

Land Where The Partridge Drums

A History of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation

by Darren Bonaparte

Akwesasne means "Land Where The Partridge Drums." It is located on the St. Lawrence River where the Canadian provincial borders of Quebec and Ontario intersect with the American state of New York. It consists of a number of islands and portions of the southern mainland. Two rivers, the Raquette and St. Regis, join the St. Lawrence in the predominantly flat river valley. The city of Cornwall, Ontario, lies on the northern shore and is joined to the United States by a system of bridges that cross through Akwesasne's only densely-populated island. The Adirondack Mountains, from which the St. Regis and Raquette Rivers descend, are visible on the southern horizon. These mountains and the area south of them were the homeland of the Kanienkehaka, or "People Of The Land Of Flint." Our neighbors knew us by a different name: the Mohawks.

This work will provide a history of the Mohawks with an emphasis on the Akwesasne Mohawk Territory and the people who live there. It is important to note that the area described in the paragraph above is the undisputed territory of the Akwesasne Mohawks *as it is today*; our traditional territory is much greater. Kanienke, or "Land Of Flint," once encompassed the entire Adirondack Mountains as far south as the Mohawk River Valley and included land in Vermont and Quebec as far north as the St. Lawrence River. Over time that territory came to include the Thousand Islands and tracts of land north of the St. Lawrence River. Today you could drive across the Mohawk territory remaining in New York in about the same time it would take you to drink a cup of coffee.

Land Where The Partridge Drums will attempt to tell the story of just how our vast territory came to be as small as it is. It will also show how the fate of our Mohawk people was linked to the fate of the land on which we lived, just as the fate of a child depends on the fate of its mother. There is no doubt that the clash of European and native cultures brought fundamental changes to our traditions, religion, political systems and landbase, but in many ways Mohawk and Haudenosaunee people have had just as critical an effect on the development of American and Canadian society. The tragedy of the theft of our land and the undermining of our traditional leadership is thus compounded by the injustice of being forgotten as founding fathers of both these nations.



Introduction

To really understand Akwesasne history, one must look far before the accepted 1755 founding date of the St. Regis Mission. One must even look before European contact to the era that is known to us only through the oral tradition, since this is the soil in which the seeds of the Mohawk saga were planted long ago. *Land Where The Partridge Drums* will place the events of Akwesasne history in their proper context with regard to Haudenosaunee history and, to a lesser

extent, world history. Naturally, space does not permit more than a general description of the culture, personalities, and events of history that make up the Mohawk saga, but this book will provide a Mohawk point of view on the events depicted since most of the original sources were written by non-natives whose writings reflect the biases and prejudices of their time. Unfortunately, readers searching for the definitive collection of Mohawk oral history

and tradition may be disappointed; *Land Where The Partridge Drums* deals mostly with information found in books, old newspapers, and archives full of dusty old documents stained by the coffee cups of time. The oral tradition clearly deserves a major project of its own.

The research for this project began in the years following the much publicized "Gambling War" and "Oka Crisis" of 1990. As the goal of this project is to bring things up to date as much as possible, these dark times must be touched upon. However, I have chosen not to go into detail about specific events because the Culture Vultures out there have already picked that skeleton clean in the form of endless newspaper articles, college theses, coffeetable books, and television documentaries. I have also chosen not to use this history as a platform to push any particular "side" of these very divisive issues. If the research for this project has taught me anything, it's that nothing is strictly black or white in Mohawk country.

I don't expect that all people will agree with my take on the events described. History is deeply personal, especially to those who have seen it hijacked, twisted and hidden, and I won't presume that this history is in any way definitive. I believe that the history and culture of the Mohawk Nation and Haudenosaunee Confederacy is worthy of a whole library of books. That is what is required if one is to do the subject justice, but a heavier responsibility you would never find. To the people to whom this history and culture belongs, it is sacred ground, land that is best traveled in the footsteps of an elder who has been there. And that means following in person, not just reading a book about it.

When taken all at once, many of the events described in *Land Where The Partridge Drums* can be draining. But through all the warfare, internal division and hardship, we are constantly reminded of the remarkable resilience, patience, and community spirit that marked Mohawk people regardless of the time they lived or the adversity they faced. It is my hope that this history will serve as a reminder to the Mohawks living today that our grandfathers survived far worse political crises than we will ever know. We owe it to the future generations to learn from those that have come before us. The fact that we exist today in far greater numbers than ever before is a testament to their wisdom and tenacity.

Darren Bonaparte

From the Land of Flint to the

Land Where the Partridge Drums

The Migration from the Mohawk Valley to Kahnawake and Akwesasne

The Mohawks used this area in ancient times for both permanent and seasonal occupation. It was rich in game and fish and often served as a trading center of tribes such as the Algonquins, the Hurons, and other Iroquoian groups. Burial sites have been found in the region dating back at least as far as 5,000 years. It would not be difficult for Mohawks from their settlements in the Mohawk Valley (northwest of present-day Albany, New York) to travel northward along the numerous rivers, lakes, and streams in the Adirondacks to reach the mighty St. Lawrence. This region was the northern frontier of their vast territory.

It is said that long before the Europeans came to America the Mohawks were visited by a Huron prophet known as the Peacemaker. He was born of a virgin mother in a village known to us as Kahanayenh, said to have been located in the area of the Bay of Quinte near Kingston, Ontario, on the northern shore of Lake Ontario. The legend holds that upon adulthood the Peacemaker carved a canoe out of stone and paddled it across Lake Ontario, then traveled up the Oswego River to reach the territory of the Mohawks. With the help of an Onondaga chief named Ayonwatha, the Peacemaker forged a great

union among the nations of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca that would come to be known to the Europeans as the League of the Iroquois, or the Five Nations Confederacy. The members of this league, naturally, had a name for it in our own language: Haudenosaunee.

Haudenosaunee means "People Of The Longhouse." It refers not only to their customary dwellings of curved branches and bark that reached hundreds of feet long, but to the geographical makeup of their territories. The Seneca were located south of Lake Ontario and came to be known as the "Keepers Of The Western Door." According to Confederacy protocol, visiting nations from the west could only approach the Haudenosaunee through the Seneca, said to have been the largest of the Five Nations. East of them were the Cayuga, the "People Of The Big Pipe." Some refer to the Cayuga as the "People Of The Mucky (or Swamp) Lands." In the center were the Onondaga, whose main village was located near present-day Syracuse, New York. They were known as the "People Of The Place On The Big Hill" and "Keepers Of The Fire" because it was in their territory that most of the Haudenosaunee Grand Councils

were held. East of the Onondaga were the Oneida, or "Standing Stone People," also known as "People Of The Big Log." At the far east end of this longhouse of nations were the Mohawk, regarded as the "Keepers Of The Eastern Door." The Tuscarora, admitted to the Confederacy in 1722, in some cases were designated "Those Of The Indian Hemp." The Confederacy became known from then on as the Six Nations.

The Great Law Peace, or Kaianerekowa (literally, "The Great Good") brought peace to a people ravaged by internecine warfare and blood feuds. The Peacemaker was believed to be a messenger sent from the Great Spirit; he buried all of the weapons of war beneath a symbolic "Tree of Peace" whose four symbolic white roots would one day spread to all the regions of the earth as an invitation for all to take shelter under its branches. For centuries, this union based on peaceful coexistence made the Haudenosaunee one of the strongest groups in the entire continent of North America. The success of such a union encouraged other groups to copy the Haudenosaunee model of confederation, and contact between these confederacies was promoted when possible. Artifacts found in burial mounds attest to the vast

trading networks of the pre-contact cultures of the Northeast Woodlands.

The Mohawks in the Colonial Wars

With the advent of European colonists came drastic changes for the Haudenosaunee. Dutch, English, and French fur traders sparked a violent competition among the Haudenosaunee and their Algonquin and Huron neighbors. With the introduction of firearms, these nations suddenly saw the balance of power shift to those that had the closest ties to the Europeans. Traditional hunting grounds became exhausted by overhunting and a dependency developed for the European goods made of steel. The strength of unity which had saved the Haudenosaunee from self-destruction generations before suddenly became a source of strength in conquest. In a series of conflicts known as the Iroquois Wars, the Haudenosaunee conquered and absorbed entire nations, earning them a reputation as a force to be reckoned with.

Much has been written about these dark times in Haudenosaunee history, and almost all of it stresses the cruelty and violence with which our ancestors fought