

A BRIEF HISTORY OF KAHNAWÀ:KE

1-Overview - written historical records

The written records of early explorers, such as Cartier, Noel, and Champlain, place Iroquoian peoples throughout the St. Lawrence Basin. Also the records of missionaries and fur traders, give us a more complete account of Iroquoian cultures and languages in this area.

2-Oral tradition – documentation

Documentation of oral traditions of continuous Iroquoian-Iroquois presence in the St. Lawrence Valley and Region is important. In looking at a map of the area, and the historic record the geographical importance of the portages at Lachine and Kahnawà:ke are known. We know the Lachine portage is close to Cartier's Hochelaga, so the appropriateness of the site for Iroquoian occupation is already established. We also know from Kahnawà:ke oral tradition that the turtle clan was located at the Turtle River (near Delson) and the wolf clan was located at the Wolf River (at Chateaugay). The Bear Clan was located on the north shore of the St. Lawrence just below Lachine and thus these three Mohawk clans controlled the portages and the River itself.

3-Archeological evidence

Archeological evidence of early settlement of Iroquois people in the area of the St. Lawrence Valley is evidenced in the historic record or even earlier linguistic reconstructions of the pre contact past.

4-Linguistic and other cultural evidence

Evidence from language provides us two kinds of evidence: Cartier's Iroquoians at Hochelaga-Ohserake and modern Iroquois at Caughnawaga-Kahnawà:ke. If the speakers of contemporary languages can be identified with a particular territory over a period of time, then their attachment to that land can be determined on the basis of this evidence.

5-Map of the St. Lawrence Valley and Basin

A map of the St. Lawrence Valley and Basin shows the importance of this area to the whole of North America. The area is a fertile and rich area, and was always heavily traveled by the indigenous peoples of this region and by the explorers and missionaries throughout the colonial history of the area. The St. Lawrence River itself is the most important river of the continent and is the key to the exploration, trade, and transportation routes of the historic and prehistoric period. The indigenous peoples of the area were aware of the river's uses and formed their alliances and fought their enemies and used their knowledge of the land and river to sustain their cultures and governments.

6. Colonization and the interpretation of some historical and anthropological facts

The Iroquois were constant users and occupiers of the region, and there are successive layers of history when it comes to the Iroquois and more particularly the Mohawks of the St. Lawrence.

It is a commonly held belief that the geographical origins of the Iroquois are upper New York State. It is comforting for those who wish to promote their own sovereignty that the static views of experts do not consider the pre-colonial history of the region in the consideration of the current locations of Iroquois communities.

As an example of how documents can influence perception, when some of the Mohawks from Kahnawà:ke moved in 1752 to the Akwesáhsne location it was not the beginning of Akwesáhsne Mohawk history. Yet for many, 1752 became the date of Akwesáhsne beginnings. Current archeological research confirms that the Mohawks of Akwesáhsne had already settled at Akwesáhsne 8000 years earlier. So it is that the Jesuit Relations related the move of certain villagers to this area in 1752, and firmed up the view of court experts to a position that the Akwesáhsne site began in 1752.

It is surely this kind of interpretive evidence that must be considered when we examine the history of Kahnawà:ke seigniorial deed of 1680. It is certainly not the first settlement in this area of Mohawks, Oneida, or Onondaga people, but a continuing tradition of occupation of the area. When experts relate that modern day Mohawks mistakenly claim settlement in the area since early times and then takes the historical view that Mohawks and Huron-Wendat communities settled here only in the 17th and 18th centuries it becomes a political statement rather than a comment on history.

7-Brief Historical Overview-300 years in brief

Throughout the last 300 years the Iroquois and more specifically the Mohawks have played a pivotal role in the occupation and settlement of the French. The French were always eager to form alliances of protection and friendship with the Mohawks to better protect a struggling colonial occupation in this part of North America. Further, colonial wars (French and English struggles) and economic opportunities for the Mohawk entrepreneur led to a confused and insecure relationship between the French and the Mohawks. It was not an easy task to attempt to subdue and also attempt alliance with the Mohawks and exert a dominant hand and assert French sovereignty when access to the South Shore of the St. Lawrence was not available to the French. As well, French population during this time was minimal and the government of France was not willing to pour the required resources into the struggling colony. The time between 1666 and 1680 was crucial for alliance between the Mohawks and the French. Through the process of Seigniorial Deeds (1680) signed by King Louis XIV recognition and setting apart of traditional Mohawk Iroquois lands was made to the Iroquois of the Sault. The Jesuit Order was intimately connected to the Seigneurie of Sault St. Louis, as the Iroquois settlement came to be called. The people came to be called the Iroquois of the Sault (1680-1960) or the Caughnawagas (1796) or the Caughnawaga Nation-les gens du Sault (1701).

The Iroquois of the Sault were a hybrid collection of nations: Oneida, Onondaga, Mohawk, Abenaki, Chickasaw, Huron, Nipissing and Tetes de Boules. The congress of these peoples came to be known by the confederation style of the Iroquois as the 8 Nations, and later on as the 7 Nations. The Iroquois political principles of confederation and governance were visibly demonstrated through the structure of governance at Kahnawà:ke throughout this time. The clan is one such governance entity and to this day there are 10 extant clans, a reminder that the confederation of peoples in a dominant Iroquois model of government at Kahnawà:ke was the direct result of the colonial wars' turbulence and the coming together of various aboriginal peoples during these times.

Throughout the 300-year history of Kahnawà:ke, by way of the Jesuit Relations, there have been recorded daily and annual interactions highlighting to some considerable extent the importance of the Iroquois population and its interactions with other aboriginal populations and with the French and English governments.

8-From Iroquois community to Mohawk territory

The Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke (Kahnawa'keró:non) are an ancient people with a vibrant culture and rich history. We are one of the eight communities that make up the Mohawk (Kanien'kehá:ka) Nation and have historic, political and cultural ties to the Oneida, Seneca, Onondaga, Cayuga and Tuscarora Nations of the Northeastern part of North America.

In ancient times, these nations achieved a major and innovative development by forming a Confederacy and devising a system of governance known as the Great Law of Peace. In all of the world's history, there are very few examples of such a confederation of nations for the purpose of peace; the formation of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy is one of them.

The Confederacy and the Great Law of Peace, along with the Creation Story, the principles of the Two Row Wampum and the concept of the Seventh Generation, form the basis of our beliefs, values, traditions, philosophies and unique worldview. The founding of the Confederacy demonstrates to us the value of working together in a respectful and peaceful manner; the Great Law provides a democratic model for governing ourselves; our Creation Story explains how we came to be on this earth and what our duties are as human beings; the Two Row Wampum instructs us on how to interrelate with other governments and nations; and the concept of the Seventh Generation reminds us to be respectful and mindful of future generations. The contemporary community of Kahnawà:ke has sustained itself and built on this rich cultural background.

Many significant events and poignant moments mark our history. During the 17th and 18th centuries, when the British and French were establishing themselves and fighting each other for control of North America, the Caughnawagas found themselves wedged between these two colonial rivals. Their traditional territory was situated between the fur trading posts established at Québec City by the French and at Albany by the British. Independent and militarily strong, the Kanien'kehá:ka used the colonial rivalry, their geographic location and their exceptional diplomatic skills to their political and economic advantage.

During that same period of time, the present day site of Kahnawà:ke, located approximately 10 kilometers from the city of Montreal, proved to be another strategic location politically, economically, and militarily. A group of Caughnawagas had re-established themselves in the Northern part of their ancestral homelands where a Jesuit mission was established under the authority of the French Regime. Politically, they organized the community in accordance with the Great Law and maintained kinship ties to the other Iroquoian communities. The resettlement proved to be advantageous economically as the Kahnawa'keró:non opened up the trade route for furs and other goods to Albany.

During the War of 1812, Kahnawa'keró:non were recognized for distinguishing themselves during two attempts by the Americans to invade Canada. In 1813, the American army was moving towards Montreal by the Chateaugay River. To protect Caughnawaga territory, a force was organized and together with the British and French, they pushed back the Americans. In 1814, the Mohawks of Caughnawaga joined Akwesáhsne, Kanehsatá:ke and Six Nations in the Battle of Beaver Dam. Lieutenant Fitzgibbon, Commander of the troops, acknowledged that 'not a shot was fired on our side by any but the Indians. They beat the American detachment into a state of terror.'

After the War of 1812, our independent and self-sustaining life would change dramatically. Within less than a hundred years, repressive government legislation, such as the 1876 Indian Act, would ravage a thousand years of political growth, social development and economic prosperity. The Indian Act and subsequent government policies suppressed Traditional government, attempted to "civilize" and assimilate into mainstream society, prohibited the use of Mohawk language and the practice of Mohawk culture, and diminished the Mohawk land base. Oppressive legislation also determined eligibility to be an "Indian" based on a legal definition, and removed Caughnawaga's authority to determine its own affairs and placed this authority in the hands of the Minister of the Department of Indian Affairs.

Throughout history the Caughnawagas have shown resilience and an ability to adapt to ever-

changing circumstances. From the time of Creation to the imposition of the Indian Act, Caughnawagas have responded to these challenges with the same tenacity, dignity, resourcefulness and hope, which have guided us throughout time. The Kahnawà:ke community has directed its attention to internal affairs and we are in the process of strengthening the links to our proud heritage and rebuilding on the philosophies and principles contained within the Great Law, the Two Row Wampum Treaty, the Creation Story and the Seventh Generation.

9-Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory

The Kahnawà:ke experience has been that a population can, of its own accord, without written laws become singular in language and that language become predominant until it is the only language of a people. This became the situation at Kahnawà:ke, and reflects what is the actual experience of the community. The style of governance was reliant on clans and chiefs, the procedures of government reliant on Iroquois confederation style, and the language of that governance Mohawk. Through the various decades and centuries, the people of Kahnawà:ke understood themselves to be a concentration of nations of the Iroquois, each with its own voice spoken through the clans by representation of the chiefs. In the 1600's Kahnawà:ke was known as the Iroquois of the Sault, in the 1700's as the Caughnawagas or as the 7 Indian Nations of Canada. In the 1800's we were called the Iroquois of Caughnawaga and in the 1900's as the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke. What has taken place at Kahnawà:ke is an evolution of a people through the colonial turmoils and continuing struggles for status. Victories and losses during the 300 years of war led to a concentration and absorption of peoples and languages until the transformation was complete and the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke emerged as one entity.