



## ONONDAGA LAKE: SACRED SPACE, CONTESTED SPACE

Onondaga Lake in what is now upstate New York is back from the dead. Once declared the most polluted body of water in the United States where fish literally swam out of the lake from lack of oxygen, life is back. Waterfowl, aquatic mammals, fish, and eagles have all returned to the lakeshore. Onondaga Lake is a modest body of water compared to its Finger Lakes neighbors. Onondaga is less than five miles in length, compared to Seneca Lake’s seventy-five miles. It has a maximum depth of sixty-five feet whereas Seneca’s is 615 feet. Its modest appearance belies its historic and cultural significance. Onondaga Lake became the site for the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy under the Great Law of Peace, a form of representational democracy that preceded the creation of the United States’ republic by centuries.<sup>1</sup> At that moment, according to the Onondagas, “the lake became a sacred place, one that must be cared for and respected” (Onondaga Nation, 2023a). It was the place where the Haudenosaunee came to deliberate, negotiate, and create consensus on policies that would affect the internal stability of the Confederacy. It sat at the center of a metaphorical Longhouse that housed the Five Nations.

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1. The Haudenosaunee were commonly referred to as the Iroquois, which is a term of questionable origin used primarily by early European colonists. Haudenosaunee, or People of the Longhouse, is the name they use to refer to themselves. The Onondagas are members of the Haudenosaunee.

It was where the council fire continually burned, and it was watched over by an eagle who kept a wary eye for outside threats. That first threat came in the form of Jesuits bringing the ideas of a Christian God and hegemony, a combination that created the legal justification for Christian empires known as the Doctrine of Discovery, to the shores of Onondaga. It would be followed by the arrival of American troops sent at the order of George Washington during the American Revolution. Soon the Industrial Revolution would take its toll with the extraction of natural resources from the lake and the surrounding area replaced by industrial waste including mercury, arsenic, and benzene. The historical memory of the lake has focused on the Jesuits, and the Onondagas were actively erased from the history of the lake. Over time, however, the Onondagas maintained their own history. They maintained their dedication to the Great Law of Peace. Now, over 350 years after the beginning of that erasure process, the lake is making a comeback and the Onondagas have reestablished a physical presence on the lake. With this, the Great Law of Peace is revived as the Onondagas and their non-Native neighbors engage in a process of deliberation, negotiation, and consensus building about the future of the lake as it affects all, Haudenosaunee or not, who live within the territory of Longhouse, including the eagles who, for the first time in over a century, have returned to Onondaga territory and once again watch over the lake.

Centuries before the arrival of Europeans into what is now upstate New York, the Great Law of Peace was established on “the sacred shores of pristine Onondaga Lake” (Lyons 2021; Onondaga Nation, 2023b).<sup>2</sup> The story of the founding is told through Haudenosaunee oral tradition and recorded in what is known as the Hiawatha wampum belt. According to the oral

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2. There is much debate about the exact date of the establishment of the Great Law of Peace. The Onondaga Nation’s website states it was “over a thousand years ago,” placing the establishment earlier than a more exact date of 31 August 1142 offered by scholars Barabara Mann and Jerry Fields. The date of 1450 is also used as a date for the founding. While the dates vary widely, the Great Law as a form of representational democracy predates the US Constitution by centuries.

tradition, the Indigenous peoples of the area had been at continual war with one another through cycles of revenge killings. This violence moved the Creator to send his messenger, the Peacemaker, to bring peace to the region. The Peacemaker came from the Wendat (Huron Nation) on the northern shore of Lake Ontario and traveled in a canoe he carved from white stone, which would help convince the people of the Creator's message of peace. Starting with the easternmost end of Haudenosaunee territory, the Peacemaker first convinced a woman who had advocated the continuation of violence among the people to accept his message of peace. As the first person to do so, women were given a special position in the Five Nations. As Clan Mothers, women would have the responsibility to advocate for peace and to choose male leaders who had the wisdom and strength to maintain the Great Peace (Shenandoah 1992: 36–42).

With his first convert to what would become the Great Law of Peace, the Peacemaker sought out the most feared leaders to convert them to the Creator's message. He steadily convinced these leaders to give up their violent ways and join together as allies. He explained how a single arrow could be easily broken, but five arrows bundled together, representing the five nations of the Haudenosaunee, were exponentially stronger. Leaders from four of the nations adopted the Creator's Great Law of Peace, but the most fearsome leader of the Onondagas, Tadodaho, held out. Tadodaho was a man filled with such hate and evil that snakes grew from his head and his body was crooked with corruption. Tadodaho refused to hear any talk of peace, and when Hiawatha came to him to speak about peace, Tadodaho killed his family in response. Hiawatha, who would find solace from his pain in the white and purple clam shells that would become wampum beads, joined the Peacemaker in his quest to end the violence among the Five Nations and to convert Tadodaho to the Creator's Great Law.

Joined by the leaders who had accepted the peace, Hiawatha and the Peacemaker traveled across Onondaga Lake to, once again, confront Tadodaho, who tried all his powers of sorcery to stop them. The Creator's message was unstoppable. In exchange for accepting the Great Law of Peace, Tadodaho would be given a revered

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position of presiding over the 50 chiefs of the Grand Council. He would be responsible for maintaining a good mind and making decisions to benefit Haudenosaunee alive as well as those yet to be born. With this, the snakes were combed from his hair and his body became straight. The Peacemaker then uprooted a white pine tree on the shores of Onondaga Lake and the 50 chiefs buried their weapons of war, jealousy, hatred, and anger into the hole where they were washed away. The tree was then replanted as the Tree of Peace and the Peacemaker placed an eagle at the top to watch for and warn the Haudenosaunee of potential dangers (Lyons 2021).

Thus was born the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy upon the shores of Onondaga Lake. This momentous event was recorded through oral tradition and the Hiawatha Belt (see figure 1) which symbolized the connection of the Five Nations with the Onondagas located at the center and represented by the Tree of Peace that stands on the shores of Onondaga Lake.<sup>3</sup> This also serves as a representation of the metaphorical longhouse established at this time. Haudenosaunee means People of the Longhouse. This metaphor would serve as the understanding of the relationship among the Five Nations. They were part of a community with responsibilities to one another, Mohawks were keepers of the Eastern door and Senecas keepers of the western door, in order to maintain the Great Law given to them by the Creator. Moreover, the creation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Great Law of Peace established the first form of representational democracy in North America, centuries before the creation of the United States. Within this government, the Five Nations agreed to avoid conflict with one another while also allowing each nation, village, and individual

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3. Wampum belts were made out of the purple and white shells of the quahog clams that are found in the North Atlantic. These belts serve as mnemonic devices that record and recall historically significant events of the Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous groups in northeast North America. The Onondagas, located at the center of the confederacy, took on the role of the keepers of the central fire. The belt has subsequently been turned into the flag of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, an adopted European practice of claiming sovereignty over land (for more information on the use of wampum belts as historical sources see Nabokov 2022: 150-171; Foster 1995: 99-114).

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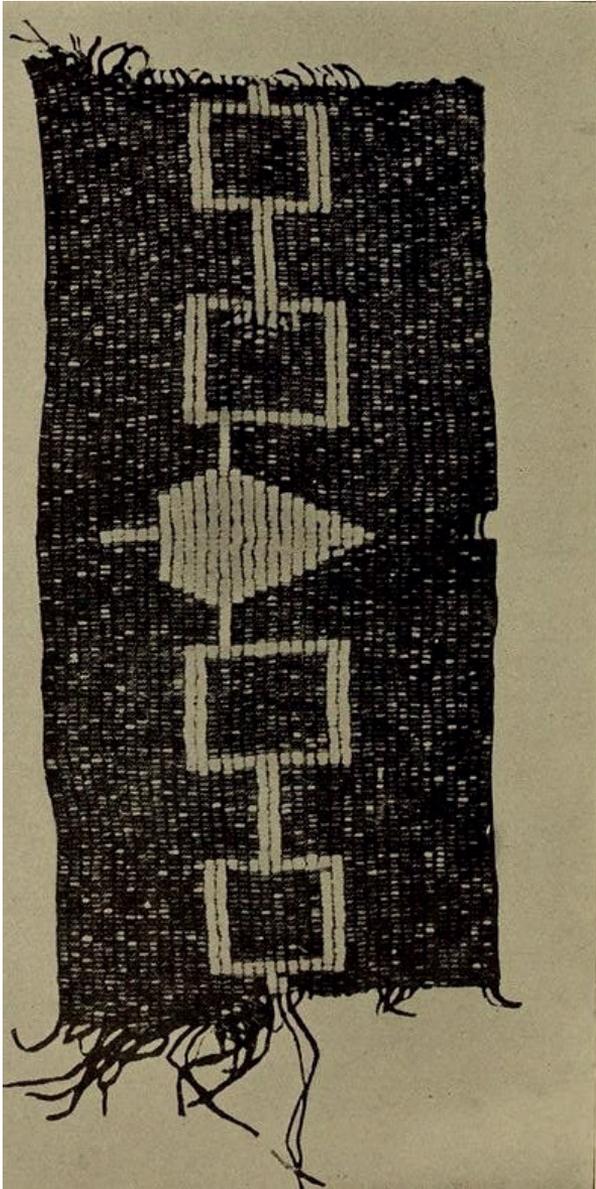


Fig. 1. Image of the Hiawatha Wampum Belt (“Hiawatha Belt”) depicting the creation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy under the Great Law of Peace. The squares signify four of the members of the Confederacy, from left to right, the Senecas, Cayugas, Oneidas, and Mohawks. At the center stands the Great Tree of Peace planted along the shores of Onondaga Lake and signifies the role of the Onondagas and the Tadodaho as the symbolic center of the Haudenosaunee Longhouse. From *New York at the Jamestown Exposition* (1909). Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hiawatha\\_Wampum\\_Belt\\_%281909%29\\_%2814779431751%29.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hiawatha_Wampum_Belt_%281909%29_%2814779431751%29.jpg) (public domain).

autonomy to make decisions that best served them, as long as those decisions did not disturb the peace maintained within the Confederacy. As stated above, women held positions of authority and responsibility within the Confederacy as well. Whereas men served as the chiefs, Clan Mothers were responsible for choosing those men they believed best suited for the job and had the ability to recall those leaders who failed to maintain “the good mind” (Lyons 1992: 31–33).

Non-native scholars did and often continue to deny the significance of the Great Law of Peace as the first form of representational democracy in North America. For some the problem is that it was not a written document but an oral narrative. For others, the issue was a racist denial that Indigenous peoples had the ability to create such a government. Late twentieth-century Native scholars such as Oren Lyons, John Mohawk, Vine Deloria Jr., and Audrey Shenandoah, to name a few, spoke and wrote about Indigenous sovereignty, practices, and knowledge. Haudenosaunee leaders such as Tom Porter and Jake Thomas gave voice to the ways the Haudenosaunee had worked for centuries to create consensus and maintain the “good mind,” and people began to listen. In 1987, Hawaii Senator Daniel Inouye introduced Senate Concurrent Resolution 76 commemorating and acknowledging the existence of the Great Law and the role of the Haudenosaunee in advising and providing an example to the founding fathers in the creation of the US Constitution. The resolution also called for the US government to continue to recognize Indian treaties and to continue a government-to-government relationship with Indigenous nations (Barreiro 1992: vii–viii; Inouye 1987; Lyons 1992; Mohawk 1992; Porter 1992; Shenandoah 1992; Thomas 1992).

While there is much debate as to whether or to what degree the Haudenosaunee Confederacy had upon the creation of the US government, the significance of the creation of this government cannot be denied. And while people often talk of places associated with the creation and continuation of American democracy as sacred space such as the US Capitol and Gettysburg Battlefield, the same is not typically applied to places associated with Indigenous creations and defense of government, even though those sites of Euro-American democracy are also secular spaces

whereas places such as Onondaga Lake actually hold a spiritual element as well as a political one; the two cannot be separated from the sacredness of Onondaga Lake. Yet, with the arrival of Europeans, the sacred center of the Confederacy has been under attack, and despite the abuse done to the lake, it has withstood the invasion (Gulliford 2000: 69–80).<sup>4</sup>

#### CHRISTIAN EUROPEAN COLONIZATION AND THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

In 1654, at least two centuries after the establishment of the Great Law of Peace on the shores of Onondaga Lake, the French Jesuit Simon Le Moyne arrived at the sacred center of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Thus began the contest over control of the lake, land, and people of Onondaga. The story of New France is often told as two different experiences: a spiritual story of Jesuits collecting souls and a secular story of soldiers, settlers, and fur traders collecting lands and profits. However, as we cannot separate the sacred nature of the creation of the Great Law of Peace from its practical political purpose, we cannot separate European spiritual and secular goals in North America. When Le Moyne arrived he came armed with the full power of the Doctrine of Discovery; the legal right and duty to convert souls to the Catholic faith and to lay claim to any territory not under the control of a Christian power.

The Doctrine of Discovery has origins that date back to the eleventh century and provides the legal basis for Christian powers to expand control over non-Christian territory and peoples. Although initially created as an international law applicable only to Christian, European countries to deal with conflicts in trade and colonization amongst themselves, it soon became a legal mechanism

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4. Here Gulliford identifies “Religious sites identified with oral tradition and origin stories” as being in need of preservation. He mostly mentions sites in the American West as many are still relatively intact and haven’t seen the same level of environmental devastation that Onondaga Lake has experienced. In response to the 06 January 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, many news stories and government and civil leaders referred to the Capitol as “sacred” space or ground. On 6 January 2022, President Joe Biden said, “One year ago today, in this sacred space, democracy was attacked” (Oatis et al. 2022).

to dominate non-Christian lands and people. It is important to stress the fact that it was not non-Europeans who were the focus of the Doctrine, it was non-Christians. Eastern Shawnee legal scholar Robert J. Miller points out the use of the Doctrine in the early fifteenth century, well before Columbus, in a conflict between Poland and the Teutonic Knights to control Lithuania, a European, but non-Christian land. The Council of Constance in 1414 decided that non-Christians shared “natural law rights to sovereignty and property as Christians but that the Pope could order invasion to punish violations of natural law or to spread the gospel” (Miller 2006: 13). So while the Vatican recognized non-Christian natural rights, it opened them to the consequences of subjugation at the order of the Pope (Miller 2006: 9–13; Mohawk 1992: 44–52; Muldoon 1977: 109–119; and Newcomb, 2008).

The Doctrine of Discovery would be expanded later in the fifteenth century as Spain and Portugal moved beyond their borders to colonize lands in the Atlantic, Africa, and eventually South and North America. During this period, Christian domination of lands and peoples was based not on a lack of adherence to natural laws by non-Christians, but on Christians’ rights of discovery of non-Christian lands and peoples and on their need and duty to lead them into “civilization,” meaning Christianity. Through a series of papal bulls Christian powers, initially Portugal soon followed by Spain, could,

invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit. (Nicholas VI, *The Bull Romanus Pontifex*)

The year after Columbus’s “discovery” of the “infidels” of the Caribbean and their lands, Pope Alexander VI famously divided the New World in two with his *Bull Inter Caetera* that called for Spain to conquer the areas west of the line and Portugal east. The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas would adjust the line slightly giving Portugal

dominion over what is now Brazil, and this Doctrine was then considered international law (Miller 2006:15; Pagden 1995:47; and Williams 1990: 80).

Other Christian, European powers were not to be left out. The question was how to claim authority over lands and peoples that, according to the *Inter Caetera* and subsequent Treaty of Tordesillas, were reserved for Spain. English legal scholars reasoned that England would not be in violation of the *Inter Caetera* if England laid claim to lands that Spain had not. This left a good part of North America free for the taking in English and French eyes. If no other Christian nation actively occupied a region, any Christian nation could lay claim to the territory and its non-Christian population, as long as that nation physically occupied and possessed that territory. The 1606 Charter of Virginia begins,

JAMES, by the Grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, &c. WHEREAS our loving and well-disposed Subjects, [...] have been humble Suitors unto us, that We would vouchsafe unto them our Licence, to make Habitation, Plantation, and to deduce a colony of sundry of our People into that part of America commonly called VIRGINIA, and other parts and Territories in America, either appertaining unto us, or which are *not now actually possessed by any Christian Prince or People*, situate, lying, and being all along the Sea Coasts, between four and thirty Degrees of Northerly Latitude from the Equinoctial Line, and five and forty Degrees of the same Latitude, and in the main Land between the same four and thirty and five and forty Degrees, and the Islands hereunto adjacent, or within one hundred Miles of the Coast thereof. (The First Charter of Virginia 1606; emphasis added)

While the Charter gave England control over the land and established their possession of Virginia in relation to other Christian countries, there was no mention of Indigenous peoples beyond authorizing the colonists to mint metal coins for the “Ease of Traffick and Bargaining between and amongst them and the Natives there (First Charter of Virginia 1606).” The Protestant English were less concerned with saving souls than their Catholic counterparts, but were still happy to play by legal rules of Christian dominion initially established by the Catholic Church.

France, wanting its own portion of North America, was happy to adopt the English modification to the Doctrine of Discovery. In order to provide proof of discovery, if not outright occupation,

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of land, Christian countries practiced their own forms of, as Patricia Seed termed it, “Ceremonies of Possession.” Planting crosses, burying tablets or coins, hanging signage all served as ways to establish symbolic possession of the lands. From there, Christian nations developed the idea of *terra nullius* (empty land) to further their justification to claims to the land. It allowed for Christian nations to claim land that was not only unclaimed by other Christian nations, but was also not being utilized in a civilized manner, meaning for European style agriculture. Land not under direct cultivation was seen as vacant wilderness and open to the claim and occupation of Christian Europeans. While Le Moyne’s main purpose in traveling to Onondaga may have been to save souls, the Doctrine of Discovery, automatically created the conditions that France, under whose authority and protection he traveled, would lay claim to the territory of the Onondaga peoples, including their sacred site of Onondaga Lake (Miller 2006: 18–21; Seed 1995).

#### SIMON LE MOYNE ARRIVES IN ONONDAGA

It is within the context of the Doctrine of Discovery that Le Moyne arrived in Onondaga in the summer of 1654. Le Moyne was there at the behest of the French government in Quebec with the goal—beyond saving souls—to create an alliance, or at least a peace with the Onondagas, for the benefit of New France. The Jesuits had some success in bringing Mohawk converts into the sphere of influence of New France, and thereby helped bring needed peaceful relations and trade benefits with the nation that occupied the region between New France and New Netherland. Bringing the Onondaga into the French sphere would be a great boon to establishing a greater French presence in the *terra nullius* of the Great Lakes region.

The account of Le Moyne’s time at Onondaga indicates the secular as well as spiritual purposes of his visit; the two goals cannot be separated. Most significant is the account of Le Moyne’s speech to the General Council at Onondaga. Here he had the honor of speaking at the sacred site on the shores of Onondaga Lake where the Great Law of Peace was established. However, he did not necessarily recognize that fact as an adherent to the Doctrine of Discovery, the non-Christian Onondagas were not seen as equal

to the French in religion, government, or land use. Although Le Moyne stood in the sacred space of renewal and consensus building and took on the tone and style of Haudenosaunee diplomatic speech, his message was still one of Christian, European dominance.

He began his speech by stating, “First, I said that Onnontio—Monsieur de Lauson, Governor of New France—was speaking through my mouth, and in his person the Hurons and the Algonquins, as well as the French, since all three Nations had Onnontio for their great Captain” (Le Moyne 1898: 109).<sup>5</sup> With these words, it is clear that Le Moyne was there in the combined role of missionary and sovereign as defined by the Doctrine of Discovery. He also indicated that the French have already gained sovereignty over the Hurons and some Algonquians, both the people and the lands. His account continued and he eventually recorded these words: “At each of my presents they uttered a loud shout of applause from the depths of their chests, in evidence of their delight. I was occupied fully two hours in delivering my entire harangue, which I pronounced in the tone of a Captain,—walking back and forth, as is their custom, like an actor on a stage” (Le Moyne 1898: 111). Le Moyne fully viewed himself as playing a theatrical role delivering his harangue. He spoke in the “tone of a Captain” but did not recognize the significance of the space and institution in which he spoke. His point of view was that of a representative of French sovereign power and his goal was to extend that power over the sacred space of Onondaga Lake.

Le Moyne recorded the response of the Haudenosaunee council thus:

To conclude these Thanksgivings, the Onnontaerrhonnon Captain took the word. ‘Listen, Ondessonk,’ he said to me; ‘Five whole Nations address thee through my mouth; I have in my heart the sentiments of all the Iroquois Nations, and my tongue is faithful to my heart. Thou shalt tell Onnontio four things, which are the gist of all our deliberations in Council.

“It is our wish to acknowledge him of who thou hast told us, who is the master of our lives, and who is unknown to us.

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5. *Onnontio* was the title the Haudenosaunee used to refer to the Governor of France. Likewise, all Governors of New York were called *Corlaer* after a Dutch man who was well known to the Mohawks.

The May-tree for all matters of concern to us is to-day planted at Onnontagé.' He meant that that would be thenceforth the scene of the assemblies and parleys relating to the Peace.

We conjure you to choose a site that will be advantageous to yourselves, on the shores of our great lake, in order to build thereon a French settlement. Place yourselves in the heart of the country, since you are to possess our hearts. Thither we will go to receive instruction, and thence you will be able to spread out in all directions. Show us Paternal care, and we will render you filial obedience.

We are involved in new wars, wherein Onnontio gives us courage; but for him we shall have only thoughts of Peace." (Le Moyne 1898: 117)

While one must question the absolute accuracy of his recollections, we can gain great insight into the significance of this meeting to the Haudenosaunee. Point two refers specifically to the planting of a tree of peace at Onondaga, replicating the establishment of the Great Law Of Peace of the Haudenosaunee at that same place, and reinforcing the significance of the Onondaga Lake as the Longhouse's sacred center. Points three and four require a bit more reading between the lines. Why would the Haudenosaunee invite the French to build a settlement on the "shores of our great lake"? Did they really invite the French "to spread out in all directions" and offer their "filial obedience"? Were they really submitting to the authority of the French under the Doctrine of Discovery? Point four may help us understand the Haudenosaunee response a bit more when they indicate that they are involved in new wars and that they only have thoughts of peace for Onnontio. Instead of approaching this meeting from within the context of the Doctrine of Discovery, the Haudenosaunee were working within their own context of the Great Law of Peace.

As indicated in point four, the Haudenosaunee were at war and were in need of allies and assistance. The French could easily offer that. By bringing the French into the metaphorical Haudenosaunee Longhouse, the council would turn the tables on the French. It would not be the French spreading out in all directions, but it would be the Haudenosaunee "extending the rafters" of the metaphorical Longhouse and thereby expanding their own authority and doing so from their heart of sacred power, the Grand Council

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at Onondaga Lake. In a sense, it was the Onondagas colonizing the French (Foster et al. 1984; Parmenter 2010).

The Onondagas were also looking for assistance from the French in the relocation of Wendat (Huron) refugees to Onondaga to be adopted into the Longhouse, thus strengthening the community in the face of population loss from war and disease. The Wendat people were decimated and were no longer able to stand on their own. They are culturally and linguistically connected to the Haudenosaunee and were desired as new members of the Longhouse. It is important to note that the Onondagas were in competition with the Mohawks to acquire these refugees. Some could read this direct competition between the two nations as a sign of the weakening of the Longhouse. However, it must be remembered that the Great Law of Peace was put in place to end violence amongst the Five Nations and to provide a method and a space in which to solve conflict without war. This is just what the Mohawks and Onondagas were doing as both tried to gain much needed population through the adoption of the Wendat refugees. In his work, *The Edge of the Woods: Iroquois, 1534–1701*, Jon Parmenter writes that, “The strength of the League rested on the capacity of its symbolic structure for innovation, enabling Iroquois people to engage novel political circumstances and to shape them for their own benefit” (2010: xlvi). The introduction of Christians under the authority of the Doctrine of Discovery created a novel and dangerous political circumstance to which the Haudenosaunee had to adapt. As the Doctrine of Discovery continued to evolve from its inception in the 11th century to the 21st century, so too did the Great Law of Peace (Leavelle 2002: 913–940; Parmenter 2010: 81–100; Tomlins and Mann 2001: 11).<sup>6</sup>

This moment in 1654 set off the struggle for control over the sacred center of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The French did indeed establish a mission on the shores of Onondaga Lake that housed both Jesuits and soldiers, a clear indication that the French were working through the authority and understanding of the Doctrine of Discovery by spreading the gospel and sovereign

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6. For other examples of the use of geographical understanding in the history of both colonial encounters and in American Indian history and culture, see Basso 1996; Dennis 1993; Gulliford 2000: 69–80; Nabokov 2002).

authority of the French empire. This French attempt at establishing their dominance under the Doctrine of Discovery was taken a step further in the spring of 1656 through the promulgation of Jesuit control over the land of the Onondagas. Similar to the wording of the 1606 First Charter of Virginia, the Royal representatives in New France

by the power given to us by the Company of new France [...], we have given and Granted [...], by these presents to the Reverend fathers of the Society of Jesus, The following extent of Territory, To wit: ten Leagues of space in every direction [...]—and where they shall choose to establish themselves in the country of the Upper Iroquois [...], be it in or near the village of Onnondagé [...] which they shall Judge most convenient to Them [...] is to be Possessed by The Said Reverend Jesuit fathers, Their successors and Assigns, in freehold forever, in full right and ownership [...]; together with all The Lakes, rivers, brooks, springs, Islands, Islets, meadows, land, and woods [...] that District shall come under jurisdiction of The Grand Seneschal of new France, or his Lieutenant established in the Circuit of three Rivers. Accordingly, we enjoin the grand Seneschal of new France [...] to put [...] the Society of Jesus in possession of the said Region, by virtue of these presents. [...] This twelfth of April, one thousand six hundred and fifty-six: thus signed, De Lauson. (*Jesuit Relations* XLI 1656: 244–245)

The entire text is crucial in illustrating the role of the Doctrine of Discovery in French attempts to establish control over the heart of the Haudenosaunee Longhouse. We clearly see the connection between spiritual and legal authority in the granting of Onondaga land to the Jesuits, whose authority over souls could be assumed but who needed a formal proclamation of their authority over the lakes, rivers, springs, and other natural features in the face of possible encroachment from Dutch and, later, English colonizers. They did not need to bury lead plates in the ground, the Jesuits had the equivalent of a legal deed to the land as practiced by Christian European powers.<sup>7</sup> The rights to the land could not be in the possession of the Haudenosaunee as they did not put it to proper

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7. Burying metal plates in the ground was one of the several ways different European powers supposedly proved their “discovery” of unclaimed lands. Other practices included planting flags and crosses and, a favorite of the English, taking possession of soil and a stick from the newly claimed lands. The Dutch were a bit more formal as they would create maps as their initial claim of possession. All served the same purpose, which was to show

use according to European standards. The fact that there were valuable salt springs located around the lake gave greater significance to the French Jesuit claim to the land as part of the Doctrine of Discovery. The land was rich in potential souls and potential profits (Le Moyne 1898: 123).

The legal authority of the French government, combined with the Haudenosaunee desire to bring the Wendats into the protection of the Longhouse (and to bring the French if not into the Longhouse, then at least within the Haudenosaunee sphere of influence), the Jesuits established the mission of Sainte Marie, which stood from 1656–1658. According to the Relation written by Father Paul Ragueneau to Father Jacques Renault, Provincial of the Jesuits in France, the small group of Jesuits and soldiers miraculously escaped the growing threat of hostile Natives who planned to enslave or kill the Europeans (Ragueneau 1898: 153–161). While Ragueneau specifically mentions ten soldiers among the residents of the mission along with about fifty other Frenchmen, many modern narratives of the events often leave out the presence of the soldiers in the mission (Eggleston 2009). Onondaga oral traditions, however, clearly recall the presence of the soldiers among the Jesuits. They argue that it was not “hostile Natives” who were the problem, but the hostile French in the form of Jesuit missionaries and soldiers who were working to establish their dominion over Onondaga people and land, including the sacred space of Onondaga Lake, which the French viewed more as a source of wealth than of spiritual significance.

In 1658, tensions between the Onondagas and French remained from the abandonment of the mission until 1701 with the establishment of the Great Peace of Montreal. This peace agreement, finalized in the heart of French colonial authority in Montreal, brought an end to violent conflict between the Haudenosaunee and the French and their Indigenous allies. While the peace culminated in Christian dominated Montreal, the path to that peace traveled through Onondaga as well. It was here that the Haudenosaunee Grand Council convened, debated, and negotiated their stance with the French, especially in light of the growing English

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they were the first Christians to “discover” and, therefore, possess the land (see Seed 1995).

power to the east of the Longhouse. In the end, the Haudenosaunee decided on a stance of relative neutrality with the French and paved the way for the Peace of Montreal in 1701, which ushered in a relatively tranquil period for those who lived and met on the shores of Onondaga Lake, at least until the American Revolution brought more violence to the heart of the Haudenosaunee Longhouse (Havard 2001: 94–97; Richter 1992: 391–393).

#### ENTER THE AMERICANS

While the French and Indian War (1754–1763), known in Europe as the Seven Years' War, had a great impact on the balance of power in North America with the eventual exit of the French, Onondaga itself remained relatively unscathed. Fighting took place in surrounding areas, but not in the heart of the Confederacy. The Confederacy itself was able to maintain an official stance of neutrality in the conflict between the French and English until 1760 when many Haudenosaunee joined the English, who, by then, had an upper hand in the war. After the French and Indian War, there were many Europeans moving into the territory of the Longhouse, primarily in the eastern sections and home of the Mohawks and Oneidas. Many individual Europeans traveled to Onondaga, but significant European settlement had yet to occur.

When the American Revolution broke out in 1775, the Haudenosaunee tried to continue a stance of neutrality between the English and Americans. However, the violence of the Revolution would soon arrive in the Longhouse with devastating consequences. By 1777, stress grew within the Longhouse as many Oneidas and Tuscaroras who lived among a growing number of American settlers opted to join the American cause. This move went against the majority opinion of the Longhouse to remain neutral, but the Oneidas, Tuscaroras, and even some Onondagas decided that throwing in their lot with the Americans, who were their neighbors, would be their best bet to preserve their homelands in the long run. This decision put these members of the Longhouse in direct conflict with the Mohawks who opted to ally with the British, primarily following the lead of chief Joseph Brant and his older sister Molly Brant. Joseph was the protégé of the late Sir William Johnson, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs

in the Northern Colonies, while Molly was Johnson's wife. These relationships granted the Brants great influence with the British government and military that they would retain through the period of the American Revolution, even after they were forced to flee first to Fort Niagara and then resettle in Canada (Calloway 1995: 59–60, 139; Shannon 2008: 185–189; Carson 2001: 47–48, 86–96).<sup>8</sup>

The fact that there were now Haudenosaunee combatants on either side of the war put them in a position where they would face each other in combat. This situation has led some historians to think of the American Revolution as a civil war amongst the Haudenosaunee. However, recent scholarship, especially that from Karim Tiro whose research has revealed that Haudenosaunee were hesitant to face each other in battle and would often abandon the battlefield in order not to wage war against their Confederation and possible clan kin (2011: 49–50). This is not to say that all was peaceful within the Longhouse, but it provides an understanding of the continued strength and commitment to the Great Law of Peace as established at Onondaga Lake. The Peace never required unanimous consensus on all decisions regarding the Haudenosaunee; it did require that peace be maintained within the Longhouse. Individuals were able to choose their own path outside the Longhouse, but when it came time to commit violence against their kin, they, for the most part, held true to the Great Law of Peace (Calloway 1995: 34, 85, 123; Glatthaar and Martin: 2006 ; Shannon 2008: 182–193; Carson 2001: 77–108).

Despite Haudenosaunee's commitment to the Great Law of Peace even on the battlefield, they could not escape the destruction

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8. Molly Brant provides a good example of the influence of Haudenosaunee women in politics as established by the Great Law of Peace. Although most scholars look to her brother Joseph as the larger influence in Mohawk relationships with the English. As the wife of Sir William Johnson, the British Superintendent of Northern Colonies, Molly extended Mohawk kinship ties to William and their children, as all Haudenosaunee children are part of their mother's clan. While Joseph gained entry and influence into the world of the British, Molly was crucial for William to gain influence and entry into the world of the Mohawks. Even after William's death, Molly wielded much influence with the British and served as a leader to her people (for more information on Molly Brant, see Carson 2001; Leavy 2015: 62–85; Feister and Pullis 1996: 295–320).

of the American Revolution. In 1779 General George Washington meticulously planned and ordered an attack on the Haudenosaunee. His hope was to sow division in the Longhouse and get the Oneidas to provide intelligence on the situation at British-held Fort Niagara and to get the Onondagas to capture Joseph Brant (Washington to Clinton 1779; Washington to Schuyler 1779). Neither group was willing to cooperate. Still, under the leadership of General John Sullivan, the American army moved into Haudenosaunee territory and executed a strategy of burning their homes and crops. To inflict maximum damage, Washington was advised to invade the Longhouse from several directions and “at a season when their corn is about half grown” (Greene to Washington 1779). The invasion began in April, and Washington’s first target was the sacred center of the Haudenosaunee at Onondaga. Striking at the sacred center, Washington hoped, would send an important message to the rest of Confederacy. 550 American soldiers invaded Onondaga country; they burned fifty longhouses, killed dozens of non-combatants, took more prisoner, and destroyed all sources of food to starve any left behind (Calloway 1995: 53; Calloway 2018: 247–250; Graymont 1972: 196; Mann 1972: 29–33).

The destruction continued through the Spring and Summer, with dozens of towns burned, non-combatants killed, fields and orchards burned, and livestock destroyed. In October of 1779, Washington wrote to Major General Horatio Gates,

I have the pleasure to inform you that the Army under the command of General Sullivan arrived safe and in perfect health at Wyoming on the 7th after having fully completed the destruction of the whole Country of the six Nations; the Indians of which must be thrown this Winter upon the Magazines of Canada for subsistence, which I imagine will not be a little distressing, as they were unprepared and probably unprovided for such an event. (Washington to Gates 1779)

The Sullivan campaign succeeded in spreading terror and starvation through the Confederacy, and Washington was correct that the refugees who survived the invasion looked to the English at Fort Niagara for their subsistence. The British were not prepared for the thousands of Haudenosaunee who arrived at the fort and many who survived the violence, would not survive the winter. From this, Washington earned the title “Town Destroyer”

from the Haudenosaunee. The sacred center had been attacked and destroyed. The future looked grim (Calloway 2018: 250–259; Fischer 1997: 7; Shannon 2008: 179).

#### THE RISE OF NEW YORK STATE

From the outside, the Haudenosaunee Longhouse seemed to be in shambles and that the sacred center had finally succumbed to the power of a less than just war. Within the Longhouse, the commitment to the Great Law of Peace remained, although by the end of the eighteenth century, it was becoming increasingly clear that Onondaga Lake was destined to become a center of resource extraction as well as the sacred site of the founding of the Confederacy. The sacred fire, of which the Onondaga were given responsibility to look after, was rekindled in Seneca territory, further west, away from the quickly encroaching Americans. Even in viewing the Haudenosaunee as a defeated people, the newly formed United States did not have the power to eradicate the Haudenosaunee completely, so it, along with the State of New York, pursued a strategy of land dispossession with its legal grounding in the Doctrine of Discovery. Even the US-allied Oneida Nation, whose leaders believed their claim to their lands would be more secure after the Revolution if they joined their American neighbors against the British, suffered loss of their lands (Hauptman 1999: 78–79; Blau et al. 1978: 495–496).

Soon after the war's end, the US government began a series of treaty negotiations with Indigenous peoples who found themselves living in the boundaries of the new nation. These treaties were primarily agreements where Native peoples gave up land to the US in exchange for much needed material goods. Since non-Christian Indigenous people did not have sovereign rights over their land according to the Doctrine of Discovery, they were only able to make land agreements with the United States. The US government reinforced their position as the sole authority to treat with Indian nations through the Federal trade and Intercourse Act of 1790, which states, in Section One, "That no person shall be permitted to carry on any trade or intercourse with the Indian tribes, without a license for that purpose under the hand and seal of the superintendent of the department, or of such other per-

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son as the President of the United States shall appoint for that purpose” (US Congress 1790). While the US claimed the authority of the Doctrine of Discovery, it did not have the strength to enforce this against the will of New York State officials who were well aware of the economic potential of the land. Philip Schuyler, the well-known actor in the American Revolution, led the way in establishing New York’s authority of the land by clearly disregarding the Intercourse Act.

Schuyler would negotiate a series of so-called treaties with the Cayuga, his former Oneida allies, and the Onondagas, dispossessing them of thousands of acres of land in violation of federal law. By the 1790s, when the federal government and the State of New York were competing with one another to control land negotiations with the Haudenosaunee, about one hundred Onondaga people (out of an estimated four hundred in the state) were living on Onondaga land. At this point the council fire of the Confederacy was burning in Seneca territory and by 1793 the creation of Military Tracts and several illegal state treaties had reduced the Onondaga Nation to less than twenty-five square miles of land south of the sacred site of Onondaga Lake. In 1795 a Schuyler negotiated treaty with the Onondagas finalized New York State’s ownership of Onondaga Lake, its surrounding lands, and its highly valuable salt deposits. In 1789, the Onondagas had complained to New York Governor Clinton that the settler, Asa Danforth, was illegally building a house on the shore of Onondaga Lake. Along with agricultural land, New York State’s growing capitalist class was deeply involved in speculating in salt as well as land (Galpin 1941: 19–32; Hauptman 1999: 76–80; New York State Legislature 1795: 199–203; Murphy 1949: 304–315; Tustin 1949: 40–46).

The story of Onondaga Lake would now focus on the development of the salt industry and the growing Euro-American population, first in the aptly named town of Salina and then the growing city of Syracuse. But while New York State was dispossessing the Haudenosaunee of their land in an attempt to assert its authority over that of New York and its Indigenous population, the US government was negotiating a treaty with the Haudenosaunee that actually recognized Haudenosaunee, particularly Seneca, sovereignty. Land speculators in the state were running

amok. One of the famous financiers of the Revolutionary War era, Robert Morris, alone had purchased four million acres in western New York with great profits in sight. As stated above, at this point in time, the Onondagas now lived on about twenty-five square miles of land, which is equivalent to approximately 16,000 acres. The US government had to do something to reign in the speculators and their accomplices in the New York government. To do this US Commissioner Timothy Pickering met with the Haudenosaunee in Canandaigua, New York and established what is known as the Pickering or Canandaigua Treaty on 11 November 1794. The treaty gave the US rights to land the Haudenosaunee held in the Ohio Valley and in return the Senecas regained land they had lost in 1784 as part of the Treaty of Stanwix, and it secured their land holdings within New York State. This was not a mere treaty negotiation where Indians gave up land in exchange for quickly exhausted material goods. This was, according to some historians as well as the Haudenosaunee, a treaty among sovereign states, and it was agreed upon by the full Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Campisi and Starna 1995: 467–490; Oberg 2015; Powless 2000; US and Six Nations 1794).

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The Pickering Treaty was also recorded through the creation of a wampum belt known as the Washington Belt, who actually had it commissioned. The belt is 6 feet long and features thirteen human figures representing the thirteen states linked in unity. At the center are two other people and a house. These two people signify the Haudenosaunee, specifically the Senecas as Keepers of the Western Door and the Mohawks as Keepers of the Eastern Door; they are protecting the Haudenosaunee Longhouse that still stands between them. Within a few years of this historic agreement, land speculators were once again at the doorstep of the Longhouse and its members were forced again to cede land. However, the treaty still stands to this day. Every year there is a meeting between the US State Department and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to renew the agreement (Onondaga Nation 2010).

By 1800, the sacred site of the Great Law of Peace was now under the control of Euro-Americans who were focused on its potential first for salt, then for transportation, recreation, and eventually

an industrial dumping ground. The nineteenth century saw the United States adopt the full force of the Doctrine of Discovery, which was solidified in the Supreme Court ruling of *Johnson v. McIntosh* in 1823. Although we can also see how the Louisiana Purchase, where the United States purchased 530-million acres of land from France who had acquired their rights through discovery and negotiations with other European nations, particularly Spain, also showed how the US adopted the Doctrine of Discovery. Even the Lewis and Clark expedition served as a ceremonial claiming of the land as the two men, under the authority of President Jefferson, traveled through the new territory, bestowing gifts on the Indigenous peoples and mapping this new *terra nullius* for future generations of Christian Americans (Miller 2006: 59–98).

Yet it was *Johnson v. McIntosh* that established the Doctrine of Discovery as the basis for American law as it relates to Indigenous peoples. The case was a land ownership dispute in Illinois. The plaintiffs, Joshua Johnson and Thomas Graham, based their ownership claim of the land through a purchase that originated through a transaction between the Piankeshaw Nation and William Murray, a land speculator in the eighteenth century. The defendant, William McIntosh, purchased his competing claim from the United States government who had acquired it through treaties with the Piankeshaw Nation. Johnson believed he had a rightful claim to the land as he purchased the land from the people who had occupied the land prior to the arrival of Europeans. Chief Justice John Marshall disagreed. He wrote, “Discovery is the foundation of title, in European nations, and this overlooks all proprietary rights in the natives” (Marshall 1823: 567). Marshall traced this authority, now possessed by the United States, back to the founding of the North American colonies. In this legal system, Indian peoples had no right to own land, only to occupy it:

While the different nations of Europe respected governments respected the right of the natives, as occupants, they asserted the ultimate dominion to be in themselves; and claimed and exercised, as a consequence of this ultimate dominion, a power to grant the soil while yet in possession of the natives. These grants have been understood, by all, to convey a title to the grantees, subject only to the Indian right of occupancy. The history of America, from its discovery to the present day, proves, we think, the universal recognition of these principles. (Marshall 1823: 574)

Two years after this ruling, the Erie Canal opened, and it utilized the waters of Onondaga Lake along its course. Sacred claims to the lake would not trump profits or the legal authority of the Doctrine of Discovery. Nevertheless, the Great Law of Peace remained in place.

#### INDUSTRY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEVASTATION

The story of Onondaga Lake from 1825 to the mid-20th century is not a pretty one. From the beginning Europeans were drawn to the area to control the land and exploit the resources as was their right, as they understood it, through the Doctrine of Discovery. The city of Syracuse grew quickly upon its eastern end, which was dominated by salt production and also was an outlet for the Erie Canal. People and commerce and great wealth passed through the heart of the Longhouse on canal boats. Syracuse became a center of not only commerce but of reform. Women's rights, abolitionism, temperance, and evangelicalism all left their marks, although only one reformer, Matilda Jocelyn Gage, openly advocated for the rights of the Haudenosaunee who lived just outside the city. Gage wrote admiringly about the political and social roles of Haudenosaunee women. This was not a popular stance among her fellow reformers who were not prepared to work to extend the vote to women of color. This may be a significant reason why Gage is not as well known as some of her contemporaries (Gage 1893; Sheriff 1997: 126, 164; Wagner 1998).

By 1917 the Erie Canal no longer flowed through Syracuse. In 1921 the *Syracuse Herald* reported that,

The Erie Canal between Salina and Clinton streets appears to be a favorite gathering place for scum and refuse. The wind sweeps papers, boxes, pieces of wood and other rubbish into this cove and leaves it there. The wind tends to clear the main channel of the canal of such rubbish, but does not affect such secluded places.

Weeds from the bottom of the canal have grown to the surface and add to the general unsightly collection. They gather the other refuse and aid in giving the canal the general appearance of a dumping place. Tuesday morning there was such a heap of rubbish just east of the Salina Street bridge that the railing was crowded with spectators.

The refuse remains—a menace to public health. (*Syracuse Herald* 1921: 11)

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The canal would be filled in through Syracuse in 1923, and the city and surrounding industry would refocus their dumping efforts on Onondaga Lake. By the 1920s, the lake along with the canal, already had serious problems with pollution. The commercial fishery in the lake collapsed in 1890 due to pollution and invasive species introduced through the Erie Canal attacked the salmon and whitefish populations. In 1900 ice harvesting on the lake was banned for public health reasons. By 1920 swimming in the lake was banned for the same reasons.

In the twentieth century, the City of Syracuse moved to a municipal water and sewer system. The original system's storm sewers also served for waste removal, most of which ended up in the lake. 1922 saw the introduction of screening and treatment of sewage prior to it entering into the lake, but as indicated above, the damage was done. Despite continual upgrades to the system in the 1930s and 1950s, raw sewage continued to enter the lake. Many people were willing to turn a blind eye to this problem because industries around the lake also used it as a dumping ground (Effler and Hennigan 1996: 4-6; USEPA 2023).

The largest industrial polluter was Solvay Process chemical manufacturing. Solvay Process would eventually be known as Allied Signal and Allied Chemical Co. It is now owned by Honeywell International. Solvay Process exploited the abundant water, salt, and limestone supply in the area to manufacture soda ash and produced significant amounts of sodium, calcium, and chloride pollutants that were dumped directly into the lake. In 1946 Allied Signal began industrial production that resulted in mercury being released into the lake, which would continue until 1986. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimated that Allied Signal discharged 75,000-kilograms of mercury into Onondaga Lake between 1946 and 1970, when sport fishing was banned. Although by that point, there were not many fish in the lake left to catch. In addition to mercury, industries discharged arsenic, lead, hexachlorobenzene, phenol, and PCBs into the lake. In 1995, the EPA placed Onondaga Lake on the list of Superfund priority sites (Effler and Hennigan 1996: 4-6; USEPA 2023).

As industry continued to grow along the shores of Onondaga Lake after the filling of the Erie Canal, the French Jesuits returned. In 1933, during the Colonial Revival Period in America, the city of Syracuse claimed the site of the seventeenth-century French mission on Onondaga Lake and decided to reconstruct the mission to memorialize the arrival of the Jesuits to the shores of Onondaga Lake and as a public works project to give work to men during the Great Depression. The reconstructed site, Sainte Marie de Ganentaha, opened later that year. Its main feature was the “French Fort” which was, in reality, an inaccurate reconstruction of a log cabin. The site was more of an ode to the idea of American expansion, in which Native peoples had to be conquered and their lands settled by Christian Europeans, than an attempt to depict the historical encounter between the Jesuits and Onondagas. In fact, for several decades, there was no interpretive material or texts within the site at all. Visitors were left to interpret the site for themselves. In the 1970s, when Onondaga Lake was considered the most polluted body of water in the United States, Sainte Marie hired costumed reenactors, but there was still no formal interpretation. In 1988, the 1933 mission structure was torn down and a new one built based on existing plans for a similar structure in Sainte Marie among the Hurons in Canada. It was reopened as Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois Living History Museum in 1991 but closed its doors in 2011 (Connors 1980; Gadua 2018; Ryan and Stokes-Rees 2017: 27–29).

During this time, the Onondagas, illegally pushed from their sacred site on the lake and represented in Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois as figures of secondary importance, were working to reestablish their presence in the heart of the Longhouse. The environmental degradation of the lake and the surrounding land were at the heart of the 2005 Onondaga Lands Right claim. The opening statement reads:

The Onondaga People wish to bring about 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. 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

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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. (Hill 2014)

Unfortunately, their claim was never heard because it was dismissed by the US Federal Court as too disruptive to the people of New York State. 2005 is also the year that the US Supreme Court ruled on the case of *City of Sherrill v. Oneida Nation of New York*. In this case the Oneida Nation had purchased land on the open market that they had been illegally dispossessed of by the State of New York 200 years earlier. Once they acquired the land, the Oneidas moved to place it under their jurisdiction and remove it from the local tax rolls in the City of Sherrill. The dispute made it to the Supreme Court, which ruled eight-to-one in favor of the City of Sherrill. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote the majority opinion and said, "Given the longstanding non-Indian character of the area and its inhabitants, the regulatory authority constantly exercised by New York State and its counties and towns, and the Oneidas' long delay in seeking judicial relief against parties other than the United States, we hold that the tribe cannot unilaterally revive its ancient sovereignty, in whole or in part, over the parcels at issue" and that the court must prevent "the Tribe from rekindling the embers of sovereignty that long ago grew cold" (Ginsburg 2005). The Doctrine of Discovery remained alive and well in the early years of the twenty-first century.

The land around the lake is still owned by Onondaga County, which developed a park and multipurpose trail around most of the lake. In 2011 the Onondaga County Legislature voted to return a thirty-six-acre piece of land, known as Murphy's Island, a highly contaminated piece of land on the eastern end of the lake, to the Onondaga Nation. In 2016, the county reneged on the deal in order to extend the trail further around the lake, in a move that Onondaga Nation lawyer, Joe Heath, declared was "another broken promise" (Coin 2019). Onondaga County, the Onondaga Nation, New York Department of Environmental Conservation, and Honeywell

continue to struggle over the future of the lake and how exactly the contamination from centuries of abuse should be cleaned.

The Onondagas and the rest of the Haudenosaunee continue to live and work in the spirit of the Great Law of Peace and they continue to make inroads in reviving the sacredness of Onondaga Lake. With Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois closed, leaders from the Onondaga Nation, such as Faithkeeper Oren Lyons, Tadadho Sid Hill, Council Chief Jake Edwards, and clan leaders Bettye Lyons and Freida Jacques along with Syracuse University professor of religion, Phil Arnold, created a new plan for the space, which would tell the story, not of European conquest under the Doctrine of Discovery, but of the creation and persistence of the Great Law of Peace. Skä-Noñh, Great Law of Peace Center opened in 2015 on the shores of Onondaga Lake, thus bringing the Peacemaker and the Great Law back to this sacred site. With the collaboration of Indigenous Values Initiative and the Onondaga Nation, The Center has hosted several *Creator's Game* weekends, where Haudenosaunee lacrosse teams play each other in the "Medicine Game." The Indigenous Values Initiative states, "we are dedicated to re-establishing a Haudenosaunee presence back at Onondaga Lake where the game was originally played" (Indigenous Values Initiative 2023).

Jesuits at Le Moyne College in Syracuse have also begun reckoning with their history as not just well-intended soldiers of Christ, but as representatives of an imperial power with the goal to subjugate non-Christian lands and peoples for their own benefit. It will be a long process (Gadua 2018; Lonetree 2012; Ryan and Stokes-Rees 2017: 30–32).

So too does Onondaga Lake still suffer from its years of exploitation at the hands of the City of Syracuse and the industries around the lake. Despite the lake being a haven for beachgoers in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, swimming is no longer allowed. While the population of fish and other aquatic animals has rebounded from their low in the 1970s, it is advised not to eat more than one fish a year caught in the waters of Onondaga Lake. The struggles of the Haudenosaunee to have their sovereignty recognized and their voices heard continues, but so does the progress. In the spring of 2022, for the first time in over

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a hundred years, a pair of breeding eagles have built a nest atop a tree by the Skä-Noñh Center and are raising a pair of eaglets overlooking Onondaga Lake and the Haudenosaunee Longhouse.

*Abstract:* Onondaga Lake, located in what is now Central New York, is the sacred place of the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. It is where the Peacemaker paddled his stone canoe and established the Great Law of Peace that has stood for centuries. In 1654 Simon Le Moyne, S. J. arrived on the shores of Onondaga Lake. In 1656 the French government, in accordance with the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, granted the Jesuits rights to the lake and the surrounding land, much prized for its abundant salt springs. They built a mission to lay claim to both the land and the souls who occupied it. It is this moment that sets off the contest for control of the lake and the history. The lake remains the sacred center of the Confederacy, which has survived despite attempts to eradicate it. The future of both is dependent on the recognition of its sacred status by those who have seen the lake as a source of profit and power as well as a convenient dumping ground. This is the story of that struggle.

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