ONE REAL AMERICAN

The Life of Ely S. Parker

SENECA SACHEM AND CIVIL WAR GENERAL

JOSEPH BRUCHAC

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Kwai kwai nid8ba (Hello, My Friend),

When I was young, the movies, television and even the books in my school library presented Indians in one of two ways: a noble "vanishing race," or dangerous ignorant savages. Yet all the Indians I met didn't match either stereotype. Family friends, storytellers, public speakers—they were just people. Plus, though my family never spoke about it publicly back then, my heritage on my mother's side was from the Algonquin nation known as the Western Abenaki.

By the time I reached college, I was determined to learn as much as I could about that heritage. Years of research yielded a different story—thousands of stories, in fact. Rather than monolithic "Indians," there were hundreds of different original nations in North America, each with their own rich histories and cultures. They were neither "vanishing" nor locked in the past.

I sought out Native elders. Far from ignorant, they were sophisticated in their knowledge—not just of their own nations, but of the majority culture around them. Hearing things firsthand from such teachers as the Abenaki elder Maurice Mdawelasis Dennis, Ray Tehanetorens Fadden of the Mohawk Nation—who created the Six Nations Museum—and Onondaga Clan Mother Alice Dewasentah Papineau was the best kind of education.

I also found the name of Ely Parker, a Seneca man of the nineteenth century, turning up again and again. Brilliant and highly educated, he became a representative of his Tonawanda people, he helped prevent the loss of their reservation and was chosen as a Grand Sachem while still a young man. He became a civil engineer and a close friend of Ulysses S. Grant.

Though Ely's life was not without its troubles, he always managed to rise above them. More than any other person of his time, he succeeded in both the Native American and the European American worlds. His story is one that I think young readers will find not just eye-opening but also inspiring.

Peace,

Joe Bruchac

DEDICATED TO MY MANY FRIENDS AMONG

THE SIX NATIONS,

WITH SINCERE THANKS FOR ALL OF THEIR HELP AND GUIDANCE OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY

The inspiration for the border design and other motifs comes from the beadwork and basket weaving collections at the Seneca Iroquois National Museum and Fenimore Art Museum as well as Iroquoisbeadwork.blogspot.com.

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Note: The Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse, have been known by different names since the coming of Europeans. Although they did not originally use those names themselves, such names as "Iroquois" for the Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse, and "Seneca" for the Onondowaga, the Great Hill People, have become so familiar and commonly used that contemporary Haudenosaunee people are comfortable with those names and use them on a daily basis. They appear in the historic record of federal and government relations with the Senecas and Iroquois as a whole. Ely S. Parker in his writings and everyday life referred to himself as Seneca and to the Six Nations as the League of the Iroquois. It is for those reasons that I've chosen to use "Iroquois" and "Seneca" throughout this book.

Some Iroquois names in this book are hyphenated, and some are not (and some are written both ways), which reflects the way that Iroquois words were written in English in different time periods and by different writers.

1

A MEETING AT APPOMATTOX

I was present at the meeting of the two generals commanding the two great contending armies, Grant and Lee, the one quiet, modest and reticent, the other dignified, but broken. I saw the one write his terms for surrender, and the other his acceptance of the same. I hold in my hand an original of General Grant's terms of surrender in his own handwriting, and which I, as military secretary, transferred into ink before it was passed to Lee.

—FROM GENERAL ELY S. PARKER'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

April 9, 1865, was a warm spring Sunday in the town of Appomattox Court House, Virginia. Accompanied by several members of his staff, General Ulysses S. Grant approached the house of Wilmer McLean, who had offered the use of his parlor for the signing of General Robert E. Lee's terms of surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia. It was an event, in that modest two-story building, that would mark the formal conclusion of hostilities

between the North and South, although there were other battles lasting until the Cherokee Confederate General Stand Watie gave up in June of that year. It would bring an end to the American Civil War, one of the most brutal struggles in the history of the United States.

MCLEAN HOUSE AT APPOMATTOX COURT HOUSE, VIRGINIA

Inside that house, dressed in a new full uniform and wearing the ceremonial sword given to him by his beloved home state of Virginia, Robert E. Lee, the brilliant southern commander, waited.

That uniform, as Grant himself would later note in his memoirs, was a contrast to what the leader of the Union forces appeared in.

"In my rough traveling suit, the uniform of a private with the straps of a lieutenant-general, I must have contrasted very strangely with a man so handsomely dressed, six feet high and of faultless form. But this was not a matter that I thought of until afterwards."

Lee's retreat after Petersburg and Richmond fell into Union hands had been blocked by Grant. The charismatic southern leader's only choice, one he found hard to make, had been to accept defeat. He'd sent a note to Grant asking for an interview to discuss terms of surrender.

That note, as Grant's personal secretary Brevet Brigadier General Ely S. Parker would later recall, was read by Grant with no outward show of emotion. That was no surprise, for Grant was famously taciturn. Grant's staff, however, reacted quite differently.

As Parker put it, "The Staff had a little jollification of their own on the lonely road in the woods by cheering, throwing up their hats, and performing such other antics as their tired limbs and dignity would permit."

Grant's reply to Lee, written by Parker, who was always by his side, indicated his readiness to meet. It was delivered by one of Grant's aides, General Orville Elias Babcock, who now stood

waiting for Grant in front of the house's wide front porch. While he ushered the Union's commanding general up the steps and into the parlor, the rest of Grant's staff sat down on the porch. But only for a moment. Babcock soon returned to the door.

"The General wants you all to come in," he said.

What happened next, the formal introduction by Grant of each of his staff members to General Lee, went smoothly at first. As Parker noted, Lee "shook hands with each in the most courteous, condescending and yet affable manner, making no remark further than passing the usual salutation."

Until Parker himself held out his own hand. According to Lieutenant Colonel Horace Porter, another of Grant's secretaries, "When Lee saw his swarthy features he looked at him in evident surprise, and his eyes rested on him for several seconds. What was passing in his mind, no one knew, but the natural surmise was that he at first mistook Parker for a negro, and was struck with astonishment to find the commander of Union armies had one of that race on his personal staff."

Whatever General Robert E. Lee had been thinking, he soon recognized that the dark skin of the person before him, though dressed in a Union uniform, marked him not as one of African ancestry, but as a Native American.

"I am glad to see one real American here," Lee said as he took Ely Parker's hand.

"We are all Americans," Parker replied.

As the meeting progressed, Parker continued to play a very visible role. Colonel Theodore S. Bowers, one of Grant's adjutant generals, had brought the papers for the surrender. Bowers, a former newspaper editor, had enlisted as a private and rose rapidly through the ranks to become one of Grant's favorites. That day, though, awed by the occasion, he was visibly nervous. Parker helped him arrange the papers as Grant sat smoking his pipe.

When Grant indicated he was ready, it was Parker who handed him the manifold order book. In those days, a manifold order book, several bound sheets of thin yellow paper with carbon inserts, was used to produce duplicate copies. Grant wrote out his terms and passed them over the table to Lee. A few changes were agreed upon and Parker wrote them in the book.

The manifold book was then returned to Bowers for him to make the official copy in ink. He tried to do so, but his hands were shaking and he destroyed one sheet after another. Finally he gave up the task.

"Parker," he said, "you will have to write this. I can't do it."

PRINT OF THE ROOM IN THE MCLEAN HOUSE IN WHICH GEN. ROBERT E. LEE SURRENDERED TO GEN. ULYSSES S. GRANT ON APRIL 9, 1865. ELY PARKER IS STANDING, THIRD FROM RIGHT.

So it was that the official terms of surrender marking the end of the Civil War were written in the hand of Ely S. Parker. Ely S. Parker, who was not only the highest ranking Native American in the Union Army but also bore the title of Donehogawa (the Guardian of the Western door) as a Seneca Grand Sachem of the Haudenosaunee—the League of the Iroquois.

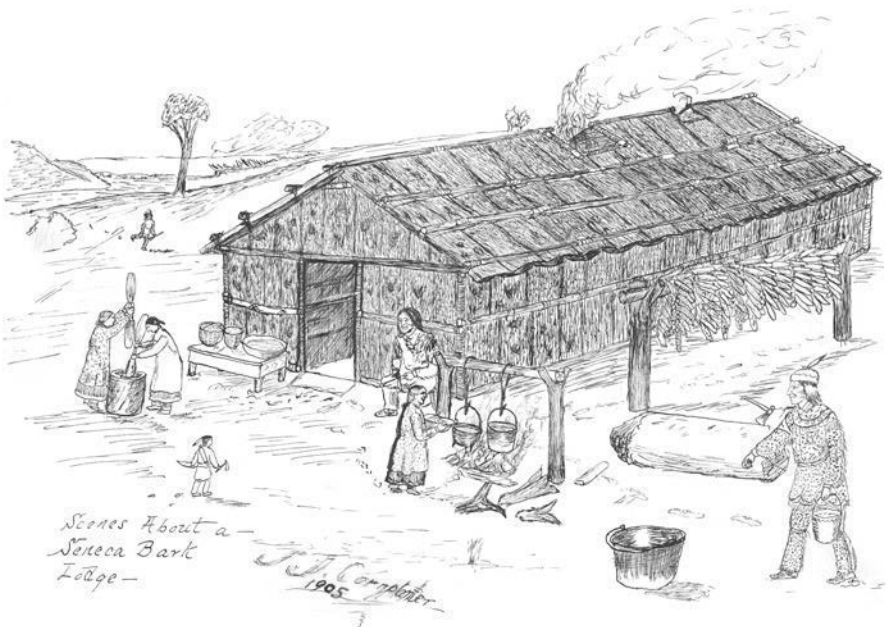
2

WHO ARE THE IROQUOIS?

The ancient League is legitimately entitled to great praise and honor among the expiring peoples of the earth . . . In their simplicity they early discovered, adopted and exemplified the incontrovertible and wise political doctrine, that in union there is strength.

—ELY S. PARKER, FROM A LETTER DATED JULY 22, 1887

There was a time when the Haudenosaunee, the five Native nations commonly known as the Iroquois, were constantly at war with one another. Those five nations, who spoke different dialects of the same language, were the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Onondagas, the Cayugas, and the Senecas. They lived in great longhouses covered with elm bark in stockaded villages. They viewed their confederacy as being shaped like one of those



SCENE FROM AN IROQUOIS BARK LONGHOUSE BY JESSE CORNPLANTER, 1905

traditional structures. Although those large longhouses sometimes sheltered hundreds of people in family apartments on either side of the central fires, that symbolic longhouse of the Great League was even more immense. It stretched across what is now New York State from the Hudson River in the east to the Niagara River in the west. The Mohawks in the east were the guardians of the eastern door, through the traditional entrance of a physical longhouse. The Onondagas kept the fire in the center in the area of present-day Syracuse. The Senecas, as the westernmost of the original Five Nations, had the job of guarding that door, beyond which were

MAP OF THE IROQUOIS FIVE NATIONS AS IT WAS AROUND 1650. TONAWANDA RESERVATION, ESTABLISHED CIRCA 1750, THE BIRTHPLACE OF ELY PARKER, IS ALSO SHOWN.

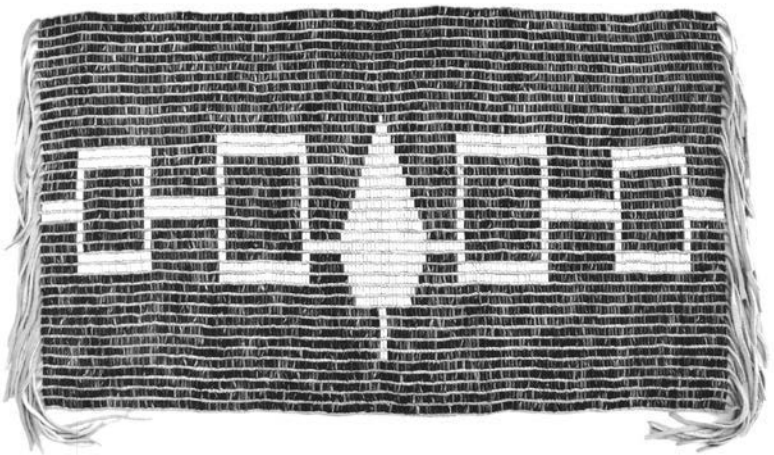
all of the western tribes that were sometimes at odds with the Confederacy.

Once, they had lived together in peace, but that time had passed. All of their oral traditions speak eloquently of that bitter age of raid and counterraid, constant revenge and brutal retribution. No one was safe, not even the women and children or elders. As Jake Swamp, a subchief of the Mohawk Nation explained it, "We were the worst people in the world back then."

That is when, perhaps a thousand years ago, a miracle happened. A boy was born among the Wendat people who lived to the

west, on the shores of Lake Ontario, On-ia-de-lee-yoh, the Beautiful Lake. As soon as he could speak, his every word was of peace. He bore a name that is regarded so sacred it is only spoken in ceremony, so he became known as the Peacemaker. When he was old enough, he made a canoe of stone and sailed across the lake to the lands of those five warring nations. His mission was to unite them in peace.

Among the Iroquois nations, the women have always played a central role, heading the households and caring for the land.



A DUPLICATE OF THE ORIGINAL CENTURIES-OLD FIVE NATIONS OF HIAWATHA WAMPUM BELT. IT SYMBOLIZES THE FOUNDING OF THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY. EACH SQUARE REPRESENTS AN IROQUOIS NATION. ON THE FAR LEFT IS THE SENECA NATION; ON THE FAR RIGHT IS THE MOHAWK NATION; AND THE ONEIDA AND CAYUGA NATIONS ARE IN BETWEEN. THE CENTRAL TREE IS THE ONONDAGA NATION. (THE TUSCARORA NATION JOINED THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY IN THE EARLY 1700S SO IS NOT REPRESENTED IN THIS EARLY BELT.)

To this day, a person's clan is inherited from the mother and each of the several clans in each nation is headed by a clan mother. So, it is significant that one of the Peacemaker's first disciples was Jigonsaseh, an influential woman who embraced and endorsed his idea of bringing peace.

Aided by an eloquent Mohawk leader named Hiawatha, who was the second to enlist in his cause, the Peacemaker went to one Haudenosaunee nation after another. Though it was no easy task, his words and his deeds convinced those nations, one by one, to lay down their weapons and join what became known as the Great Peace.

The last to agree to the Great Peace were the Onondagas. Led by Tadadaho, a powerful chief—described as an evil sorcerer in all Iroquois traditions—they refused to hear the Peacemaker's words. Tadadaho was a giant of a man with snakes—evidence of his twisted mind—growing from his hair, and seven crooks in his body. Whenever the Peacemaker and his disciples tried to approach him, he would use his magic to escape. It was not until all his people joined their voice in a hymn of peace, that Tadadaho became so entranced that he could not move. The Peacemaker and Hiawatha then straightened his body while Hiawatha—whose name means "the Comber"—combed the snakes from the giant chief's hair.

His mind no longer twisted, Tadadaho was set up as the head of the council of fifty royaners, representatives chosen by the clan mothers of each nation, to govern the united peoples. A war club was symbolically planted beneath a pine tree that represented the new league. An eagle holding five arrows in its talons was placed atop the tree, which had white roots stretching to the four directions, East, South, West, and North. Those five arrows, easy to break one by one, but strong when bound together, stood for the five nations now governed as one.

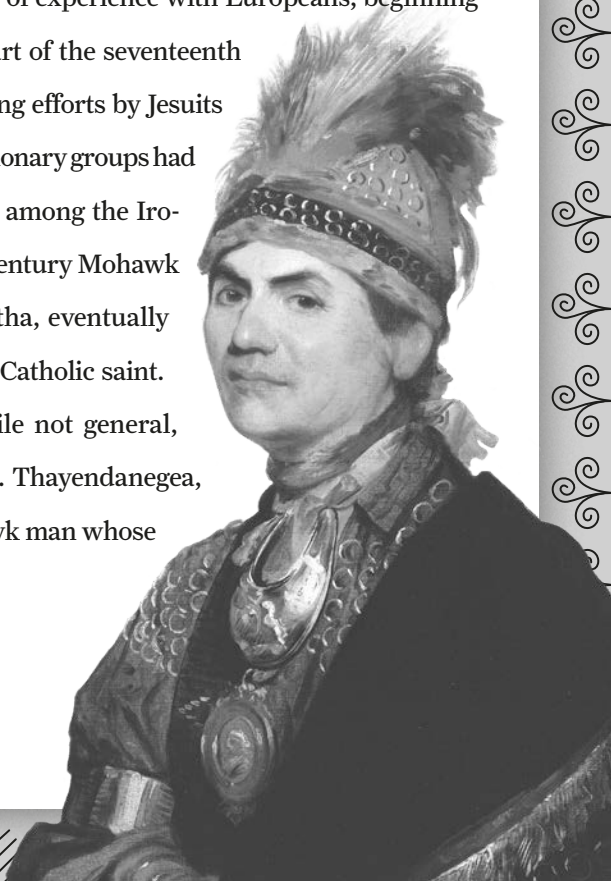
To this day, the names of those fifty original representatives are passed down from one leader to the next, still chosen by the clan mothers. Thus, there is always a Tadadaho at Onondaga.

That powerful League of the Iroquois became known as the Six Nations after the Tuscaroras joined them in 1722.

When the Europeans came, the League of the Iroquois found itself in a unique position, both geographically and politically. As the strongest and most united of the northeastern tribal nations, they were valued as military allies during the decades-long struggle for North America between France and England in the first half of the eighteenth century. The territory the Iroquois controlled, roughly from the Hudson River in the east to Lake Ontario in the west, was the major corridor—along the Mohawk River—for western

movement. They also controlled the lucrative fur trade at a time when beaver pelts for the making of hats were in great demand. That the Iroquois threw their lot in with the English against the French was one of the deciding factors in what became known as the French and Indian War in America. That final part of the world-wide struggle between the two European nations—also called the Seven Years' War—ended in America with the defeat of France.

By the start of the American Revolution, the Iroquois had more than a century and a half of experience with Europeans, beginning with the Dutch at the start of the seventeenth century. The Christianizing efforts by Jesuits and other numerous missionary groups had produced many converts among the Iroquois. One seventeenth-century Mohawk woman, Kateri Tekakwitha, eventually would be canonized as a Catholic saint. Fluency in English, while not general, was also not uncommon. Thayendanegea, or Joseph Brant, a Mohawk man whose



THAYENDANEGEA. JOSEPH BRANT, PAINTING (DETAIL) BY GILBERT STUART, 1786

village was near present-day Canajoharie, New York, was the best-educated (by English standards). Like Ely Parker a generation later, he mastered both spoken and written English. The star pupil at Parson Eleazar Wheelock's school for Indians in New Hampshire, Brant seemed destined to become a missionary. It was unforeseen then that his greatest success would be as a war leader in a struggle that would split the Iroquois League and result in the loss of most of their lands.

During the American Revolution, Brant was a high-ranking officer in the British army. After the British capitulated, he led a large breakaway group of Iroquois to resettle on the new Six Nations Reserve in Ontario—where the town of Brantford was named after him. Brant bridged the gap between the white and Native worlds and achieved success in both, even becoming a high-ranking member of the Masons after being initiated into the Masonic lodge in England in 1776.

The Iroquois League, at the beginning of the American Revolution, was well versed in dealing with their European neighbors. Iroquois diplomats were sophisticated and often much better informed than the white leaders with whom they dealt. In fact, the interest of America's early leaders in the Iroquois form of democracy was promoted by the Six Nations themselves. Before the creation of the Articles of Confederation that preceded the Constitution, the Six

Nations grew tired of dealing with the different rules for trade they encountered with each of the separate northeastern colonies. Benjamin Franklin and others were invited to meetings of the Iroquois League to observe how a central government and common rules would be beneficial.

When the American Revolution began, both the British and the breakaway colonies sought the Iroquois as an ally. At the start of the American Revolution, a meeting of the League was held to decide which side they would align themselves with—the Crown or the Colonies. However, they could not all agree on which to support. Because consensus and total unanimity was required for the League to make a decision, in the end the council fire that was lit whenever the members of the League met was ceremonially covered. Each of the Six Nations was free to make its own choice.

The Oneidas supported the thirteen colonies and served—quite effectively—on their side. If it were not for the hundreds of bushels of corn and other food brought by a faction of the Oneidas to General George Washington when his winter-bound troops were in danger of starving at Valley Forge, the Revolution might have failed. Most of the Iroquois fighters, though, including Joseph Brant's Mohawks, joined the English side.

The Iroquois did not fare well in the American Revolution. The surrender of the British—who ceded their colonial lands and generally abandoned their Native allies—left them vulnerable. The most devastating blow was felt by the Senecas, the victims of the 1779 Sullivan Expedition, a scorched-earth raid of Iroquois lands meant to bring the war home to the enemy to break their morale. Lasting from June through September, more than forty Iroquois villages were destroyed along with millions of bushels of corn, their winter stores. After the war, the controversial Treaty of Fort Stanwix (signed under duress and later rejected by the Iroquois Confederacy) greatly reduced the formerly vast land base of the Iroquois nations. In that treaty the Six Nations also pledged to never again make war against the new American nation and to always be its ally.

The tragic results of the Revolution for the Iroquois were threefold. First, for the only time since the founding of the league, Iroquois people had found themselves sometimes fighting other Iroquois. Second, the war devastated large parts of the Iroquois homeland. Third, after the war, the Iroquois who remained in the United States found themselves confined to tiny parts of their formerly vast territories on those small reservations in western, central, and far-northern New York. They were also now divided between Canada and the United States.

Some Mohawks followed Joseph Brant to that new reserve in Ontario provided by his British allies. Other Mohawks relocated on four reserves in Quebec, Gibson, Kahnawake, and Kanesatake and the St. Regis Reservation (now known as Akwesasne) that is partially in Canada and partially in the United States on the St. Lawrence River. The Onondagas kept a four-mile-by-four-mile reservation in the heart of their original territory. Many of the Oneidas went to Wisconsin, with only a few families remaining on a forty-acre plot of land in their central New York homeland. The Tuscaroras kept a reservation near Niagara Falls, while the Cayugas ended up as refugees at Six Nations territory in Ontario and on Cattaraugus Seneca lands with no New York land base at all. The Senecas, formerly the most numerous and powerful of Iroquois nations, found themselves, after the 1784 treaty, confined to several small pieces of land in western New York.

The last decades of the eighteenth century were, not surprisingly, a time of great turmoil and distress for the Iroquois. Alcoholism became common and many white observers felt that the Iroquois would melt away like the snow in spring. But they were more resilient than European Americans thought and survived that difficult time. One factor in their survival was the arrival of a new spiritual tradition that was accepted by many in all the Six Nations. A Seneca man who bore the chieftaincy name of Ganio'dai'io', or Handsome Lake, had

a visionary experience. He awoke from a near-death coma brought on by drinking to relate a series of prophetic visions given to him by Four Messengers from Ha-wen-ne'-yu, the Creator. The half brother of Cornplanter, a deeply respected Seneca leader, Handsome Lake's words proved to be enormously influential. His experience led to the establishment of a new way—the Gai'wiio, or Good Message, emphasized morality, peace, family ties, and sobriety and might have been influenced by Quaker practices. It so impressed Thomas Jefferson that the president had his secretary of war, Henry Dearborn, write a letter commending the prophet, which was delivered to a Seneca delegation visiting Washington, D.C.:

> **Brothers—The President is pleased with seeing you all in good health, after so long a journey, and he rejoices in his heart that one of your own people has employed to make you sober, good and happy; and that he is so well disposed to give you good advice, and to set before you so good examples.**
>
> **Brothers—If all the red people follow the example of your friend and teacher, the Handsome Lake, and in future will be sober, honest, industrious and good, there can be no doubt but the Great Spirit will take care of you and make you happy.**

Dearborn's letter certainly added to Handsome Lake's prestige among the Iroquois, many seeing it as something like a license for him to preach. Others, however, such as Red Jacket, an influential Seneca elder and famous orator, viewed him as a charlatan and bitterly opposed his teachings.

Over the next sixteen years, from 1799 until his death in 1815, Handsome Lake refined, added to, and taught his precepts among the Six Nations. Handsome Lake's teachings, which became known as the Longhouse Religion, were not universally accepted and he was driven from his home on the Allegany Reservation. However, he found refuge on the Tonawanda Seneca Reservation, 180 miles to the north. There his successor, Chief Jemmy Johnson, or Sose-ha-wa, who was the prophet's nephew (but called his grandson), continued his teachings. Tonawanda became the center of both the new religion and resistance to further removal of the Senecas from their lands.

The new Longhouse Religion—which also strongly condemned the sale of Indian land—was one of the factors that led to the survival, against all odds, of the Tonawanda Reservation. There was also a recognition among the elders of all six nations that they would have to find a way to work with the American nation that now surrounded them on all sides. One of their strategies was to choose promising young Iroquois men to be sent from their communities to learn the

ways of the white man. By gaining a European-style education, such men could then act as defenders of their people's interests—especially in protecting what little land was left to them from white men seeking to take it. They could, in the old tradition of men being chosen to carry wampum-belt messages from one nation to another, become "runners." Their destinations would not be other Indian communities, however, but the white centers of power in Albany and Washington.

Going to Washington to defend their interests was not a new thing for the Senecas. Despite the fact that he had been forced to put his name on a treaty in 1826, Red Jacket was known for strongly opposing the sale of Indian lands.

Red Jacket's Seneca name, Sagoyewatha (He Who Keeps Them Awake), reflected his legendary abilities as an orator. He was the most famous Indian of his time, well known to the white world for his speeches, which were often translated into English and published in newspapers.

Even though he only spoke in Seneca, white people would come to listen to him because of the beauty and power of his voice. It was said that he had gained his oratorical strength by standing close to the cataract of Niagara Falls and absorbing its roaring power. To this day, a statue of Red Jacket stands next to the falls.

SAGOYEWATHA. RED JACKET WEARING PEACE MEDAL, PAINTING (DETAIL) BY CHARLES BIRD KING.

One story about Red Jacket tells of how he took a walk along the Niagara River with a man who called himself a friend of the Indians. Red Jacket sat down with him on a log near the river. Then Red Jacket shifted closer to the man.

"Move over," Red Jacket said.

The man moved, only to have Red Jacket slide up to him and say, "Move over" a second time.

This went on until the white man was at the very end of the log.

"Move over," Red Jacket said yet again.

"But if I move further, I shall fall into the water," the man protested.

Red Jacket nodded. "And even so, you white people tell us to move on when there is no place left to go."

Handsome Lake, in one of his later visions, saw his enemy Red Jacket doomed to carry burdens of soil for eternity as punishment for his role in signing that Buffalo Creek Treaty of 1826. A deceptive agreement forced on the Senecas, it ceded the entire Buffalo Creek Reservation—land that became the city of Buffalo—to a development group called the Ogden Land Company.

Red Jacket led Seneca delegations to Albany and to Washington, where he spoke directly with President John Quincy Adams. That the 1826 treaty was never ratified by Congress was in part because of Red Jacket's appeal to allow the Senecas to hold on to what little land remained theirs. However, the fact remained that a treaty ceding the Seneca land existed and those lands were highly desirable.

By 1826, due to earlier cessions, the Ogden Land Company had

already gained access to millions of acres formerly owned by the Senecas. But the greed of the Ogden Company was not satisfied. They did everything in their power, including bribery and the use of force, to dispossess the remaining Indians—who they publicly described as ignorant, uncivilized, and savage.

The Senecas, however, were far from uncivilized or ignorant. Although few were fluent in English, they had been trading with Europeans for generations. The Tonawanda clan mothers, and the men these women chose to represent their nation, had a much better understanding of the white world surrounding them than the vast majority of white people had of the Native American world.

An example of that sophisticated Seneca understanding of the new world in which they lived came in 1812. The new American nation faced a threat from an old enemy. At the start of the War of 1812, the second armed conflict with England, many Americans feared the Senecas would aid their former British allies. In fact, the colonies of Upper and Lower Canada were saved, in large part, from American attachment by the wholesale participation of the Canadian Mohawks in alliance with the British and Canadians. Although Handsome Lake spoke against taking part in a "white man's war," the Seneca leaders decided otherwise. In a decision that was both strategic and patriotic, the Seneca nation declared

its support for the American cause. Not only would they state their loyalty, they would risk their lives to prove it. They would fulfill their treaty obligation to always support the United States—and also engage in one of the most honored of pursuits for young men, defending their homeland—winning the respect of their white neighbors in the process.

Tonawandas joined the American army in proportionately large numbers. They engaged in many of the crucial battles of the western frontier as soldiers and scouts. More than ninety men, half the adult male population of Tonawanda, enlisted. Among their number was Red Jacket and a stocky eighteen-year-old Seneca warrior named Jo-no-es-sto-wa, or Dragonfly, whose European name was William Parker. He and his two brothers, Samuel and Henry, had taken the last name of Parker from an Englishman who had been adopted by the Senecas. For his two years of service during the war, in which he was wounded, William Parker received an army pension. And it is to that determined young man and his remarkable family that this story now turns.