

# The Iroquois on the Web



*The Common-place Web Library reviews and lists online resources and Websites likely to be of interest to our viewers. Each quarterly issue will feature one or more brief site reviews. The library itself will be an ongoing enterprise with regular new additions and amendments. So we encourage you to check it frequently. At the moment, the library is small, but with your help we expect it to grow rapidly. If you have suggestions for the Web Library, or for site reviews, please forward them to the [Administrative Editor](#).*

For the past decade I have taught at a college in the Genesee Valley of New York built on and near a number of locations that have factored largely in the history of the Senecas, the westernmost of the famed Six Nations of the Iroquois. The "Chenussio" or Geneseo Senecas figure prominently in the historical records documenting the history of French and English colonialism in New York, and French forces marched through what is now Rochester and its suburbs in 1687 in an effort to eradicate interference in France's fur trade (see the Website [Ganondagan](#)). The Sullivan-Clinton campaign of 1779 marched nearby through the Genesee Valley in an effort to destroy the offensive capacity of the British-allied Iroquois and force them to become a drain on the British treasury, and numerous marked historic sites stand near the college. Legend has it that two of Sullivan's scouts, Boyd and Parker, were tortured while bound to a tree that grows not far from the campus (fig. 1). At the "Ambuscade," a site a few miles from the campus in the town of Groveland, Sullivan's men engaged a Seneca and Loyalist force intent on slowing the advance of the American Army. Nearly two decades after the Revolution, the Senecas sold all of their lands west of the Genesee (nearly the entire western third of New York State) to Robert Morris at the Big Tree Treaty of 1797. The treaty was negotiated at a site that is now a student parking lot on campus. And at both ends of Geneseo's historic Main Street, mansions bearing the Wadsworth family name stand. The Wadsworths were original investors in the Ogden Land Company, a syndicate of well-connected speculators determined to extinguish the Senecas' title to their remaining reserves in western New York.

Nearly all of my students are western New Yorkers, and most of them come from the counties immediately surrounding the college. Still, they arrive on campus knowing very little at all about the Iroquois. State social studies curricula make a passing nod towards educating elementary and secondary students about the Haudenosaunee (as the Iroquois, or People of the Longhouse, refer to themselves), but these efforts, generally, are limited to requiring fourth graders to build model Iroquois longhouses out of twigs, balsa wood, and Styrofoam and, in high school, to reciting the tired and discredited "Iroquois Influence Thesis," or the claim that the Founding Fathers modeled the United

States government in part after that of the Iroquois Confederacy. (A Google search of *model* and *longhouse* returns 55,900 hits, while a smaller but by no means insignificant number of Websites provide students with information on how the Iroquois League provided the foundation for American democratic principles and the United States Constitution). [The Six Nations: Oldest Living Democracy on Earth](#) contains links to many Websites related to the Iroquois influence thesis. Though few historians find the thesis persuasive and its promoters have had little success in publishing their arguments in the peer-reviewed literature, the influence thesis maintains a following on the margins of American Indian studies and still has a good number of adherents. The site, which describes the Six Nations as the “oldest living **participatory** democracy on earth” (the bold face type apparently suggests that there were older nonparticipatory democracies), includes links to Bruce Johansen’s book *Forgotten Founders* (1982) and the book he co-authored with Donald Grinde entitled *Exemplar of Liberty* (1991).

While sites like these may serve to obscure more than they enlighten, there are valuable Web resources providing more reliable information on Iroquois history and culture. Dedicated to preserving Haudenosaunee languages, song, and dance, the Website [Ohwejagehka](#) offers a wealth of information, including recordings of Iroquois songs in real audio format. [The Onondaga Nation of New York](#), who still live on what remains of their aboriginal territory south of the present-day city of Syracuse, has on its Website a useful collection of information on Onondaga culture and history, as well as a valuable assortment of materials relevant to the Nation’s land-rights action in the United States Federal Court. Anyone interested in understanding the legal and ethical arguments behind Iroquois land claims would benefit by visiting this site. Those Iroquois nations involved in trying to recover lands that were taken from them in violation of federal law or to exercise their sovereignty in other ways are opposed by the anti-sovereignty group [Upstate Citizens for Equality](#). Its cluttered Website, which includes mostly position statements, does include copies of the briefs filed by the defendant counties and by the State of New York in opposition to Iroquois land claims.

As for historical sources, some of the Six Nations’ early diplomatic agreements and treaties, taken from the *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (1855) and *Indian Treaties Printed by Benjamin Franklin, 1736-1762* (1938) are available online (see, for example, [Conference between Governor Burnet and the Indians](#) and [A Treaty Held at the Town of Lancaster](#) at [Early Recognized Treaties with American Indian Nations](#)). Important sources like the reprint edition of Peter Wraxall’s [An Abridgement of the Indian Affairs](#) (1915) are available at Google Books, and William Savery’s *Journal of the Life, Travels, and Religious Labors of William Savery* (1844) is available from the University of Michigan’s [Making of Americaseries](#). [The Papers of William Johnson](#), the Crown’s superintendent for Indian affairs in the Northern Department and a man whose ties to the Six Nations extended across four decades in the middle of the eighteenth century, have been scanned by the University of Toronto. And Creighton University has

digitized *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, the magisterial collection of French missionary reports and a vital source for understanding seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Iroquois history. The [online edition](#) has some errors and should be checked against the print version, but it is searchable and still a valuable resource. Alternative copies of specific volumes of the *Jesuit Relations*, as well as other texts from the early history of Canada that relate to Iroquois History, are housed at [Early Canadiana Online](#).

There are other online resources that could be discussed here, and undoubtedly many readers of *Common-place* have favorites of their own of which I am not yet aware. Certainly many of these are impressive and valuable Websites housing an extraordinary amount of information. In terms of my own teaching, however, I find myself going back frequently to an outstanding Web resource for educators on the Sullivan-Clinton campaign against the western Iroquois, a major military invasion of the Iroquois homeland conducted by the Continental Army during 1779: [Sullivan/Clinton Campaign, Then and Now](#).

Largely the work of Robert Spiegelman, who has done an enormous amount to bring public attention to the Sullivan campaign and its historical significance, the opening page of the site includes a montage of photographs demonstrating the site creator's familiarity with and affection for the region's history: the Boyd-Parker "torture tree" and the salt mine where Seneca remains were discovered in the 1990s and destroyed with the blessings of a vindictive state governor upset about Seneca land claims. Spiegelman and his colleagues point out in their mission statement that they hope to "feed and deepen" an "enduring hunger for history" by "exploring new ways to heighten awareness of the non-stop interplay of past and present as it shapes our everyday lives."



Fig. 1. Image from Sullivan/Clinton Campaign Website. Courtesy of Dr. Robert Spiegelman.

Fig. 1. Image from [Sullivan/Clinton Campaign](#) Website. Courtesy of Dr. Robert Spiegelman.

From the opening page, viewers can follow a large number of links: A who's who of the Sullivan-Clinton campaign, including brief capsule biographies of the notable figures; a brief glossary of places mentioned in the records; copies of Sullivan's marching orders from General Washington, dated May 31, 1770; and excerpts from other documents and brief quotes from a wide variety of individuals ranging from Cadwalladar Colden to the Onondaga Nation's present day counsel Joe Heath, to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Tacitus, and the producer of the recent HBO production of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*.

By clicking on "Texts," the viewer is led to a long list of quotes from historical figures giving reasons for learning about the past: Shakespeare, Faulkner, and Washington Irving. The site's creators range widely, perhaps needlessly so. Seneca women, for instance, pointedly told their audience that "you ought to hear and listen to what we women shall speak; for we are the

owners of this land, AND IT IS OURS!" Enough said, perhaps.

The section includes more brief excerpts from the documents relevant to a reconstruction of the Sullivan campaign. There are excerpts from the recollections of individual soldiers, Goose Van Schaick's sterile account of his brutal assault on the Onondagas in the spring of 1779, and [a link to the officer's journals](#). There are also essays by Spiegelman and others, reflecting on the meaning of the Sullivan-Clinton campaign.

The "Gallery" link leads the viewer to five galleries, each with a large number of high quality images. "Mother Earth" looks at environmental destruction in what was once Iroquoia. Some might find the content here polemical, but clearly the assault on Iroquois lands after the Sullivan campaign was fueled by the desire of wealthy speculators to transform what they considered a tractless wilderness into a bustling agricultural republic. If the text accompanying the images is, in places, needlessly pedantic, the images are sometimes jarring and can be used to great effect to provoke discussion of the environmental consequences of the "Invasion of America."

The "Americana" gallery serves a similar function. It includes imagery related to memory of the Sullivan-Clinton campaign—photos of historical reenactors, historical portraits of the principals, and photos of various historical markers that commemorate the expedition. Here again, the images can lead to a lively classroom discussion of how "we" remember historical events and decide what becomes part of the historical record. Another gallery features "Alternate Takes" on the region's history, including patriotic memorials from throughout the state and pictures of the angry signs posted by Upstate Citizens for Quality throughout the Cayuga land-claim area. Some, again, may object to the interpretive bias in the captions accompanying some of the photos, but the images are powerful and should generate a response from all but the most jaded students. The fourth gallery offers a fascinating look at "A Tale of Three Cities": the Onondaga capital south of Syracuse; Little Beard's Town, a settlement near Geneseo along the Genesee River; and the Cayuga capital, Goi-o-Guen, near present-day Aurora, New York. Students will learn much by observing how the rise of the Empire State relied upon Iroquois dispossession. Finally, a gallery entitled "Iroquoia!" provides students with a range of Haudenosaunee images, including paintings of important Seneca leaders like Cornplanter and Red Jacket, photographs of sites important to Iroquois history, artwork by present-day Haudenosaunee artists, and historic photographs of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Iroquois at gatherings in western New York. The images, once again, are impressive.

The centerpiece of the Sullivan-Clinton site, however, is the wonderful animated map showing the course of the Sullivan-Clinton campaign as it carried destruction into the heart of Iroquoia in 1779. I have used the map in my classrooms to good effect, and students have been impressed.

The Website is clearly a labor of love. Spiegelman is actively involved,

according to the biography that accompanies the site, in increasing public awareness of the Sullivan-Clinton campaign and the importance of the Iroquois in the history of New York and the young United States. He obviously wants the viewers of his site to think about the consequences of the nation's progress and how the birth of the United States was a disaster for the Six Nations.

This article originally appeared in issue 8.4 (July, 2008).

---

Michael Leroy Oberg is professor of history at the State University of New York, College at Geneseo. He is the author, most recently, of *The Head in Edward Nugent's Hand: Roanoke's Forgotten Indians* (2007).