

Saratoga County – The fishing grounds of the Mohawk Nation

By Charles Hogan

The Mohawk Indian Nation deeply valued the central and northeast parts of Saratoga County; in other words, the Fish Creek, Saratoga Lake/Lake Lonely, and Kayaderosseras Creek waterway, along with the western bank of the Hudson River. Those areas were their spring and summer fishing grounds. It was the only place in their territory that marine fish - herring, shad, and striped bass - came up the Hudson River from the Atlantic Ocean, in massive numbers, to breed.

Like tribes on both coasts of North America, the Mohawks were semi-nomads. They had permanent villages. In the case of the Mohawks, during historic times, these were on either the north or south banks of the Mohawk River in Schoharie or Montgomery Counties. But, like other semi-nomads, they decamped for their seasonal hunting grounds during the non-winter season. The most important of these hunting grounds for coastal North American semi-nomads were either places with shell fish, or places with seasonal fish runs. The Mohawk River is too far from the coast to have significant shell fish beds, and the Cohoes Falls blocks any fish run. The Hudson River and the Kayaderosseras Creek, however, had very nice fish runs. Herrings bred in the Kayaderosseras, while shad and striped bass hugged the west bank of the Hudson River until they were stopped by the Hudson Falls.

The whole Mohawk economy depended on the easy obtaining of large amounts of fish protein in the spring of the year, at the time when their previous corn harvest was depleted and their new harvest was still growing. Venison was a nice treat, but the seasonal dependability of corn and fish was the basis of their survival.

The Kayaderosseras Creek fish run continued until it was permanently ended by the building of a mill dam along Fish Creek in 1760. The Mohawks, who had been holding on to their Kayaderosseras hunting ground with great persistence against efforts by the white settlers to acquire them through a disputed land sale known as the Kayaderosseras Patent, suddenly became amenable to a land sale after 1760.

The following description of Mohawk fishing practices comes from a 1630's journal kept by Dutch Reformed minister Johannes Megapolensis. It is, possibly, the first description of human activity in Saratoga County in the historical record.

“In the spring, they catch vast quantities of shad and lampreys, which are very large here: they lay them on the bark of trees in the sun and dry them thoroughly hard, and then put them in “notasten” or bags, which they plait from hemp which grows wild here, and keep the fish til winter. When their corn is ripe, they take off the ears and put them in deep pits and preserve them therein the whole winter. They can also make nets and seines in

their fashion and when they want to fish with seines, ten or twelve men will go together and help each other, all of whom own the seine in common.”

Magapolensis, as well as being a keen observer, was, by his own account, the first Dutchman to seriously attempt to learn the Mohawk language. The word “notasten” appears to be a Mohawk word. Seines are fish nets that hang from floats. The dried fish were hung from the rafters of the Mohawk's long houses.

At the time that European fur traders and settlers first reached the central St. Lawrence River and the Hudson River, during the first decade of the Seventeenth Century, the Iroquois Nations were engaged in a Great War against a broad alliance of Algonquin-speaking peoples spanning southern Canada, New England, and the southern Hudson River Valley. The Iroquois, including the Mohawks, were losing that war. The intervention of French explorer and colonist Samuel Champlain, in 1608, on the side of the Algonquins, helped them lose it even more quickly.

When Henry Hudson anchored his ship, the Halfmoon, just south of current day Albany in 1609, Saratoga and Albany were in the hands of what appears to have been the wolf clan (Mohican) of an Algonquin speaking people, whose tribal name translates as “people of the tidal river.” The word Mohawk (probably “flesh eaters”) was their name for a tribe that called themselves Kanien'kehá:ka, “people of the flint.” The best flint in the area comes from a very ancient quarry in Normanskill, NY, which is about 40 miles south of Albany.

Just based on names, it would seem likely that Saratoga being in the possession of the Algonquin tribes was a recent setback of war. Absent a pottery find in Saratoga County (the Mohawks had a distinctive pottery style) that will just have to remain a proposition. Whatever the truth of that guess, the Mohawks gained, or regained, Saratoga County in the Mohawk-Mohegan War of 1624-1628.

The Iroquois, as an identifiable culture, date back to somewhere between 1200AD to 1300AD, according to archeologists. The use of the fishing grounds goes back much earlier. The carbon 14 dating of the remains of camp fires near Lake Lonely, indicates that people were camping here as far back as 85 centuries ago. In other words, Saratoga County was the summer place to be for many more centuries before the Europeans arrived, then it was after they arrived.

Sources: Johannes Megapolensis, A Short Sketch of the Mohawk Indian in the New Netherland, their land, stature, dress, manners, and magistrates, written in the year 1644, (NY Historical Soc. Collection); on semi-nomadic tribes see Daniel M. Cobb, Native People of North America, Great Courses, lectures #1-5; on archeological information, Edwin Barhart, Great Courses, lecture #24; dating of Lake Lonely camp fires comes from Walsh, J.P., Skidmore Archeological Survey; etymology of Mohawk, comes from Collins English Dictionary; clan and tribal name of the Mohican, Wikipedia.