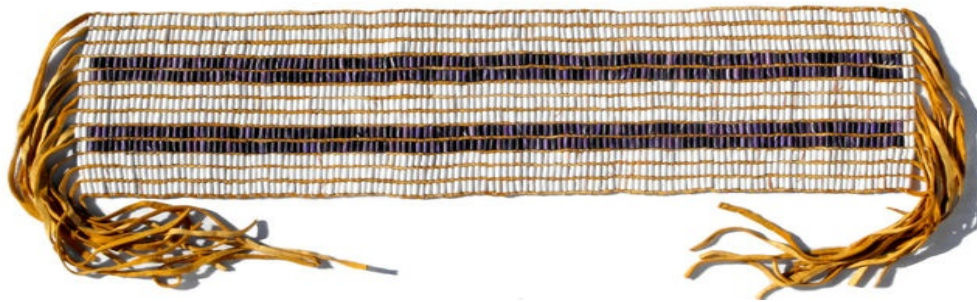


# **THE ONONDAGA NATION'S and THE HAUDENOSAUNEE HISTORICAL CONNECTION TO LAKE ONTARIO**



**RED PAPER BY ONONDAGA NATION  
AS BACKGROUND RELATIVE TO THE PROPOSED  
NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY IN LAKE ONTARIO  
June 12, 2019**

## **I. HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF THE ONONDAGA NATION AND THE HAUDENOSAUNEE IN LAKE ONTARIO:**

The Onondaga Nation is a traditional Haudenosaunee Nation and one of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee [Iroquois] Confederacy. The Nation is the Central Fire or Capital of the Six Nations and its currently recognized territory is just south of the City of Syracuse.

The Nation, its leaders and its people have a unique spiritual, cultural and historic relationship with the land and the waters. This relationship goes far beyond federal and state legal concepts of ownership, possession or legal rights. The people are one with the land, and consider themselves stewards of it. It is the duty of the Nation's leaders to work for a healing of their land and waters, to protect them, and to pass them on to future generations.

The Onondaga Nation and the Haudenosaunee believe in and act upon the notion that people, nature, society and all living things are interconnected, in relation to one another, and operate as a system. To the Onondagas, Lake Ontario is a living relative and their culture has taught them through their language, stories, ceremonies and life ways that their identity and very existence are directly connected in the land and waters.

By sharing its history, the Nation, is acting on behalf of its people in the hope that it may hasten the process of healing historic harms and environmental dangers; and to bring lasting justice, peace and respect among all who inhabit the area. Further, their cultural and spiritual obligation to be stewards of the original lands and waters has been, and continues to be, negatively impacted by the environmental destruction to the sand dunes and wetlands and by the continued operation of the three nuclear power reactors in Scriba, near Oswego, New York.

Today, the Nation's recognized territory, or reservation, is only about 7,500 acres which is merely a tiny fraction of the Nation original territory of approximately 2 ½ million acres, which was the homeland of the Nation and its people for centuries before the European colonization. A map which shows the general boundaries of the Nation's original territory is attached below as "Figure 1".

This is where the Onondaga people lived, fished, hunted and gathered for thousands of years. Their territory is not defined by the colonial boundaries that have been created around them, but rather, where their people have existed in harmony with Mother Earth for generations. The unmarked graves of thousands of ancestors lie within their original territory.

The Nation still governs itself under the traditional system of government that was given to them by the Peacemaker, over 1000 years ago, in the Gayanashagowa, the Great Law of Peace. The Nation is still governed by its Council of Chiefs, who are selected and nominated to these leadership positions by their respective Clan Mothers, who also hold the authority to remove from power a Chief, under certain specified protocol.

The Nation and the other Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee hold three treaties with the United States government: the 1784 Treaty of Fort Stanwix, the 1789 Treaty of Fort Harmor and the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua. In Article II of the Canandaigua Treaty, the United States government guaranteed the Nation the "free use and enjoyment" of their protected territory.

#### **A. PRE-COLONIAL HAUDENOSAUNEE HISTORY:**

Lake Ontario and the Oswego River system are of great historical, cultural and spiritual importance to the Nation and the other Haudenosaunee nations, as they were used extensively by the Onondaga people before the arrival of Europeans, for fishing,

hunting, gathering and transportation. Further, it should be noted that the Haudenosaunee had acted as stewards of Lake Ontario for centuries prior to European colonialism; and that, guided by their cultural understanding of their duty to preserve the natural world and its waters for the future generations, the Haudenosaunee had preserved the water, the fish and aquatic plants so well that the colonists marvels at their abundance.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, the Grand Council often met at Three Rivers, because the various Nations: Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga and Seneca could travel there by canoe on the Oneida and Seneca River systems which meet at Three Rivers, to form the Oswego River, which connects with Lake Ontario, in Oswego.

Additional evidence of the historic and cultural history of Oswego and Lake Ontario can be found in: *Aboriginal Place Names of New York, (1907)*, which was originally published by the New York State Museum <sup>1</sup> in 1907 and reprinted by Kessinger Publishing:

1. Under the heading: “OSWEGO COUNTY”: *“Most of this country was in the territory of the Onondagas, but after the colonial period, the Oneidas increased their claims. The eastern part originally belonged to them but not the Ontario lake shore, the Onondagas having a village at the mouth of the Salmon River in 1654. Nearly all the names are thus Iroquois.”* (Page 168.)
2. The word “Oswego” is derived from the Onondaga and Haudenosaunee: *“O-swe’-go, Osh-wa-kee and Swa-geh are forms of the well known name,*

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<sup>1</sup> Historically, the New York State Museum has been one of the principle arms of the state government that, for over 230 years, has actively worked to destroy the culture of the Onondaga and the Haudenosaunee—by stealing their wampum belts and other items of cultural patrimony, by illegally and immorally keeping 100s of set of ancestors’ human remains, and more recently, by acting in defiance of NAGPRA. So, these admissions by the museum, in its publication, are incontrovertible proof of the extent of the original territory of the Onondagas.

*meaning flowing out, or more exactly small water flowing into that which is large.” (Page 171.)*

3. *“Ga-so-te’-na, high grass is Scriba Creek.” (Page 170.)*

## **B. EASTERN LAKE ONTARIO AND EARLY COLONIAL HISTORY**

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the St. Lawrence River and the eastern end of Lake Ontario served as the pathway for the French colonial expansion into Haudenosaunee and Onondaga original homelands and territory. The first European colonial invasion of Onondaga territory was in 1615, when Samuel Champlain led an army of about 500 Hurons and attacked and laid siege to the Onondaga village, on the shore of Onondaga Lake. Champlain traveled from Montreal, up the St. Lawrence River and then south along the Eastern shore of Lake Ontario, to present day Oswego. He then proceeded south, up the Oswego River, through Three Rivers, and up the Seneca River to Onondaga Lake. Figure 2 is Champlain’s sketch of this failed attack.

Champlain attempted to breach the palisade that surrounded the Onondaga village with a European siege device called a “cavalier”, which is shown on the right side of Figure 2, and which allowed his troops to fire over the palisade, while other forces attempted to burn through the palisade. Champlain was defeated and severely wounded in this attack, and he was carried back to Montreal by his retreating army.

Despite this successful defense, the Onondagas were subsequently severely impacted by diseases brought by the European colonists, which decimated their population. After this failed military attack, the French switched to a more diplomatic approach, which resulted in a short-lived French mission on Onondaga Lake, for only twenty [20] months, from 1656 to 1658. The French left that mission secretly in the

middle of the night, to retreat back down the Oswego River and back to Montreal.

The historical importance and use of Lake Ontario by the Onondagas is further documented in the 1684 French drawing that depicts a meeting of French explorers and Onondaga Chiefs on the eastern shore of Lake Ontario, at what is now called Port Ontario, where the Salmon River enters the Lake. This 1684 drawing, (Figure 3) below is taken from page 282 of the New York State Museum's published book: *Wampum and Shell Articles Used by the New York Indians*, which was originally published in 1901 and reprinted by AMS Press in 1978. This 1684 meeting was in the same location as the 1654 Onondaga village that was documented by the NYS Museum, as reflected in paragraph I (A) (1) above.

## **II. THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECOLOGICAL UNIQUENESS AND FRAGILITY OF THE EASTERN LAKE ONTARIO DUNES AND WETLANDS:**

The Nation, its leaders and its people take their obligations to be stewards of their original lands and waters very seriously and within the past fifteen years have joined with citizens along the shores of Lake Ontario in two, separate environmental actions: one prevented the construction of an illegal golf course in Port Ontario which was planned to illegally drain into a wetland and which would have jeopardized an endangered species of turtles, and the other prevented the proposed construction of a "clean coal" plant in Scriba, New York.

The Nation's currently recognized territory is located with the peak injury zone, approximately forty (40) miles from the three, aging nuclear reactors in Scriba. Nine Mile 1 reactor is the oldest nuclear reactor in operation in the United States. The Nation remains opposed to New York State's policy of forcing all electrical rate payers in the state subsidize these aging reactors both because of the dangers they present and because

the state's carbon footprint would be more effectively reduced by using these \$12 billion plus funds to promote and build more solar, wind and renewable generation.

This stretch of Lake Ontario includes 16.5 miles of shoreline, from El Dorado Nature Preserve, near Stony Creek in the town of Henderson, south to the Deer Creek Marsh Wildlife Management Area, near the Salmon River in the town of Richland. Figure 4 is a topographical map of this unique area.

This area presents an exceptionally beautiful collection of pristine beaches, towering sand dunes, wetlands and fens, as well as peninsulas, spits, flats, ponds and multiple creeks and tributaries. The beaches features splendid sand dunes which are the state's tallest and the second tallest in the Northeastern United States, after Cape Cod.

The formation of the dunes took tens of thousands of violent storms over hundreds of years to pile the sand into the six-zone signature which consists of beach, two generations of dunes, a depression between them called a swale, a back dune and a wetland and which collectively form the eastern Lake Ontario coastal barrier system.

This area supports a vast array of more than 300 species of plants, mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians. The wetlands and fens are the home of the endangered bog turtles, and seven known rare plant populations.

The Selkirk Fen and the Deer Creek Marsh exemplify the importance of this series of wetlands and this coastal barrier system. The 330 acre Fen, which is a unique, bog-like portion of the Deer Creek Marsh, provides habitat for a variety of rare animal and plant species. Two species that are listed by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation ("DEC") as endangered, pursuant to the New York Endangered Species Act, Environmental Conservation Law ("ECL") § 11-0535, inhabit the Fen: the bog turtle (*Clemmys mühlenbergii*) and the bog buckmoth (*Hemiluca sp. 1*). The bog turtle is also listed as threatened by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the federal Endangered

Species Act. 16 U.S.C. §§ 1531-1544. The Fen is also home to the spotted turtle (*Clemmys fustata*), which is listed by DEC as a species of special concern.

The Fen also supports swamp smartweed (*Polygonum setaceum* var *interjectum*), listed by DEC as an endangered plant species pursuant to the New York Protected Plants Act, ECL § 9-1503. In addition, dragon's mouth (*Arethusa bulbosa*), bog aster (*Aster borealis*), creeping sedge (*Carex chordorrhiza*), Houghton's sedge (*Carex houghtoniana*), livid sedge (*Carex livida* var *radicaulis*) and bladderwort (*Utricularia minor*), each of which is listed by DEC as a threatened plant species have been documented in the Fen.

In 2003, the Onondaga Nation joined with a groups of home owners on the eastern shore of the Lake, just north of the Salmon River, in a state court law suit that prevented the completion and operation of an illegal golf course, that would have drained its toxic chemicals into the Deer Creek Marsh and would have endangered the bog turtle and other endangered species. Ironically, this golf course was being built in the same area of the 1684 meeting of the Onondaga Chiefs and French colonists, as shown in Figure 3.

The Onondaga Nation joined in this cooperation action on behalf of its people, its neighbors and the natural world in the hope that it might hasten the process of healing from the historic injustices and environmental destruction, and bring lasting justice, peace and respect among all who inhabit the area.

#### CONCLUSION:

The cultural, spiritual, historic, archeological and environmental connections of the Onondaga Nation and the Haudenosaunee to Lake Ontario and its eastern shore is undeniable; but, unfortunately, it is not currently well known. This rich and important history is not taught in schools, so the general population is not aware of this history. The



Onondaga Nation, therefore, adamantly requests that this history be included in the narratives that are created as this marine sanctuary is recognized and established.

Respectfully submitted,

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Joseph J. Heath, Esq.  
Onondaga Nation General Counsel  
512 Jamesville Avenue  
Syracuse, New York 13210  
(315) 447-4851  
[jjheath1946@gmail.com](mailto:jjheath1946@gmail.com)

# Approximate Area of Onondaga Nation Aboriginal Territory

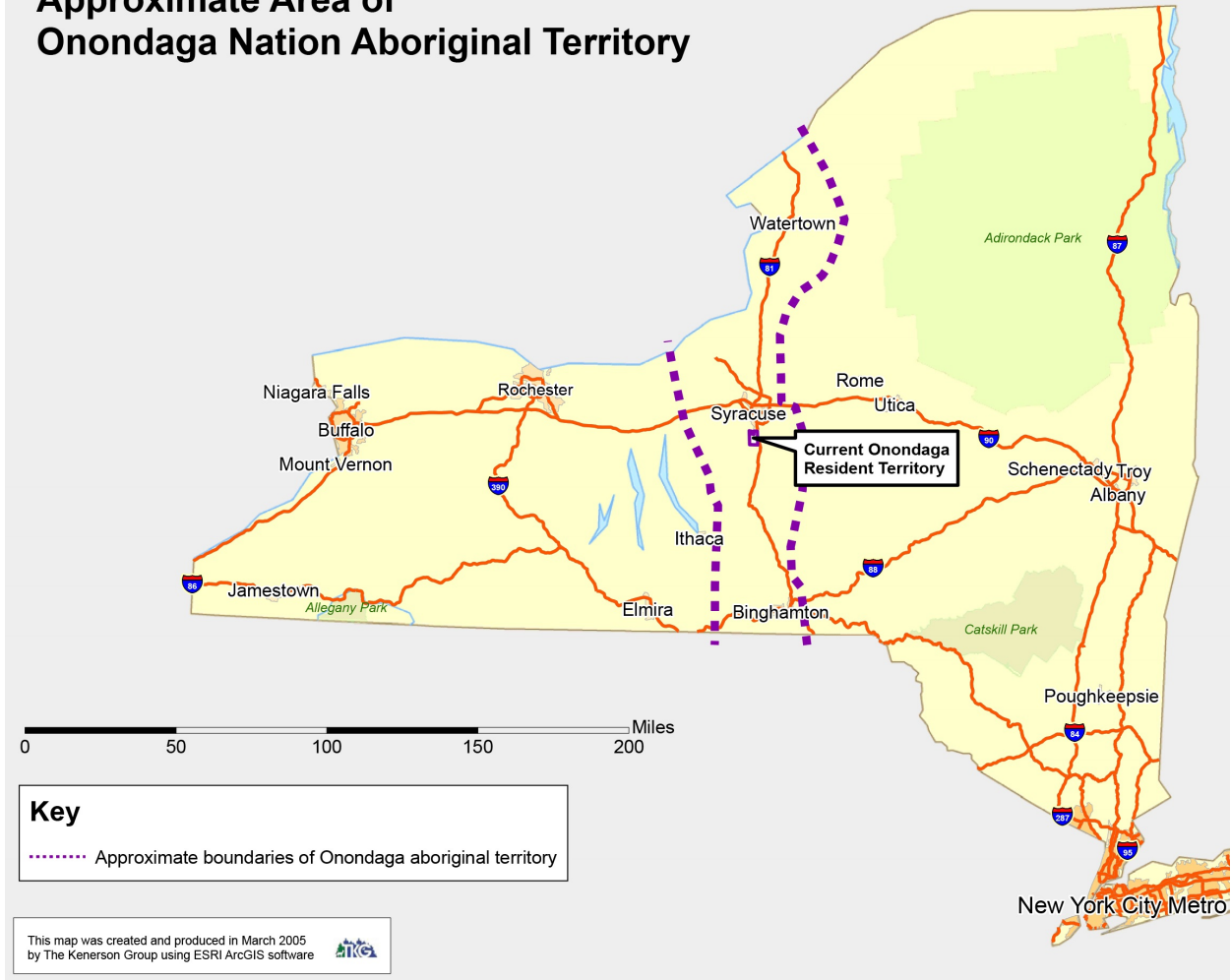
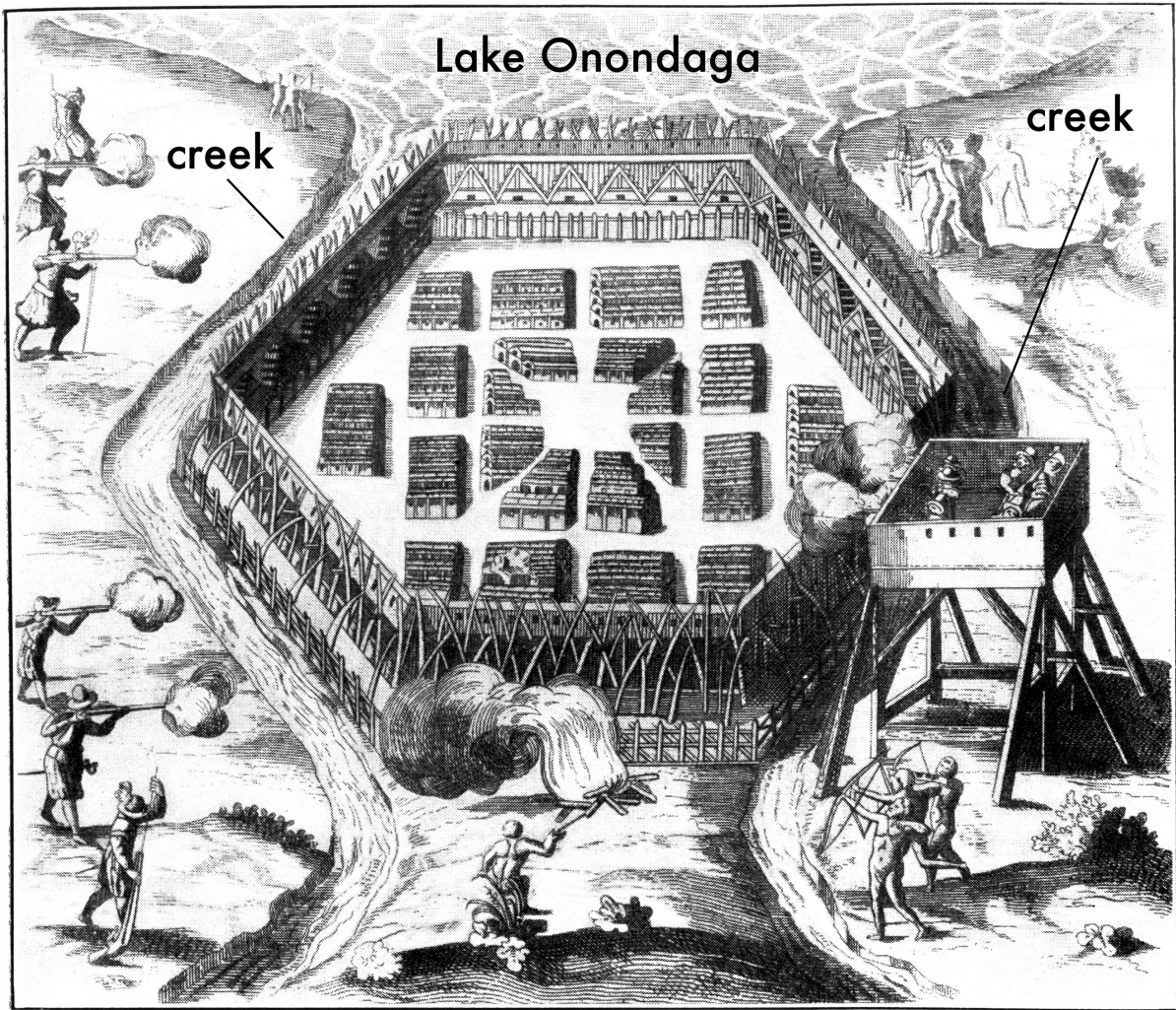


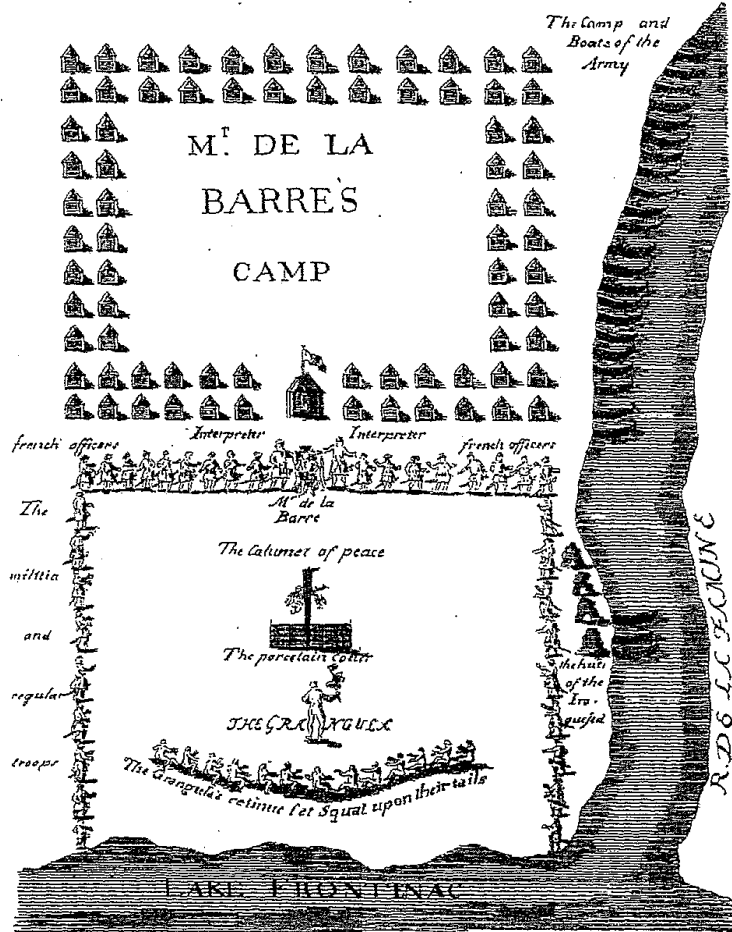
Figure 1



AN IROQUOIS FORT

(Believed to have stood on the shore of Onondaga Lake. Besieged by Champlain in 1615.)

Figure 2



Lahontan's view of De la Barre's council at La Famine September, 1684

PLATE 13

Lahontan's view of De la Barre's council at La Famine (Salmon River N. Y.) September 1684. An Onondaga chief is speaking, who is the famous orator usually called Garanguia. The spot is at the mouth of Salmon river in Oswego county, on the north side, and represents fairly well the conditions of the picture. The place received its name in 1656 from the famished condition of the French colonists when they reached it. It had been intended for their habitation but the plan was changed. As a landing place on Lake Ontario it had long been a notable place of resort, and was the terminus of the beaver land trust deed. A fine picture of this council adorns the Flower Memorial Library building in Watertown, in which Lahontan's plan is followed in a general way. This was the Great La Famine river. A smaller stream farther west had the prefix of little.

Figure 3

*Eastern Lake Ontario Dunes and Wetlands:*



Figure 4