

# Place of the Swift Waters: A History of the First People of the Saratoga Lake Watershed

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## **Abstract**

We examined a history of the native people of the Saratoga Lake Watershed, beginning with archaeological evidence from 12,000 years ago and focusing on the time surrounding early European contact. Though many New England tribes such as the Mahican used the lands in this area, we explored the ways that the Mohawk people in particular related to water in terms of food resources, including fishing, hunting, and agriculture; travel, trade, and warfare along the area's waterways; the medicinal springs of Saratoga; spirituality and culture; and current water-use issues.

## **Preface**

Joseph Bruchac, a Native American local of the Saratoga region, introduces a book of Native American stories by describing the relationships native peoples of North America have with the Earth. “The Earth is not something to be bought and sold, something to be used and mistreated,” he writes. “It is, quite simply, the source of our lives—our Mother” (Caduto and Bruchac 1991). He continues to explain the role of native people on the Earth as entrusted with a mission to maintain the natural balance of the Earth. In Native American philosophy, life is seen as a great circle in which each person is related to everyone and everything. All natural objects and phenomena are thought to be inherently spiritual. It is through this philosophy that Native Americans form connections with the land, water, and other natural resources surrounding them, in addition to other peoples and cultures.

William Cronon, in *Changes in the Land*, discusses the interactions between American Indians, European colonists, and the land of New England. He describes the relationships between people and their environment as “historical and dialectical” and as “connected within an interacting system” (2003). Their relationship was dialectical because they felt a deep desire to be respectful to nature; however, at the same time, they needed to exploit nature to survive. Whether it was by collecting wood for fuel, clearing

land to build houses and plant crops, or setting controlled fires, Native Americans unavoidably altered the areas in which they lived. However, they did so sustainably, relying on the wise management of tribe leaders and their vast environmental knowledge



notably large caches of archaeologically significant goods. Because of this, our study not only relies on information from local archaeological settlements, but also of neighboring, related tribes, as it can be assumed that they shared common practices and tools.

It should also be mentioned that the First People did not live by the modern boundaries or city limits we have defined today. Because this area was used predominantly as a seasonal hunting ground, the tribes studied lived elsewhere during other times of the year. Although this is a project that focuses on the Saratoga Lake Watershed, it will also include information from the areas directly outside of the watershed. Also, because our project emphasizes connections to water, their main mode of transportation, our research inevitably takes us to other nearby places.

Our paper focuses largely on the Mohawk, a subset of the greater Iroquois Nation.

Finally, another hindrance in our quest for reliable information on the First  
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## Methods



Howes Cave, NY, we spoke with Native American Educator Mike Tarbell, who spoke with us about the Mohawk people and Iroquois spirituality. Our conversation with Mike served as an opportunity to verify many of our previous findings to create an accurate historical account. The exhibits at the Iroquois Indian Museum offered us insight into the culture of the Iroquois people through art, such as a painting from the Saratoga area; artifacts, such as fishing supplies; and replications, such as a large birch-bark canoe.

We also visited the Ndakinna Education Center, a wilderness and Native American education center in Greenfield Center, NY, where we spoke with Founder and Director James Bruchac. Here we dug deeper into the history of the area through folklore and oral histories by discussing our project with Jim. We were able to further verify the research we had completed, as well as expand our understanding of the spirituality and history of the First People in the Saratoga Lake Watershed. We also looked at exhibits in the Center, including models of birch-bark canoes and fishing hooks.

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## Introduction

### *The People of the Saratoga Lake Watershed*

The focus of this paper begins several hundred years prior to European contact and extends to the early development of Saratoga County in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, an understanding of the prehistoric lives of the First People in the Saratoga Lake Watershed, as well as a general history of these people, is necessary. In prehistoric times, the First People who lived in the Saratoga Lake Watershed were the Mohegans, the Mahicans, and the Mohawks. Many other tribes, including the Abenaki, Oneida, Pequots, Nipmucs, Wampanoags, Naraganests, Sokokis, and several other New England tribes used the Saratoga area for its hunting, fishing, and water resources or passed through on migratory routes to other places at different time periods throughout history. This paper will briefly introduce the occupancy of the Mohegans, but will focus on the lives of the Mahicans and Mohawks, those First Nations most commonly associated with this area. Because the Mahicans and Mohawks were using the resources in the area at the time of European contact, most of the accessible information about the First People of the area is centered on these two tribes (See Figure 1).

Both the Mohegans and the Mahicans share the common root language of Proto-Algonquian. The Proto-Algonquian language family is the largest linguistic family on the North American continent, and many other tribes who shared the Saratoga area spoke from this common root language (Olan and Bruchac, *Languages* 2007). The Mohegans were a people who inhabited regions of the northeastern United States for centuries. They originally lived in the upper Hudson River region, including the Saratoga Lake Watershed, but at the time of European contact, the Mohegan had migrated east to the



lack of resources in the winters, they would eat saplings and the bark of trees (Keller 1976). Such name-

The Five Nations were brought together by the Peacemaker, a man from the Huron nation, another Iroquoian speaking group, between 500 and 1,000 years ago. Discouraged by the social dysfunction, confusion, suspicion, warfare, and general disharmony that the five tribes faced, the Peacemaker went to each tribe with a message of peace and unity. Through his efforts, the Five Nations, or the Peace League, was formed. The Great Law of Peace is an oral constitution among the Haudenosaunee. Based on peace, power, and righteousness, the Great Law of Peace established a democracy among the tribes and put an end to intertribal feuding. It also expresses the respect for and responsibility to the natural world, encompassing many of the ideals that the Iroquois have lived by for hundreds of years (Malinowski and Sheets 1998, Olan 2007, pers. comm. M. Tarbell). The Great Law of Peace had great implications for our current society. Benjamin Franklin and other framers of the United States Constitution met with Haudenosaunee leaders to learn about their constitution, and many similarities exist between the two constitutions and the two democracies. Additionally, during the Boston Tea Party, many colonists dressed as Mohawks to express their desire for the democracy, freedom, and representation that the Haudenosaunee lived by. In 1987, Senator Daniel Inouye (Democrat, Hawaii), introduced a Senate resolution to acknowledge the contributions made by the Haudenosaunee to the United States Constitution (Olan 2007).

In 1720, the Five Nations became the Six Nations, as the Iroquois Confederacy is known today, with the addition of the Tuscarora (Waller 1966). Within each of the Six Nations, there are eight clans or tribes, including the Wolf, Deer, Bear, Snipe, Beaver, Heron, Turtle, and Hawk. The spirits of the animals for which the clans are named act as

the guardian spirits of the people in that clan. The name of the clan to which a person belongs is considered a part of his or her name, and it is mentioned in introductions. For example, Mike Tarbell, the Native American Educator at the Iroquois Indian Museum,

communities flourished at sites such as the Arrowhead





land, which traditionally belonged to the Mahicans, to English settlers, as part of the Schenectady, Hoosic, Canistigione, and Niskayuna Patents (Comer 2007). In part, the Mohawks were forced out of the area by encroaching European settlement and society, and unfair land sales and trades are testament to the tensions that existed between the two groups who wanted to use the land in the Saratoga region.

Perhaps one of the most controversial land sales was that of the Kayaderosseras Patent. As the Mohawks adapted to the presence of the settlers in the land they dominated, they began to sell patents of Kayaderosseras land to the English, though the Mahicans were the traditional owners of this land. Between the 1680s and 1770s, a series of complicated negotiations with the Mohawks led the land to be sold to English settlers. In 1703, Samuel Shelton Broughton, attorney-general of the area, obtained a license from the governor to purchase the tract of land, for which the Mohawk signed a deed in 1704. In 1708, the deed was finally confirmed by the tribe through the influence of Sir William Johnson. The tract of land included Saratoga Lake and much of modern Saratoga County (DeMicco, Sylvester 1979). Conflicts during the French and Indian War, however, delayed permanent English settlement, and in 1764, the first English families to settle at the mouth of the Kayaderosseras Creek were driven off by Mohawks. The Mohawks complained that their hunting territory had never been sold; they testified that the original grant of the land they sold was only a few farms near Saratoga, as opposed to the 600,000 acres of land being claimed by the English. In 1764, the Mohawks accepted a reduced patent. Due to these conflicts, few permanently settled in the region until the 1770s. In 1771, the Kayaderosseras land was divided into 25 allotments which were sold to the English, clearing the issues surrounding the land sales. In 1772, the Kayaderosseras and

Saratoga Patents were united by the colonial government, creating the districts of Saratoga, Halfmoon, and Ball's Town, or present-day Ballston Spa (Bruchac, DeMicco, Sylvester 1979).

By the 1780s, the northwest shore of Saratoga Lake was occupied by settlers, and by 1785, the northern shore was also settled (DeMicco). After the 1780s, most of the remaining Mahicans had left New York as a result of European settlement and relocated in Wisconsin to form the Stockbridge Munsee Mahican Nation. Some Mohawk families also left the area and relocated to Kahnawake, also known as Caughnawauga, and Akwesasne, as well as other places north of Saratoga.

Other families remained in the Kayaderosseras region through the 1800s and 1900s. During the 1800s, many of the tribes still living in Saratoga County were well-mingled and intermarried, and during the 1900s, they continued to lose their traditional lands to white settlement. In the 1920s, three towns belonging to the First People, Barktown, Indian Stream, and Indian Hollow, built over 12,000 acres of land just west of Saratoga County, were flooded when the Hudson River Regulating District dammed the Sacandaga River to prevent spring flooding further downstream. *Sacandaga*, a Kanienkehaka Mohawk word, means "drowned lands," a name that originally referred to the large bowl-

### *The Place*

The First Nations in the Saratoga Lake Watershed, in particular the Mohawk people on which this paper is focused, made extensive use of the natural resources available to them. Only living temporarily in the settlements surrounding the streams, rivers, and lakes, the people allowed forests to re-grow and game and fish stocks to replenish when they moved elsewhere. The people collected wood for fuel and building houses, and they collected plant materials to make nets, containers, weapons, canoes, dyes, and medicines (Dunn 2000). They practiced controlled burning to make the area suitable for farming and to allow an understory of berries and grasses that would attract the game they hunted. The interactions that the First Nations in the area held with the landscape were directly related to the resources that were provided by nature, but “in nothing is this more clear than in the names they attached to their landscape” (Cronon 2003). In the Saratoga Lake Watershed, the First People named their landscape for their water resources.

There is a great deal of speculation about the origin of the name “Saratoga” (See Figure 2). Some accounts indicate that the name is derived from the Iroquoian language, while others note that the name is derived from the Algonquian language. Original spellings of the name are varied, and include words such as *Sarachtogoe*, *Serachtague*, *Saraghoga*, *Saraghtogue*, *Sarachtoga*, *Saraghtoga*, *Cheratoge*, and *Schorachtoge*, among other spellings (Simpson 2002, Waller 1966). Early historians and European settlers spelled this word in more than twenty different ways, and each word had a slightly different meaning. The earliest date that a variation of the word is seen in history is 1684 (Sylvester 1979). One definition is “place of the swift waters”; this meaning is made up

of two Iroquoian words, *saragh* meaning “swift water” and *oga* meaning “place of.” Other potential definitions include “hillside country of a great river,” “the place of herrings,” and “place where the track of the heel is seen,” an allusion to an area where depressions like footprints are seen in the rocks (Sylvester 1979, Waller 1966, Woodward 1982). The Mohawk word *Assarat*, meaning “sparkling water” is another possible origin (Bruchac, *Names* 2006). Algonquian speaking nations that may have named Saratoga include the MicMac, Mahican, Pequot, and Abenaki. *Togue* is a MicMac word for “trout”; *Scaghtakook* is a Pequot word meaning “where two streams converge”; and an Abenaki meaning of a variation of the word is “place of the miraculous waters in a rock” (Dorrrough 2006). The Mohawk also knew the area as *Ochseratongue* or *Ochsechrage*, meaning “at the beaver dam,” and the Mahicans called the area *Amissohaendiek*, meaning “beaver-hunting territory.” In 1646, Jesuit Father Isaac Jogues transcribed the name for the area as *Ossarague*, which he translated to mean “fishing place” (Bruchac, *Names* 2006). The Abenaki knew the area as *Salatogi*, where they came to drink *nebizonbik*, “the medicine waters” at High Rock Spring (Bruchac, *Mineral Springs* 2007).



**Figure 2:** A diagram showing many of the various spellings and possible origins of the name “Saratoga.”



## **Food Resources**

First and foremost, water was crucial to the survival of the First People as it provided them with a bountiful supply of food resources. The water bodies here not only supplied fish and mollusks, but they also made it possible for large amounts of game to inhabit the area. The tools and practices the First People used to hunt and gather these food resources teach us about their culture and provide us with archaeological information about village locations and which tribes lived in a given area at a given time. Finally, the practices the First People used influenced their customs spiritually, politically, and socially. So, we can see that water played an important role in providing subsistence and was so important that it impacted the First People's culture.

### *Resources*

The Saratoga area offered a plethora of animals, both in their numbers and in species diversity. The First People who occupied or visited this area were met with a seemingly endless supply of fish, birds, and mammals. The Hudson River was an important and reliable resource for fish before it was dammed, over-fished, and polluted as it is today. Schools of fish came in numbers that would now be considered unfathomable. Herring ran up the west side of the Hudson, through Fish Creek, and into Saratoga Lake. This fish resource was exploited up until 1760, when the construction of milldams on the lower creek disrupted their migrations (DeMicco). Shad, a favored delicacy, ran down the east side of the river and rested in vast schools in the falls and rapids above and below Fort Edward. Sturgeon frequented the nearby Mohawk River and sunned themselves in the basin below Cohoes Falls. Striped bass and perch were

also common in the lakes and rivers. Even whales occasionally traveled the Hudson and made their way as far north as this hunting ground, though the most recent recording of a

Geese, mallards, canvasbacks, teal, and the now extinct heath hen stopped by the lakes and rivers during their migrations. They were bountiful and easy to catch. Beavers were also present in these water bodies and were vital clothing resources for the native people. After the European colonization, the trade of beaver pelts between Mohawks and white settlers became crucial to the survival of the Mohawk. However, the Saratoga area was a famous hunting ground not just for beavers, but for all native fauna. The saline properties of the mineral springs in this area attracted animals and provided the people with great hunting resources such as rabbits, squirrels, turkey, deer, moose, bears, and the now extinct passenger pigeon (Keller 1976).

### *Tools and Practices*

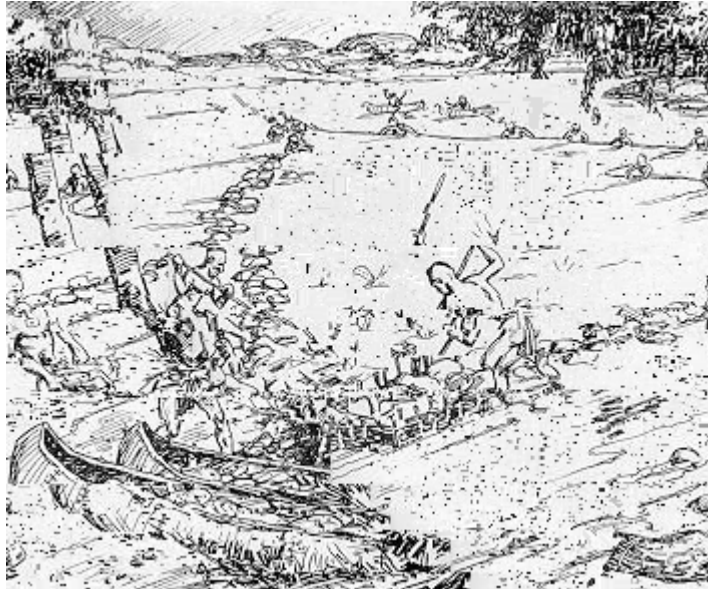


whole. However, because Native Americans of this area *recurrently* occupied camps at prime fishing localities, there is other evidence to note (Engelbrecht 2003). From 1964 to 1967, excavations were performed on Winney Island, which is located on the Fish Kill stream, which drains into the Hudson, just west of Grangerville. Projectiles, such as arrowheads and harpoons, were found here that dated around 7,000 to 10,000 years ago, suggesting that this had been an important fishing locale for thousands of years. Based on the huge caches of bi-notched fishing sinkers found, archaeologists have determined that “a sizeable fishing industry existed here” (Davis). An absence of hooks or harpoons suggests that the people working here mainly relied on nets. Nets were made of hemp and their floats of wood or pinecones, all of which would have decomposed a long time ago; however, the presence of stone sinkers confirms this hypothesis. Archaeologists could tell from the food refuse they encountered at Winney Island that fish were caught here and probably cleaned, cured, and stored, but not eaten here. Rather, they believe

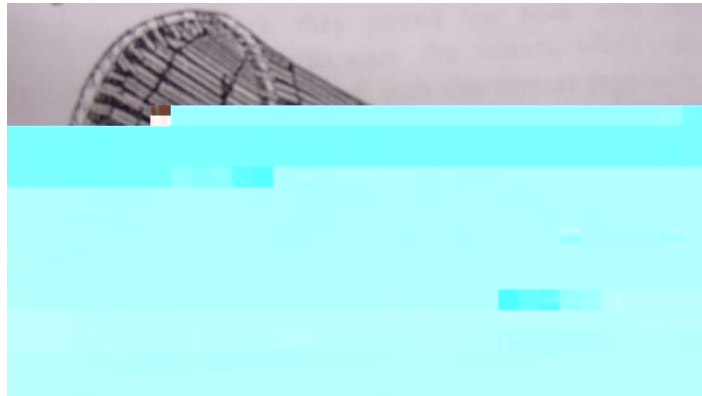
that Huron netted fish in the winter by passing nets under the ice using poles, and it is speculated that Mohawks used this same practice on Saratoga Lake. Gill nets were also used, but probably not until the Late Woodland period (1000 BCE-1000 CE). Unlike seines, gill nets were used in deep water and required the use of canoes. These were usually set at a depth of about 30 fathoms (one fathom is equal to about six feet). In 1687 at Mackinac, Henri Joutel observed gill nets 200 fathoms long and two feet deep with cedar wood floats (Engelbrecht 2003).

Another common practice was the building of V-shaped stone weirs in rivers, which have been found all over New York State. Stone weirs are difficult to date, but a wooden weir was found along the Atlantic coast that dated back to 2500 BC (Engelbrecht 2003). These structures were used to channel fish into a catching area where they could be speared or scooped up with baskets (Dunn 2000) (See Figure 3). The Mohawk would fish for herring in the *Caniaderiossera*, or Saratoga Lake, using wicker baskets anchored at the openings of these weirs. These wicker baskets, called *yont-ka-do-qua*, were built from black-ash splint into a conical form about three feet in length, fifteen inches in diameter at the mouth, and six inches at the smaller end (See Figure 4). Fishermen would use weirs or sticks to direct the fish into the partly submerged baskets (Morgan 1901).

Other less common forms of fishing included spearing and hooking. Fish, like sturgeon, were speared at night from canoes by the light of burning pine knots (Dunn 2000). Spears were made of barbed bone points affixed to a shaft. Spears were eventually replaced by the Middle Woodland period (about 2,000 years ago) by harpoons with detachable heads (Engelbrecht 2003). Spearing was not the most successful form of



**Figure 3:** *First People Harpooning Fish in a Stone Weir (Images)*



**Figure 4:** *A Wicker Basket Used to Scoop Fish (Engelbrecht 2003)*

fishing; however, sometimes fish were so plentiful, especially during spawning seasons, that they were easily speared or could literally be scooped up in baskets. Bone and copper fishhooks have been recovered from archaic sites in the Great Lakes area, although they are less common tools for fishing (Engelbrecht 2003). Trotlines, which use hooks, have also been seen occasionally. These were made of hemp and strung across lakes or rivers. At the Owasco Castle Creek site, a trotline was recovered that had









### **Trade, Travel, and Warfare**

The Saratoga region is one of the most water-rich areas of this country. It is the meeting place of the “headwaters of all the great waters,” including the Mohawk, Hudson, and St. Lawrence Rivers (pers. comm. M. Tarbell). These waterways allowed the people of this area to travel great distances to favored hunting grounds and fishing areas and then to other villages to trade their catches. It is mainly because of this system of resource collection and trade that the Iroquois Five Nations were able to develop as powerfully as they did. Control of the rivers meant control of the land as well. Of course, with this power came the inevitable struggle to maintain it and, thus, these waterways also acted as important routes while waging war.

The early history of the Iroquois was mainly spent migrating in the search for hunting and camping grounds. This search was often met with conflict between other tribes. However, when conditions were favorable, the Iroquois set up permanent communities. Once the Iroquois grew powerful enough, they could defend their( )-10(c)4(oul)-2ch(e)4(a)4(r

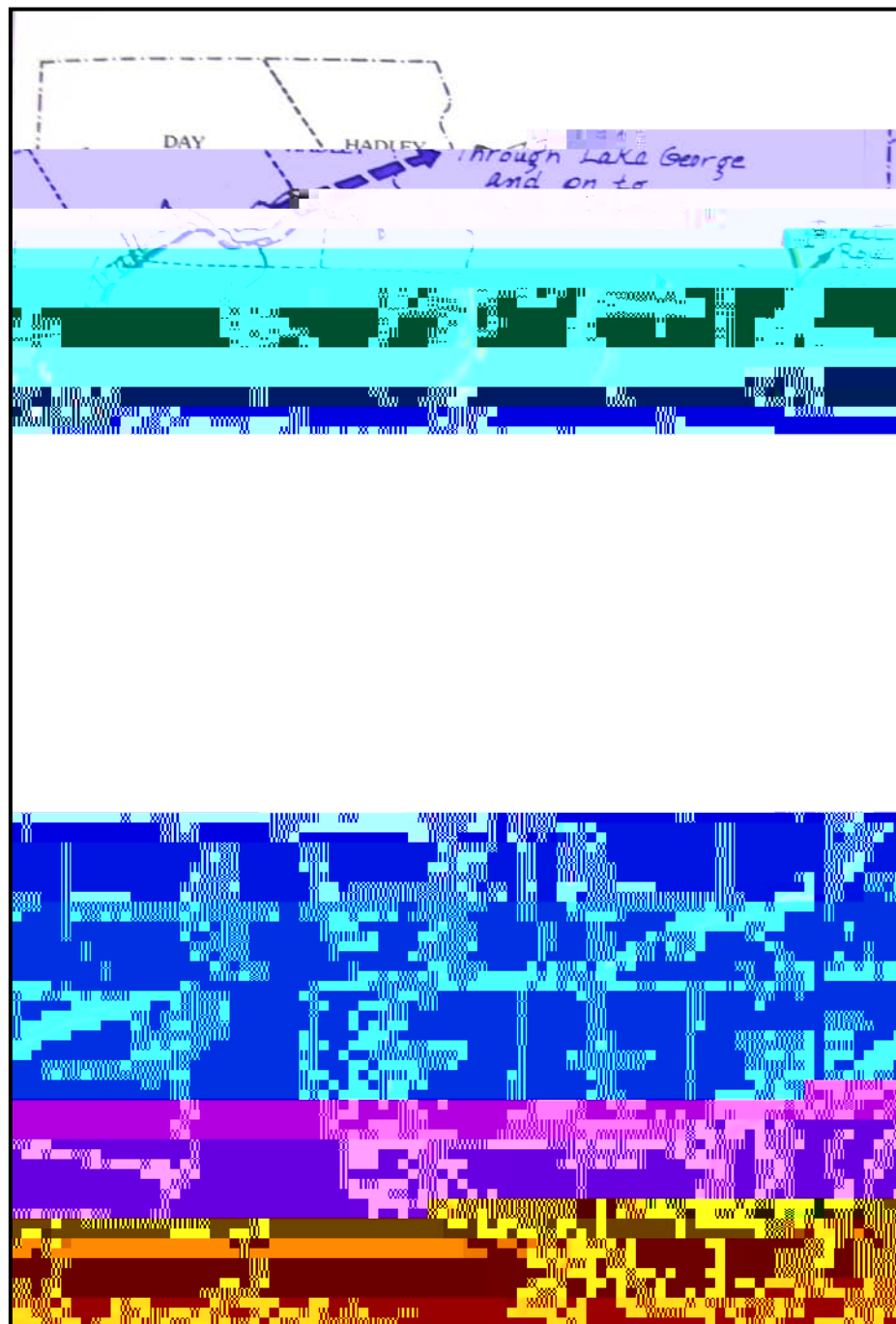




popular form of travel and, as such, many of these trails relied on water routes or were used to get to and from other water bodies.

The oldest known path in the county is the Aalpaats Trail, which runs northeast to southwest. This trail passes through Saratoga, Saratoga Springs, Malta, Ballston, and Clifton Park. The trail was predominantly used as a warpath and dates back to Algonquian occupation of the area (Snell 1980). The Sacandaga Trail originated at Lake George and ran north to south through Corinth, Greenfield, and Milton to the Schenectady area where it branched off at the Sacandaga River along Daly Creek and headed to Ballston. This path was important as it connected the Mohawk and St. Lawrence Rivers (Snell 1980). The Kayaderosseras Trail began at the southern end of Lake George and traveled to a bend in the Hudson River about ten miles west of Glens Falls. From there, it moved south through the towns of Wilton, Greenfield, and Galway to the Mohawk River (Snell 1980). The great East-West Trail, or Hoosic War Trail, began on the Atlantic coast and made its way to interior of New York. Along the way it passed through Halfmoon, Stillwater, and Clifton Park. In peaceful times Algonquian tribes used it to get to the rich hunting grounds. During war, it was used as a path between Mohawk and Algonquin. European settlers continued to use this path and it has since influenced the location of modern cities (Snell 1980). Finally, the Saratoga Water Trail is significant for a couple of reasons. This trail is unique in that it links the St. Lawrence and Mohawk Valleys almost strictly via water. It is also unusual in that it is fairly well documented and still completely intact. The trail starts at the Mohawk River and follows Aalpaats Creek to its northernmost point. Here, it crosses overland for a short distance along the outlet to Ballston Lake. It then follows the Mourning Kill, down

the Kayaderosseras Creek, and into Saratoga Lake. From here, the trail takes Fish Creek to the Hudson River, which can be taken north up to Lake Champlain (Snell 1980) (See Figure 5).



*Figure 5: Map of Trade Routes in Saratoga County*

*Beaver Wars*

When European traders first came to the Americas, they were seen as intrusive. Forest diplomacy in Iroquois tradition dictates that in order for a visitor to enter a village, he must wait outside the front door to be invited in. The Mohawk were known as the “Keepers of the Eastern Door” because this is the direction from which visitors were expected to enter. When the Europeans arrived, unaware of this, they greatly agitated the Mohawk (pers. comm. M. Tarbell). Furthermore, some of the Europeans were forcefully encroaching on Mohawk territory. It is for this reason that Mohawk were friendlier to the Dutch than the English and other invaders, because the Dutch acted merely as business partners in trade, as opposed to the English, who were there to colonize.

Life in Saratoga was in a state of transition during European colonization. It was “a terrible world at that moment”; due to disease, the Mohawk were experiencing a loss of life that they had never seen before and could not understand (pers. comm. M. Tarbell). Many were losing faith in the Great Law and feared not only for their lives but also for the survival of their nation. Generally, the Mohawk were a peaceful people, but this unfathomable set of circumstances drove them to take arms. And because this aggression lasted for so long, Mohawks are widely remembered today as being an incredibly violent group of people. In 1650, Father Ragneau wrote, “my pen has no ink black enough to describe the fury of the Iroquois” (Sylvester 1979).

At the time of the arrival of the Europeans, the Saratoga area was Mohawk and Mahican territory. In 1624-1628, the area became solely Mohawk territory as they pushed

struggled to gain access to more hunting areas to acquire beaver, deer, and other furs and skins for trade with the English and Dutch. At the time of the arrival of the Europeans, Europe was going through a “Little Ice Age” and as such, furs had become a lucrative commodity for coats and felt hats (Johansen and Pritzker 2008).

Like most wars, the “Beaver Wars” had many provocations, the most prominent of which was the competition over diminishing stocks of fur-bearing animals, particularly beavers. The Mohawk were situated between two major trading posts, Albany and Montreal, and as a result had developed a dependency on the fur trade to support their livelihood, as traditional subsistence methods were no longer adequate in the colonial world (Johansen and Pritzker 2008).

The Wyandots, a Huron tribe near Lake Huron who had also become dependent on the fur trade, found themselves facing constant raids by the Iroquois, namely Mohawk and Seneca groups. These harassments continued for nearly a decade. Finally, between 1647 and 1650, the Wyandots, after being weakened by disease, were pushed out in one final sweep by the Iroquois. Their confederacy dissolved and the Mohawks and Senecas usurped their share of the fur trade (Johansen and Pritzker 2008).

By 1700, the Beaver Wars had diminished significantly. The Iroquois were nearing exhaustion from the continual warfare. Their attention was distracted when they realized that the English were starting to occupy the Mohawk Valley in upstate New York. They consequently moved to establish a diplomatic policy of balancing relations between the French in New France and the British colony of New York. The Iroquois also tried to create diplomatic alliances and commercial agreements with other First Nations to the west by promising access to trade at Albany in return for access to hunting

and trapping grounds in the Great Lakes region (Johansen and Pritzker 2008). The Mohawk were progressive people and were willing to make adjustments and adapt to the modern world (pers. comm. M. Tarbell).

The first beaver pelt hat-making factory was built in Danbury, Connecticut roughly 400 years ago, though others existed in New York and Albany. The process of hat-making leached mercury into the waters and soil. The effects of this pollution are still being felt today (pers. comm. M. Tarbell).

The Beaver Wars are one example of how water played a part in Mohawk warfare. Of course, there were many battles conducted by this First Nation, theesn-004 5 0 2(hi).c5-2(r)J

## **The Springs**

Earth movements caused by ancient volcanoes shifted the layers of limestone, metamorphic crystalline rock, shale, sandstone, and dolomite that existed in the Saratoga area, causing faults and fissures to form in the limestone layers. The waters of the springs come from underground streams formed during the prehistoric glacial era. The subter

word that the Abenaki used to refer to the “medicine waters” (Bruchac, *Names* 2006). The variety of the names given to the springs and the surrounding area indicate that the area was used widely by both Iroquoian and Algonquian speaking tribes. The Mohawks and Mahicans both used the area for the restorative power of the mineral springs, where the waters could be used internally or externally to solve skin problems, digestive problems, and other ailments. After the Mohawks subdued the Mahicans in 1628, they generally claimed the springs and surrounding hunting grounds as their own domain (Dorrrough 2006).

The Mohawks believed that the Medicine Springs, later known as High Rock Springs, had been created by the Great Spirit when an epidemic threatened to destroy the tribe. The Mohawk chief, whose loved one lay dying from the disease, prayed to the Great Spirit, who then created the springs and gave them powerful medicinal qualities (Waller 1966). Another legend says that the Great Spirit caused the medicine springs to flow to heal the forest children within the depths of the old hunting ground (Sylvester 1884). One more oral legend describes the limestone rocks from which some of the waters rise. The rocks are outcroppings of limestone reefs containing fossilized stromatolites, or lime-secreting algae, which tradition says are the remains of a vibrant garden planted by ancient ancestors. After the owners of the garden fought with their neighbors, the sky spirits devastated the village and turned the garden to stone (Bruchac, *Mineral Springs* 2007).

The Mohawks were attracted to the springs for both their healing powers and the beautiful landscape surrounding the springs. In 1853, the New York Herald described the area: “A descent down the steep hillside seems to tell us that the locality was once



somewhat romantic as well as quite beautiful. To this lovely spot the Indian resorted for relief, and partook with his own hand of the healing waters as they spread over the top

springs (Waller 1966). One of the early spellings and meanings of Saratoga was *Sarghtaga*, or “place of the salt springs,” and the Mohawks referred to their hunting grounds by this name (Moran 1976). The hunting grounds, set in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains and the nutrient rich river valley of the Hudson River, reach over 40 miles north to south and 30 miles east to west. This large area, covered with thick forests and plenty of water resources, provided adequate habitat for the many animal species the Mohawks hunted during the summer months (Holmes and Stonequist 2000). Because of the excellent water resources, hunting opportunities, and healing powers that the medicinal springs provided, the Mohawks kept the springs hidden from European settlers for many years.



*Figure 7: Sir William Johnson (Waller 1966).*

However, the magical waters would not remain a secret from European colonists forever. Sir William Johnson, Superintendent of Indian Affairs in northern America for the British Crown, first arrived in the Mohawk Valley in 1738 (See Figure 7). After trading fairly with the Mohawks, protecting them from dishonorable colonists, and learning to speak the Mohawk language, Johnson won the respect of the tribe. He was

made a chief of the Mohawks and given the name *Warraghiyagey*, or “He Who Does

establishing a village known as Saratoga within a 4,000 acre tract of land. By 1783,

hiking guides, the appeal of the mineral springs as a tourist attraction allowed the Mohawks to share their culture with European settlers and visitors as well as to receive an economic benefit from sharing their skills and traditions.

Despite such sharing of culture and crafts, however, the presence of First People in Saratoga Springs and near the medicinal springs themselves led to some conflicts with European settlers. Regardless of the success of the encampments, white racist views of the time period kept the First People separate from white society. In addition to such racism, the Mohawks were being pushed from the land they had inhabited each summer as the area became more settled and developed. While the city still encouraged the Mohawks to return for the summer encampments, they were less welcome and less able to use the hunting grounds, lakes and streams, and mineral springs as they had in the past. Such racist views can be seen in William Strickland's description of the springs in 1794. Strickland writes of the springs, "They are resorted to by people chiefly of the lower order, afflicted with sores and humours in the blood, but no tolerable accommodations are yet to be met with at the place, and there is nothing about it to tempt the visits of any one, being situated in a steril country, surrounded by pine barrens" (Horne 2004). The sacred springs, which the Mohawks had depended on for centuries, had become an attraction for "people...of the lower order," and the site has "no tolerable accommodations" for visitors. Strickland's perception of the springs is of

The discovery of the Medicine Springs of the Great Spirit led to the development of the Saratoga area as English, Dutch, and French settlers arrived. Such settlement led to the migration of the Mohawks out of the Saratoga Springs area as well as new social dynamics and an end to the traditional hunting, fishing, and healing grounds of the Mohawks. However, the legacy of the magical healing waters still stands. To confirm the traditional ownership of the springs by the First People, an excavation and re-tubing of the High Rocks Spring in 1866 revealed that the remains of platforms and tubing apparatuses belonged to the ancient people that first inhabited the region. This simple fact serves to remind present visitors to the springs that the First People were the earliest to use and value the medicinal powers of the springs.

## Spirituality and Culture

The Mohawk are very spiritual people. They believe in a great interconnectedness between nature, humans, and the spirits. The Great Spirit who rules over everything is called *He-wen-ne-ya*, while *Orenda* is the life force that flows through all of creation. The Mohawk see everything in nature as essentially spiritual and, as a result, feel that everything in creation should be honored with a song, a dance, and a story. Thanksgiving is a part of the Great Law of Peace. Songs of Thanksgiving are performed throughout the day when an individual feels blessed. The Mohawk are humbled in front of nature because they realize that the earth can survive without them, but humans cannot survive without nature (pers. comm. M. Tarbell).

The oral tradition is part of an everyday spiritual existence and is ordained in the Great Law. Mohawk chiefs were leaders as well as spiritual guides and were responsible for maintaining such oral traditions. They believe that stories provide many different ways of looking at something and can give people a more complete understanding of an issue (pers. comm. M. Tarbell). As such, we have collected five tales, mostly of Mohawk descent, that relay an understanding of spirituality in this region, particularly in relation to water.

*“The Great Law of Peace”*

The Great Law of Peace was proposed by the Peacemaker. For many years, he and Aionhwatha, an orator, traveled together in hopes of convincing the people to follow this Law. When all of the five Iroquois nations finally decided to join together, the Peacemaker pulled up a white pine tree by its roots and asked the people to throw their weapons of war into the pit that had been created. An underground stream washed the weapons away so that future generations would never see them again. It is said that this is where the term “bury the hatchet” comes from. The tree was put back into the ground and is referred to as the Great Tree of Peace (Olan, *Haudenosaunne* 2007).

*“The Healing Waters”*

Nekumonta is remembered as one of the strongest and bravest chiefs of the Mohawk and is famed for discovering the mineral springs. As legend goes, his tribe had caught a plague and was suffering terribly. When his wife, Shanewis, fell ill, Nekumonta knew he had to do something. In desperation, he fled to the woods in search of medicinal



herbs. He spent several days in the forest, but was unable to find anything that could help. Finally, one night while he was dreaming, he was told, “Strong and brave chief of the Mohawks, here are the healing waters of the Great Spirit. Take us from our prison and thy loved Shanewis shall live.” Nekumonta woke up and dug frantically on the very spot he was sleeping to discover a mineral spring. He fashioned a clay jar, stored the





way through she began to feel weak and feared she would not make it. As she was chanting her death-song, a monstrous bird of prey sighted her and swooped down to catch her. The young girl was too heavy and he dropped her. When the bird tried again, the girl clung to him for dear life and the two plunged into the lake. The tribe watched from the shore as they disappeared beneath the surface. Moments later, the girl emerged at the shore. Sitting upon her head was the white dove of the *Kay-ad-ros-se-ra* (See Figure 10). The girl's father, believing her to be dead, had died of heartache as soon as he saw her go

canoe. As one legend goes, Gluskabe created his body out of clay. He first scooped up a pile of clay and sculpted his arms, then his torso, and his head; but he had forgotten to shape legs. So, when Gluskabe tried to stand, he struggled. He reached to one side and tried to push himself up and instead pushed up mountains. He reached to the other side, pushing up mountains. These mountains are known today as the Green Mountains and Adirondack Mountains. When he re

## **Conclusion**

Through historical accounts and archaeological evidence, it is clear that water was an extremely important resource in the lives of the First People of the Saratoga Lake Watershed. Not only did these people depend on water for the ability to travel and for numerous food resources, but they also depended on water as a symbol of their spiritual connections to nature and as a tool by which to heal those suffering of various ailments. Their connections to water are clear through legends, myths, creation stories, artifacts, site remains, tradition, and accounts by European settlers and descendants of the First People.

In our conversation with Mike Tarbell, he told us a story about fishing and swimming in a river as a child. “That river was our life,” he told us. However, Mike can no longer swim in the river because of pollution and cannot eat its fish because of the

resources for our offspring and generations to come. Furthermore, these water bodies need to be protected because of their intrinsic value to the region's history and culture.

### **Afterword**

The connections that the First People held with water have not dissipated even as settlement and development of North America have dispersed them away from their traditional lands. Today, First People all over the country continue to value water for its physical and spiritual necessity. Though several First People remain in the Saratoga region, most of the Mohawk and Mahican people that used to live in this area in the past have fled to reservations across the northeast. Through current political and



power to modify these rights. Under tribal regulations, state governments cannot prohibit the possession or sale of fish and game taken from non-reservations. However, the rights of First Nations to hunt and fish on their ancestral lands are subject to some limitations, and they have had to continually protest to maintain their rights to use the waterways that once belonged to them (Thompson 2005).

Many environmental injustices that the First Nations face are water-related. In 1965, a portion of the Kahnawake Reservation was destroyed by the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway, and one third of the Allegany Reservation was flooded by the Kinzua Dam, despite the feasibility of less detrimental alternatives. The results were devastating. The construction of these projects led to entire communities and rich farmland being drowned by the waters, as well as burial grounds and other significant spiritual sites. In addition, the New York State Power Authority claimed a portion of the Tuscarora Reservation near Lewiston for a major hydroelectric project. The First People have watched the trout in Lakes Erie and Ontario face risk of endangerment and extinction as introduced species have invaded the waterways, and Mohawk women at Akwesasne have been warned to stop eating fish from Lake Ontario because of the risk of passing PCBs to their children through their wombs or breast milk. Toxic waste at the Akwesasne Reservation, revealed by recent drilling, has contaminated the well water for many families living there (Engelbrecht 2003).

Such environmental problems have meant great changes in the traditions and lives of First People. However, not all stories of such environmental injustices have negative

Boston water treatment project. Additionally, in 1994, the Stockbridge-Munsee tribe joined with the Menominee, Forest County Potawatomi, and Mole Lake Chippewa as Nii Win, or “The Four,” to oppose a copper mine that Exxon planned at the headwaters of Wisconsin’s Wolf River (Malinowski and Sheets 1998). The successes that such people had in protecting their water resources are testament to the significance of water and the efforts people will make to protect it. Such efforts should be taken as an example by all; together, despite our ancestry, history, spirituality, or politics, we can protect the rich water resources that allow our communities to thrive.

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