

Dating the Iroquois Confederacy

by Bruce E. Johansen

The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy, one of the world's oldest democracies, is at least three centuries older than most previous estimates, according to research by Barbara Mann and Jerry Fields of Toledo University, Ohio.

Using a combination of documentary sources, solar eclipse data, and Iroquois oral history, Mann and Fields assert that the Iroquois Confederacy's body of law was adopted by the Senecas (the last of the five nations to ratify it) August 31, 1142. The ratification council convened at a site that is now a football field in Victor, New York. The site is called Gonandaga by the Seneca.

Mann, a doctoral student in American Studies at Toledo University of Ohio; Fields, an astronomer, is an expert in the history of solar eclipses. The Senecas' oral history mentions that the Senecas adopted the Iroquois Great Law of Peace shortly after a total eclipse of the sun.

Mann and Fields are the first scholars to combine documentary history with oral accounts and precise solar data in an attempt to date the origin of the Iroquois League. Depending on how democracy is defined, their date of 1142 A.D. would rank the Iroquois Confederacy with the government of Iceland and the Swiss cantons as the oldest continuously functioning democracy on earth. All three precedents have been cited as forerunners of the United States system of representative democracy. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy functions today in Upstate New York; it even issues passports.

The date that Mann and Fields assert for the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy is more than 300 years earlier than the current consensus of scholarship; many experts date the formation of the Confederacy to the year 1451, at the time of another solar eclipse. Mann and Fields contend that the 1451 eclipse was total, but that its shadow fell over Pennsylvania, well to the southwest of the ratifying council's location.

According to Mann, the Seneca were the last of the five Iroquois nations to accept the Great Law of Peace. In an academic paper titled "A Sign in the Sky: Dating the League of the Haudenosaunee," Mann estimates that the journey of Deganawidah (The Peacemaker) and Hiawatha in support of the Great Law had begun about a quarter-century earlier with the Mohawks, at the "eastern door" of the Confederacy, about 25 years earlier. "Haudenosaunee" means "People of the Longhouse." "Iroquois" is a French term for the united nations of the Haudenosaunee, who also were called the "Six Nations" by English colonists. The five original nations (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca) were joined by the Tuscaroras about 1700 A.D.

The 1451 founding date was first proposed in 1948 by Paul A.W. Wallace, who gathered Iroquois oral history in his *White Roots of Peace* and other works. In her paper, Mann suggests

that Wallace knew enough of the Senecas' oral history to realize that a solar eclipse was a key element to determining the founding date. Wallace also was fluent in German, the language in which he would need to read T.R. Oppolzer's *Canon der Finsternisse*, the best historical eclipse tables available at the time. The first pre-contact solar eclipse in Seneca country occurred June 28, 1451. Mann believes that Wallace did not dare risk an earlier date because of the academic politics of the late 1940s. "As late as 1949," writes Mann, "white scholars were still trying to insist that Europeans . . . had invented wampum -- a back-bone artifact of the League!"

The argument that the Iroquois League was established substantially before contact with Europeans is supported by oral-history accounts. Mann and Fields cite [Paula Underwood](#), a contemporary Iroquois oral historian, who estimated the League's founding date as A.D. 1090 by using family lineages as temporal benchmarks. Another traditional method to estimate the founding date is to count the number of people who have held the office of Tadadahoh (speaker) of the Confederacy. A graphic record is available in the form of a cane that the eighteenth-century French observer Lafitau called the "Stick of Enlistment" and modern-day anthropologist William N. Fenton calls the "Condolence Cane." Mann and Fields used a figure of 145 Tadadahos (from Mohawk oral historian Jake Swamp), and then averaged the average tenure of other lifetime appointments, such as popes, European kings and queens, and U.S. Supreme court justices. Cautioning that different socio-historical institutions are being compared, they figure into their sample 333 monarchs from eight European countries, 95 Supreme Court Justices, and 129 popes. Averaging the tenures of all three groups, Mann and Fields found an estimated date that compares roughly to the 1142 date indicated by the eclipse record, and the 1090 date calculated from family lineages by Underwood.

Mann and Fields also make their case with archaeological evidence. The rise in interpersonal violence that predated the Iroquois League can be tied to a cannibal cult and the existence of villages with palisades, both of which can be dated to the mid-twelfth century. The spread of the League can be linked to the adoption of corn as a dietary staple among the Haudenosaunee, which also dates between 900 A.D. and 1100 A.D., Mann and Fields contend.

Assertion of the 1142 founding date is bound to raise a ruckus among Iroquois experts who have long asserted in print that the Confederacy did not begin until a few years before contact with Europeans in the early 1500s, or even afterwards. In their paper, Mann and Fields dispute statements by Temple Anthropology Professor Elisabeth Tooker, whom they quote as placing the original date "in the period from A.D. 1400 to 1600 or shortly before." Mann and Fields believe that scholars who argue the later dates dismiss the Iroquois oral history as well as solar-eclipse of data. Since such scholars use only documentary sources with dates on them, and since such documents have been left to use only by non-Indians, the Native American perspective is screened out of history, they argue. "It is capricious, and most probably racial, of scholars to continue dismissing the [Iroquois] Keepers [oral historians] as incompetent witnesses on their own behalf," Mann and Fields argue in their paper.

Scholars who insist on proof of the Iroquois League's origins written in a European language engage in a circular argument, Mann argues. When such writing is the only allowable proof, dating the Iroquois League's origins earlier than the first substantial European contact becomes impossible. One must be satisfied with the European accounts that maintain that the League was

a functioning, powerful political entity when the first Europeans made contact with its members early in the 1500s. "What I imply is that there is no 'proof' of the League's origins 'written' in a contemporary (i.e. Mid-sixteenth century) European language," Mann argues. "In fact, what written records exist point in exactly the opposite direction."

Mann also offers another example of what she believes to be the European-centered and male-centered nature of existing history. Most accounts of the Iroquois League's origins stress the roles played by Deganawidah, who is called "The Peacemaker" in oral discourse among traditional Iroquois, and Aionwantha (or Hiawatha), who joined him in a quest to quell the blood feud and establish peace. Mann believes that documentary history largely ignores the role of a third person, a woman, Jingosaseh, who insisted on gender balance in the Iroquois constitution. Mann's argument is outlined in another paper, "The Beloved Daughters of Jingosaseh."

Under Haudenosaunee law, clan mothers choose candidates (who are male) as chiefs. The women also maintain ownership of the land and homes, and exercise a veto power over any council action that may result in war. The influence of Iroquois women surprised and inspired nineteenth-century feminists such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, according to research by modern feminist Sally Roesch Wagner.

While a high degree of gender equity existed in Iroquois law, sex roles often were (and remain) very carefully defined, right down to the version of history passed down by people of either sex. Men, the vast majority of anthropological informants, tended to play up the role of Deganawidah and Aionwantha, which was written into history. Women who would have described the role of Jingosaseh were usually not consulted. Mann points out that Jingosaseh, originally the name of an historical individual, subsequently a title, as a leader of clan mothers. The historic figure Tadadaho, originally Deganawidah's and Aionwantha's main antagonist, became the title of the League's speaker. Occasionally in Iroquois history, a title also may become a personal name -- Handsome Lake (a reference to Lake Ontario) was the title to one of the 50 seats on the Iroquois Grand Council before it was the name of the nineteenth-century Iroquois prophet. According to Mann, "it is only after the Peacemaker agrees to her terms that she throws her considerable political weight behind him . . . She was, in short, invaluable as an ally, invincible as a foe. To succeed, the Peacemaker needed her."

"Jingosaseh is recalled by the Keepers as a co-founder of the League, alongside of Deganawidah and Hiawatha," writes Mann. "Her name has been obliterated from the white record because her story was a woman's story and nineteenth-century male ethnographers simply failed to ask women, whose story hers was, about the history of the League."

The story of how Jingosaseh joined with Deganawidah and Hiawatha is one part of an indigenous American epic that has been compared to the Greeks' Homer, the Mayans' Popul Vu, and the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The Great Law of Peace is still being discovered by scholars; as recently as 1992, Syracuse University Press published the most complete available translation of the Iroquois Great Law. Once every five years, the Cayuga Jake Thomas recites the entire epic at the Confederacy's central council fire in Onondaga, New York, a few miles south of Syracuse. The recitation usually takes him three or four eight-hour days, during which he speaks until his

voice cracks. According to the calculations of Mann and Fields, the Iroquois' central council fire has burned at Onondaga for more than 900 years.

Mann and Fields conclude: "The only eclipse that meets all requisite conditions -- an afternoon occurrence over Gonandaga that darkened the sky -- is the eclipse of 1142. The duration of darkness would have been a dramatic three-and-a-half-minute interval, long enough to wait for the sun; long enough to impress everyone with Deganawidah's power to call forth a sign in the sky."

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