

A Preliminary Report on the Seneca Sequence in Western New York, 1550-1687

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THE Iroquois Five Nations, Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk, made their home in northern New York State. The Seneca, by far the most populous of the group, were the youngest member and were the guardians of the western door of this league of nations.

Many collections of archeological material have been gathered from the sites of ancient Seneca villages and burial grounds. Some of these collections have been scattered and lost. This great wealth of material has long needed studying and an attempt at correlating and dating the sites should be made while there yet remains some record in the ground. With this in mind we offer this tentative outline of the sequence and dates of the major Seneca villages, basing our conclusions on the results of twenty years of personal field research.

The Seneca villages of the early historic period (1550-1687) are located in a relatively restricted area of some 100 square miles in western New York, approximately twenty miles south of Rochester, in the counties of Monroe, Ontario, and Livingston. They comprise twenty-two known sites of which thirteen are of major size, the remaining nine being lesser villages or sub-stations. The major villages are divided geographically into two groups, a western group of seven villages along the water shed of Spring Brook, and an eastern group of six villages in the Honeoye and

Mud Creek valleys.

The Seneca had two coexisting great villages which they moved seven times in approximately 150 years in a general northward direction. Since they moved only seven times they must have remained from 15 to 25 years at each location. In changing their villages they usually moved a scant one or two miles. This northward trend in their migration was first noted by Houghton.¹ The destruction of their villages in 1687 by the French army of General DeNonville terminated this northward migration and documented the date and location of the Seneca capitals at that time.²

After the destruction of their towns, the Seneca moved eastward ten to twenty miles to the present Canandaigua and Geneva area and subsequently scattered in numerous smaller villages about the Finger Lakes and the middle and upper Genesee Valley.

The prehistoric villages of the Seneca have not been positively identified. They may be represented either by the series of fortified sites found in the Bristol and Genesee valleys and best represented by the site at Richmond Mills,³ or they may

1. Houghton, Frederick, *The Migrations of the Seneca Nation*. *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 29 #2 p. 245, 1927.
2. O'Callaghan, E. B. *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York*. Vol. 3, p. 338, Albany 1861.
3. Parker, Arthur C. *A Prehistoric Iroquois Site*. *Research and Translations of the N.Y.S. Archeological Association*. Vol. 1 #1, Rochester 1918.

be represented by the series of valley bottom sites such as found at Dansville and Long Point. Archeological evidence supports the latter.⁴

The destruction of the Seneca burial sites has been in progress for 250 years. Present day excavations show that very shortly after burial some of the graves were robbed of their useful articles such as wampum, glass beads, iron axes, and good brass kettles. Native material was left behind. Whoever did this looting knew where most of the important graves were and where in them to look. This may have been done by the Seneca themselves or possibly by DeNonville's Indian allies during their invasion.

With the arrival of the early settlers the graves were again dug into; this time the scavengers were in quest of iron for the blacksmiths. Excavation of these graves discloses only iron rust stains where axes, knives, and guns had been. The native-made material was left behind scattered in the grave fill.

The search by the curious for Indian relics began as early as 1822,⁵ but did not become popular until the turn of the century. Only the earliest of the historic Seneca sites escaped the several lootings, probably because their locations had been forgotten and because less trade material was found on them. Scientific excavation of these important burials has been a recent development.

THE 1550-1575 PERIOD

The earliest of the historic Seneca sites occur several miles northeast of Livonia Center and are the southernmost of their sites. These are Adams⁶ and Tram⁷ (Sta-

tions 1 on map). Both were fortified villages located on commanding heights. Curiously these sites are separated by a scant half mile. This might suggest that their builders had arrived in the area recently or had fear of an enemy.

At this time the Seneca were basically a prehistoric people standing on the threshold of European acculturation. Only a trifling amount of trade material was trickling through to them. This small amount of goods probably had its source from the numerous fishing and exploring boats along the Atlantic seaboard.

The Seneca were good pottery makers, manufacturing coarse grit tempered ware of various styles and shapes. Nearly half the pottery had two or more castellations while less than one quarter had the familiar Seneca notched, nocked, or fringed rim decoration.⁸ Spouted and shoulder decorated varieties suggest an Erie influence. High collared linear and chevron decorated pottery suggests an influence from the Richmond Mills Cayuga people. The pottery varied in capacity from one pint to two gallons.

Pipe smoking had not become popular. Only a few stone vase-shaped and one crude clay trumpet style pipe can be attributed to these people. There is some evidence that wooden pipes existed as shell inlay and pipe dottle have been discovered in Seneca burials.

Their stone industry was well developed, producing well made triangular flint points, large oval shaped knife blades, end, and side scrapers. The thick polished ungrooved stone axe, adzes, and bar celts comprised Seneca polished stone work. Their rough stone tools included hammerstones,

4. MacNeish, Richard S. *Iroquois Pottery Types*. Bulletin 124, National Museum of Canada, pp. 38-46, Ottawa 1952.
5. Doty, Lockwood L. *History of Livingston County* p. 102, Genesee 1876.
6. Staire, E. G. *Antiquities of the State of New York and the West*. p. 91, Buffalo 1851.
7. Staire, E. G. *Ibid.* p. 62.

8. MacNeish, Richard S. *Iroquois Pottery Types*. Bulletin #124, National Museum of Canada, pp. 38-46, Ottawa 1952.

anvils, mullers, combinations of these, and net sinkers.

The wearing of ocean shell beads and ornaments was popular and numerous discoidal, cylindrical, and massive wampum-like beads were worn as necklaces. Pendants were made from sections of conch shell.

Many splinter and joint bone awl varieties were used. Harpoons were rare, although both unilateral and bilateral forms existed. Rattles were made from turtle shells and human skulls. Flaking tools and combs were made from antler and horn. The combs were both plain and ornamented to represent animals and humans. Teeth of the bear, elk, cat, and dog were cut and drilled for pendants. Bear molars were altered to represent the human foot, by removing one root and shaping the crown. This practice may also indicate a link with the Richmond Mills people.

Practically no trace of European trade goods can be found on the surface of these sites. In Seneca burials only a few iron axes and large iron knives have been found. Glass beads were very rare; the few they received were pea-sized, round and oval shaped, blue, green and a few with red and black stripes on red or green.

Tubular brass beads and ornaments, in the form of spirals and rings, were commonly worn and are characteristic of the period. They were worn in various fashions by men and women as earrings, necklaces, hair ornaments, and breast ornaments.

Burial of the dead may have been controlled by clans or moieties as there are always two large cemeteries and one or more lesser ones. This is true of all the early historic Seneca sites. The graves were dug from three to six feet deep and often contained more than one individual. The pits were first prepared by lining the floor with a matting of reeds, barks, or furs. Upon

this the dead were placed in a flexed position with the hands usually before the face and the knees drawn up. There was no attempt to place the dead so that they headed in any particular direction. The large and numerous Seneca cemeteries, with a high percentage of multiple burials, suggest the ravages of epidemics, a situation to be expected with the arrival of the Europeans, who brought with them new diseases as well as the blessings of civilization.

The dead were accompanied by what they were wearing, occasionally an offering of a pottery jar or a basket of food, or rarely a few tools. Children were greatly loved, as evidenced by the lavish offerings usually found in their burials. Seldom was anything buried with an adult female. When the grave was ready to be covered, a layer of bark or large stone slabs was often placed directly on the bodies.

THE 1575-1590 PERIOD

In the 1575-1590 period, typified by the Cameron site (Station #2 on map), little change is noted from the Adams-Tram stage. The village was still on high protected ground. The main change was the increase in the amount of trade material. The refuse of the village clearly shows traces of European material. A few polychrome and a very few tubular red, blue, and white glass cane beads were becoming available. Certain native tools were rapidly being replaced, especially stone axes and flint knives. Pottery making was still of major importance. The notched rim style vessel was increasingly used.

Burial customs were the same, except for the tendency to give the dead more offerings.

THE 1590-1616 PERIOD

This period produced four villages, two greater and two lesser: Dutch Hollow

(Cleary), Factory Hollow,⁹ Feugle, and Vita-Taft (Stations #3 on map). The Villages were located on high ground, with the exception of Dutch Hollow.

Native material accounted for 75% of the cultural goods owned by the Seneca during this period. Pottery makers were active in spite of the presence of a few brass kettles. Nearly half of their pottery was decorated by a notched rim. Many other pottery styles were popular, some resembling Cayuga and Andaste high-collared types with linear and chevron decorations and some resembling the Erie spouted varieties.

Pipe smoking was increasing in popularity. The ring bowl pottery pipe makes its appearance and the first pottery effigy styles appear (bird and human).

Flint chipping was still necessary and plentiful; many finely made triangular flint points, scrapers, and saws were produced. The polished stone axe had been completely replaced by iron axes although a few round stone hammers, anvils, and mullers lingered on.

Shell beads and ornaments seem to have become less numerous; true wampum beads appear for the first time. Perhaps interest in shell was overshadowed by a great increase in the glass beads available. The bead types are numerous and for the most part are of the round polychrome variety. This was the time of the "Star" and "Flusheye" beads, the characteristic beads of this period. Brass beads and ornaments were still in style,

Combs are few and far between. This is the time of the antler figurine or doll, "September Morn" style, and represents one of the key traits of the period. Little masks of antler, bone, and stone are

fairly prevalent, which may indicate the activity of the False Face Society as early as 1600.

Burials were still being made in the same fashion in deep pits. Cemeteries numbered two or more. Grave offerings were much more common and lavish and consisted mostly of glass beads, pottery vessels of food, iron axes, knives, arrowpoints, turtle shell rattles, and occasionally pipes. All the bodies were placed in the flexed position with a strong tendency (75%) to head the body to the west. The procedure of placing flat rocks over the dead was practiced only on the Feugle site, perhaps due to the availability of stone there. As yet brass kettles were seldom placed with the dead although their presence is proved by fragmentary scraps in the refuse. They must have been too valuable an item to permit their burial.

THE 1615-1630 PERIOD

From 1615 to 1630 there were three sites, two large and one small: Warren, Lima, and Bosely Mills (Stations #4 on map). With the exception of Warren they are all on high ground.

Native material now represented only a little better than half of Seneca material culture. Pottery was very abundant and nearly 75% was decorated with the familiar notched or fringed rim. The remaining styles were high collared chevron and linear, reminiscent of Cayuga and Andaste wares, and a few spouted vessels in the Erie manner.

Pottery and stone pipes were increasing in number with the most common in order of their frequency being: ring bowl, animal and human effigy, and stone vase-shaped varieties. Combs were still rare. Shell was increasing in popularity again, wampum beads becoming universal.

The stone industry was on the decline. Arrowpoints of flint, while common, were

9. Parker, Arthur C. *A Contact Period Seneca Site. Researches and Transactions of the N.Y.S.A.A. Vol. 1 #2, Rochester 1919.*

being replaced by triangular brass points. The presence of a few gun flints indicates that flint lock muskets were getting into Indian hands.

Glass beads were numerous and predominantly of the polychrome cane variety; tubular glass beads were increasing in numbers. Brass kettles were abundant. The so-called "Jesuit" or "Cossick" button, of dark colored glass, makes its appearance. Iron goods were increasing in quantity and variety.

Burial customs remained unchanged, there being two or more cemeteries with all the bodies in the flexed position and about 75% oriented with the head to the west. Grave offerings were more numerous and for the first time brass kettles were often placed in the graves. Pottery jars were common burial offerings and frequently one or more vessels of brass or pottery were placed in the same grave.

THE 1630-1650 PERIOD

The 1630-1650 period produced two major sites, the Power House and Steel (Stations #5 on map). Both were located on low ground by small streams. These unprotected settlements might indicate Seneca feelings of strength and security.

Seneca native culture had dwindled to 50%. Pottery was definitely on the way out, but when present was monotonously styled, 80% having the notched or fringed rim decoration. The remaining varieties were high collared or had castellated chevron and linear decorations. The capacity of the vessels was growing smaller, averaging from one to two quarts.

Pipe smoking was very popular with effigy forms abundant. In order of frequency these were: ring bowl, twisted stem snake, square bowl, bird, bear, and blowing mask. Stone pipes were rare. European-made kaolin pipes were not uncom-

mon and were marked with the initials EB and WC.

The triangular flint point was being replaced by arrowpoints cut from sheet brass. Most of these had beveled edges and were occasionally perforated. There was an increasing supply of flint lock muskets and pistols of the dog-lock and snaphaunce variety of the early 1600's.

Shell was the reigning style of the day, even overcoming glass beads in quantity and varieties. Necklaces of both tapered and straight drilled wampum beads, massive tubular and rectangular-shaped beads, and pendants were plentiful. Discoidal shell beads reached their maximum and were worn as massive strings or mixed with other beads. This is one of the key traits of the period. Only on sites of this age are these beads numerous, both in burials and in the refuse. Two-holed shell gorgets from two to six inches in diameter were worn by men. Red slate, fireclay, and catlinite beads were slowly increasing in numbers.

Bone and antler tools were still used, including fishhooks, bilateral harpoons, flaking tools of long and slender varieties, powder measures, pottery markers, and a few awls. The awls were being replaced with their European counterpart of iron. Comb-wearing was not in fashion. A few bone and wooden European made "cooty" combs appear for the first time.

Trade material was abundant and apparently easily acquired. Bead styles were changing; red and blue tubular cane beads were most common, while polychrome types were disappearing. Some star beads of unusual size, up to one inch in diameter, were available. A few examples of china-ware (Delft) and glassware had made their appearance. Reworked pieces of these were worn as pendants.

The influence of the Jesuit priests was

beginning. A very few brass religious rings and, rarely, silver or gold medals found their way into Seneca hands. The rings of this period bear the IHS or L and heart symbols. Glass buttons were common and for the most part were worn as beads.

A few pewter objects were being traded to the Seneca and included porringers, pipes, and spoons. Articles of silver were very rare. One example of a wine taster bears the London and 1576 hallmarks and the manufacturer's initials (WC). Silver-plated brass spoons have been found bearing English hallmarks of the early 1600's. A brass mirror box of this period portrays Wilhelm Frederick (William the Silent), Prince of Orange, riding a horse. This Dutch leader lived from 1533 to 1584.

Burials were little changed. Two or more cemeteries were used and the dead were placed in the flexed position. Some of these cemeteries were protected by palisades. Nearly 95% of the bodies were oriented with the head to the west, and for the first time muskets and pistols were occasionally buried with adult males. Brass kettles were more numerous than pottery vessels as food holders for the dead. Large shell gorgets, apparently the badge of the warriors, were buried with adult males. Nearly every adult male was accompanied by one or more pipes, often contained in pouches decorated with beads or animal teeth. Adult females seldom were accompanied by anything more than an iron axe and a kettle or pottery jar of food. All the offerings were placed in front of the face, between the head and knees, or behind the back. Infrequently was anything placed at the feet. Some time after the dead were buried, probably after the village had been abandoned, looters ransacked the head portions of half the graves. This marked the beginning of systematic robbing of the historic sites.

THE 1650-1675 PERIOD

In the 1650-1675 period there were two large villages: Dann and Marsh, and possibly a third and smaller the Fox (?), (Stations #6 on maps). These sites were also on low land or hillsides, again reflecting a feeling of power and security on the part of their inhabitants.

Native-made tools now represented 25% of Seneca cultural goods. All the up-to-date cooks served their meals in the shiny brass kettles. The few old-fashioned pottery jars that remained were small and foreign to the Seneca, some being attributed to the Andaste and Fort Ancient peoples¹⁰ (captives).

Pipe smoking was very popular, with the ring bowl predominating, but animal and human effigy, square bowl, and chevron styles were common. A few stone vase and Micmac forms were present. Kaolin pipes of various sizes and shapes were numerous and bear the initials EB.

Stone tools were seldom used, rarely did a flint arrowpoint, stone hammer or muller persist. Wooden tools were seemingly more abundant, perhaps due to the presence of a greater number of brass kettles to preserve them. Arrowpoints of brass were carelessly made and frequently were perforated.

Shell was the rage now. Wampum necklaces and belts were common, most of the wampum beads having small straight drilled holes. Little shell pendants were in style; two-holed shell crescents, imitation claws, and bird effigies are diagnostic of this period. Shell runtees, with engraved designs, were just beginning to appear. Antler and horn combs rose in popularity, with animals and birds decorating most. These were worn by men and women.

Glass beads reached their height of

10. Witthoff, John. Personal communication 1952

abundance during this period with tubular cane varieties being the greatest in number. Polychrome beads were scarce and probably were hand-me-downs. Round red and black cane beads, although not numerous, were increasing. Glass buttons were very numerous and were used both as beads and buttons. China and glassware was still a rarity; the few glazed pitchers must have been prized possessions.

Objects of pewter, porringers, spoons, and pipes, were increasing. Iron material was commonplace and consisted of axes, knives with wood or bone handles, bracelets, scissors, strike-a-lights, awls, chisels, and scrapers. A cover of a brass mirror box of this period portrays Frederick Henry, Prince of Orange and Knight of Nassau, and bears the date 1634.

The abundance of Jesuit material suggests the possibility of there being missions established on the sites. The familiar brass rings are almost all of the IHS variety. Wooden crucifixes, with brass images, were present.

Burial customs were changing. There were from three to seven, or more, separate cemeteries. For the first time 25% of the dead were placed in the extended position (European style), the remainder being flexed. Grave offerings were lavish with as many as 10,000 or more beads in a single grave. Flint lock muskets and pistols, varieties of the early and middle 1600's, were often buried with males. Nearly all the males were accompanied with one or more pipes, and an assortment of iron knives, awls, hematite paint, gun parts, and whetstones. These offerings were predominately placed between the head and knees and now occasionally by the feet. The bodies were nearly all oriented with the head to the west.

THE 1675-1687 PERIOD

Between 1675 and 1687, when the Seneca territory was invaded by the French,

four separate towns were established. These were: Rochester Junction (Sonnon-tuan), Boughton Hill (Ganagaro), Kirkwood (Keinthe), and Beal (Gandougarae), (Stations #7 on map). Several smaller villages scattered about Boughton Hill were probably part of that extensive settlement. These sites were all on high well-protected ground and Boughton Hill had a fort established one mile west of the village. The Seneca must have been afraid of invasion and certainly were feeling less secure.

Seneca native culture had shrunk to a new low, representing less than 25% of their material goods. Pottery was exceedingly rare. Pipes, however, were commonplace, and of the same types described in the 1650-1675 period. Combs had become popular and depicted animals, birds, and humans (Indian and European). Shell beads and pendants were very popular. Decorated shell runtees were numerous and are characteristic of the period.

Of the trade material, beads had undergone the greatest change. Tubular varieties had disappeared and polychrome types were virtually non-existent. Round red, black, and green cane beads, about the size of a pea, were plentiful and monotonous in occurrence.

Iron goods were numerous and commonplace. In addition to those described in the 1650-1675 period there were iron pails, drawshaves, files, and smokers' companions.

Jesuit rings were more abundant and depicted many religious scenes. Crucifixes, though rare, were the same type as described in the 1650-1675 period.

Glass buttons were not quite so plentiful as before. Pewter was still available, although not abundant. A lead seal bearing the date 1676 verifies the date of these sites.

Burials were made in three to seven separate cemeteries, half were extended, the remainder being flexed. Nearly all were

headed towards the west. Ancient grave robbers had looted more than 75% of them. Grave offerings were numerous and often lavish. Many offerings were placed at the feet as well as before the face and by the hips.

CONCLUSIONS

Prehistoric Seneca Archeology is in a confused state. Projecting the cultural trends backward as indicated by their early historic sites, we would expect their prehistoric villages to be on fortified high ground and to possess a culture comprised of low collared, castellated and, spouted grit tempered pottery of medium size, lacking pipes, but with a well developed bone, stone, and shell industry.

The pottery suggests strong links with the Erie and weak connections with the Richmond Mills type (Cayuga). The rarity of pipes, especially of clay, similarly shows little connection with Richmond Mills. The relative abundance of ocean beads and pendants, evidently not manufactured in their own villages, suggests connections to the south (Maryland and Virginia). All their flint artifacts were made of western New York or Ontario Onondaga flint, so if they were newcomers they would have had to come from the direction of Buffalo. The general northward and eastward migration of Seneca historic villages would indicate their movement from the south or west. The recent pottery study by McNeish suggests a lineage coming from the Dansville area, some thirty miles to the southwest.

The first European trade goods arrived in the hands of the Seneca by an indirect source, probably by barter and trade with the coastal Indians or from the early exploring and fishing boats. The style of wearing earrings, often only one ear being decorated, might stem from the same style popular among the Basque, whose boats were early along the Atlantic seaboard.

The stone axe was the first native tool to be replaced by its European iron counterpart. Next in order of their replacement went hammerstones, flint knives, arrow-points, perforators and scrapers, bone tools, pottery, grinding stones, combs, wampum, and lastly pipes (after 1800).

The first articles of European origin the Seneca received, other than the iron axe and knife, attracted their esthetic sense rather than their common sense. Brass kettles were cut up and made into beads and pendants and not until 50 or 75 years later is there evidence of their being used for cooking and eating or as offerings to the dead. Glass beads were evidently among the first articles that these Indians desired and they soon acquired them in abundance. The recent study of trade material by Mr. Kenneth E. Kidd of the University of Toronto has disclosed that nearly 600 different varieties of glass beads were brought into this country for the Indian trade.

The custom of giving the dead offerings used their stock of European material nearly as fast as the Seneca received it. There just wasn't too much left to hand down to the next generation. This is best shown by the cycle of bead types found on their sites. The earliest sites produced mainly round polychrome beads; afterwards tubular types were dominant and these in turn disappeared in favor of round, single-colored, glass beads. The wire wound variety of glass bead does not occur on these pre-1700 sites. This cycle of bead types probably also reflects European influence. The later bead types were cheaper and easier to manufacture than the complicated polychrome varieties and probably represent exploitation of the growing Indian fur trade. On sites after 1700 there appears to be a mixture of earlier and later bead types—perhaps the result of looting of the earlier burial grounds.

