

Gillian McBride  
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Polishing the Chain of Friendship:  
Intercultural Healing Through the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation Historical Markers Project

## INTRODUCTION

“What does justice require?” asked Philip Harnden, historian of the American Friends Service Committee, writing from rural New York State at the turn of the century, where the Iroquois people, who call themselves the Haudenosaunee, were asserting their claim to 350,000 acres which New York State denied to them in the interest of the settlement of European immigrants (“Whose Land?”). To the non-Haudenosaunee people who lived in those areas, the assertion of these claims appeared far-fetched, inappropriate, and frightening enough to generate widespread hostility and opposition far beyond the courtrooms, according to Harden. “We know the Iroquois people have waited for generations to have a fair hearing and a just resolution of their land claims. But we also know that non-Indians in the claim areas have important concerns that must be addressed,” continued Harnden.

In the case of land stolen several centuries ago by one nation, the early United States of America, from another, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy - known as the Iroquois to French and Dutch fur traders - what does justice require? It was not until March 10, 2005 that the Onondaga Nation, one of the five member nations of the Confederacy, offered up their own idea of what justice would look like, in their formal complaint and call for legal action in the U.S. federal courts against New York State; in its opening words, “a healing between themselves and all others who live in this region that has been the homeland of the Onondaga Nation since the dawn of time” (“Welcome to the Historic Markers Project”). The Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, a

partner organization of non-Indian residents of the area, came together to support this call and initiate several collaborative projects, one of which is the Historical Markers Project. The Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation Historical Markers Project speaks to the importance of updating the language of historical and park site signage in the interest of accuracy and intercultural reconciliation, and employing an effective community outreach strategy which includes an extensive catalogue of publicly-accessible information about the project as well as active and long-term alliance through partnership between the Onondaga Nation and non-Haudenosaunee partner organizations and governments.

### BACKGROUND OF THE ONONDAGA NATION

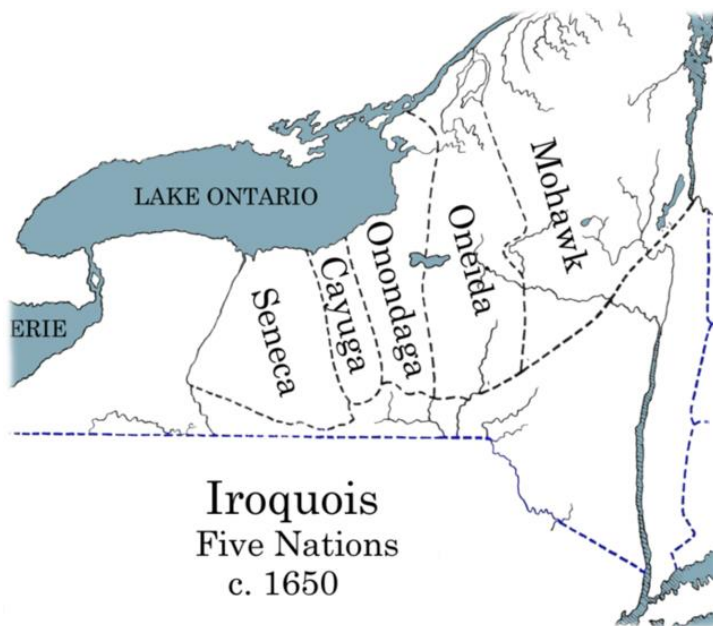


Figure 1: Map of the respective land rights of the member nations of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy based on inter-tribal and U.S. treaty agreements, ca. 1650 (Source: Native American Netroots).

When the first Europeans arrived on the shores of present-day North America, a nearby confederacy of five nations had already established itself for several centuries as the greatest

power on the continent. This confederacy would come to be called the Iroquois by the French traders who began to make land and fur trade deals with its leaders, but the name they called their own alliance was Haudenosaunee. The formation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy over a thousand years ago was when “democracy was born,” according to the Onondaga Nation, and was earned only after centuries of violent conflict among several area Nations (“Birth of a Nation”). The history of the Onondaga Nation explains that the Creator sent a messenger, known as the Peacemaker, in a stone canoe to seek the warring leaders of five area nations to let them know their actions were saddening the Creator. Following that visit, fifty leaders from across the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk Nations came together to uproot a great white pine tree, throw their weapons into the hole it made, and watched as a stream washed away the weapons. They replanted the tree and the Peacemaker placed an eagle on top to warn all of the nations at once of any dangers to the peace. The Hiawatha wampum belt - to memorialize *Haionwhatha*, or Hiawatha, one of the first leaders to advocate for peace among the nations - was created to record the event and ensure the representation of all five nations in the history and symbolism of the new Haudenosaunee Confederacy, with the Onondaga Nation represented by the great White Tree of Peace itself (“Birth of a Nation”).

From that point forward, the Confederacy became an extended network of kinship groups known as clans, who each saw themselves as living together in one extended lodge, similar to the smaller family lodges in their own villages, with the rest of the Haudenosaunee people. The name Haudenosaunee itself means “People Building a Long House” (Harnden 2000). The clans cross national lines and send forth representatives from each nation to a Grand Council of Chiefs. Originating in the Great Law of Peace which brought together the five nations, the

Haudenosaunee Confederacy governs itself by a concept of justice which seeks, “beyond simple right and wrong to search for balance and harmony with all creation” (Harnden 2000).

Several centuries later, when the original expansive territories of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy had long been overtaken by non-Native American landholders, the member nations worked from this original concept of justice and good government to lay claim to their lands and call for a widespread intercultural healing in their homeland. The Onondaga Nation refers specifically to the original agreement which brought about the Confederacy in the aforementioned call for legal action in 2005, explaining:

The Nation and its people have a unique spiritual, cultural, and historic relationship with the land, which is embodied in *Gayanashagowa*, the Great Law of Peace. 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 this land, to protect it, and to pass it on to future generations. The Onondaga Nation brings this action on behalf of its people in the hope that it may hasten the process of reconciliation and bring lasting justice, peace, and respect among all who inhabit the area (“The Complaint”).

In response to the suit against the State of New York, City of Syracuse, Onondaga County, and several local corporations, several grassroots organizations heeded the call for reconciliation and sought non-Haudenosaunee residents, academic experts, and community leaders who were sympathetic to the cause. The most predominant of these are the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign and the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation. The Campaign commemorates a treaty, part of Haudenosaunee tradition but unconfirmed by any written sources, established in 1613 between Dutch explorers and Mohawk Nation representatives, to co-inhabit the land peacefully and to “polish the chain of friendship” from that point forward between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and European nations (“About,” Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign). The agreement is recorded on a wampum belt produced afterwards which features two parallel purple stripes to represent the two nations coming to agreement, and a background of white beads to

symbolize peace (Spula). The Campaign also acts as a mediating partner between the Onondaga Nation and the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, the latter of whom represents the people with whom the original treaty was forged. The Neighbors form a grassroots organization of local non-Haudenosaunee civilians to serve as an ally in several capacities to the Onondaga Nation, joining in its call for reconciliation and justice.

The Historical Markers Project is thereby an ongoing collaborative effort between the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation and the Onondaga Nation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, facilitated by the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign and advised by several other local experts and organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee. In acknowledgement of how “misleading historical information on [Onondaga] culture make reconciliation and justice difficult,” the project identifies and analyzes historical markers in the region which provide inaccurate or incomplete information related to the history of the Onondaga Nation and Haudenosaunee Confederacy (“Welcome to the Historic Markers Project”).

The leaders of the project have identified over thirty historical markers in the region of the Onondaga Nation which are catalogued online with their geographic coordinates, pictures, dates of placement, and a variety of information for each site under several categories, including “Problematic Issues,” “Circumstances of Marker Placement,” and “Indigenous Place Names for Site” (“Marker List”). The website also lists “words to watch for” and important questions to ask when visiting a historical site or park and reading a sign, to understand how the information and impressions these historical markers leave are incomplete and problematic (“Reading Markers 101”).

One of the largest undertakings related to the Historical Markers Project is the replacement of a marker in Onondaga Lake Park about the Iroquois Confederacy which the Neighbors reported contain several misleading statements. They are currently pursuing the replacement of the sign in partnership with the Onondaga Parks Department and town historians (“Welcome to the Historical Marker Project”).

### **POLICIES AFFECTING THE PROJECT**

The predominant policy driving the Historical Markers Project is *Gayanashagowa*, the Great Law of Peace which brought together the member nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Without the Onondaga Nation’s call for legal action based on the tenets of this original agreement, the non-Native American residents of the area might not have unified to support the Tribal sovereignty and land rights of the Haudenosaunee people, nor pursued action in initiatives such as the Historical Markers Project, which seek in small but significant ways to update the language with which community members speak about the Onondaga Nation and their impressions of Onondaga history and culture.

The Great Law of Peace is one of three specific addresses which, in Haudenosaunee tradition, was given by the Creator to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy at critical moments in their history. The second is the Thanksgiving Address, which is recited before every important ceremonial gathering of the Haudenosaunee people to acknowledge the role of every being in creation in human decisions and unite the human community in work that promotes further creation. The third is the *Gaiwiyo*, also known as the Code of Handsome Lake, which warns of how “accepting certain things from European Americans would erode the Haudenosaunee

relationship with the Creator” (Taylor 747). Without the last address in particular, Haudenosaunee people feel their traditions would have been lost entirely.

The 1613 treaty established between Dutch explorers and the Mohawk Nation is also of critical importance to the Historical Markers Project, but is controversial for its lack of written evidence by the Europeans in the area at the time. However, several treaties of this nature were forged in present-day New England when the first European explorers and traders arrived, and as local columnist Jack Spula notes, “Haudenosaunee tradition is probably no less accurate, in the fullest sense, than the fragmentary and often contradictory European records of that era” (Spula).

A second treaty and wampum belt commissioned in 1794 for the Treaty of *Canandaigua* reinforced the agreement between the U.S. and the member nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to maintain the latter’s “free use and employment” of their landholdings (Spula). This wampum treaty belt re-entered local awareness when the Onondaga Nation appealed their case to the U.S. Supreme Court, with the understanding that legal victory was unlikely, but victory over public opinion was possible. After the Nation publicly announced their appeal and displayed the wampum treaty belt, Onondaga faith keeper Oren Lyons explained to a local newspaper that the publicity of the case was meant to raise a response from the American public and continue working towards the intercultural reconciliation called for in the lawsuit. “I think this country has to talk seriously about how to deal with this,” Lyons said. “What we need is some truth and healing here” (Coin, “Onondaga Nation seeks public’s support”).

In 2010, the lawsuit of New York State by the Onondaga Nation was rejected by the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. The Nation appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, who in 2013 rejected their petition to review the dismissal of the case, claiming the Nation “waited too long” to file the suit and their land claims - though within the bounds of their alleged treaty rights -

were inappropriate at the time of filing. The Nation claims it will continue to pursue its case at the international level with groups such as the United Nations or the Organization of American States Commission on Human Rights. As Tadodaho Sidney Hill, a member of the Onondaga Nation, shared with a Syracuse newspaper following the 2013 decision, “our people have always talked about and worked for a return of our stolen lands. We will continue to do so for the sake of future generations to come” (Coin, “U.S. Supreme Court Rejects Appeal”). However, the 2013 decision does not bode well for the legal land claims of the Onondaga Nation.

The remaining U.S., New York State, and local policies affecting the Historical Markers Project are too many in number to list and describe properly for their effect on the circumstances of the placement of each historical marker, their potential removal or replacement, and how each interacted with the legal traditions and political systems in place at the time. Their collective impact is much more evident in the potential social implications of the successes of the Historical Markers Project, which - though no comparison to the successful granting of a land claim - may serve as a meaningful step forward and meeting place between outright expropriation of landholdings and redistribution to the Onondaga Nation, and no course of action at all.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

In modifying or replacing historical markers which do not grant central New York State community members or visitors a complete and accurate understanding of local history which includes the Onondaga Nation, the organizations involved have several goals in mind. Beyond responding to the Onondaga Nation’s call for intercultural healing and reconciliation, and even beyond recognizing the land rights of the Haudenosaunee people in the area, the leaders of the



Historical Markers Project are also seeking to counteract the “Doctrine of Discovery” with which European explorers first approached and understood the New World, according to historian Phillip P. Arnold in an essay for the newsletter of the Syracuse Peace Council, a local activist group (2005).

The concept of the Doctrine of Discovery originated from Papal Bulls - letters written by the Pope - in the 15th century, particularly the 1452 Law of Nations and the 1493 Inter Caetera Bull, which authorized the Kings of Portugal and Spain to travel to Africa and the New World to find and bring back resources and slaves to help the Catholic Church prosper (Arnold). The influence of the Catholic Church and Christian doctrines at the time were such that these concepts spread widely across the European continent, influencing not only the early Spanish and Portuguese explorers such as Christopher Columbus but also the Dutch, French, and British in the centuries to follow.

U.S. legal tradition, as an amalgamation of pieces of several of these legal traditions, thereby rests on several tenets of the Doctrine of Discovery, especially in the case of seizing land from Native Americans for European Americans. Arnold notes that, in Chief Justice John Marshall’s own words in 1823, writing the majority opinion in the U.S. Supreme Court case *Johnson v. McIntosh*, the doctrine meant “unoccupied lands” were defined as “lands occupied by Indians, but unoccupied by Christians” (Arnold). The Doctrine of Discovery is also cited frequently by legal scholars - at times called “Manifest Destiny” - and was cited in legal decisions as recent and significant as in the majority opinion of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, writing in 2005 to strike down the land claims of the Oneida Nation in *Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation* (Arnold).

The environmental implications of the Historical Markers Project are more evident in the general mission of the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign, and the legal grievance filed by the Onondaga Nation. The project is directly related to the land rights action which unites these entities and support the Nation in the stewardship of the culturally-significant natural resources in the areas of their land claims. Each enumerates the importance of correcting inaccurate or incomplete historical markers in achieving the “intercultural healing and reconciliation” which the Onondaga Nation called for as a part of the general movement to recognize the Tribal sovereignty and land rights of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy - if not by legal means, then by favorability in public opinion (“Welcome”).

In defining incorrect versus correct language and intention of area historical markers in regards to the Onondaga Nation, the leaders of the Historical Markers Project actively seek to counteract the Doctrine of Discovery and its influence upon the social mores of U.S. citizens, which clearly deprive the Onondaga Nation not only of legal support for their original treaty rights but also of popular support and the intercultural reconciliation they seek in their own legal traditions. In raising awareness of the full consequences of European “discovery” and “settlement” of the “empty lands” of the present-day New York State, the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation and the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign can work to erode the social foundation of the Doctrine of Discovery and allow for future possibilities of strengthening the Tribal sovereignty of the Onondaga Nation.

### **LESSONS LEARNED AND APPLICATIONS**

The Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation Historical Markers Project clearly shares its leadership among several organizations, only some of which are governmental. The drivers of

the progress of the project are predominantly local citizens and enrolled members of the Onondaga Nation with a particular passion for answering the Onondaga call for reconciliation in this way. Although the progress of the project is slow, it remains steady and continues in spite of U.S. legal traditions which continue to uphold the Doctrine of Discovery and little regard for centuries-old treaties with Native American Nations. The project provides a wide variety of easily-accessible information on their public website through the Syracuse Peace Council, which include an extensive catalogue, academic and news articles, videos, and maps of their work. The catalogue itself includes documentation, where possible, of Tribal place names, Tribal histories, and external resources to inform the future modification or replacement of the historical marker. The website also describes successful efforts at Washington Square Park in the City of Syracuse and an ongoing effort at Onondaga Lake which depicts the legal, political and social obstacles to these efforts as well as their specific partner organizations. The leaders of the project focus on building strong relationships with the managers of historic sites, town historians, park system administrators, and area Native American Studies scholars in order to build a base of historical and legal knowledge for the project, and build favorability in public opinion through alliances with local activist organizations, frequent public appearances and media contact, and their general communications strategy. The Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation distribute a monthly newsletter which includes occasional updates on the project, and appear to be the organization appointed to maintain the project website and publicly-accessible resources. The Onondaga Nation itself often delegates their general counsel, Joe Heath, to speak to press about their legal and political barriers to asserting their land claims (Coin).

The Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation Historical Markers Project provides an excellent model to emulate in Wisconsin communities, particularly in Woodland Park in the City of

Monona, which is primarily supported by individual local citizens and Tribal members of the Ho-Chunk Nation who are passionate about the initiative. The leaders of the project employ an effective public relations and communication strategy which reinforces the strength of their partnerships and helps garner the political will and public favorability necessarily to accomplish the goals of this project. In an uncertain political climate and with little guarantee of the future of Ho-Chunk land rights, much like the situation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Onondaga Nation specifically, the Historical Markers Project is a relatively comprehensive model of the partnerships needed to undertake a historical marker or park signage project and the extent of historical information which must be gathered to make an effective case.

## **CONCLUSION**

In order to continue answering the calls of Native American communities for greater intercultural understanding, reconciliation, and healing, a greater number of U.S. communities must be made aware of the importance of actions as small as modifying or replacing a historical marker with updated and culturally appropriate language to recognize the Tribal sovereignty of local Native American communities and to, in a gradual but relatively effective manner, help reclaim the land which was once seized from those communities for the sole benefit of European-American settlers - often at great cost to Native American communities, as well. The Historical Markers Project organized by the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, the Onondaga Nation and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign is an excellent model for how these efforts can and should be executed and is a tangible example of the intercultural healing, reconciliation and justice which these organizations have been able to achieve when the U.S. legal system was not necessarily on their side.

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