

Land Where The Partridge Drums

A History of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation

The Mohawk Migration to Akwesasne (continued)
Written and Illustrated by
Darren Bonaparte

Indian Time presents the second installment of the Akwesasne History Series. Last week we saw how religious, political, and economic interference split the Mohawk Nation in half, resulting in the creation of a new Mohawk community of Kahnawake near Montreal. By 1755, this community had grown so large that another settlement was established in the Land Where The Partridge Drums, or Akwesasne. This week's installment takes a closer look at the period in which this occurred and attempts to settle an old argument...

The French and Indian War

At present, there is little documentation available about the earliest days of the Akwesasne community. Academics like Jack Frisch and George L. Frear have pinpointed the date of the arrival of the Kahnawake Mohawks only after an exercise in detective work: the dates in most historical accounts vary from 1752 to 1762. The year they actually did arrive, 1755, sets it against a backdrop of rising tensions in Mohawk country that help to explain just why these families left Kahnawake.

Like Kahnawake, Akwesasne was located on the southern shore of the St. Lawrence River, the powerful waterway that had always been a natural boundary marker between the territories of the Haudenosaunee and their Huron and Algonquin neighbors. As such, the Mohawks considered Akwesasne part of the northern frontier of Mohawk territory.

The French, naturally, saw it from another perspective. As a French Indian Mission, St. Regis was considered a part of the French frontier in its earliest years; it appeared as such on a 1758 map drawn by a French captain named Pouchot. (DRCHSNY 10) The Great War for Empire, also known as the French and Indian War, began right around the time of the Kahnawake migration, and warriors from Kahnawake and other French-allied native groups played a critical role in the defeat of British forces under General Braddock in Ohio during the early days of the conflict. (Flexner 1979:131-133)

Mohawk vs. Mohawk: The Battle of Lake George

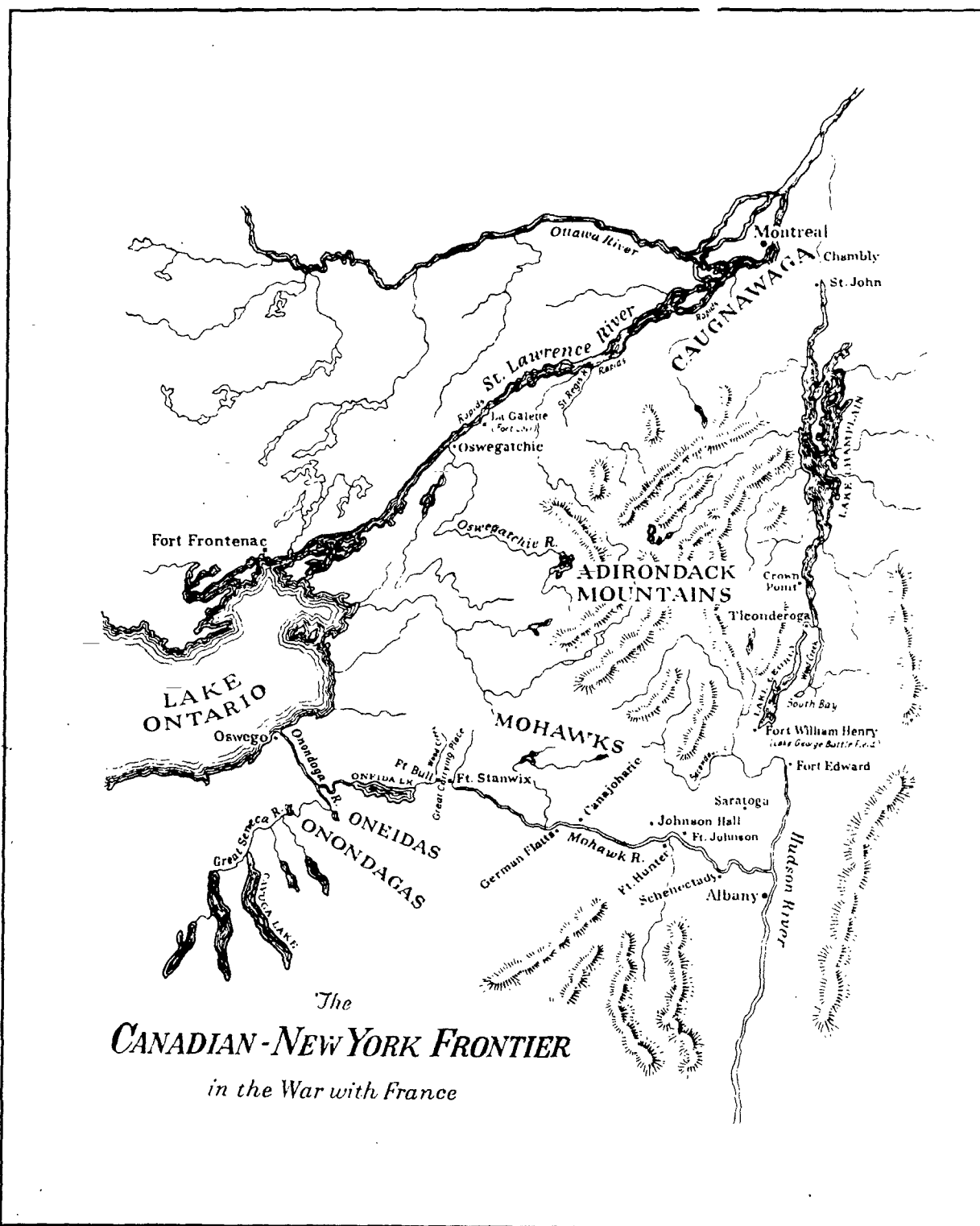
Even though Mohawks fought for both the French and English in the colonial war period, contact was maintained between the northern and southern Kanienkehaka. Contrary to what some might say, the familial bonds were never completely severed. This led to some very odd situations on the battlefield, as we will see in this account of a confrontation between Kahnawake Mohawks and their brothers from the Mohawk Valley as found in The Journal of Major John Norton (1770):

"...When Scouts brought information of the advance of the French and their Native Allies, he detached Five Hundred of the Mohawk; the Latter formed the Front, when they came to a Spring of Water, all of them ran down to drink, without any orders: at this place the French had ranged an ambuscade in the form of a Half Moon, & the Mohawk had thus fallen into the Middle of it. In this Situation, they were surprised by a Caughnawague man rising up and calling out in their language "Of what Nation are you?" They answered, "We are Mohawks and Five Nations..." Of what People are you?" He replied, "We are Caughnawagues & others... Stand aside, for we only make War against English, and do not desire to hurt any of our brothers, the Native Tribes." At this moment, one of the Party fired, and the native Allies of the French immediately made an impetuous charge rushing down the hill, on which they had been ranged, they mixed in promiscuous fight with the Mohawks, who resisted with much valour, but they were forced by superior numbers to a Retreat, which they effected. They were so intermixed with their Foes, that the straggling Fire kept up by the Militia was as injurious to them, as to the Enemy.

In this confusion, a Mohawk Warrior happened to encounter his friend, a Caghnewague...they saluted each other, and shook hands. In the meantime another came up, who making a Blow at the Mohawk...the latter parried it and killed him... A Second instantly rushed on, making a similar effort...he killed him also; His friend stood a passive Spectator of the Slaughter of his Comrades: so strong was the Band of Friendship, that even when meeting in hostile array, it obliged them to spare each other. The Caghnewague then exclaimed "Oh -- my friend, we have met in disagreeable circumstances: Let us then part." The Mohawk mixed in the Crowd, who could not distinguish him from their Friends, until he found a convenient opportunity of rejoining his party. His escape was facilitated by the Mark of Distinction which the French had caused their Native Allies to wear; it was a Narrow Strip of White Linen fastened to the Lock of Hair on the top of the Head...this man happened to have thin plates of silver hanging from the same part which were not distinguishable on slight inspection."

Almost immediately after the Kahnawake Mohawks arrived in Akwesasne in 1755, their former neighbors accepted the war belt and accompanied the French army under Baron Dieskau in their advance on the British at Albany. Although the Haudenosaunee Confederacy had so far maintained a policy of neutrality, Britain's superintendent of Indian Affairs, William Johnson, managed to convince his Mohawk friend, Chief Tiyanoga (also known as Hendrick) to raise a force of about 200 warriors to accompany his forces into battle against the French. (Flexner 1979:143) Tiyanoga was an influential chief. He had been one of three Mohawk "kings" who, with a Mohican companion, traveled to England during Queen Anne's War for an audience with Her Royal Highness. Throughout his life he led many war parties against the French, sometimes coming into deadly confrontations with Kahnawake Mohawks who knew him as the dreaded "Whitehair."

One of the young men who accompanied William Johnson and Tiyanoga on this mission was fifteen-year-old Thayendenagea ("Two Sticks Tied Together"), the grandson of one of the other Mohawk "kings" and the brother of Johnson's Mohawk wife, Molly. Most people know this young warrior by the English name Joseph Brant. This was Joseph's first taste of combat, but it was not to be his last. The same could not be said for poor Tiyanoga, who would pay dearly for holding too tightly to the Covenant Chain with the English.



Source: Seven Generations, by David Blanchard, published by the Kahnawake Survival School

When the two armies and their native allies clashed at the Battle of Lake George, the Mohawks were reluctant to fight their own people and even tried to talk each other out of fighting before the first shot was fired. One account of the battle says they initially avoided each other in hand-to-hand combat, even to the point of endangering their European allies. Sadly, there were significant exceptions: the elderly Tiyanoga tried to slip away from the action and stumbled upon a camp of the "French Indians" who promptly killed him. (Flexner 1979:145-146) This battle was an important victory for the British and earned William Johnson the title of Baronet, but it left the southern Mohawks without one of their principal chiefs and deepened the resentment between the two groups of Mohawk people.

Akwesasne's "Neutrality"

Like Kahnawake, Akwesasne loyalties appear to have been with the French at first. Three Akwesasne warriors fought alongside the French at the Battle of Fort Bull near Rome, New York in 1756, and two spied on British forces at Oswego for Pouchot in 1760. (Frisch 1971:61-63) That same year, however, the British met with the Seven Nations of Canada and convinced them to "step aside" in the conflict. As it happened, the Mohawks were less than neutral: Kahnawake Mohawks helped to guide the British forces and their Haudenosaunee allies through the treacherous Lachine Rapids in their assault on Montreal, and ten from Akwesasne actually joined in the fight and were awarded silver medals when the French surrendered Canada. (Williams 1991:20; Frisch 1971:64)

The limited number of Akwesasne Mohawks involved in these campaigns suggests that most of the community maintained neutrality in the conflict. This may be explained by the presence of John and Zechariah Tarbell, the two English captives who had grown up as Mohawks in Kahnawake. According to an early tradition collected in the 1850's, they were more or less exiled from the pro-French community.

"...this led to a series of petty quarrels, growing out of the jealousy of the young Indians of their age, which disquieted the village, and by the party spirit which it engendered, became a source of irritation and trouble in the settlement, and of anxiety on the part of their missionary, who labored in vain to reconcile the difficulties between them.

"Failing in this, he advised the two young men, (one of whom they had named Ka-re-ko-wa) to remove with their families to a place by themselves, where they might enjoy tranquility, and be beyond the reach of annoyance from their comrades.

"This advice they adopted; and taking with them their wives, and followed by their wives' parents, these four families departed in a bark canoe, with their effects, to seek a new country, and in the secluded recesses of the forest, a home." (Hough 1853: 112)

The Tarbells maintained a strong connection to their family in New England. Taking advantage of a period of relative peace between France and England, they went back to visit in 1739, unable to speak anything but Mohawk and garbed as chiefs. Although their family (and even the governor) tried to induce them to stay, they eventually returned to Kahnawake. With this in mind, the departure of the Tarbells at the onset of the French and Indian War makes perfect sense, as does the relative neutrality of the Akwesasne community in that bloody conflict.

A Promise of Protection

As we have seen, British forces swept through the St. Lawrence River Valley in the final days of the war. Sir William Johnson, who had long been concerned of the influence that the French held over their "praying Indians," sought to reassure the Mohawks and other Catholic Indian settlements along the St. Lawrence River by promising protection of their territories under British rule. His assurances must have worked, because in the spring 1764 a number of Mohawks from Akwesasne, Kanesatake, and Kahnawake are said to have taken up the hatchet once again, and while it was not stated just who they were going to war against, it has been suggested that their adversaries were the pro-French Ottawa Chief Pontiac and his alliance of tribes in the West. (Frisch 1971:66)

Mohawk Valley Migration to Akwesasne

Although the Kahnawake migration figures prominently in the historical record, Mohawk oral historians insist that some families from the Mohawk Valley moved into the area either before the Kahnawake migration or shortly thereafter. Little documentation exists as to which came first, the Mohawk Valley families or the group from Kahnawake. One Mohawk oral tradition maintains that the first permanent settlers kept an eye on the St. Lawrence River for the canoes of "enemy scalping parties" coming from the Niagara area. These Indians may have been allies of the French, who had a fort there until 1759. This would suggest that the first permanent settlers came from the Mohawk Valley via the St. Regis River, the Raquette River, and/or other water routes, but there is little evidence to support this and no date is given for their arrival. Yet another tradition maintains that the Kahnawake migrants found a canoe marked with the symbol of the wolf clan and knew that they had relatives in the area. (NAITC1978:61)