

# **Seneca County Before European American Settlement**

by

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Before the Revolutionary War, the area now covered by Seneca County was not settled by whites (European Americans). As early as 3500 B.C., we have the so-called Lamoka culture, based on evidence found at Tyrone in Schuyler County, Frontenac Island in Cayuga Lake and the Lawson Site in northern Seneca County. Significantly, Frontenac Island is the only island in the Finger Lakes. Excavations there in 1939-40 by William Ritchie of the Rochester Museum, suggest that the people of the Lamoka culture used this one-acre island for fishing and hunting, had the knowledge of use of fire, and used such musical instruments as flutes and whistles.

Jesuit missionary priests were the first white men to reach this area, carrying on their work from 1656 to 1684. They established missionary stations among the Cayuga nation. Their St. Stephen station was located at the Indian village of Tiohero situated on the east side of Cayuga Outlet. Another was located at St. Rene (Onontare) near the present village of Savannah in the town of Galen, near the north boundary of the present-day Seneca County. In May 1656, Father Rene Menard accompanied a French expedition to Onondaga (near Syracuse today) and then to the Cayugas in August. He remained with the Cayugas for two months until he was recalled to Onondaga. Soon thereafter he returned and remained until the missions were broken up in 1657. His early missionary work largely explains why the Free Bridge on Routes 5 and 20 is named the Father Rene Menard Bridge. From a journal entry of Father Raffeix in 1671, we get an early white man's report of the beauty of what is today Seneca County. Using the word "Goigouen" to refer to this area, he said the following:

Goigouen is the fairest country I have seen in America. It is a tract between two lakes and not exceeding four leagues in width, consisting of almost uninterrupted plains, the woods bordering it are extremely beautiful. Around Goigouen there are killed more than a thousand deer annually. Fish, salmon, as well as eels and other fish are plentiful.

Four leagues from here I saw by the side of a river fine salt springs.

Two Moravian missionaries, Bishop Cammerhoff and Rev. David Zeisberger, passed through the territory in 1750. They visited the Onondagas, then the Cayugas near Union Springs, crossed Cayuga Lake and then proceeded on foot upon a short spiritual mission to the Seneca Indians.

Another missionary, the Rev. Samuel Kirkland, provided much insight into this area and the Indians. He made the acquaintance of Sir William Johnson, the British agent for Indian affairs, in the fall of 1764. In January 1765, escorted by two Senecas, Rev. Kirkland commenced a journey of some two hundred miles to the Senecas. He reports of the bitter cold and the snow so deep that snowshoes were required. On the twenty-third day of his journey, he reached Kanadaseagea (Geneva) which was then the capital of the Seneca Nation. He stayed there for eighteen months. He was adopted by the chief sachem. He was subjected to attempts to take his life. He became familiar with the language of the Senecas. He visited neighboring towns such as Skoi-yase.

There were some other isolated contacts of European white American traders with the Indian natives in this area prior to the American Revolution. One can easily imagine

the Indians' interests in securing blankets liquor, etc. Trading had its advantages, but the Indians did not want white settlers. The Iroquois became increasingly irritated over the white settlers taking the best lands along the Mohawk and upper Susquehanna Rivers.

Another noteworthy contact was made by Sir William Johnson, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the British. He was instrumental in the Treaty of Stanwix in 1768. This treaty forbade white settlers from settling west of a line that ran from Rome, NY south to the headwaters of the Delaware River and west of the Alleghany Mountains. For \$10,000 and other gifts, the Indians gave up western Pennsylvania and Kentucky.

Sir William Johnson himself visited our area in 1769. He crossed Cayuga Lake near Canoga and proceeded to the Indian village of Skoi-yase (today's Waterloo). Using a Seneca's council site--under a group of six oak trees located at the foot of Locust Street--he held a council with the Cayugas and the Senecas. Johnson reported that "the Cayugas and Senecas here made known to him their grievances, the murder of their people by the whites, and frauds and abuses perpetrated upon them."