

Before There Was A Batavia

For current residents of Batavia, it is difficult to imagine what was here in the centuries and millennia before our own time. However, in order to gain some context for the last 214 years, we ought to go back at least to the last glacial period, the end of which is thought to have been about 10,500 B.C.E, i.e., approximately 12,500 years ago. The great sheet of ice that covered our part of the world is known as the “Wisconsin Episode.” Ice covered most of Canada, the Upper Midwest, and New England. The Great Lakes are a result, just five of the ways in which the geography of North America north of the Ohio River was radically altered. (“Last Glacial Period,” *Wikipedia*, online, accessed 16 April 2014)

As the last glacier receded, our area initially was a tundra before eventually becoming heavily forested. Among the forms of animal life that returned to the area were mastodons. These very large animals were a mammal species related to elephants and became extinct perhaps 10,000 years ago during a period of mass extinction perhaps due to rapid climate change. (“Mastodon,” *Wikipedia*, online, accessed 16 April 2014) The *Daily News* of October 13, 1908 reported the discovery of mastodon bones and teeth in a garden near Willow Street in Batavia, property then owned by ex-mayor Willis D. Sanford (“Great Bones Brought to Surface,” *The Daily News*, Batavia, N.Y., 13 October 1908). In the last four decades, remains of mastodons have been found at the “Hiscock site” in the Town of Byron north of Batavia.

One of the most interesting local changes produced by glaciation was a change in the route taken by the Tonawanda Creek. Originally it continued flowing north from Batavia and its waters eventually ended in Lake Ontario. It is only since the last glacier that it has turned west at Batavia and flowed into Lake Erie. (*The Daily News*, Batavia, N.Y., 10 August 1907)

According to the Buffalo Museum of Science, the first humans to inhabit our region showed up about 11,000 years ago. They were nomadic and followed herds of animals. Eventually, humans in this area became less nomadic and lived in villages, grew corn, squash, and beans, and used pottery as indicated by earthworks and other evidence of prehistoric human activity. Those inhabitants, of which little is known, were conquered and exterminated by the Seneca Indians ca. 1650 C.E. (“Tonawanda Creek Watershed Map Guide,” *Tonawanda Creek*

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Watershed Committee, n.d. and Seaver 2, *A Historic Sketch of the Village of Batavia* [Batavia, N.Y.: William Seaver & Son, 1849] pp. 1-2)

The Seneca Indians were part of an association of six linguistically-related tribes thought to number about 5,500 when the first European explorers encountered them in the 1600s. Initially five tribes were involved consisting of, from east to west, the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas. Early in the 1700s, they were joined by the Tuscaroras who immigrated from present-day North Carolina. While referred to by European settlers as “The Iroquois Confederacy,” these six tribes referred to themselves as “The Haudenosaunee,” i.e., “people of the longhouse.” The Confederacy is thought to have been established at some point in the period between 1350 and 1600 C.E. (Loretta Hall, *Iroquois Confederacy*, online, accessed 22 February 2013)

Among the Iroquois, extended families of up to 50 people lived together in bark-covered, wooden-framed houses 50-150 ft. long. Villages of 300-600 people were protected by triple-walled stockades of wooden stakes 15-20 ft. tall. The men set out on hunting expeditions to provide meat and hides while women tended to farming. The hunters used bows and arrows for larger game and blowguns for smaller. About every 15 years, depletion of nearby game, firewood, and soil would lead to moving. The men would find and clear an alternative site and the village would then rebuild. Historically, there was no private ownership of land. Instead, tribal land was held in common. (Loretta Hall, *Iroquois Confederacy*, online, accessed 22 February 2013)

Iroquois tribes were each organized into eight clans. At birth, individuals became a member of his/her mother’s clan. Members of the same clan were regarded as blood relatives even if in different tribes. Each clan was led by a clan mother. In consultation with other women, the clan mother chose one or more men to serve as the clan chiefs. Each chief was appointed for life, but the clan mother and her advisors could remove him from office for bad behavior or dereliction of duty. (Loretta Hall, *Iroquois Confederacy*, online, accessed 22 February 2013)

In the period immediately preceding the establishment of Batavia, this area was heavily wooded. Contrary to what some have claimed, there was no Indian village here. However, there were two Indian trails that intersected just as, today, state highways intersect in Batavia. One of the trails ran from the Hudson River to Lake Erie. The other ran from present-day Geneseo to present-day Lewiston. (“Tonawanda Creek Watershed Map Guide,” *Tonawanda Creek Watershed Committee*, n.d.) Seaver described the Indian trail from the Hudson River to Lake Erie as well beaten, about 1 ft. wide, and worn 3-6 inches deep. It crossed the Genesee River near present-day Avon and continued west to a point about two miles east of the present

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site of the 1841 Courthouse in Batavia. There it avoided ponds and marshes in the area by bearing off in a southwest direction to the east bank of the Tonawanda Creek near the great bend. Circling the bend, it continued on high ground to the present-day intersection of West Main Street and Lewiston Road. From there, it turned northwest toward present-day Oakfield. A summer trail served as a cut-off when the ground permitted and followed the route of present-day East Main Street and East Main Street Road. (William Seaver 1, *A Historic Sketch of the Village of Batavia* [Batavia, N.Y.: William Seaver & Son, 1849] pp. 3-5)

While there was no Indian Village here and the area was heavily wooded, there was a space grassy and devoid of trees, amounting to between two and three acres, located between the present sites of the 1841 Courthouse and Holland Land Office Museum. There was also a large natural spring there. The area served as a campground and meeting place. According to Seaver, it was called “De-on-go-wah” which translates as “the grand hearing place.” (William Seaver 2, *A Historic Sketch of the Village of Batavia* [Batavia, N.Y.: William Seaver & Son, 1849] pp. 3-5)

During the American Revolution, the Iroquois were more or less allies of the British and conducted raids on the New York and Pennsylvania frontiers. This fact precipitated the “Clinton-Sullivan Campaign of 1779” when General George Washington sent American forces to destroy the villages and food supplies of the Cayuga and Seneca Indians. By the end of the expedition, Sullivan’s army had destroyed over 40 villages and destroyed at least 160,000 bushels of corn and an untold number of other vegetables and fruit. Meanwhile, over 5,000 Indians fled to Fort Niagara near Lewiston to seek protection from the British. (“The Clinton-Sullivan Campaign of 1779,” *National Park Service*, online, accessed 17 April 2014)

Despite the support that the defeated Iroquois had given to the British during the American Revolution, in a 1784 meeting with the Iroquois at Rome’s Fort Stanwix, New York State granted recognition to Indian ownership of most of the land in the western part of the state (Frederick Beers, *Gazetteer and Biographical Record of Genesee County, N.Y. 1788-1890* [Syracuse, N.Y.: J. W. Vose & Co., Publisher, 1890] p. 20). However, Indian ownership of this land then became complicated by competing claims between New York and Massachusetts that resulted from the charter originally granted to the Massachusetts Colony by a British king. Both states claimed this area as their own. The problem was resolved by a 1786 agreement between New York and Massachusetts that involved drawing what was called the “Pre-emption Line,” a line that passed near present-day Geneva and ran from Lake Ontario to the Pennsylvania state line. Under terms of the 1786 agreement, New York was to govern the area west of the Pre-emption Line while Massachusetts took title to the land. (Larry Barnes, *The Brisbanes of Batavia* [Batavia, N.Y.: self-published, 2009] p. 1) The resulting conflict between both Indian

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and Massachusetts ownership of the land was handled by the understanding that any party purchasing land from Massachusetts also had to remunerate the Iroquois (Frederick W. Beers, *Gazetteer and biographical record of Genesee County, N.Y. 1788-1890* [Syracuse, N.Y.: J. W. Vose & Co., Publisher, 1890] pp. 21-22).

Massachusetts set out to sell its western New York holdings to private investors. Sales were made to many different individuals with the land in the Batavia area and westward eventually being purchased in 1791 by Robert Morris, the same Robert Morris who played a major role in financing George Washington's military campaigns in the Revolution and after whom one of Batavia's schools was later named. Two years later, Morris, in turn, entered into an agreement with a group of Dutch investors who sought to buy most of the land in his possession. Those investors came to be identified simply as "The Holland Land Company." The land they wanted to buy was later commonly referred to as "The Purchase." (Larry Barnes, *The Brisbanes of Batavia* [Batavia, N.Y.: self-published, 2009] p. 1)

Before the Holland Land Company would pay Morris, it insisted that all possible Seneca Indian claims to the land be extinguished first. As a consequence, in 1797 negotiations between Robert Morris and the Senecas took place near present-day Genesee at a place called "Big Tree." Following several days of difficult talks, a settlement was reached (some say with the help of bribes paid to key women in the tribe) and the Senecas formally relinquished all but a small portion of the land for a payment of \$100,000. The areas retained by the Seneca Indians became reservations. (Larry Barnes, *The Brisbanes of Batavia* [Batavia, N.Y.: self-published, 2009] p. 1)

Once the Holland Land Company was satisfied that it would have clear title to the land, dealings with Robert Morris were concluded and preparations for surveying The Purchase were begun. The plan of the Holland Land Company was to divide the land into large segments which would then be quickly sold off to major developers. The individual chosen to perform the necessary survey work was Joseph Ellicott. The choice of Ellicott was a good one because he and his brothers had established a reputation for great skill in earlier work they had undertaken throughout the country. Among the most notable surveys done by the Ellicotts were the western border between New York and Pennsylvania and the City of Washington, D.C. The survey work on The Purchase commenced in 1798. (Larry Barnes, *The Brisbanes of Batavia* [Batavia, N.Y.: self-published, 2009] p. 2)

The survey was essentially completed by January of 1800. At this time, Joseph Ellicott returned to Philadelphia where he met with Paolo Busti, the American representative of the Holland Land Company, presumably to discuss the survey results. Later in the same year,

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Ellicott was appointed the resident land agent in charge of selling the land on The Purchase. For his work as the resident land agent, it was agreed that he would receive a liberal salary, a grant of 6,000 acres of land, and a 5% commission on sales. (Frederick Beers, *Gazetteer and Biographical Record of Genesee County, N.Y. 1788-1790* [Syracuse, N.Y.: J. W. Vose & Co., Publisher, 1890] p. 188) After his newest appointment, Joseph Ellicott returned to The Purchase and spent the next two decades shaping the development of western New York.