

ONÖDOWÁ'GA:' GAWĚ:NÖ' THE **SENECA** LANGUAGE

THE LANGUAGE OF THE GREAT HILL PEOPLE

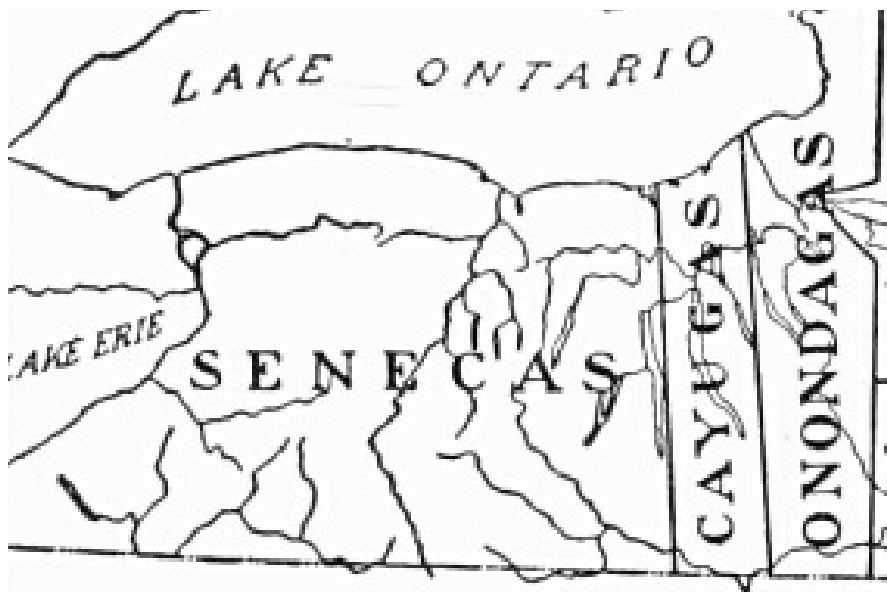
AN INTRODUCTION

The **onödowá'ga:'** ("Great Hill People") are most commonly referred to by the Algonquian-based exonym **Seneca** ("Stone"). The Seneca nation is located in present-day western New York and is one of the original members of the **Haudenosaunee Confederacy**. The **onödowá'ga:'** speak the Seneca language, or **onödowá'ga:' gawě:nö'**, an Iroquoian language related to Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and most closely, Cayuga.

The language is greatly endangered and is spoken by between 50 and 100 people, mostly on three Seneca reservations in the westernmost region of upstate New York (Cattaraugus, Allegany, and Tonawanda). Despite Seneca's endangered status, the **onödowá'ga:'** remain optimistic and have put forth efforts to preserve and revitalize the language for younger generations.



LINGUISTIC OVERVIEW



LANGUAGE FAMILY

IROQUOIAN

- Northern Iroquoian
 - Lake Iroquoian
 - Five Nations
 - Seneca-Cayuga
 - Seneca

LINGUISTIC FEATURES

ORTHOGRAPHY

13 Latin-based characters
Use of diacritical markings
Usually written in all lower-case

MORPHOLOGY

Agglutinative
Polysynthetic
Rich verbal morphology
Simple nominal morphology
Rich system of pronominal prefixes
85% of words are Seneca in origin

SYNTAX

Free word order
Words are ordered by importance
Considered nominative-accusative
Proximal/distal distinction

ONÖDOWÁ'GA:-' GAWĚ:NÖ'

ALPHABET & SOUND INVENTORY

SYMBOLS*

a'	stop like 'uh-oh'
a:	long vowel
á	raised pitch
à:	falling pitch; long vowel

NOTES

This specific alphabet is pulled from Wallace Chafe's "English-Seneca Dictionary", which was compiled with the help of Seneca people. IPA is provided under the "pronunciation" columns.

*a is used here as a sample letter to clearly demonstrate application of diacritical markings.

VOWELS

a
e
i
o
u
ä
ë
ö

CONSONANTS

w
n
y
d
dz/ts
t
g
k
s
š
j
h

PRONUNCIATION

[a]	a in 'father'
[e]	e in 'they'
[i]	i in 'police'
[o]	o in 'note'
[u]	u in 'tune'
[æ]	a in 'cat'
[ẽ]	e in nasal 'men'
[õ]	o in nasal 'own'

PRONUNCIATION

[w]	w in 'wash'
[n]	n in 'not'
[j]	y in 'yes'
[d]	d in 'dog'
[dz~ts]	like 'Edsel'/'cats'
[t~th]	like 'sty'/'tie'
[g]	g in 'girl'
[k~kh]	like 'ski'/'key'
[s]	s in 'sit'
[ʃ]	sh in 'show'
[dʒ~tʃ]	like 'jar'/'char'
[h]	h in 'hat'

THE BODY

IN ONÖDOWÁ'GA:' GAWĚ:NÖ'

onö'ö:'
head

ogóhsa'
face

o:nyá'sa'
neck; throat

o:néhsa'
shoulder

o'dóhsä'
chest

onë:sha'
arm

ogé'ä'
hair

oshé:wa'
belly

os'óhda'
hand

ohsi:nö'
leg

GOLDIE JAMISON CONKLIN, Seneca, 1908

Also known as "Pretty Flower", Goldie was born November 30, 1892 in Salamanca, NY on the Allegany Seneca reservation. Goldie is wearing traditional regalia showcasing intricate beadwork. Features like her tiara and collar are still major components of Seneca and other Haudenosaunee regalia today.



THE GENOCIDE OF A PEOPLE AND THE ENDANGERMENT OF A LANGUAGE

"KILL THE INDIAN, SAVE THE MAN"

THE LEGACY OF CARLISLE INDIAN INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL

About 50 years after Andrew Jackson instated the Indian Removal Act, a policy marking the beginning of mass displacement of indigenous people across the US during a period known as the “Trail of Tears”, the United States’ first off-reservation boarding school was established. The **Carlisle Indian Industrial School** was founded in Pennsylvania by Civil War veteran Richard Henry Pratt in 1879, with the purpose of assimilating native people to fit Anglo-American ideals in hopes that indigenous groups could be quelled in ways more efficient than launching raids or engaging in battle.

The ultimate goal was the complete destruction of native presence and identity within the United States, thus removing one of the biggest obstacles to the Americans’ western expansion and greed for resources. To present the cause as a more noble one, Pratt championed the slogan “kill the Indian, save the man,” suggesting that nativeness was a disorder indigenous people needed to be cured of, thereby making their Anglo-American oppressors out to be saviors.

Carlisle was a model for assimilation institutions across the United States. Characteristics of these schools included the emphasis of physical and domestic labor in curricula, mass conversion of indigenous students to Christianity, the rejection of native cultural values, enforcement of western aes-

-thetics and values, the abandonment of native names in favor of Anglo-American ones and the suppression of native languages. Unsurprisingly, countless schools have also been found guilty of neglect, sexual assault and murder, which have been left widely unacknowledged to this day.

The violence committed by boarding schools was not confined to the campuses. The children that survived and returned home found it almost impossible to reconnect with their families. Indigenous children were taught to associate their languages with shame and were raised away from their families, growing up with strict schedules, vastly different diets, wearing different clothes, and adopting a different religion and a different set of values. The strains caused by alienation were only strengthened by the children's PTSD and other mental illnesses.

Despite families being physically reunited the damage had already been done; family units crumbled and religions, languages, and cultural traditions were lost, with generational trauma surviving in their stead. Indigenous communities across the US suffer the effects of forced assimilation today as many struggle to maintain their heritages while also combating public health issues like poverty and mental illness alongside continued oppression and colonialism at the hands of federal and state governments.

FORCED ASSIMILATION IN WNY

THE THOMAS INDIAN SCHOOL



THOMAS INDIAN SCHOOL

Cattaraugus Reservation, Irving, New York

The campus was built by New York state in around 1900.

Two decades before Carlisle was established, two missionaries founded the **Thomas Indian School** (originally the **Thomas Asylum of Orphan and Destitute Indian Children**) on the Cattaraugus reservation in western New York. It is due to this school's location that it is overlooked in the conversation on boarding schools as it resides on a reservation rather than as a separate entity. The institution was originally an orphanage built to house native children whose families could no longer provide for them due to poverty, alcoholism, abuse and other issues brought on by systemic oppression. At its founding, the school was not designed for assimilation and included the teaching of onödowá'ga:' by Seneca teachers in its curricula. However, in 1875, the school's management switched hands and philosophies when the State Board of Charities took over,

turning Thomas Indian School into an agent of assimilation.

In addition to the children being voluntarily sent by desperate families, other children were forcibly removed from their communities altogether. An onödowá'ga:' man named Elliot Tallchief recalls being taken away from his family by social workers at five years old, along with his then six year old sister, to be taken to the school. It was there that he learned to view native people as inferior, even cheering for protagonists in films as they fought against Native American characters. An onödowá'ga:' woman (unnamed) remembers being carefully watched by teachers, even during recess hours, and being punished whenever she spoke her native language.

The school operated into the 1950's, meaning that many of today's Seneca elders had attended Thomas before its closing; having been subjected to being shamed for their language, they and their peers did not see the value in teaching onödowá'ga:' gawë:nö' to younger generations, further contributing to the language's decline. Seneca elders make up the majority of the language's fluent speakers, which has recently become urgent as this demographic continues to age. In around 2004, onödowá'ga:' had around 200 fluent speakers, which dwindled to about 30 by 2014. Due to recent revitalization efforts, those numbers have been slowly recovering.



REVITALIZING ONÖDOWÁ'GA:' GAWĚ:NÖ' PROGRAMS & RESOURCES FOR SENECA PEOPLE

The revitalization of onödowá'ga:' gawë:nö' is currently being addressed with a handful of interconnected programs in western New York that are available to onödowá'ga:' children and adults. Included is a children's Montessori style school designed specifically to teach children onödowá'ga:' history, culture and language; an immersion program for onödowá'ga:' adults where they can learn their language from elders; and a website with a collection of resources on onödowá'ga:' gawë:nö' for children and adults.

It should go without saying that these resources are intended solely for those connected to the Seneca Nation, as the language is a pillar of onödowá'ga:' culture and therefore belongs firstly to the onödowá'ga:'.

Pictured: Haudenosaunee in Buffalo, New York

PROGRAMS & RESOURCES

Faithkeepers Montessori School Seneca Language Nest Allegany

1431 West Perimeter Rd.,
P.O. Box 136,
Steamburg, NY 14783
(716) 354-2219

This school teaches Seneca children Seneca history, culture and language through Montessori methods. Characteristic of Montessori learning, the school teaches children by allowing them to learn at their own pace with student-led learning. Students are taught with an emphasis on play and physical work to learn intellectual concepts. Children also enjoy nature-oriented studies alongside math, practical studies and language. The FKS Language Nest lays the groundwork for future education in Seneca by teaching the sounds and basics of the language which can be applied to more advanced lessons as students grow.

Deadiwënöhsnye's Gëjóhgwa' Immersion Program Cattaraugus

86 Iroquois Drive,
Irving, NY 14081
(716) 532-4900 ext. 8922

For adults looking to reconnect with their heritage language, the Seneca nation has an immersion program taught mostly by onödowá'ga:' elders, the remaining fluent Seneca speakers. The program focuses on everyday language so that students can quickly become conversational speakers. Many students that have reached a higher level in this program became teachers themselves to continue the revilization of onödowá'ga:' gawë:nö' by teaching their peers and the generations after them.

Seneca Language Department Resources Website

<https://senecalanguage.com/>

Onödowá'ga:' gawë:nö' has a wealth of resources provided online by the Seneca Language Department. Included are lessons, audio, booklets, teaching materials, videos, board games, printables, and even study materials for the admissions tests for the immersion program. The website also has two English-Seneca dictionaries and a Seneca grammar.

Earlier this summer (2020), the program also posted about Skype classes for the Seneca language on this website.