

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-12 The Iroquois Confederacy

I: The Onondaga and the Central Council Fire

Jackson, Michigan, and

Williams, Arizona

July, 1973

Mr. Richard H. Nolte

Institute of Current World Affairs

535 Fifth Avenue

New York, New York 10017

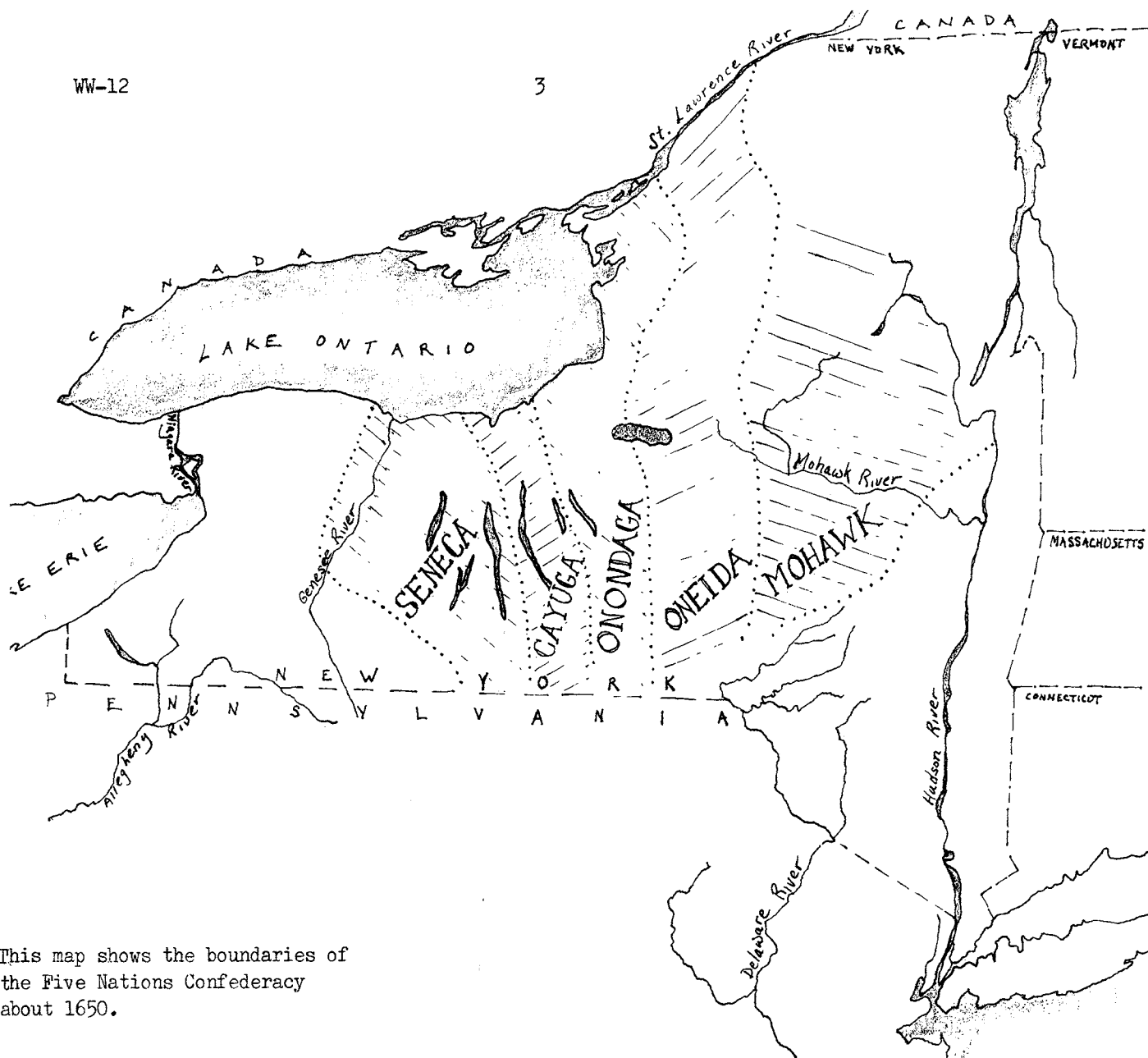
Dear Mr. Nolte:

For three centuries before the American Revolution, what came to be known as New York State was the homeland of the most powerful and sophisticated Indian nation north of the Aztecs-- the Iroquois Confederacy. To end warfare among themselves and to protect their territories against other Indians, the chiefs of five neighboring Iroquois states formed the only native American alliance that has survived to the present day. According to traditional history, it was a Huron visionary named Deganawidah, assisted by a brilliant orator named Hiawatha ("He Was Awake"), who conceived the Confederacy and persuaded the five nations to subscribe to the elaborate constitution under which it operates.

"I am Deganawidah. With the statesmen of the League of Five Nations, I plant the Tree of Great Peace.... I name the tree Tsioneratasekowa, the Great White Pine.... Roots have spread out from the Tree of Great Peace, one to the north, one to the east, one to the south, and one to the west. These are the Great White Roots, and their nature is Peace and Strength.... You, the League of Five Nations Chiefs, be firm so that if a tree should fall upon your joined hands, it shall not separate you or weaken your hold. So shall the strength of the union be preserved." *

Besides securing domestic peace among the Five Nations, the Iroquois eventually dominated all other Indian states from the St. Lawrence River to the Tennessee, and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi. The Confederacy homeland included the major east-west trail (now the New York Thruway), the eastern Great Lakes, and the headwaters of all four major river systems: the Delaware, Susquehanna, Ohio, and St. Lawrence. When Europeans settled the

* For the first 400 years, the more than 100 "articles" of the Great Law were preserved by memory assisted by wampum. In the twentieth century they have been translated into English and published in several versions. These excerpts come from one published by White Roots of Peace, Roosevelt town, N.Y. 13683.



This map shows the boundaries of the Five Nations Confederacy about 1650.

Non-Indian Americans have tended to make two assumptions about the Iroquois: one, that the Confederacy ceased to operate when the separate nations signed treaties, and, two, that post-Revolutionary settlements extinguished Iroquois sovereignty. I visited the Iroquois Confederacy nations in May and June. The Confederacy is alive. It is struggling to regenerate missing members and revitalize those that have atrophied. And it is asserting its sovereignty at every opportunity. The League of the Iroquois represents for Indian activists across the country the best surviving example of pre-Columbian self-government. As such, it symbolizes native resistance to the elective-council form of government that operates on most reservations.

Iroquois is a French word based on the Algonkian Irinkhoiw, "real adders" . (The French succeeded the Algonkian tribes as arch enemies of the Iroquois.) The people of the Confederacy called themselves Ongwanonsionni "we are of the extended lodge" . They not only lived, worshipped, feasted, and held councils in longhouses, but also replicated the longhouse in the abstract structure of their League, and superimposed the longhouse floorplan on the geography of Iroquoia. Thus the Seneca, the westernmost nation, are the Keepers of the Western Door, the Mohawk are the Keepers of the Eastern Door, and the Onondaga, in the middle of the Five Nations, the Keepers of the Central Council Fire. Until 1715, the Confederacy consisted of these three nations, plus the Cayuga (between the western door and the central council fire) and the Oneida (between the eastern door and the central council fire).

The longhouse was easily extended. At the center there was the central fire tended by the matriarch of the extended family inhabiting the longhouse. Along the corridors stretching in two directions from the center were subsidiary household fires belonging to the nuclear families related to the matriarch matrilineally. Each of these household fires was shared by two nuclear families living opposite one another across the fire. As daughters married, the longhouse could be extended to accommodate their new families. And as granddaughters married, it could be extended further. As prisoners of war were adopted, more room would be made.

In the same way, the political longhouse sheltered a changing, growing population through its history. The so-called Massachusetts Indians lived as wards of the League in Oneida territory, and the Delaware joined the Confederacy as a protectorate and tributary before the Revolution.* In exchange for a place in the Longhouse, they gave up independence of action against non-allied nations, and promised to abide by rulings of the Council of Chiefs, on which they were represented by their Iroquois guardians. (When the Delaware attacked a western nation at peace with the League, the Council of Chiefs deprived the Delaware of all authority to make war or direct their internal affairs. The Chiefs "reduced them to the status of women," so signifying by presenting the Delaware chiefs with a woman's skirt and a corn mortar.)

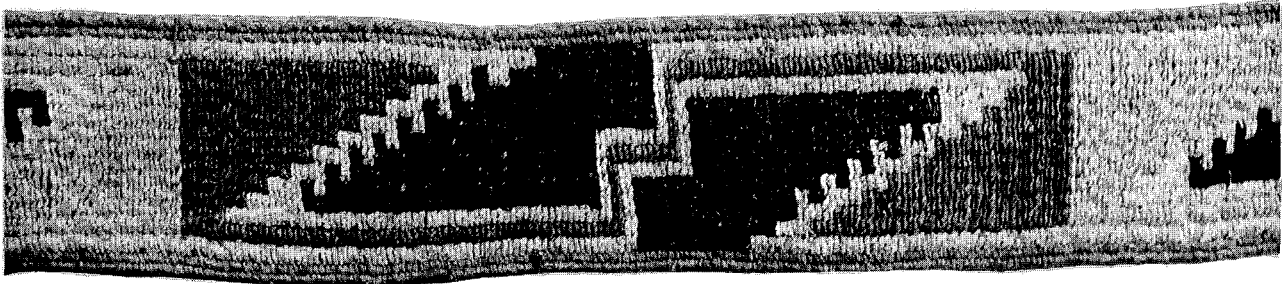
Only one nation, the Iroquois-speaking Tuscarora, was admitted to co-equal status in the League and allowed to send a representative to Council meetings. Driven out of North Carolina by the Europeans, they entered the Longhouse as "little brothers" to the Seneca. With the addition of the Tuscarora, the League came to be known as the Six Nations.

* The term Massachusetts Indians refers to three bands of homeless Algonkians-- the Stockbridge, Munsee, and Brotherton, who were remnants of east-coast tribes dispersed by the Europeans: Moheconnuck, Mohegan, Narraganset, Pequot, Stonington, Farmington, and Montauk. Their descendants still live on reservations in Wisconsin.

Sitting one rainy morning in the trailer home of an Onondaga chief on a back road of the Onondaga Nation a few miles south of Syracuse, I began to understand the nature of the Confederacy's fight against extinction.

"Now, as I understand it," I said, indicating that I did not understand it, "no one chief has authority over other chiefs, but there is one, called Tododaho, who has more prestige than the others and presides over meetings of the League Council."

No response. But then, I hadn't asked.



"Is there a Tododaho now?"

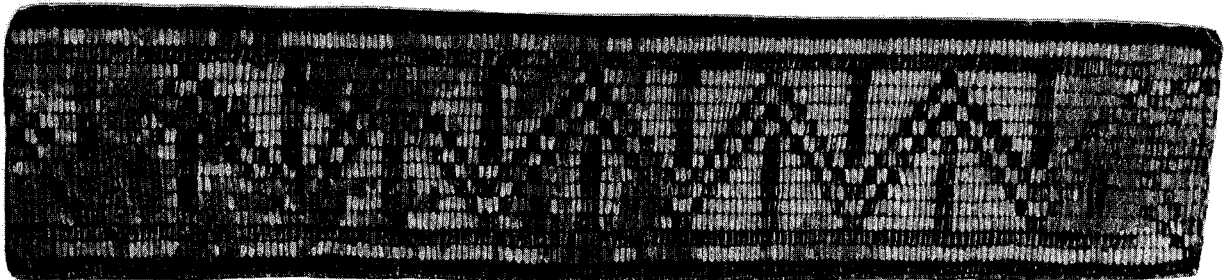
"Yes."

"And who is he?"

"Tododaho."

"What's his name?"

"Tododaho."



When an Iroquois becomes a chief, he takes on the name of the chieftainship to which he has been appointed. To me, the custom expresses continuity. But the chief was telling me that each Tododaho is the embodiment of the original chief spirit. The other 48 League chiefs are living manifestations of the first chiefs, too. It is the Iroquois apostolic succession. There is only one Tododaho.

This Onondaga chief is looking at me to see if I understand and accept the mystical claim. He seems belligerent, as if he does not expect me to believe. He wears his

hair loose around his shoulders, and a beaded medallion around his neck. The Confederacy is more than a system of political organization. It is a world view, something in the realm of ideas. This young chief and other Iroquois nationalists work to preserve and renew the system, the state, but they also guard the idea and its emblems against patronizing intellectualism.

We talk about a climbing lane, something concrete. Interstate 81 cuts through the eastern part of the Onondaga Nation, under the terms of an easement granted to the State of New York in the early 1950's, when the chiefs were meeker. As trucks climb the long hill that forms the eastern slope of the Onondaga valley, they lose speed. Two years ago the State of New York sent a crew to construct a climbing lane. The Onondagas had permitted the construction of a four-lane highway. They would not allow the State to add a fifth lane. The State insisted that within the strip of land already granted they could build a fifth lane without Onondaga permission. A band of Onondaga lay down before the bulldozers. The chief said, no, the fifth lane would not have increased the area of land taken by the State. But it would have represented a variance from the Onondagas' understanding of the use to which the land would be put.

"So, you weren't going to lose any more land. You stopped them from building it just—"

"That's right."

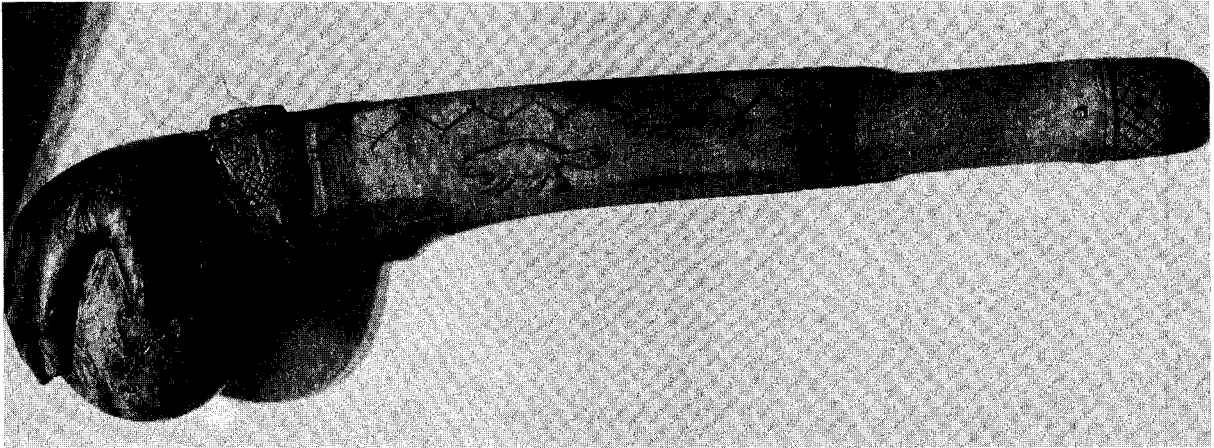
"—as a matter of principle?"

He said slowly, "As a matter of principle."

I once had a wonderful coloring book. To make colors appear in all the right places, all you had to do was paint the whole page with plain water. As I responded to this man's words with what I thought was easy, non-reactive credulity, a pattern was emerging. These Iroquois are dead serious.

The people of the State of New York seem to take pride in the presence of the Iroquois among them. They are a part of the heritage of the Empire State. The non-Indians around Syracuse spoke rather fondly of the Onondaga. New York State Assemblyman Leonard Bersani, from Syracuse, is chairman of the legislature's Committee on Indian Affairs, and he tries "to play an active part in solving Indian problems." Presumably he was trying to accord the Confederacy all due respect this spring when he invited the Chiefs of the Six Nations to meet with him and his Committee at a Syracuse motel. He wanted to discuss Indian legislation.

The meeting lasted twenty minutes. It did not count. The League of the Iroquois,



like any government, has its procedures for the convening of the Chiefs--

"When there is any business to be transacted and the Council of the League is not in session, a messenger shall be sent... to the Firekeepers (Onondaga)...with a full statement of the business to be considered. The Atotarho (Tododaho) shall call his cousin chiefs together and consider whether the business is of sufficient importance to call the attention of the League. If so, he shall send messengers to summon all the chiefs of the League and to assemble beneath the Tree of the Great Peace."

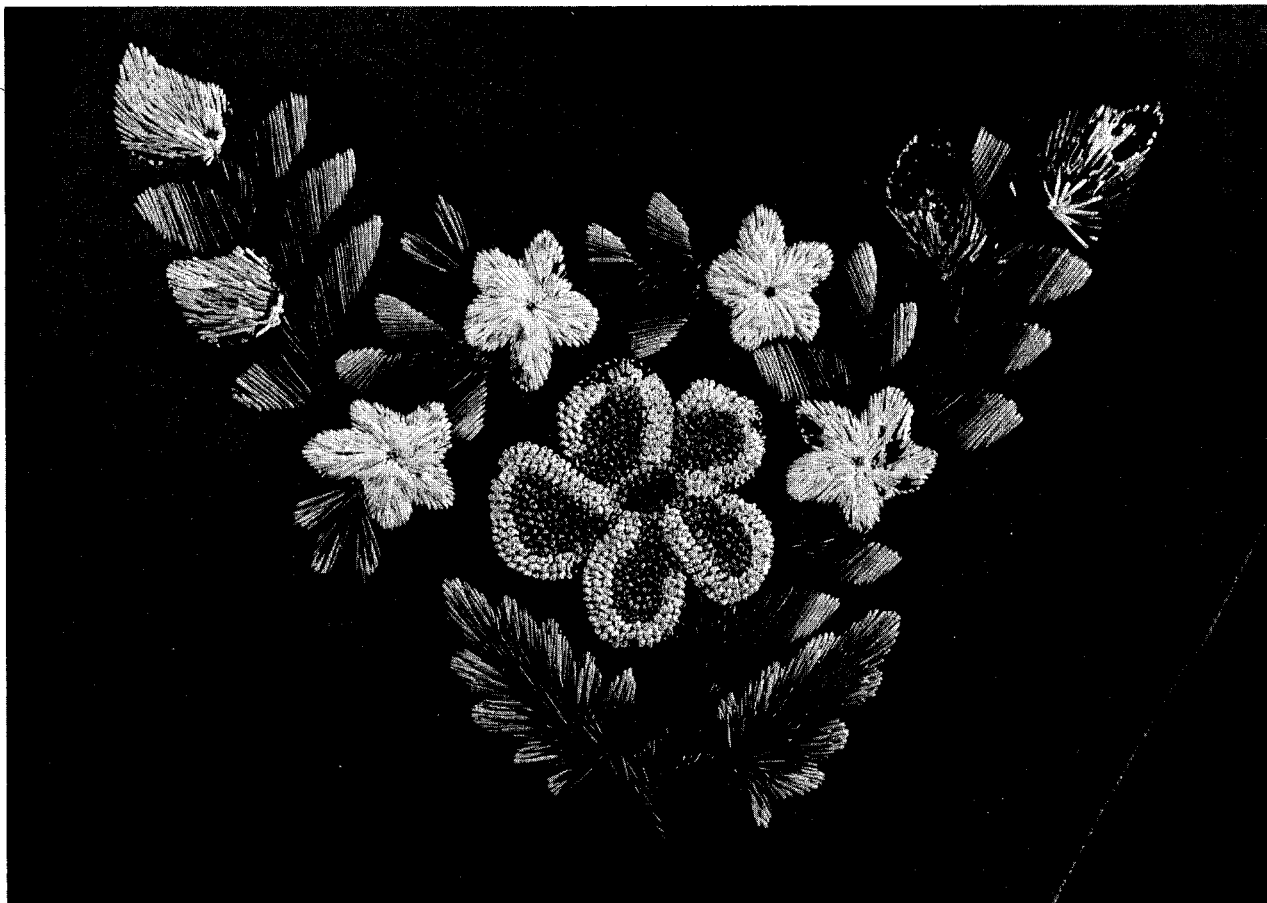
and a place for such meetings— the Onondaga Council House, a language for discussions among the Chiefs-- Iroquois, and a disaffinity for Holiday Inns.

Some weeks later, the Council of Chiefs met at Onondaga with the men from Albany. But they kept silent on the Indian legislation. The Confederacy will not seek to influence, even through advice, the legislative process of the State of New York. Among the bills was one proposed in response to the demand of certain Iroquois that they be allowed free travel on the New York Thruway while the State legislature was meeting, in keeping with treaties between the Iroquois and the State. But the Six Nations Chiefs said that advising on or supporting State legislation would be a violation of the principles of non-intervention contained in the Two-Row Wampum. Should the Confederacy need to treat with the Americans, they would treat with the government of the United States, nation to sovereign nation. Finally, if the State of New York wanted to honor the principles of the Two-Row Wampum-- showing two parallel lines of purple in a field of white, it would eliminate the position of Onondaga Indian Agent and allow the Onondaga to perform what are now the Agent's functions. Otherwise, the Chiefs had nothing to say.

The Onondaga Indian agent is the last of his kind in New York State. He took the part-time job because he had known and liked Onondaga people as neighbors for years. Now he feels a little abused. His official duties are few: to distribute annual payments of salt, cash, and cloth according to the treaties; to keep the tribal rolls; and to help when he is asked. He is a soft-spoken, gracious, white-haired man apparently in his fifties. He talks about himself and his job easily, and the theme that runs through his remarks is that the Onondagas, particularly certain younger chiefs, seem to defeat themselves. Refusing to advise on legislation is typical, but another instance distresses him more. One year the legislature voted to add to the annual appropriation for the salt payments an additional sum to be given to the Onondaga Chiefs to use in the tribe's behalf however they chose. They refused it.

The Onondagas do exasperate. For purposes of education, the territory of the Onondagas is served by the Lafayette Public Schools. One of the elementary schools of the small, rural Lafayette district is the all-Indian Onondaga School, staffed by a mixture of Indian and non-Indian teachers. When they leave there, Onondaga children attend Lafayette High, where they make up about twenty per cent of the enrollment. The two ethnic groups do not always get along well. They toss epithets back and forth-- "Cochise!" and "Custer!", and teachers have become wary of topics like Columbus's discovery of America. Until lacrosse was introduced into the high school athletic program, Onondaga students rarely stayed on to graduate. Now drop-outs are few. With lacrosse came Onondaga teachers and coaches, including one of the most effective and aggressive advocates of Iroquois rights anywhere in the Confederacy. The gradual accommodation of Onondaga interests by the Lafayette schools does not seem to have been the result of concessions wrung from them by the Indians, although the Council of Chiefs of the Onondaga Nation have steadily pressed for the improvement of their children's education. Rather, the local white community has met Onondaga pressure with decency and willingness. But the Onondagas seem to make it hard for the white people to help them.

For years the Chiefs and Onondaga people generally have complained that no Onondaga sat on the school board. (That is a complaint among Indian people all over the United States. The majority of Indian children attend public schools, but only about one in ten of the boards serving Indians includes Indians in its membership.) Two years ago the Lafayette School Board altered its rules to allow Onondaga people to stand as candidates for the Board and vote in Board elections. "If they had put up a candidate, people would have seen to it he was elected," one official told me.



People saw the point of placing an Indian on the Board. They would have elected him. People do that kind of thing in Lafayette, New York.

The elections have come and gone, and the School Board is still all white. The Onondagas never put up a candidate. "You know what they say?" a local citizen asked me. "They say, 'We don't vote.'"

"We don't vote," the young chief explained. He did not doubt that the people of the Lafayette district would accept an Indian candidate. But the two rows run parallel forever. Signing petitions and voting are the paraphernalia of the United States, the State of New York. The School Board itself is a piece of foreign government.

Some Onondagas see the solution in a complete school system for Indians only, under the direction of the Council of Chiefs of the Onondaga Nation. The Chiefs have submitted a proposal along those lines to the State Department of Education, which is charged with carrying out treaty provisions for the education of Indian children. To Lafayette school personnel, the idea looks impractical. An enrollment

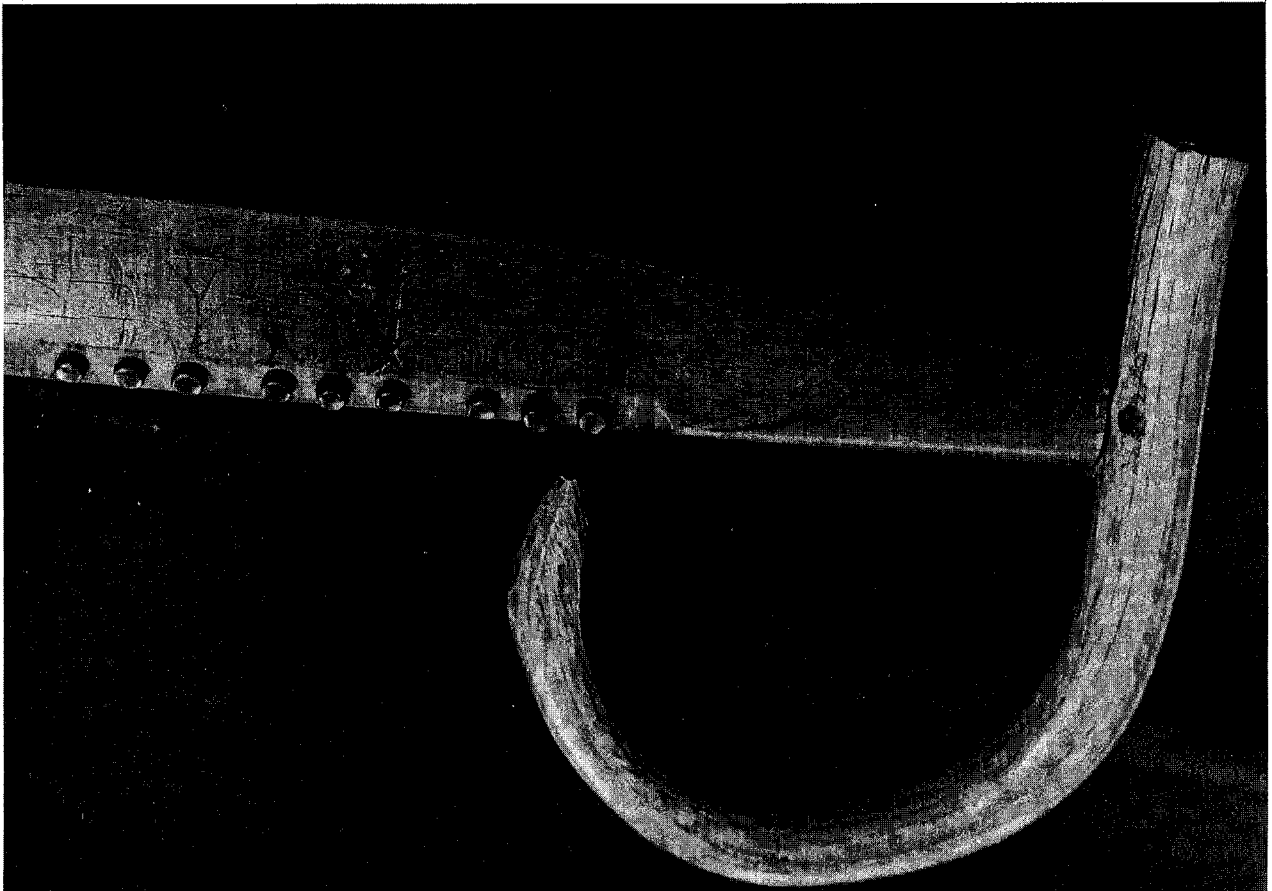
of about 300 cannot justify the plant, equipment, and variety of personnel necessary to a complete school system. Yet that seems to be the only answer to the Onondaga demand that their children be educated in schools the Nation directs.

Assemblyman Bursanti, the Indian Agent, the school officials, all are representatives of institutions that hinder rather than facilitate the fulfillment of the responsibilities of the United States to the Six Nations, according to the traditionalist Iroquois view. Although the U.S. Congress has shifted its responsibilities toward the Iroquois to the State of New York through legislation, the Six Nations have never agreed to that revision in the treaties they signed in the 1780's and 1790's with federal commissioners. The Confederacy, say the nationalists, was never conquered by the Continental armies. To this day, they say, the Confederacy retains sovereignty. (The nature and extent of that sovereignty are points of debate among Iroquois and white alike, but even the most imperialist view of Confederacy affairs after the Revolution begrudges the Iroquois a degree of sovereignty. Advising the Congress in 1783, General Philip Schuyler argued that, given the objective of removing the Iroquois from land in New York and Pennsylvania, the United States had two choices: military conquest or dispersal through the gradual attrition that was sure to result as white settlers entered Iroquois country. He favored the latter, since it saved "the expense, trifling as it may be, of purchase.") As a sovereign state, the Confederacy rightly treats not with New York State but with the U.S. as a whole. Further, the transfer of responsibilities to the Iroquois from Washington to Albany violates the law of the United States, since, the Confederacy nationalists point out, the Constitution prohibits Congress's passing laws that abridge treaties with foreign nations.

So we must not think the Chiefs ungrateful when they refuse New York's largess. They simply do not want to appear to recognize the State's right to regulate their affairs. When they chose not to accept free fishing licenses (and the special grant, and the right to vote for the School Board, and so on), they were not acting out of orneriness and hostility. Or, at least, not only out of these feelings. They were asserting sovereignty.

These questions of law and diplomacy have practical meaning for Onondaga families. Health care has been promised the Onondaga by the eighteenth century treaties and supplied fairly regularly through the years. An Onondaga chief

notes that recently, with the shift of responsibility from the federal to state government, services declined. (New York always performed functions for its resident Indians that the BIA ordinarily performed in other states. New York's responsibility for federal obligations to the Indians was formally recognized by law in 1948.) Until the Roosevelt years, he says, there was a physician living among the Onondaga. Then he left and a physician visited several times each week. Now the state has given the responsibility to the county. A doctor and nurse come out once a week, Thursday afternoon. "Just be sure you don't get sick on Friday," the chief says. When the people complain, they are told to go to the county. But when the old chiefs talked that treaty into the Two Row Wampum, it was not with the county.



This picture shows one of several devices the Iroquois used to record events that would later be recounted from memory. It is a Condolence Cane, made about 1570. It is about three feet long, and has five beveled surfaces set with pegs. Each set of pegs has corresponding pictographs scratched into the flat surface of the cane. Each of the five sets of pictographs represents the League Chiefs of one of the Five original Nations of the League, and indicates their seating arrangement at Council meetings. This cane was used until the Tuscarora were admitted (about 1720), when it became obsolete. The cane was used when the official roll was called at the opening of League meetings. The roll was also called when the chiefs met to mourn a deceased chief and confirm his successor. Thus the term "condolence."

At the time of the founding of the League, according to traditional history, all the chiefs of all the five nations had been persuaded to accept the Great Law except one-- the Onondaga chief Tododaho (also rendered "Atotarho"). Tododaho means "tangled" in Iroquois, and reminds us that Tododaho is pictured in the myth as having a mass of snakes for hair. It was Hiawatha who overcame Tododaho's resistance and sealed the confederation of the Iroquois by suggesting that Tododaho and his Onondaga chiefs be given honorific responsibilities under the Great Law. ("He Who Combs" is a possible translation of the name Hiawatha.) The Onondaga became the Keepers of the League's Council Fire, Keepers of the Sacred Wampum, moderators of League discussions, presiding hosts for all Council sessions.

"You, Atotarho, and your thirteen cousin statesmen shall faithfully keep the space about the Council Fire clean, and you shall allow neither dust nor dirt to accumulate. I lay a long seagull wing before you as a broom. As a weapon against a crawling creature, I lay a stick before you so that you may thrust it away from the Council Fire. If you fail to cast it out, then call the rest of the united statesmen to your aid."

After 200 years of disunity and defections within the Confederacy, and withering disregard of Iroquois institutions by outsiders, the Onondaga continue to tend the fire. Onondaga is **the firm**, unyielding center around which the Confederacy is working to renew itself. In the next two newsletters, I want to describe the **state** of the Confederacy today and its efforts towards solidarity.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

P.S. My thanks to the Cranbrook Institute of Science and the Flint Institute of Arts for permission to photograph objects appearing in this and the next two newsletters. The top photo on page 5 shows a section of an Iroquois burden strap probably made of nettle fiber, with moosehair decorative patterns. The lower photo on page 5 shows a strip of woven quillwork. Both pieces were probably made before the Revolution. The war club on page 7 is Seneca, made about 1850. The photo on page 9 shows embroidery in dyed moosehair on stiff red broadcloth. It was intended to be the top piece of a moccasin. Except for the two strips shown on page 5, all the artifacts in these three newsletters reflect strong European influence in design and technique.

Received in New York on August 13, 1973.