

The Mothers of the Nation

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The Mothers of the Nation: Women and the Land

Students of the Iroquois have evaluated the status of Iroquois women as high on various counts, and the basis of their judgments directly or indirectly refers back to female control of the means, processes, and distribution of local subsistence production. The land 'belonged' to the women: the concept of ownership, however, was not an Indian one, and the issue became relevant only when sale of land to whites was a possibility. In council in 1791, Red Jacket, who was the sachem designated as the official speaker for the women, announced for them that 'you ought to hear and listen to what we women shall speak . . . for we are the owners of the land and it is ours'. This fundamental ownership was recognized by the revised Constitution of the Seneca Nation of 1868.

Although women were disenfranchised and the former, clan-based political structure, through which women exercised control by the appointing and removal of sachems, was abolished, it was still required that three-fourths of the clan mothers consent to any decision to sell tribal land. In no instance does any authority suggest that land was legitimately under male control; but whites, of course, always assumed male control to be operative, and negotiations with Indian males for land sales was the rule.

In addition to the land itself, women owned the tools of agricultural production and food preparation, even when these tools were manufactured by men. Men's equipment was owned by men, but the distribution of the food products acquired with them (i.e., meat, fish, etc.) seems usually to have been at the discretion of the women. Certainly, women controlled the distribution of cooked food. Women also determined the distribution of surpluses, which would have come largely from their cornfields and were stored in pits against times of shortages. This control has special significance since it is likely that surpluses were exchanged intertribally and thus has implications for female participation and decisions in intertribal trade and politics. Furthermore, to the extent that war parties were dependent on provisions supplied by women, they could make significant determinations for or against military action by refusing provisions. Productive activities were carried on by work groups under the direction of a head woman who was chosen for her ability by other women. This system provided frequent opportunity for female competence and experience to be exercised and rewarded by social recognition. The communal and cooperative work structure persisted long after the matrilineal residence pattern was abandoned. Writing 1912, Arthur Parker described contemporary agricultural work groups under

the direction of a head woman. Moreover, men who participated were under her direct supervision.

The presence of matrilineal, multifamily dwellings both facilitated such work groups and supported the independent position of women. These domiciles, which were built by the men but owned by the women and transmitted through the matrilineal clan, offered a maximum degree of protection to the women, whose husbands were frequently away, and provided the basis for the easy rejection of a husband who did not perform up to standards.

While matrilineality provides a convenient residential arrangement to enhance female independence and to facilitate work groups composed of related women, any residential arrangement along with village endogamy (marrying within a village), would accomplish the same end. Men and women from the same clan were prohibited from marrying, but Seneca villages invariably contained two or more clans and village endogamy was a frequent practice. William Allinson, a Quaker who visited the Allegany Seneca settlement in 1809, presents a description of the marriage and residential patterns of the time. His visit occurred 11 years after both the establishment of the reservation boundaries and the introduction of the Quaker missionaries, and by this time there appeared to be a preferred pattern of virilocality (in which the wife goes to live at the residence of her husband) but within an apparently endogamous community. Allinson reports that marriages were arranged by the mothers or eldest sisters of young people on the basis of the young man's stated choice. A gift of trinkets worth approximately six to ten dollars was presented by the man and returned if his proposal was not accepted. If it was accepted, the mother of the girl then accompanied her to the house of the man, who was probably living with his mother, and left her there; but 'as the Seasons for planting, hoeing, gathering corn, procuring Fire wood and other business came on, the female connections of the young woman assist her in the different operations during the first year at the end of which without any ceremony the marriage is considered valid and honourable'. These activities occupied much of the year and indicate the close presence of the girl's family. With endogamy as the general rule within a village with a clustered type of settlement, specific residence rules have little significance for work-group organization; related women could as well work together in one field even if they didn't share one roof.

The Quakers, as we have said, were initially received by the Seneca 'with an apparently hearty welcome, and

treated with kindness'. Acting as spokesman for the group, Cornplanter extended total freedom of land utilization to the Quakers. When the latter indicated that they had sent a boatload of goods which had not yet arrived, they were loaned Indian tools and presented by the women with the seeds of 'corn, potatoes, beans, squashes, and a variety of other garden seeds which they presented as a present to Friends, observing "that it was very hard to come so far and have nothing to begin with".' The Quakers purchased a small house from the woman who owned it along with her daughter.

A reciprocal exchange was maintained throughout the summer. Halliday Jackson noted that 'a great number of them came flocking about Friends, especially the women, who appeared kind and respectful, frequently supplying them with venison, fish, strawberries, and such other delicacies, as their country afforded'. We should note that the inclusion of venison in the list suggests the control that women had over the meat procured by the men, as well as over their own products. In exchange, the Quakers distributed 'useful articles, such as needles, thread, scissors, combs, spectacles, etc., which were sent for that purpose, and were received by the natives with lively marks of gratitude'.

Although the women were very eager to observe the Quakers' agricultural practices, they wanted this information for their own use. As Wallace tells us, 'Agriculture by men had been resisted as an effeminate occupation with the women themselves taking the lead in ridiculing male farmers as transvestites'. Allinson illustrates: 'If a Man took hold of a Hoe to use it the Women would get down his gun by way of derision & would laugh & say such a warrior is a timid woman'. It is women who mock men; men seemed not to have any stake in other men's experimenting with farming. The women seemed to have no objection to men learning to plow fields that the women would then work, and men had always assisted women in the preparation of fields by clearing land and burning the timber and brush. In the spring of 1801 an experiment was conducted whereby every other row in a cornfield was prepared with the plow; the alternating rows were prepared in the traditional manner. The advantages of the plowed rows in terms of increased yields were apparent, and thereafter the plow was increasingly used for field preparation.

In general, aspects of the novel agricultural activities that were introduced were selectively adopted by the men. In spite of the fact that there is no physical reason why women cannot plow, Quaker instruction in its use was exclusively directed toward Seneca men. But plows and oxen to pull them were scarce and expensive commodities. By 1811 there were only six yoke of oxen and four plows, owned as collective property, and wages were earned by those men who were able to plow for others. In 1819, for instance, it was reported that a young man had plowed 22 acres for other Indians at the rate of \$2 per acre and plowing thus became not an early step in a total male agricultural cycle, but a specific cash-producing activity.

The Selective Conservatism of Seneca Women

While women conservatively retained their former agricultural control, they eagerly made themselves available to the Quakers to be taught a whole new range of additional skills — soap making, knitting, household management skills, and others — and they added the new tasks to the old ones. That the Quakers, in their professed desire to relieve the women of onerous tasks,

probably merely added a whole new set to the old ones is an interesting possibility. (Recall Mary Jamison's description of the life of a Seneca woman as pleasant, productive, and not excessively burdened when compared with that of white women of the same period.) Under the Quakers' direction, those household chores that had been casual were encouraged to become a focus of compulsive attention, but we may assume that the continuing criticisms of an overall 'negligent' attitude toward housekeeping reflected the firm grip that Seneca women kept on the reality of important versus trivial activity.

Erosion of Power: The Effects of Colonization

As Seneca life changed under the influence of white society, the power and position of Seneca women changed as well, although they continued to control a large measure of the subsistence production. Repeated accounts by travelers of their buying corn from Indian women would indicate that they probably derived some small cash return through the sale of surplus produce. Women continued to participate equally with men in overseeing the general conduct of ritual life, and the celebration of the three sisters of corn, beans and squash — which is the special domain of women — further reinforced female control of these basic subsistence items. Male crops are excluded from ritual consideration.

Evidence that the important position of women was being challenged appears sporadically in the record. John Adlum, traveling among the Senecas in 1794, observed that 'if the Indians go to war without the consent of the great women the mothers of the Sachems and Nation, The Great Spirit will not prosper them in War, but will cause them and their efforts to end in disgrace'. The debate about going to war was heated and the women were adamantly opposed. Cornplanter, who was advocating the action, eventually got tired of the obstinacy of the Women and to do way (with) the superstition of the men respecting it, rose and made a speech against superstition, he called it folly and nonsense, and was surprised that men of understanding had so long submitted to this ancient custom handed down to them by their ancestors, and now was the time, for men to decide for themselves and take this power from the women.

Handsome Lake, the Seneca prophet who rose to power after 1799 and around whose teachings the current Seneca longhouse religion is structured, endorsed a modification in the structure of Seneca society away from matrilineal unity and towards the primacy of the nuclear family. As Wallace writes,

It is plain that he was concerned to stabilize the nuclear family by protecting the husband-wife relationship against abrasive events. A principal abrasive, in his view, was the hierarchical relationship between a mother and her daughter. Mothers, he believed, were all too prone to urge their daughters toward sin by administering abortifacients and sterilizing medicines, by drunkenness, by practicing witchcraft, and by providing love magic. . . . Thus, in order to stabilize the nuclear family it was necessary to loosen the tie between mother and daughter Although he did not directly challenge the matrilineal principle in regard to sib membership or the customs of nominating sachems, he made it plain that the nuclear family, rather than the maternal lineage, was henceforward to be both the moral and economic centre of the behavioural universe.

The final challenge to women's control came with the replacement in 1848 of the traditional political structure,

in which sachems were appointed by the women and administered power under their watchful eye, by a system of elected representatives. Women were disenfranchised and did not regain voting privileges in the Seneca Nation until 1964. This radical change in political structure which had been advocated and supported by whites (the Quakers prominently among them) was the culmination of the loss of female power. As whites dealt with 'chiefs' — self-appointed or white-appointed spokesmen over whom women at best had tenuous

control — rather than with Sachems — over whom women had direct control — the action of these chiefs was frequently independent of review by either women specifically or the community at large. In negotiations between Indian men and white men, the intervening presence of female mediators was unexpected and unwelcomed by the whites and inhibited the exercise of full control by Indian men, who were observing the independent action of white men in male-oriented American society. ©

Industry's Handmaidens: Women in the Quebec Cotton Industry

Gail Cuthbert Brandt

Depuis la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, la main-d'oeuvre pour l'industrie du textile du Québec est surtout féminine. Cet article souligne les problèmes auxquels les femmes ont dû faire face et les changements positifs acquis pour la femme dans le marché du travail.



National Archives of Quebec

The old fashioned spinning wheel can still be found, in use, in rural Quebec.

As nation builders, women have distinguished themselves by the extraordinary diversity of their contribution. They bore and raised the children upon whom the nation's growth and development depended; they frequently organized the embryonic social services which characterized pioneer society; and they acted as the purveyors of culture and civilization.

But more than anything else, women worked. Unpaid or ill-paid, they toiled at dirty, monotonous, back-breaking jobs in the nation's homes, farms and factories. By acting as a cheap and flexible labour force, they greatly

facilitated the transformation of the Canadian nation from a rural, agricultural society into an urban, industrial one.

One of the earliest Canadian industries to make extensive use of women was the textile industry. Women simply transferred their time-honoured spinning and weaving skills from the hearth to the factory. By the late 19th century, the production of cotton cloth was a principal activity of the Canadian textile industry, and was particularly important in the economy of Quebec. Encouraged by the protective tariff set in place by the Conservatives' National

Policy, industrialists chose to locate in Quebec since it offered two abundant and inexpensive resources: hydro-electric power and labour. As Table I indicates, women constituted a significant proportion of the workers employed in the Quebec cotton industry.¹

Writing the history of these and other working class women raises unique methodological problems. Documentation pertaining to the role of women in industry is sparse although some general information can be gleaned from federal census material, government reports and newspapers. Exploring the actual