Other Native Peoples in Saratoga County

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OTHER NATIVE PEOPLES IN SARATOGA COUNTY

Although Saratoga County was originally the homeland of the Mohican Indians, several other groups of Native people moved here as a result of European settlements elsewhere.

After King Philip's War in 1675-6, a large number of Native refugees from the Massachusetts tribes in the middle Connecticut River Valley temporarily relocated to New York State, at the invitation of Governor Edmund Andros. Native people from Agawam, Nonotuck, Pocomtuck, Sokoki and Wuronoco moved to the refugee village forming at a place called Schaghticoke, meaning "where the waters meet," near the confluence of the Hoosic and Tomhannock Rivers east of Stillwater. (Despite the name, this village was not part of the Schaghticoke Tribe on the Housatonic River in northwestern Connecticut.) Some Connecticut River Valley refugees also settled among the Palmertown Mountains in northern Saratoga County, where they became known as the Palmertown Indians.

Between 1686-1734, the lands around Schaghticoke were sold off to English settlers by Mohican and Mohawk signatories on various deeds, and the refugees from the Connecticut River Valley were forced to move again. Some went north to join Abenaki villages at Missisquoi, Winooski, or Cowasuk. Some went into French territory to join the Abenakis at St. Francis/Odanak. Some scattered into the hilltowns of the Adirondacks, where their descendants mixed with Mohawk, Mohican, and Abenaki people, or with rural white families.

The "Brothertown Indians" (Christianized Native families from Mohegan, Pequot, Wampanoag, Montauk, and Narragansett), led by the Mohegan minister Samson Occum, also passed through Saratoga County on several occasions. From the 1730s through the 1780s, these families relocated from their homes in New England to Oneida territory in central New York state, then to Stockbridge, Brothertown Indians eventually moved west, but some stayed in the Saratoga region. Anthony Paul (Narragansett), and his wife, Occum's daughter Christiana (Mohegan) moved to the town of Stony Creek, in northwestern Saratoga County. Their son, Jonathan Paul, became that town's first minister.

By the 19th century, the Native families from different tribes who lived in Saratoga County were pretty well mingled and intermarried with each other. Indians who stayed in rural regions like the Sacandaga River Valley or the Palmertown Mountain Range continued their traditional lifeways of hunting, trapping, fishing, and seasonal traveling. Some were "Indian Doctors," dispensing herbal medicines; some worked as guides and lumberjacks; and some enjoyed the bustling tourist trade in places like Ballston Spa, Lake George, and Saratoga Springs. The Fox Hill Indians around Greenfield, Porters Corners, Corinth, and Splinterville made a good living selling furs to traders, and wild game and woven ash-splint baskets to the grand hotels in Saratoga Springs. One of the most picturesque of these basketmakers was Sam Hill, who used to walk down the Greenfield-Corinth Road (Route 9N) so loaded up with baskets he could barely be seen.

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Native families from several different tribal nations came to the Indian Encampment in Congress Park to sell their ash-splint baskets and other tourist goods. Oneida and Mohawk people came from central New York State, and Christianized Abenaki and Mohawk folks came from Canada. The Saratoga Springs Indian Camp was originally located in the Pine Grove near North Broadway; during the 1850s, it moved to South Broadway. By the 1860s, it had moved to Congress Park, bounded by Circular, Spring, and Congress Streets, where it was also known as the "Gypsy Camp." ("Gypsy" was a common insult at the time for Native people who looked particularly dark-skinned.)

[1870s Indian Camp at Pine Grove, Saratoga Springs, New York. Illustration from Harpers New Monthly Magazine, August 1876.]

One of the most famous Indians in Saratoga Springs around this time was George Speck (also called George Crum), known for his fine preparations of wild game dinners. George was St. Regis Mohawk (with perhaps some Mohican ancestry). George was married several times; his first wife was a Stockbridge Mohican woman who left him to move to Wisconsin. He learned to cook from Pete Francis (Mohawk) when both men worked as guides in the Adirondacks. George’s sister, Catherine (Aunt Katie) Wicks (or Weeks) cooked at Sans Souci in town before joining George out at Moon’s Lake House on Saratoga Lake. One day in 1853, Katie accidentally fried some potato slices extra thin, but they met with George’s approval. The "chips" became a taste sensation, and were packaged up for sale by Moon. (Some folks later imagined that George invented "Saratoga Chips" after a wealthy patron complained.) George left Moon’s in the 1860s to open his own restaurant on Storey Hill overlooking Saratoga Lake.

 Many northeastern Indians served in the American Civil War; some served in white regiments; others in so-called "colored" regiments alongside Irish or African-American soldiers. At least three Abenaki Indian Civil War veterans resided in Saratoga County. Louis Bowman (Company E, 69th NY Infantry), who was badly wounded at Hatcher’s Run, settled on a farm in Porter’s Corners. Thomas Kesiah (Company K, 2nd Regiment New York Veteran Cavalry) was secretly accompanied during the war by his wife Margaret, who dressed in men’s clothes to make her way to the front. Abram Burlett (Company L, 1st Vermont Cavalry) and his wife, Marie Louise Joseph, came to Saratoga Springs after the war to sell baskets. George Speck’s three sons also enlisted in the Civil War; William and George died at Bull Run, but Richard became a sergeant and went on to serve in the Indian Wars out west. [continued on next page]
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Native people who worked as guides, basketmakers, doctors, or even models and movie actors, made a pretty good living around Saratoga and the lower Adirondacks during the early 20th century. But rural Native communities continued to lose their lands to white settlement. In the 1920s, 12,000 acres and three Native towns – Barktown, Indian Stream, and Indian Hollow – were drowned forever when the Hudson River Regulating District dammed the Sacandaga River to prevent spring flooding downriver. These communities were located in the Sacandaga River Valley, just west of Saratoga County. "Sacandaga," in the Kanienkehaka Mohawk language, originally meant "drowned lands," referring to the large bowl-shaped depression that once held a huge glacial lake. The region is now flooded with rich vacation homes, in place of the Native towns that had been there for generations.

During the early 20th century, most Native American families living in Saratoga County kept fairly quiet about their ancestry, due to the widespread prejudice of the times. One survival strategy of this time was intermarriage. Some Native people in New York State mixed with the descendants of New York's Dutch and English settlers; others mixed with African-Americans, French-Canadians, or the new European immigrants. Many of the Native families who still live in Saratoga Springs today – whether they identify as Mohawk, Abenaki, or some other tribal nation – can trace their descent to some part of this complicated history of relocated Native peoples from elsewhere who came to call Saratoga County home.

[thanks to Marge Bruchac for contributing this article]