

The Tonawanda Community

Early History

The exact date of the founding of a permanent Seneca community at Tonawanda is unknown; however, Seneca settlement there was no accidental occurrence. In the seventeenth century, Tonawanda and its environs had been in the vicinity of Neutral, Erie, and Wenro territory, three nations conquered and absorbed by the Senecas from 1638 to 1680.¹ In June, 1788, Reverend Samuel Kirkland, Presbyterian missionary to the Oneidas, who was traveling from the Seneca territory along the Genesee River to Buffalo Creek, noted when passing through Tonawanda that ruins of three ancient fortifications were visible.² Indeed, Arthur C. Parker, the noted anthropologist of Seneca ancestry, later suggested that some of the Senecas who settled at Tonawanda had Neutral ancestry.³ Although it is difficult for archaeologists to separate exactly Neutral from later Seneca sites, some scholars maintain that the Senecas were establishing fishing camps and hunting in the vicinity of Tonawanda and trading with the French (and later English) at Fort Niagara by the mid-eighteenth century.⁴

Migrations to Tonawanda continued to occur from the American Revolution well into the 1830s. In the summer of 1779, George Washington's army in the Sullivan-Clinton campaign devastated the Iroquois villages in the Genesee River Valley and sent the Indians fleeing westward. One group of Seneca refugees settled along the Tonawanda Creek.⁵ Other Senecas later came to Tonawanda after the land cession of the entire Little Beardstown Reservation in a federally ratified treaty in 1802.⁶ Still others arrived at Tonawanda with Handsome Lake (Ganiodayo), the Seneca prophet, after he was ostracized from the Allegany Reservation and went into exile before the

War of 1812.⁷ Another major Indian migration to Tonawanda from the Genesee Valley occurred after the federal treaty of 1826 when a large number of Canawaugus Seneca were forced off their Genesee Valley lands. Indeed, out of the 583 Indians at Tonawanda in 1830, 117 were listed by the federal Indian agent as “Cannewaugus” Senecas. Other Iroquois who were settled there by 1830 included sixteen Cayugas, twelve Onondagas, and seven Oneidas.⁸

By that time, descendants of other Indian nations, including Cherokee, Shawnee, and Catawba, also resided there along with descendants of Senecas who had intermarried with French, English, and American traders and military personnel.⁹ Today, one of the more prominent family names among the Tonawandas is Poodry, a name that can be traced back to a descendant of a French officer who served in General Montcalm’s army during the French and Indian War.¹⁰ Despite the multiethnic makeup of Tonawanda society and its highly conservative nature, this community was to establish a remarkable degree of unity in their fight to retain or regain their lands.

Tonawanda, or Ta-na-wun-da, meaning “swift water” or “the rapids are there,” was clearly selected as a settlement site by the Senecas based on geographical realities.¹¹ The location of the village, later moved upstream from the rapids, provided Senecas access to the Niagara River, approximately thirty miles away. There, the Senecas fished, hunted duck and other wild fowl and game, and, according to Arthur C. Parker, watched over the graves of their Neutral ancestors located on Grand Island and other islands in the Niagara River.¹² Besides access to a water route and rich lands and forests, the location of Tonawanda was apparently chosen by the Senecas for another important reason. Two Indian trails came through Tonawanda—one being the nearly 300-mile Seneca Trail, later known as the Genesee or Great Western Turnpike, today’s New York State Route 5; and the other, connecting the seventy-eight-mile Ridge Road from Big Tree, today’s Geneseo, the heart of the Senecas’ Genesee Country, to Fort Niagara. In the vicinity of Tonawanda the trails met and split.¹³

Arthur C. Parker also observed that at the time of Tonawanda’s founding, this area of western New York was rich in horticultural potential and contained thick forests of basswood, hemlock, oak, and pine.¹⁴ In 1788, Kirkland described the fine tract of land in the vicinity of Tonawanda Creek and surrounding heavily wooded areas filled

with ash, basswood, beech, elm, maple, and walnut trees. He noted that there were fourteen cabins at Tonawanda.¹⁵

By this time the Senecas were shifting away from large communal multi-room longhouses and had adapted and modified the log house “made with hewn logs and Moravian dovetail notches.”¹⁶ In the next half century, this type of dwelling was to be the norm in Seneca Country, accepted as a traditional style of Iroquoian architecture. According to Dorcas R. Brown, a specialist on Iroquoian dwellings, the “reservation Log House” was symbolic of the defeat, the defiance and the evolution of the Iroquoian people.¹⁷ The Tonawanda Senecas did not simply borrow the idea; they also modified it, reflecting “Moravian construction techniques, combined with an interior plan derived from the English single-pen house and from the single-family unit inside a Longhouse.”¹⁸ Brown noted the carryover from longhouse design in the log house construction:

Before and after the American Revolution there were log houses with bark roofs, central fire hearths, and built-in double berths along the sides. Bark roofs became shingle roofs. The central fire hearth was moved to one end, but it remained inside the house. Full wall-length berths were broken up by the front and back doors but remnants of this structure can be found in the built-in beds often found in the log houses. The loft was used for storage and/or sleeping space like the upper berths in the Longhouse.¹⁹

The historical record confirms Brown’s interpretation. An anonymous traveler’s account described the Tonawanda community in 1792 as being comprised of “many hundreds of the savages, who live in very tolerable houses, which they make of timber and cover with bark.” The traveler added: “By signs I made them understand me, and for a little money they cut me limbs and bushes sufficient to erect a booth under which I slept very quietly, on the grass.”²⁰ The account, albeit brief and tinged with racism, clearly indicates that less than ten years after the American Revolution, the Senecas had already substantially established themselves within the region, were living in log cabins, and were part of the white man’s monetary economy, no longer simply employing barter exchange.

In the same year, the diverse Seneca communities, fearing further reprisals and land loss because of their alliance with the British in the American Revolution, began formal negotiations with officials in Philadelphia. In 1792, a Tonawanda chief, Gun Cleaner, was one of forty-six Iroquois chiefs and warriors who met with Pennsylvania and federal officials at Independence Hall in an effort to repair the damage caused by the bitterness of the American Revolution. With British-occupied military installations, including Fort Niagara, still on American soil, American officials, realizing the proximity of these forts to Iroquois settlements and facing a major Indian war in the Ohio Country, realized the importance of the Six Nations, especially the large Seneca population. Two years later at Canandaigua, New York, representatives of all the Seneca communities met with President Washington's federal commissioner, Timothy Pickering, and negotiated and signed a treaty of alliance and friendship.²¹ In this historic agreement, the federal government returned a portion of land taken from the Senecas in the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1784; the treaty also gave assurances of federal protection to all of the Six Nations and a commitment to respect the territorial integrity of these Indians.²²

By 1797, the Tonawanda community had about 150 people. According to Jacob Lindley, a Quaker passing through the area, the community was composed of a dozen "Indian houses and huts. Surrounding Tonawanda were rich forests of poplars, bass-woods, cherry, red oak. . . ." The hospitable Indians there, including a Frenchman married to a Seneca woman, were willing to sell corn and milk.²³

Despite the transition from longhouse, with its extended family structure, to log cabin with a nuclear family structure, the Tonawandas maintained much of their pre-Revolutionary War social organization well into the nineteenth century. In her study of three Haudenosaunee communities, Deborah Doxtator described Tonawanda as retaining much of the gender roles of the past:

Women accessed the resources of the home community, while men used the hinterland resources. In Buffalo, thirty miles from Tonawanda, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, women sold corn, chickens and eggs that they had produced within the Tonawanda settlement,

and men sold venison and wood taken from the hinterland areas surrounding the community.²⁴

The clan mothers continued to nominate the chiefs, and children were members of the community through descent from a Tonawanda mother. To Doxtator, these clan mothers, eight in number at any one time, were the actual power center, choosing “clearing leaders,” namely, the fourteen to sixteen civil chiefs who administered the public affairs and daily requirements of the Tonawandas. In this matrilineal society, these women provided a structural basis as well as the cultural continuity of local government, designating certain men to speak for them and their interests in council, a carryover from the Great Law, the pre-Handsome Lake religion of the Iroquois. Clan mothers had to be consulted when the cession of lands became an issue.²⁵ Doxtator added that even when the *Gaiwio*, the Handsome Lake religion, became centered at Tonawanda by the 1840s, the theology focused around venerating traditional women’s rituals in the clearing: “women’s agricultural activities, planting, strawberry festival, green corn, bean festival and others.”²⁶ Unfortunately we know virtually nothing about individual Tonawanda Seneca women until the mid-1840s. Only then did Caroline Parker (Ga-ha-no), the college-educated teacher and woman of letters, begin to express herself in detailed correspondence with her extraordinary family and Lewis Henry Morgan.²⁷

The role of Seneca women was especially noticeable in the negotiations that took place at Big Tree in 1797. There, despite assurances of protection at the Treaty of Canandaigua in 1794, federal officials failed to intervene in 1797 to protect the Iroquois from the clutches of land speculators such as Robert Morris and state and local officials intent on Indian land acquisition. When Red Jacket rejected Morris’ proposals and covered the council fire, apparently ending all further negotiations, Thomas Morris, informed by Farmer’s Brother that Red Jacket had exceeded his authority, then presented his father’s proposals to a council of Seneca warriors and clan mothers. Like a smooth-talking flimflam man, Thomas Morris appealed to the women, whom he insisted truly understood the desperate conditions that the Senecas faced at the time, telling them that the “money that would proceed from the sale of their lands, would relieve the women from all the

hardships that they then endured.”²⁸ Faced with social disintegration caused by alcoholism and the increasing violence that resulted, the Seneca women declared themselves willing to cede land, and they did so at the treaty consummated at the Seneca village of Big Tree in 1797. Alcohol, cash payments, and promises of annuities were then made to win support for the treaty. Red Jacket received the largest payment of \$600 and a \$100 annuity, whereas Cornplanter received \$300 and a \$250 annuity. Farmer’s Brother, Young King, Little Billy, Little Billy’s mother, and Pollard were also “awarded” annuities. Even though under the Treaty of Big Tree, the Senecas reserved some 310 square miles—approximately 200,000 acres—and their right to hunt and fish on the lands they ceded, the Indians, nevertheless, had surrendered most of their lands west of the Genesee River, a vast empire of millions of acres. In return, the Senecas were to receive \$100,000, money which was to be invested and the interest distributed as an annuity.²⁹ In effect, the Treaty of Big Tree reduced Seneca Country to eleven parcels.

One of the parcels was Tonawanda, seventy square miles on both sides of the Tonawanda Creek. In the treaty, however, the Senecas agreed to give Morris the preemption rights to the eleven reservations. Morris later sold this right to the Holland Land Company, a consortium of four Dutch banks. Consequently, the Holland Land Company acquired the first right to purchase all of the Seneca lands if and when the Indians were convinced to sell any or all of their territory. By the next year, Joseph Ellicott, the company’s chief agent, had already initiated a survey of Tonawanda lands with the hope of some future acquisition of these Seneca lands. Thus, the reservation era began and pressures to get at the remaining Seneca estate intensified.³⁰

Despite federal guarantees of a large reservation in 1797, the Tonawandas faced an insecure future in western New York. In 1802, the Seneca chiefs ceded the Little Beardstown Reservation in the Genesee Valley. The son of Chief Little Beard, also known as Chief Little Beard, and some of his small community went to live at Tonawanda.³¹ In the same year, New York State began negotiations with the Senecas over the purchase of the Indian-owned islands in the Niagara River, including its largest possession, the 17,000-acre Grand Island.³²

In the fall of 1805, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, a Polish aristocrat traveling to Niagara, visited the area around the Tonawanda reservation. On the road west from Batavia, the seat of the Holland

Land Company's three-and-a-half-million-acre empire, he complained about the bad road, a "torturous track full of tree trunks and rocks and holes filled with water." Referring to the region around Tonawanda as a vast but beautiful wasteland, he expressed his views about the Indians there, and the lands "still left to the poor savage." Many Tonawandas walked briskly with guns draped on their shoulders while their "poor *squaws* or women carry all the burdens." These Indian women carried their "clothes, tomahawks, or Indian weapons, along with one or two *papooses* . . . attached by a band that they pass around the forehead. It is on this that all the weight rests." Niemcewicz added that many of the Indians were eating pumpkins raw or cooked. "Their shelters have roofs of linden bark attached to four poles, built usually on the banks of streams."³³ The Polish traveler expressed disappointment that, unlike the Holland Land Company's efforts further east, the lands west of Batavia had not been sold to and settled by more non-Indians, which he equated with "civilization."

With the outbreak of the War of 1812, the Tonawanda Senecas found themselves in a most difficult position. By that time the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake was living and preaching at Tonawanda and insisting that the Indians reject the calls by Americans to enter into another white man's war.³⁴ A rumor spread that the Seneca prophet was rallying troops on behalf of the British Crown. Consequently, the Senecas, because of their lingering memories of their past alliance with the British that led some Senecas to flee with Joseph Brant to Canada at the end of the war, were increasingly seen as a "fifth column" by whites in western New York. Added to this was a second rumor, namely, that Senecas were with the Shawnee prophet's forces at the Battle of Tippecanoe in November 1811. In order to dispel accusations of disloyalty, the Tonawanda chiefs and warriors held an open forum with the non-Indian residents of Batavia in the first days of spring in 1812.³⁵

Chief John Sky was the Tonawandas' spokesman at the meeting. He immediately rejected the idea that the Senecas at Tonawanda were pro-British, insisting that "we do not thirst for blood." He added that the Tonawandas were "a small part of the Seneca Nation" and that there was "nothing . . . to be gained by spilling the blood of our fellow creature. Our children are as dear to us as your children are to you. We value our little property—by war we know we shall lose it."³⁶

Chief Sky carefully spelled out other concerns to his largely white audience at Batavia. Although a convert to the new Longhouse

religion, but distancing himself from Handsome Lake for his Christian onlookers, he, nevertheless, frankly expressed his opposition to missionary proselytizing among his people. He fervently expressed the view that these missionaries shook "that faith which the Great Spirit has breathed into us; which is our greatest comfort and consolation in this world." Sky saw these clerics' presence as totally disruptive, tending "to destroy the foundation of our hopes of a future life; but to throw us into religious parties and confusion."³⁷

Sky also pointed out differences with other Seneca communities based on moral grounds. He asserted that the "principal chiefs and warriors of Buffaloe [Creek] regard themselves as the great leaders of the Seneca Indians. But in point of sobriety and good order they are not our leaders." Trying to curry favor with his audience, he emphasized that the Tonawandas were temperate, law-abiding peoples.³⁸

In his remarkable speech, Chief Sky brought up other troubling issues. He accused certain whites of theft of Tonawanda resources, insisting that many "bad people among our white brethren" have cut down and carried away the Senecas' finest timber. Calling this "a very great grievance," the chief maintained that if a Seneca "cut a flick" of the white man's timber for a fire in a hunting camp, he might be murdered "for this small transgression." He urged his audience to help the Tonawandas by enforcing the laws of trespass.³⁹

Despite the preaching of the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake to avoid joining in a "white man's war," numerous Tonawandas did enlist in the War of 1812 and fought in every major campaign on both sides of the Niagara River, fighting at Black Rock, Chippawa, Lundy's Lane, and Queenston Heights. They were under the command of Chief Little Beard, the son of the well-known chief of the same name who had been killed in 1806.⁴⁰ Approximately ninety Tonawandas served in the American army in the War of 1812, an extraordinarily high number that was approximately half of all the males in the community.⁴¹ Chief Sky encouraged enlistments and his own son served in the war. Besides combat on the Niagara frontier, the Tonawandas gathered intelligence and served as couriers between Buffalo, the Genesee Country, and Albany.⁴³

Despite their high enlistments and their commitment to the American cause, when the British forces that included Indians from the Six Nations Reserve in southern Ontario crossed the Niagara River and marched on Black Rock and Buffalo in 1813, the Tonawanda

community found itself in the path of a retreating American army. According to historian Carl Benn, these fleeing American troops “stopped long enough to take advantage of the confusion to rob the Senecas at Tonawanda before continuing their withdrawal from the border region. Although their homes had been looted, the Tonawandas’ food supply was saved since much of it had been hidden below the floorboards of their cabins.⁴⁴

Why did the Tonawanda Senecas, including followers of Handsome Lake, go to war in 1812 in direct conflict with the prophet’s teachings against joining in another white man’s war? First, with rapidly increasing non-Indian populations around them, the Tonawandas, especially Chief Sky, were well aware of the consequences if they went over to the British side. Elders’ memories of the Sullivan-Clinton campaign, General Washington’s retribution against the Senecas in 1779, was still in their minds. Secondly, they had signed a treaty of friendship and alliance with the United States at Canandaigua in 1794 and were committed to uphold this accord. At a council meeting at Buffalo Creek on July 25, 1813, Sky reiterated his people’s friendship to the United States. Thirdly, they were promised financial remuneration for serving. Fourthly, the Senecas served under their own Indian commanders as in the days of forest warfare; for young males, service in the War of 1812 allowed them to replicate the experiences that they had heard elders speak of in council, namely, how they had earned their stripes, leadership qualities, on the warpath. Hence, war was still an avenue of social mobility in Iroquoia. Although more speculative, Arthur C. Parker suggested a fifth reason for Seneca involvement, namely a defense “of the graves of their [Neutral] forefathers” buried on Grand Island.⁴⁶

By the end of the war, the Tonawandas were in desperate shape. Wartime inflation ravaged New York. The war also had delayed the distribution of their federal annuity payments. Contributing to the Senecas’ economic distress was the collapse of a bank in which previous annuities had been deposited.⁴⁷ In September 1815, the Seneca Nation agreed to sell the islands in the Niagara River to New York State. In an accord, in which one of the signatories was Chief Sky, the Senecas ceded Grand Island. One inducement was a promise of an annuity from the state. The Senecas also hoped that by relinquishing some land, a cession might stem the hunger of land companies and state officials; however, this piecemeal cession, much like the Little

Beardstown Reservation cession in 1802, only whetted the appetite of the non-Indian world. Unlike the 1802 treaty, which was held under the auspices of the federal government and ratified by the United States Senate, the New York State–Seneca Treaty of 1815 had no formal approval from Washington. To this day, despite a recent federal court decision, the Tonawandas still claim ownership of the islands in the Niagara River and insist that they were coerced into signing over this territory.⁴⁸

Besides the loss of Grand Island, what immediately followed the war was the “Year Without Summer” that produced famine and starvation. Because of the massive eruption of a volcano in the East Indies, global climate change resulted. In 1816, Indians in western New York lost their crops. Epidemic diseases soon followed. To compound the pressures on Indian life, New York State began to build the Erie Canal in 1817. Tonawanda Creek was to be a feeder for the canal, and a major land rush was to begin soon after the canal’s completion in 1825.⁴⁹

The pressures to survive led a troupe of Senecas to visit and tour England after the War of 1812. Among the performers was twenty-two-year-old Sta-cute or Steep Rock, a Tonawanda Seneca-Onondaga Indian. In 1818, the Senecas were cast as “Wild Indian Savages From the Borders of Lake Erie . . . The Chief and Six Warriors of the Seneca Nation.” They performed their dances and songs at concert halls at Leeds, Liverpool, and Manchester. Although they were presented as exotic specimens, the English Society of Friends showed a special interest in their welfare while in Liverpool and Manchester.⁵⁰ The English press soon favorably covered their performances.⁵¹ In a letter to the *Leeds Mercury*, one writer commented that the Senecas were “one of the most favorable specimens that Paganism could present.”⁵² To their English audiences, they appeared to be the epitome of the “Rousseau’s wild child,” the simple, unspoiled natural man of the forest world.⁵³

In 1817–1818, two white visitors—Estwick Evans and Timothy Alden—came to Tonawanda and wrote down their observations about the community. Although Evans’ brief account was laden with bias and overall had a limited understanding of these Indians, he did point out several realities of Tonawanda Seneca life of the times. Evans indicated that the village was “situated upon a plain, and contains about one hundred huts.” The nearby creek, that ran through the center of the community, was filled with “an abundance of fish.”

Evans' description of the physical setting is significant, especially since he noted the number of residences and the importance of fishing to the community. Although he referred to the Tonawandas' alleged superstitious beliefs, he made mention of the White Dog Ceremony, an ancient practice of the Iroquois that was still being performed in 1817. He pointed out funerary practices, including the burial of the deceased's clothes, pipe, dish, and spoon in the gravesite, a practice that still continues today. Evans also recounted the belief in the Spirit Journey of the deceased and the rewards for living a virtuous life.⁵⁴

In 1818 Timothy Alden, a Presbyterian missionary sent by the Society for Propagating the Gospel who later became the founder and president of Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, visited Tonawanda. On July 16 and 17, 1818, he witnessed a council meeting and praised the Senecas for hospitality. He compared Chief Sky, who held forth at the ceremony, with the great orators of ancient Greece and Rome, but noted that his health was fading quickly. Chief Sky was to die the following year. Quite importantly, Alden noted that the Tonawandas were undergoing a spiritual revival based on the moral instructions of Handsome Lake.⁵⁵ Coming at a time of increased pressures by agents of the Ogden Land Company, it was this revival that in part helped the Tonawanda Seneca community withstand some of these very same pressures.

On March 4, 1819, the New York State Assembly issued a report on the Iroquois and their lands. The report disparaged the agricultural efforts of the Indians, work "chiefly done by the females." It indicated that because of intemperance and over-leasing, the Indians were incapable of protecting themselves and that they were being surrounded by whites "who have usurped nearly all of their possessions." The legislators had taken their cue from Congressman David A. Ogden and his associates, the trustees of the Ogden Land Company, who had for nine years pushed plans to remove the Iroquois, including the 365 Tonawandas, from the state or to concentrate them all on the Allegany Indian Reservation. The report recommended that the Indians "concentrate themselves in some suitable place" for their own protection where they could be instructed in "piety and agriculture" and gain the "benefits of civilization." The report authorized the governor to cooperate with federal officials to carry out this goal.⁵⁶

In the aftermath of the War of 1812, state officials, interested in building New York's economic base and promoting rapid non-Indian

settlement in central and western New York as well as meeting the challenge of the continued British presence in Canada, developed the Erie Canal and its extensive branch canal system. Seneca reservations stood in the way of what Albany officials defined as “progress.” Two Seneca reservations were on the Erie Canal’s east-west corridor—Tonawanda and Buffalo Creek—and five Seneca reservations—Big Tree, Caneadea, Canawaugus, Gardeau, and Squawky Hill—were on the Genesee Valley Canal corridor.

The Tonawandas, as well as other Seneca communities, faced a challenge that permanently changed their world. Events between 1819 to 1830 played a major role in producing a schism in the Seneca polity and furthering the formation of two Seneca governments that exist today in New York. While Chief Sky started to define a separate path for the Tonawandas from the chiefs at Buffalo Creek, Red Jacket was to widen the split with his words and actions between 1819 and 1830.