years, proved to be one of the most enlightening for the study of the Archaic Stage. The major work of excavation was done in 1939 and 1940 under the direction of William Ritchie. It provided most of the human skeletal material and the best preserved most varied artifacts.

Frontenac is the only island in the Finger Lakes, about an acre in size. The evidence found showed that it was probably used as a semi-permanent camp site, abandoned only in midwinter. Its location probably made it a good resource for fishing and hunting.

Several dog burials were uncovered, including one where a small dog was buried with an infant. For the first time in the cultural sequence in New York, a method of fire-making was disclosed on the island. Also, more light was shed on personal decoration by the discoveries than at any other Archaic station in the Northeast. Also found was a beautifully preserved antler comb, which is probably the oldest known bone comb from North America.

A number of musical instruments made from bone and playthings were found on the island. The musical instruments were mostly flutes and whistles.

Kipp Island is located in the Seneca River, surrounded by the Montezuma Marsh. From earlier attempts to study this site, it appeared that any attempt would be futile. At first there was a lack of cooperation by the owners. When it was learned the island contained Indian relics, gravediggers and scavengers practically ruined the area. Later the New York State Thruway appropriated the entire northern section of the island for fill.

In 1962, Ritchie conducted a search on what was left of the island that had not been disturbed by man or machine. He discovered a new burial ground which provided a great deal of information on the Woodland State of culture.¹

The Iroquois Indians

The original homeland of the Iroquois was in upstate New York between the Adirondack Mountains and Niagara Falls. Through conquest and migration, they gained control of most of the northeastern United States and eastern Canada. The Iroquois did not, however, for the most part, physically occupy this vast area but remained in their upstate New York villages.

The name “Iroquois” has an interesting origin. The Algonquin called them the “Iroqu” (Irinakhoiw) meaning “rattlesnakes.” The French added the Gallic suffix “-ois” to this insult and the name became “Iroquois” The Iroquois call themselves Haudenosaunee, meaning “pople of the long house.”² Most scholars believe that about 1600, five Iroquois tribes—the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Onondagas, the Cayugas, and the Sencas—banded together to form a confederacy. A sixth tribe—the Tuscaroras--joined the confederacy in 1722.³ The Cayuga tribe called themselves “Gweugwehono.” This is translated variously as “people of Oiogouen; where the boats were taken out; people at the landing; or people of the mucky land.” The Cayugas were also referred to as “those of the great pipe.” The Senecas called themselves “Nundawaono” which meant “great hill people.” They were known in the Iroquois Confederacy as the “keepers of the western door.”⁴

The Iroquois had matrilineal social structures—the women owned all property and determined kinship. The individual Iroquois tribes were divided into three clans—turtle, bear, and wolf—each headed by the clan mother. After marriage, a man moved into his wife’s longhouse, and their children became members of her clan.

The Iroquois villages were generally fortified and large. The distinctive, communal longhouses of the different clans could be over 200 feet in length and were built about a framework covered with elm bark. Villages were almost permanent in the sense they were moved only for defensive purposes or when the soil became exhausted (typically about every twenty years).⁵

The Iroquois were hunters of many species of animals. They would hunt for bear, beaver, rabbits, muskrats, and deer. Deer were the favored prey for many reasons. The hides were used for clothing, antlers and bones were used for tools, and the meat was eaten. The brains and guts were also salvaged for tanning hides and making bindings. Despite the many advantages of hunting prey, several Iroquoian tribes favored fishing. There was always a wide variety to choose

from. Netting and spearing were the most effective ways of catching the fish. These two methods were also used during winter expeditions by cutting holes in the ice.⁶

Agriculture, however, provided most of the Iroquois diet. Corn, beans and squash were so important that there were six annual agricultural festivals held with prayers of gratitude for their harvests. The women owned and tended the fields.

Surprisingly, the Iroquois population was not that large. It is believed in that in 1600 there was less than 20,000 for all five tribes. By 1650, the spread inland of European epidemics and warfare had cut their population in half. The adoption of conquered enemies, such as 7,000 Huron, led to an estimated total of about 25,000 Iroquois in 1660.

¹ The above information has been taken word from word from a manuscript “The Original Tenants of Seneca County” written by Seneca County Historian Betty Auten, date unknown.

² Lee Sultzman, “Iroquois History” www.tolatsga.org/iro.html

³ “Iroquois Indians,” www.ohiohistorycentral.org/ohc/history/h_indian/tribes/iroquois.shtml

⁴ Sultzman

⁵ Sultzman

⁶ “Iroquois,” www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/northamerica/iroquois/html