

American Indian Presence in the Honeoye Lake Area

by Joy Lewis

Earliest Settlement at the Lakeshore – Between 100 B.C. and 100 A.D.

About two thousand years ago the northern shore of Honeoye Lake was home to a small settlement of native people. Nomadic hunter-gatherers, these early residents fished the waters of the lake with fiber-woven nets, and hunted woodland game using stone-tipped spears, thrown with the aid of an atlatl.

Evidence of their presence has been unearthed at an 85-acre property situated at the foot of Honeoye Lake known as the **Morrow Site** (in reference to the property owner at the time the site was first excavated). Archaeological finds of this period include flint blades, fabric-imprinted pottery, tubular ceramic tobacco pipes, large net sinkers, and trapezoid slate gorgets (ornaments worn around the neck).

For a space of time, perhaps seventy years, the site was occupied, then abandoned. More than twelve centuries passed during which the site remained uninhabited.

Next at the Lake Shore – Between 1300 and 1400 A.D.

Some long time later, another small band of indigenous peoples made their home on acreage identified as the **Morrow Site**. This population cultivated native plants, such as sunflowers, and little barley. They took bluegill, perch, bass, and pike from the lake and creeks. The men hunted the woodlands for deer, bear, wolf, beaver, and other wildlife.

Twentieth century excavations at the Morrow Site unearthed evidence of a fortified village of several hundred inhabitants during this period, with more than forty burials discovered. Relics dug up at the foot of the lake and at various other sites on the west side of Honeoye Lake included incised pottery, right angle trumpet pipes, small triangular Madison projectile points, bone tools, ornamental antler combs, small bar celts, and marine shell beads.

At Creek Side – 1550 A.D.

An Iroquoian-speaking tribe presumed to have moved from the Ohio River Valley by the eleventh century populated western New York from the Niagara River to the Genesee. They called themselves the Onondowaga: “People of the Great Hill.” The Dutch of New Amsterdam called this native group *sinnikins* in reference to one of their largest villages Osininka; this eventually became “Seneca.”

The Seneca lived in small, palisaded, hilltop villages of about fifty inhabitants: matriarchal extended family groups. The tribe was divided into two moieties of four clans each: Wolf, Bear, Turtle, Sandpiper; and Deer, Beaver, Heron, and Hawk. Inter-marriage within a moiety was forbidden. The men were hunters and fishermen, the women, farmers. After occupying a spot for a decade or two, a village would pack up and move on to a new location.

In the decades of the 1540s to the 1560s these small family groups, responding to aggression from other tribes, began to organize themselves into larger affiliated bands. Two principal Seneca settlements of this time period have been identified in the present-day township of Richmond: the **Belcher Site** (near the intersection of Belcher Road and CR 37, near the creek) and **Reed Fort** (on the west side of Reed Road, just to the east of the Livonia town line).

It was around this time, at mid-century, that the Seneca joined with four other New York tribes to form the Iroquois League. The five tribes, occupying territory from east of the Hudson River westward to Lake Erie were the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca – Keepers of the Western Door. The Iroquois' name for themselves is *Haudenosaunee*, meaning “The People of the Longhouse.” It was the French settlers and their Algonquian allies along the St. Lawrence River who used the name Iroquois. Linguists offer two theories of the meaning and origin for the word. It may be a Huron word – *ininakhoiw* – meaning “poisonous snakes” or, perhaps, the French interpretation of the Iroquoian words *hiro kone*: “I have spoken.”

The settlement known as **Reed Fort** was a five-acre site on property once belonging to George Reed. It was a sizeable (pre-Iroquoian) Seneca village, situated in a natural fortification between two ravines on the Hemlock Outlet creek. In 1850 the area was covered by a dense growth of oak and pine. When Mr. Reed began preparations to clear the lower slope, he discovered evidence of the Indian village. Four excavations conducted by Arthur C. Parker, archeologist of the New York State Museum, were performed between 1905 and 1916. In 1912 the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences found the only known grave site.

Historians believe that 150 to 200 Seneca occupied the site for about fifty years. This was a community composed of a score of longhouses, the traditional Seneca dwelling. Excavations, both formal and informal, have unearthed thousands of artifacts, as well as the footprint of a longhouse, 45 feet long by 20 feet wide. Reed Fort is one of the oldest and richest pre-Iroquoian sites in western New York and provides invaluable insight into the Indian culture of its time. Finds at Reed Fort included the bones of several animals: deer, moose, elk, black bear, raccoon, rabbit, woodchuck, muskrat, skunk, gray squirrel, fox, bat, otter, mink, wildcat, panther, wolf, dog, and beaver. Residue of foodstuffs found there suggests they grew corn, squash, beans, and tobacco, and gathered hickory nuts, acorns, walnuts, and butternuts.

Shortly before 1600 the native people living in the future township of Richmond moved, consolidating with other groups to form large Iroquois villages in Lima, Avon, Livonia, Honeoye Falls, and Victor. It is estimated that there were more than 17,000 Seneca living in western New York in 1687, the year their territory was invaded by French Canadian forces under the leadership of Jacques Denonville, Governor General of New France. Four principal Seneca villages were destroyed by that summertime raid and many lesser settlements routed. Sixty years elapsed before the Seneca returned to the area of Honeoye Lake.

Third Lakeside Settlement – 1750 -1780 A.D.

About the year 1750 a small band of Seneca settled at the north end of the lake at, or very near, the former site occupied by two different cultures centuries earlier: the **Morrow Site**. Contact with European settlers along the St. Lawrence, Mohawk, Susquehanna, and Delaware Rivers had influenced the Iroquois during the previous century. This third settlement at the Morrow Site was a village of about 80 people, living in single- and double-family log cabins.

On September 11, 1779, General John Sullivan's Continental Army arrived at Honeoye Lake. The Seneca village they found deserted, for the inhabitants had fled to Fort Niagara where many of them died during the harsh winter of 1779-80.