

# Indigenous People of Western New York

Kristin Szczepaniec

## Territorial Acknowledgement

In keeping with regional protocol, I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and by honoring the sovereignty of the Six Nations—the Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Seneca and Tuscarora—and their land where we are situated and where the majority of this work took place. In this acknowledgement, we hope to demonstrate respect for the treaties that were made on these territories and remorse for the harms and mistakes of the far and recent past; and we pledge to work toward partnership with a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.

## Introduction

Indigenous people of North America date their history on the land as “since time immemorial”; some archeologists say that a 12,000 year-old history on this continent is a close estimate.<sup>1</sup> Today, the U.S. federal government recognizes over 567 American Indian and Alaskan Native tribes and villages with 6.7 million people who identify as American Indian or Alaskan, alone or combined.<sup>2</sup>

The land that is now known as New York State has a rich history of First Nations people, many of whom continue to influence and play key roles in shaping the region. This fact sheet offers information about Native people in Western New York from the far and recent past through 2018.

Terms such as Native American, Native, Indigenous, First Nations, and American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) are preferred by different individuals in a variety of contexts and can be used to convey different meanings. Most Native people prefer to be recognized by their tribe, nation, or pueblo identity, since each group has a unique history and heritage. Often, the diversity of First Nation peoples is overlooked.<sup>3</sup>

Many people do not realize that it was not until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 that “Indians” born in the United States were granted citizenship and—at least in theory—the right to vote.<sup>4</sup>

This fact sheet summarizes some of the available history of Indigenous people in what is now known as Western New York and provides information on the contemporary state of Haudenosaunee communities. Intended to shed light on an often overlooked history, it includes demographic, economic, and health data on Indigenous people in Western New York.

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**PARTNERSHIP  
FOR THE  
PUBLIC GOOD**

Federal recognition and tribal identity are complex topics for most Native people today. A federally recognized tribe, nation or pueblo is an entity that has a government relationship with the United States, possessing certain inherent rights of self-government and entitled to federal benefits, services, and protections. We should note in passing that there are dozens of tribes who are not federally recognized throughout the U.S. and that not every federally recognized tribe has a land base or reservation.

Sovereignty makes Native citizens different from other groups that may be delineated by race or ethnicity. The term sovereignty denotes a political relationship with the U.S. government. As Chief Justice John Marshall ruled in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831), “tribes possess a nationhood status and retain inherent powers of self-government.”<sup>5</sup> This designation extends to the state level as well: states do not have any authority over a tribal nation within their territory unless the state and tribe have established legal agreement on a particular issue.<sup>6</sup> For example, in order to establish a casino in Niagara Falls, the Seneca Nation made an agreement with the state of New York to establish exclusivity rights in the area.<sup>7</sup>

Tribal sovereignty also means that any decisions about the tribal citizens with regard to their property and peoples are made with their participation and consent. Native peoples governed themselves for thousands of years, through tribal protocols, traditions, religion, and kinship systems. Today, while many tribes make decisions in traditional ways, most tribal governments are organized democratically with elected officials and three branches of government.

Federal, state, and local laws apply to Native citizens in different ways. On federal reservations, only federal and reservation laws apply. Individual Natives pay federal income taxes just like every other American. Most tribes have established tribal courts. Similar to state governments, tribal governments not themselves subject to taxation by the federal government. Like state and local governments, too, tribal governments use their revenues to provide essential services for their citizens, but tribal governments generally cannot levy property or income taxes because of the unique nature of their land tenure and jurisdictional restraints. Income from tribal businesses is the only non-federal revenue source for most tribes. States cannot directly tax a tribal government, but they can collect taxes on sales to non-members that occur on tribal lands—with conditions that are often established through intergovernmental agreements.

The question as to “who is ‘Indian’” is complicated and fraught with disquieting history, and the answer is not always binary. Before white settlers, tribal identity was more fluid, much like tribal boundaries and alliances with other groups. Today, as part of tribal sovereignty, tribes determine membership. Many use blood quantum, ranging from 100%

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to one-thirty-second. But the notion of membership by blood quantum was begun by colonial governments looking to determine who was a “real Indian,” and to this day, is haunted by the idea that this is a widespread practice when dealing with animals, not humans.

Originally, the federal government favored including “mixed blood” or more assimilated Indians in tribal membership rolls in hopes that they would be more likely to cede tribal land. Later after land claims were established, the government favored restricting definitions of “who is Indian” in order to limit its duties to the Native population. Officials hoped that intermarriages would “dilute Indian blood” and promote assimilation.

Today, tribes may determine membership by lineal descent (being able to prove that you had an ancestor listed as a member of that tribe—a method still beholden to colonial history), residence on tribal lands, participation in ceremonies and rituals, knowledge of tribal language and culture, or membership in a recognized clan. The issues are complex, because there are people with Native ancestry who do not know much about Native culture; conversely, there are people who are not enrolled but who regularly practice ceremonies and/or speak their Native language. In 2018, tribal citizens are still issued cards by the federal government certifying their “Degree of Indian Blood,” which can be used for things like airport security or as another valid form of ID. Modern Native people are continually asked to “prove” and define their identity—and must struggle to preserve and perpetuate their cultures while combating many incorrect or offensive stereotypes.

## Indigenous People in Western New York

There are eight federally recognized tribes in New York State: the Cayuga, Tuscarora, Oneida, Onondaga, St. Regis Mohawk (along St. Lawrence River near Quebec, Canada), Seneca Nation, Tonawanda Band of Seneca Indians, and Shinnecock (located downstate).<sup>8</sup>

Of these eight tribes, all but the Shinnecock and St. Regis Mohawk identify as Haudenosaunee (hoe-dee-no-SHOW-nee or hoe-den-oh-saw-nee). In New York State, Haudenosaunee is the designation most commonly used by the Iroquois to refer to themselves.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars of Native American history also prefer it because they consider the name “Iroquois” to be derogatory in origin.<sup>10</sup> This name derives from two words in the Seneca language: Hodínöhsö:ni:h, meaning “those of the extended house,” signifying the people of the longhouse, and Hodínöhsö:ni:h, meaning “house builders.”<sup>11</sup> The Iroquois confederacy is often referred to as the Six Nations (or, for the period before the entry of the Tuscarora in 1722, the Five Nations).<sup>12</sup>

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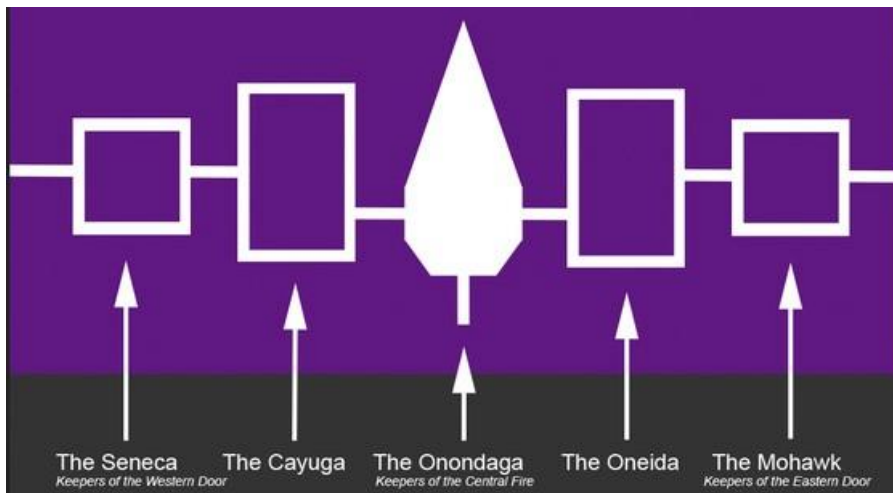


Figure 1. Wampum are beads made from white and purple mollusk shells, bound by strings to make intricate patterns on belts. The belts are used to signify official authority or to keep record of important stories, ideas or treaties.

Source: [syracuseadventures.wordpress.com](http://syracuseadventures.wordpress.com).

Many Western New Yorkers recognize the Hiawatha belt as a symbol of the Haudenosaunee [See Figure 1]. This wampum belt is named after Hiawatha, the Peacemaker's helper, and it records the time when five nations (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk) joined together to form an alliance. The center symbol represents the Onondaga Nation, as well as the Tree of Peace under which the Native leaders buried their weapons of war. The Seneca are the Keepers of the Western door and the Mohawk are the Keepers of the Eastern door.<sup>13</sup> The first nations in New York State did not, traditionally, occupy a specific tract of land, but archeologists have confirmed that these communities tended to settle and travel within general designated areas.<sup>14</sup>

In Western New York as in much of the United States, tribes were forced onto small tracts of land called reservations [See Figures 3 and 4].

- The Cayuga do not currently have a reservation, but are negotiating their land claim with New York State; there are approximately 450 members of this nation living in New York, including about 100 speakers of their language.<sup>15</sup>
- The Oneida reservation is 32 acres, located in Madison County; about 40 of the 1000 members live on the reservation, with about 200 speakers living in New York and Ontario, Canada.<sup>16</sup>
- The Onondaga Reservation is 7,300 acres, located five miles south of Syracuse (there is also an Onondaga Reservation in Canada); there are approximately 470 people living on the reservation in New York, including about 20 fluent speakers of their language.<sup>17</sup>

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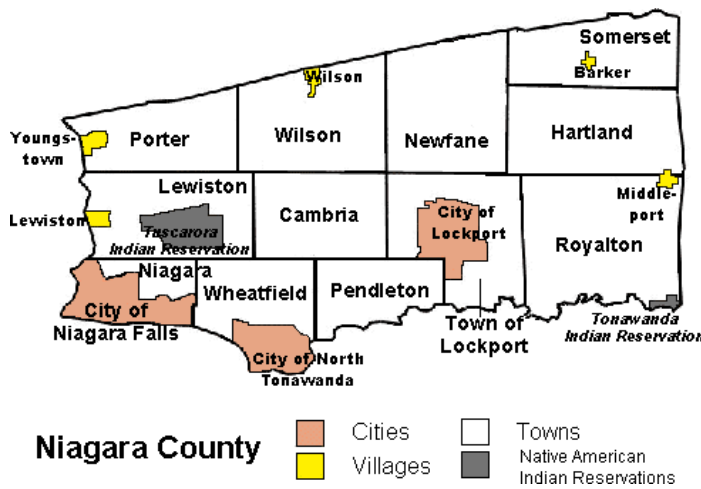


Figure 2. Source: Niagara County Native Map: <http://www.smithancestry.com/places/niag/niagaracounty.htm>

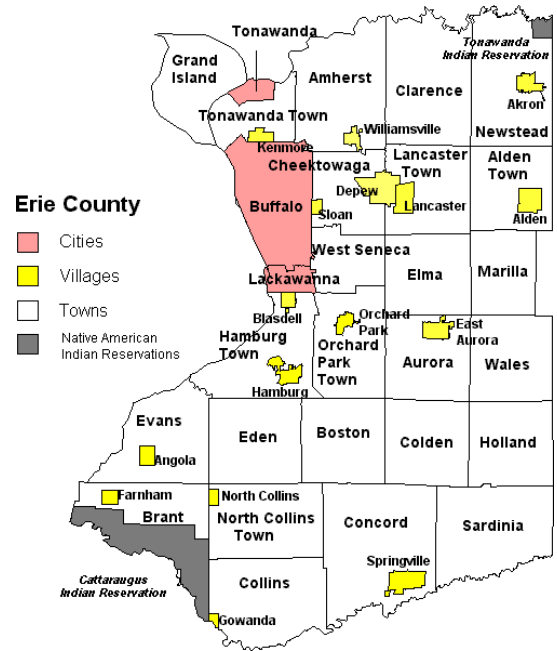


Figure 3. Source: Erie County Native Map: <http://www.smithancestry.com/places/erie/erie.htm>

- The Seneca Nation, with over 8,000 members, has five reservations in New York—Cattaraugus, Allegany, Oil Spring, Niagara and Buffalo. The City of Salamanca on the Allegany reservation is known as the “only city in the world entirely on an Indian reservation.” Unlike many other tribes, the Seneca Nation owns its territories (most other territories are held in trust for a nation by the U.S. government).<sup>18</sup> Today, there are approximately 175 fluent speakers of the Seneca language.<sup>19</sup>
- The Tuscarora reservation is 9.3 square miles located about 20 minutes from Niagara Falls, mostly in Niagara County but with a portion in Erie County. There are 1,140 people living on the reservation. There are roughly 15 fluent speakers of the language in Western New York and North Carolina.<sup>20</sup>

The Tuscarora, prior to the arrival of Europeans, migrated south from what is now Ontario and Western New York to what is now known as Eastern Carolina. After the Tuscarora Wars (1711-1713) against the English colonists in that region, most surviving Tuscarora migrated back north to areas near Pennsylvania and New York. With similar cultural and linguistic Iroquoian connections, they quickly aligned with the Iroquois of New York. In 1722, Tuscarora was accepted as the Sixth Nation of the Haudenosaunee. In 1803, a final group of Tuscarora migrated to Western New York and after that, the Tuscarora in New York no longer considered

those who remained in the south as part of their nation. Today, the Tuscarora who allied with the colonists and the Oneida during the American Revolution are recognized by the United States government as the Tuscarora Nation of New York and have a reservation that is surrounded by the Town of Lewiston. The Tuscarora who allied with the British during this time were resettled to present-day Ontario and are part of the Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation, which is officially recognized by the Canadian government.

In the United States, the historical designation of a Native group as either a tribe, nation, pueblo or band was dependent on colonial administrators who were often unfamiliar with indigenous political practices and the fluidity of social structures. Historically, for many indigenous people, there was considerable flexibility of residence because of their foraging economies. Today, in the post-reservation era, groups that maintain their political independence (and who are often affiliated with designated land bases) are known as nations, tribes or pueblos, while those who may share a similar heritage to these groups but who have formed subsidiary units are denoted as bands.

The Tonawanda Band of Seneca is a federally recognized tribe who have maintained their traditional form of government by Seneca chiefs, called sachems, appointed by clan mothers. In 1838, the U.S. signed the Second Treaty of Buffalo Creek with the six tribal nations in Western New York as part of the Indian Removal program. Under the Treaty, the Ogden Land Company would buy the four Seneca reservations in New York and the proceeds would be used to relocate the Nation to the Kansas Territory. In 1842, the U.S. entered the Third Treaty of Buffalo Creek, which clarified that the Ogden Land Company had purchased only two reservations, including the Tonawanda Reservation, but not the Cattaraugus or Allegany reservations. The Senecas of the Tonawanda Reservation refused to leave their land since they had not been consulted in this treaty, nor had their chiefs signed it. In 1848, the Seneca of Cattaraugus, Allegany, and Oil Springs adopted a republican constitution and government, electing a council and executive officials to govern their lands. The Tonawanda Band opted out of participating in the republic and seceded to reestablish their own traditional government, using the proceeds from their land sale to buy back most of the Tonawanda Reservation.

Today, most of those who identify as American Indian reside off of tribal reserves—about 78 percent.<sup>21</sup> The Buffalo Niagara metropolitan region is considered one of the top 15 major metropolitan areas for Native populations, with one percent of the people identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native in the Census, for a total of 12,017 residents [See Table 1].<sup>22</sup>

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## Major Urban American Indian & Alaskan Native Population

U.S. CITY AND NUIFC GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

Metropolitan Statistical Area	Total Metro Population	American Indian & Alaska Native alone or combined	% American Indian & Alaska Native alone or combined
Albuquerque, NM	712,738	47,280	6.6%
Anchorage, AK	260,283	26,995	10.4%
Oakland, CA	7,039,362	106,413	1.5%
Buffalo, NY	1,170,111	12,017	1%
Chicago, IL	8,376,601	50,059	0.06%
Denver, CO	2,581,506	42,423	1.6%
Los Angeles, CA	16,373,645	258,989	1.6%
Minneapolis, MN	2,868,847	37,408	1.3%
Oklahoma City, OK	1,083,346	71,926	6.6%
Phoenix, AZ	3,251,876	91,520	2.8%
Portland, OR	1,919,985	38,926	2.1%
San Antonio, TX	1,592,383	20,404	1.2%
Seattle, WA	3,554,760	81,958	2.3%
Tucson, AZ	843,746	33,910	4.1%
Tulsa, OK	803,235	86,118	10.7%

Table 1: Source: Table DP-1, Profile General Demographic Characteristics: U.S. Census 2000. Based on Primary and Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas.

Looking more broadly at the eight counties of Western New York, Natives total over 19,000 residents and comprise over 1.3% of the population (Allegany and Wyoming Counties do not report enough Native residents for Census figures).<sup>23</sup>

The history of genocide, forced migration, and broken political treaties since the time of contact with European immigrants in the 17th century continues to affect Native communities in Western New York as well as across the nation. While the U.S. government and Native tribes have made efforts in recent times to reaffirm tribal sovereignty, renew cultural practices, and reduce health, education, and economic disparities, many challenges persist.<sup>24</sup>

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## TOTAL POPULATION BY REGION

Geography	Pop. Group	Total	% AI/AN of Total Pop.
U.S.	AI/AN	5,309,095	1.70%
	Total pop.	316,515,021	
Cattaraugus*	AI/AN	3,067	3.90%
	Total pop.	78,962	
Chautauqua*	AI/AN	1,280	1%
	Total pop.	132,646	
Erie*	AI/AN	9,878	1.10%
	Total pop.	921,584	
Genesee*	AI/AN	844	1.40%
	Total pop.	59,458	
Niagara*	AI/AN	3,530	1.60%
	Total pop.	214,150	
Orleans*	AI/AN	459	1.10%
	Total pop.	42,204	
WNY (*combined counties)	AI/AN	19,058	1.30%
	Total pop.	1,497,074	

## Local History

In order to understand Native communities today, it is important to understand the events and context that have shaped them. Several events in particular have molded the Indigenous communities of Western New York.

### CONSTITUTION

Centuries ago, the nations of the Haudenosaunee united to form a confederacy, establishing peace in what is now Upstate New York. This confederacy influenced the U.S. Constitution, as the U.S. Senate acknowledged in a 1988 resolution: “the confederation of the original thirteen colonies into one republic was influenced...by the Iroquois Confederacy, as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the constitution itself.”<sup>25</sup> At a Cornell University conference in 1987, some 200 scholars examined scholarly and historical evidence that the world’s oldest living democracy is the Six Nation Confederacy of the Iroquois.<sup>26</sup>

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## TREATIES

The Treaty of Canandaigua, also known as the Pickering Treaty, signed in 1794 between the federal government and Haudenosaunee Confederacy of New York, promised the Haudenosaunee one million acres of land and annual payments of cash and goods in exchange for their support in the Revolutionary War.<sup>27</sup>

One of the most important treaties for the Seneca Nation is the Buffalo Creek Treaty of 1842, which established that the Nation would have full use of the Allegany and Cattaraugus territories, meaning that these lands are not held in trust by the federal government like most reservations but are owned by the Seneca Nation.<sup>28</sup>

## THOMAS INDIAN SCHOOL

The Thomas Indian School was founded in 1855 on the Cattaraugus Seneca Reservation and operated for almost 200 years. Because it was founded as an orphanage, unlike federally funded boarding schools like Carlisle, it is often lost in conversations about boarding schools. It began as a somewhat benevolent institution, taking in Native children from across New York State and helping children to learn their Iroquois languages. Unfortunately, the structure of the school changed in 1875 when the State Board of Charities took over. Thousands of Native children were sent there, and very few reunited with their parents or siblings, let alone with their culture, language, or way of life.

Generations of Native children were harmed by the dissolution of Native families caused, in part, by schools such as Thomas and Carlisle, which historians have deemed one of the most destructive agents of forced assimilation. When the children were finally released, they were often estranged from their parents and left with no place to go. Many children left the schools harboring feelings of resentment and abandonment, and without the self-esteem or skills necessary for survival in a world from which they had been isolated and were ill-prepared to enter.<sup>29</sup> Many of today's Native elders in Western New York attended the Thomas Indian school.

## KINZUA DAM AND INTERSTATE 86 EAST

The building of the Kinzua Dam on the Alleghany River near Salamanca in 1965 was a momentous event in Western New York history. The construction of the dam displaced more than 600 Seneca nation members and submerged 10,000 acres, nearly one-third of Seneca territory. Homes and forests were burned and then flooded. Two thousand graves, including the 1836 grave of Chief Cornplanter, were moved, but many other graves were lost. This land grab broke the 1794 Canandaigua Treaty, signed by President George Washington, and resulted in the loss of considerable fertile soils.<sup>30</sup> The majority of Seneca had practiced traditional ways until being

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displaced by the Dam project and deeply resented the forcible change to their way of life.<sup>31</sup>

In 1964, the Seneca lost an appeal over the relocation of a four-lane highway through the remaining portion of the Allegany Reservation.<sup>32</sup> This caused the loss of more land to the interstate, which divided the reservation territory. The construction of the road and dam divided tribal members who had long lived side-by-side and separated two communities that now must travel significant distances to see their friends and family.

#### NIAGARA POWER PROJECT

In 1960, the construction of the Niagara Falls Power project in what is now Lewiston marked another significant blow to the region's Native population. Led by Robert Moses, New York State seized 550 acres of the Tuscarora reservation through eminent domain to form a reservoir. Moses's initial offer to the Tuscarora tribe was just \$1,000 per acre, while at the same time he was offering adjacent Niagara University \$50,000 per acre.<sup>33</sup> The case eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the State.<sup>34</sup> As a result of this project, 37 homes were destroyed and 175 members of the Tuscarora tribe were displaced. Fishing on the reserve, which had played a significant role in providing food to Native families, became almost nonexistent.<sup>35</sup>

#### SALAMANCA

Constructed in Cattaraugus County in the late 1800s and incorporated in the early 1900s, Salamanca was once a booming railroad town. It is the only city in the U.S. that lies completely within a Native reservation—the Seneca Nation Territory. In 1892, roughly 3,000 non-Native people of Salamanca received leases to rent the Seneca land for 99 years in exchange for a total payment to the Nation of only \$17,000 per year.<sup>36</sup> In 1991, when the leases expired (after some extensions), the Nation requested increased rents and restitution. Tensions ran high, with the Senecas seeking to rectify years of exploitation by whites and non-Natives outraged that Native residents of Salamanca did not pay local taxes on their tribal land. Ultimately, the Seneca Nation increased rents dramatically (in some cases from \$24 to \$2000 per year), and leases were limited to 40 years.

#### CHANGING NAMES AND REASSERTING INFLUENCE

Today, Natives in Western New York continue to remind residents of the area's history and to influence local culture and politics. In 2015, Lancaster High School changed their 70-year-old name, "Redskins," to the "Legends." School board members recognized the old name as a "symbol of ethnic stereotyping" that could be "hurtful and disrespectful to others."<sup>37</sup> That same year, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown signed legislation to

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change the name of Squaw Island to Unity Island<sup>38</sup> (the Oxford English, Webster's and Miriam Webster's dictionaries have all cited the word "squaw" as an insult).<sup>39</sup> In addition, some school districts, including Niagara Wheatfield, have decided to rename "Columbus Day" as "Indigenous Peoples' Day," due to the history of slavery, genocide, and kidnappings linked to the Italian explorer.<sup>40</sup> Indigenous people continue to push for more widespread adoption of this policy and to remind the public that Native people are "still here."<sup>41</sup>

## Belief Systems and Cultural Values

Traditionally, Haudenosaunee social life was communal and structured around seasonal agriculture and hunting. Elders were, and continue to be, highly respected, seen as a source of wisdom, guidance, and spirituality, and consulted when making decisions within the family or the community.<sup>42</sup> The concept of family in many tribes is quite elastic when compared to the modern Western European concept of a nuclear family; it includes not just parents and children, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, community elders, and family friends.<sup>43</sup> Many tribes in Western New York have a matrilineal system, with lineage passed down through the mother or female side of the family.<sup>44</sup>

Regardless of specific religious beliefs, spirituality is a core component of Native identity, and spiritual practices permeate traditional daily life.<sup>45</sup> Practices and rituals are generally centered on respect for the earth, reverence for the gifts of nature, and responsibility for stewardship of the land.<sup>46</sup> Most Native tribes hold the land they live on as sacred; it is considered both a physical and spiritual homeland that ties past and future generations together.<sup>47</sup> Many tribes and nations share cultural values that emphasize restraint, patience, and being grounded in the present.<sup>48</sup> Polite body language is important, and Western European customs such as direct eye contact and vigorous hand shaking can be viewed as aggression or dominance.<sup>49</sup>

## Language and Education

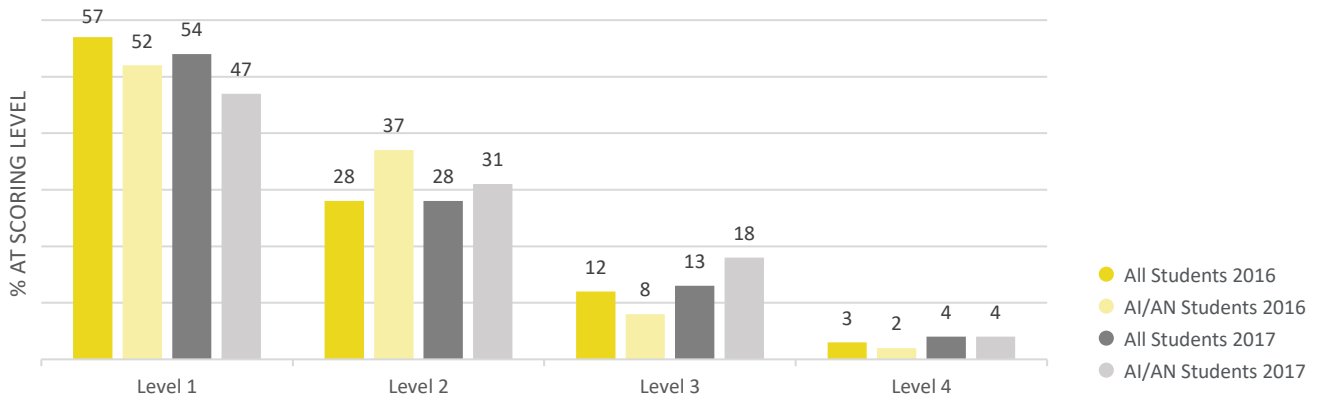
In the United States today, 28% of people who identify as American Indian and Alaska Native speak a language other than English at home.<sup>50</sup> In Western New York, 87.5% of AI/AN peoples speak only English at home and 8.2% speak another language.<sup>51</sup> Many tribes would like to see this percentage increase and are making concerted efforts at the local and national level to increase funding and programming to teach youth their tribal languages.<sup>52</sup>

Directly related to efforts to reaffirm native culture and language is a growing body of reforms to education; nationally, Native students fall consistently below average in terms of high school and college graduation

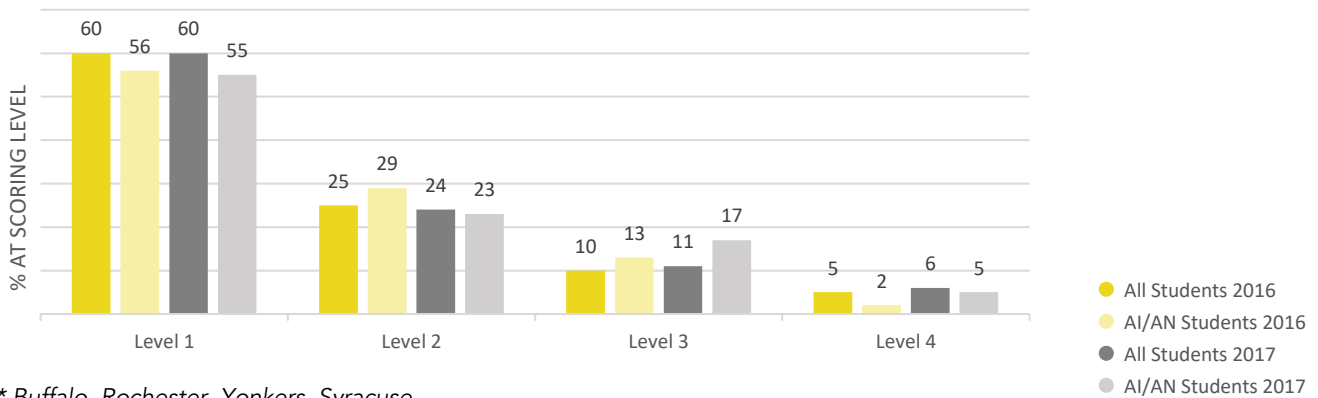
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GRADES 3-8 ELA ASSESSMENT\*



GRADES 3-8 MATH ASSESSMENT\*



\* Buffalo, Rochester, Yonkers, Syracuse

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY POPULATION GROUP

Location	Pop. Group	Total pop.	High school grad	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	Professional school degree	Doctorate degree
U.S.	AI/AN	3,106,175	877,281	276,413	362,976	145,042	30,686	25,380
	Total pop.	211,462,522	58,722,528	17,029,467	39,166,047	16,840,909	4,161,080	2,784,236
WNY	AI/AN	11,194	3,907	1,226	996	512	107	154
	Total pop.	999,364	313,740	118,475	153,932	94,370	16,830	11,331

rates, and their academic success is measurably lower than their white peers.<sup>53</sup> In 2015, the national high school graduation rate for all students reached an all-time high at 82%, while Native students experienced a stagnant rate of 69.6%.<sup>54</sup> Only 52 percent of Native students who graduated in 2004 enrolled in college immediately after high school, as compared with 74% of white students.<sup>55</sup> Of all Native students who enrolled in a four-year institution in the fall of 2004, only 39 percent completed a bachelor's degree by 2010 (compared to 62% of white students).<sup>56</sup>

In Western New York, too, higher education rates lag. In 2012, 17% of Native residents of Western New York age 25 and older held at least a Bachelor's degree, in comparison to 33% of white residents.<sup>57</sup> Native residents comprise 1.4% of high school graduates, which means they are actually more likely to graduate from high school, but they are less represented in most higher education programs: Associate's (1%), Bachelor's (0.6%), Master's (0.5%) and Professional (0.6%) degrees. Interestingly, though, Natives are over-represented in individuals obtaining Doctorate degrees, accounting for 1.4%.

When it comes to K-12 students, the picture is brighter in Western New York than in many regions. State data on Buffalo, Rochester, Yonkers, and Syracuse shows that AI/AN students in these cities perform on par with non-Native students. Today, efforts to improve education outcomes continue through things like school infrastructure improvements that bring computer technology and high-speed internet to Bureau of Indian Education-run schools and increased collaboration with tribal leadership on education policy.<sup>58</sup>

## Health and Health Outcomes

Traditional Native American approaches to healthcare reflect a holistic worldview. Health and illness are viewed within a larger context of connection to spirit, community, and the earth.<sup>59</sup> The word 'medicine' has a more expansive definition for Indigenous people than in the West, including sacred prayers and ceremony, and healers are spiritual leaders.<sup>60</sup> Healers learn practices passed down through generations, and every tribe has its unique methods such as herbal medicine, sweat lodges, and drumming, among others.<sup>61</sup>

Native healthcare is specifically protected and provided for by the federal government and administered by the Indian Health Services (IHS). Despite this, Native peoples experience severe health disparities compared to the general population. Nationally, Native Americans born today have a life expectancy that is 4.4 years less than the U.S average; they are also more likely to die from diabetes, tuberculosis, and suicide than any other group.<sup>62</sup> Suicide is the second leading cause of death—2.5 times the national rate—for Native youth in the 15 to 24 year old age group.<sup>63</sup> Many of these

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outcomes are linked to historical traumas and inadequate federal funding.<sup>64</sup> The IHS is chronically underfunded, spending an average of \$5,000 less per person compared to the national average, and less than half of low-income, uninsured AI/AN people have access to IHS healthcare.<sup>65</sup>

Recognizing the scale of the challenges, the IHS has made efforts to improve services, giving tribes greater management over healthcare delivery, providing more healthcare support for Natives who live in urban areas, and incorporating more cultural awareness in service delivery.<sup>66</sup> As more healthcare practitioners devote attention and research to the needs of Native American patients, more effort is being made to blend traditional healthcare philosophies with Western medical treatments.<sup>67</sup>

### Economy and Employment

Historical trauma, a lack of economic and educational investment, discrimination, and the physical isolation of reservations all play a role in the persistent economic disparities Native communities face.<sup>68</sup> Nationally, Native poverty and unemployment rates are double the average, and median incomes average \$13,000 less.<sup>69</sup> The median household income, in 2015 inflation-adjusted dollars, is \$40,465 for AI/AN communities in Western New York – \$8,100 lower than the general population’s median income. In Allegany, Cattaraugus, and Erie counties, unemployment for AI/AN peoples is a full 6% higher than the general population.<sup>70</sup> Of local Native people, most work in three industries: management, business, sciences, arts, and occupation services (30.2%), service occupation (24%), and sales and office occupations (22.6%).<sup>71</sup>

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY COUNTY

Geography	Pop. Group	Median household income
U.S.	AI/AN	40,271
	Total pop.	53,889
Cattaraugus	AI/AN	26,412
	Total pop.	42,601
Erie	AI/AN	30,455
	Total pop.	51,247
Genesee	AI/AN	48,313
	Total pop.	50,880
Niagara	AI/AN	35,455
	Total pop.	49,449
Orleans	AI/AN	61,691
	Total pop.	46,359

In the last decade, as a result of the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act, over 50 percent of mental health programs and over 80 percent of alcohol and substance abuse programs have transitioned from IHS to tribal control.

Nationally, Native poverty and unemployment rates are **double the average**, and median incomes average **\$13,000 less**.

The most successful economic sector for Native populations in New York State is casinos and gaming, which bring in tens of billions of dollars in revenue annually.<sup>72</sup> The Seneca Nation is the fifth largest employer in Western New York, with three casinos (Seneca Allegany, Seneca Niagara and Seneca Buffalo Creek) that employ over 3,500 people.<sup>73</sup> Indian nations in Western New York and around the country are working to create other avenues for economic growth, including tourism, construction, retail, and manufacturing.<sup>74</sup> Tribal governments are also partnering with the federal government to create economic opportunity, as seen in legislation like the HEARTH act, passed in 2012, which gives tribes the ability to determine lease regulations and reduce barriers to leasing land for residential and business use.

The Seneca Nation is the **fifth largest employer** in Western New York, with three casinos that employ over 3,500 people.

#### WORKING AND NON-WORKING POPULATION IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

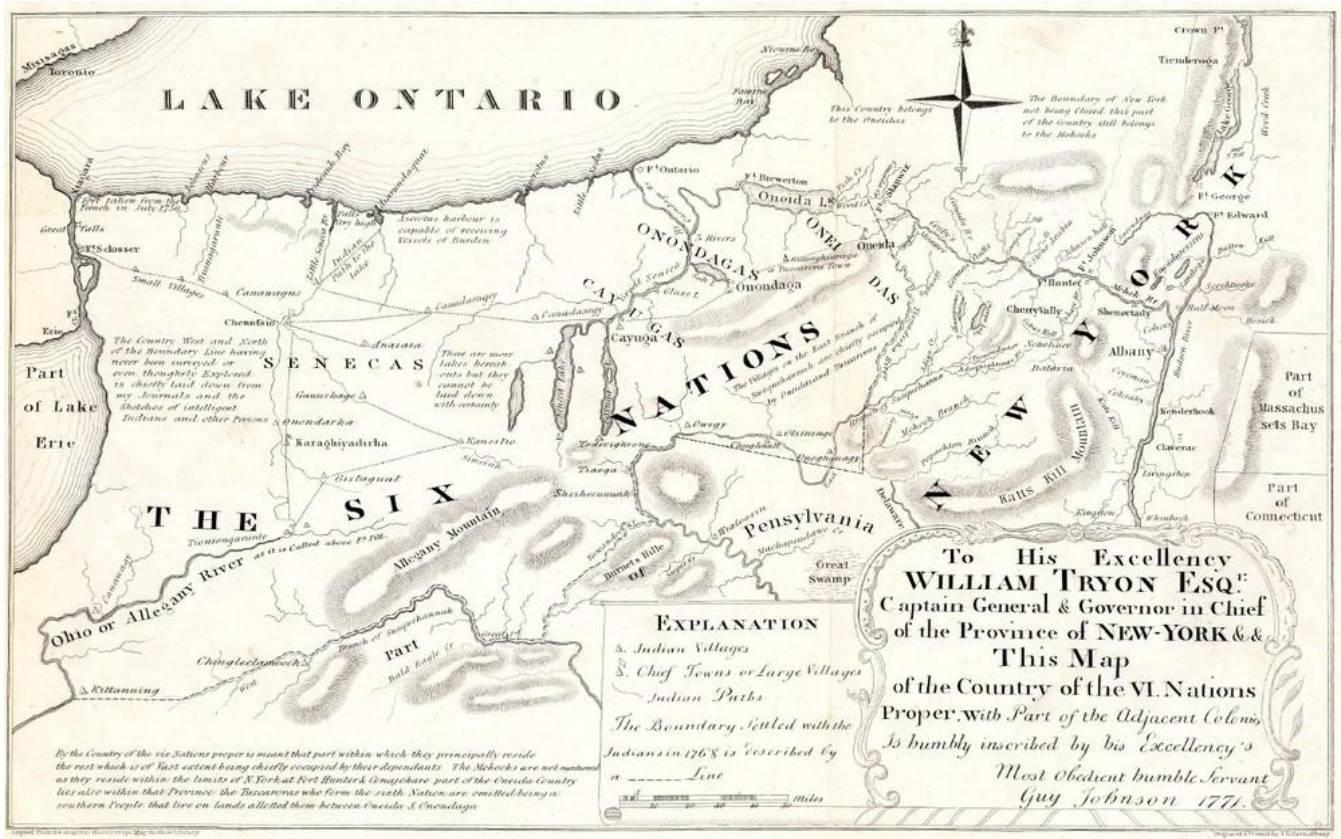
Geography	Pop. Group	Total	Total worked	% worked	Total did not work	% did not work
U.S.	AI/AN	3,449,956	2,287,962	66%	1,161,994	34%
	Total pop.	206,605,832	154,707,464	75%	51,898,368	25%
WNY	AI/AN	12,612	7,676	61%	4,936	39%
	Total pop.	944,313	720,365	76%	223,948	24%

#### POVERTY LEVEL BY COUNTY

Geography	Pop. Group	Total	Income Below Poverty Level	% Below Poverty Level
U.S.	AI/AN	5,116,958	1,272,632	25%
	Total pop.	308,619,550	47,749,043	15%
Cattaraugus	AI/AN	3,011	1,056	35%
	Total pop.	76,421	13,954	18%
Chautauqua	AI/AN	1,165	498	43%
	Total pop.	126,525	23,894	19%
Erie	AI/AN	9,558	2,654	28%
	Total pop.	895,449	134,715	15%
Genesee	AI/AN	844	135	16%
	Total pop.	58,638	7,748	13%
Niagara	AI/AN	3,435	956	28%
	Total pop.	210,195	28,816	14%
Orleans	AI/AN	339	21	6%
	Total pop.	39,289	6,173	16%

Closing

As people, policymakers, and community organizations continue conversation about Buffalo and Western New York, it is important to understand and acknowledge the Indigenous history of this area and the people who continue to live, work and recreate here. This publication was prepared in consultation with various Indigenous stakeholders and allies, and we thank them for their assistance. We welcome any feedback or clarification should additional information become available.





## WNY Native Etymologies

Appalachian means “*From where the messenger returned*” in Lenape.

**Buffalo** means “*Beautiful Water*” or “*Beautiful River.*” The meaning and derivation of the name continues to be a discussion point among residents and historians. No one contests that the original settlement, and later the city, was named for the creek on which it was located, but how that creek got its name is hotly disputed. One Indian derivation theory postulates that an Indian named “Buffalo” lived on the creek, prompting the early non-natives to call the stream “*Buffalo’s Creek.*” This Seneca was said to have been a member of the Wolf clan and called “De-gi-yah-goh” or “Buffalo” by his tribe. Although several theories involve Indian names, there are an equal number that revolve around the early French explorers. These French-based theories include that the name comes from the French words “Beau Fleuve”, meaning, “*Beautiful River,*” or Boeuf a Leau” meaning “*Oxen or Cattle at the Water.*”

**Canada** means “*Village,*” a small town or community. The word comes from an aboriginal word: “Kanata.” Canada was the first country in the world to adopt an official policy of multiculturalism (respect, equality and diversity), recognizing that it is an asset to the growth and future of their country.

**Canandaigua** derives from the Seneca name of its historic village, “Konondaigua,” which was established long before any European Americans came to the area. In a modern transcription, the historic village is rendered as *ṭḡanoda:ḡweḡh*, which means “*the chosen spot*” or “*at the chosen town.*”<sup>75</sup>

**Cattaraugus** derives its name from the Indian word “Gah-ta-ra-ke-ras,” signifying “*Sinking Shore*” or “*Sinking Beach,*” originally applied to Lake Erie and then extended to the adjacent country.

**Cayuga** means “*Boat Landing.*” The name also refers to one of the five original tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy.

**Chautauqua** has two longstanding folk translations: “*bag tied in the middle*” and “*place where fish are taken out.*”<sup>76</sup>

**Cheektowaga** is from the Erie-Seneca Indian word, Ji-ik-do-wah-gah, meaning “*Place of the Crabapple Tree.*” The earliest Indian dwellers were Neuters, who lost their lands to the Seneca tribe of the League of the Iroquois.<sup>77</sup>

The meaning and derivation of the name [Buffalo] continues to be a discussion point among residents and historians.

**Erie** was the name of a Native people who lived along the southern shore of Lake Erie. It is unclear whether the lake was named after the tribe, or the tribe was called Erie because of its proximity to the lake. The Iroquoian tribe called the lake “Erige” (“*cat*”) because of its unpredictable and sometimes dangerous nature.<sup>78</sup>

**Gowanda** is a Seneca word meaning “*Beautiful Valley Among the Hills.*”

**Keuka** means “*canoe landing*” in the Iroquois language and “*lake with an elbow*” in the Seneca language. Keuka Lake is unusual because it is Y-shaped, in contrast to the long and narrow shape of the other Finger Lakes. Because of its shape, it was referred to in the past as Crooked Lake.

**Kinzua**, site of the controversial new dam in Pennsylvania, was named by the Senecas. The correct pronunciation, according to them, is ‘Kin-zu-ah,’ not the commonly heard ‘Kin-zoo.’ The ‘Kinzu-’ part derives from a Seneca word signifying *fish*’ and the ‘ah’ is a suffix meaning ‘*penetrated*’ or ‘*speared.*’ The whole expression therefore means “*fish on a spear.*”<sup>79</sup>

**Lackawanna** means “*stream that forks*” in Lenape. It was given to a river in Pennsylvania. Western New York’s Lackawanna was named after the Lackawanna Steel Company—which was founded in Scranton, Pennsylvania before opening up in the suburb of Buffalo now known as Lackawanna.

**Niagara** derives from the Iroquois name for the river On-ga-ria or On-guia-ahra meaning “*The Throat*” or “*The Strait.*” “Niagara” is a simplification of the original. Other sources have the translation as “*Thunder of Waters.*”<sup>80</sup>

**Oswego** is a Mohawk name that means “*flowing out*” or specifically, “*small water flowing into that which is large.*”<sup>81</sup>

**Scajaquada** derives from the name of Philip Conjockety, who was also known as Ska-dyoh-gwa-deh meaning “*Beyond the Multitude.*” Scajaquada creek was originally named Conjockety Creek.<sup>82</sup>

**Tonawanda** means “*Land by the Waters.*” It was given to the town by the Neuter and Erie Indians, the area’s original inhabitants. This is most likely from the Tuscarora *tahnawá•teh*, which means “*merging water.*” It could also mean “*swift waters,*” which would certainly describe the Niagara River as it heads towards the falls.<sup>83</sup>

**Toronto** means “*Meeting Place,*” which is appropriate since it has been called the world’s most multicultural city.

**Tuscarora** means “*Shirt Wearers.*” It is derived from *Skarureh*, meaning “long shirt people,” which refers to the long shirt worn by Tuscarora men.

The correct pronunciation, according to them, is ‘Kin-zu-ah,’ not the commonly heard ‘Kin-zoo.’

## WNY Local Resources

In addition to the many individuals who are knowledgeable about Haudenosaunee history and contemporary communities in WNY, the organizations below are all hubs, connectors, and disseminators of this knowledge.

### **Oneida Indian Nation**

Genesee Street Oneida, NY 13421  
<http://www.oneidanation.org/>  
<http://www.oneidaindiannation.com/info@oneidanation.org>

### **St. Regis Band of Mohawk Indians**

412 State Route 37 Akwesasne, New York 13655  
<http://www.srmt-nsn.gov/>  
[communications@srmt-nsn.gov](mailto:communications@srmt-nsn.gov)

### **Seneca Nation**

PO Box 231  
 Salamanca, NY 14779 <https://sni.org/>

### **Cayuga Nation of Indians**

PO Box 11  
 Versailles, NY 14168 <http://cayuganation-nsn.gov/index.html>

### **Tonawanda Band of Senecas**

7027 Meadville Rd  
 Basom, NY 14013

### **Tuscarora Nation**

5226 Walmore Rd.  
 Lewiston, NY 14092

### **Onondaga Nation**

3951 Route 11  
 Nedrow, NY 13120 <http://www.onondaganation.org/admin@onondaganation.org>

### **Shinnecock Indian Nation**

PO Box 5006  
 Southampton, NY 11969 [sination@optonline.net](mailto:sination@optonline.net)

### **Cornell University Indigenous Studies Program**

[jkr33@cornell.edu](mailto:jkr33@cornell.edu)

### **UB Native Grad Student Association**

<https://www.facebook.com/UB-Native-Graduate-Association-115746445154451/>

### **UB, the Haudenosaunee-Native**

#### **American Studies Research Group**

<https://www.facebook.com/UBHNASRG/>

### **Native American Community Services of Erie & Niagara Counties, Inc.**

1005 Grant Street  
 Buffalo, NY 14207  
[mmartin@nacswny.org](mailto:mmartin@nacswny.org) or [phill@nacswny.org](mailto:phill@nacswny.org)

### **SNI Buffalo Native Resource Center**

135 Delaware Avenue, Suite 300  
 Buffalo, NY 14202

### **Indian Health Services, Lockport Services Unit**

6507 Wheeler Road  
 Lockport, NY 14094

### **Native American Resource Program @ Native American Magnet School #19**

97 W. Delavan Ave., Room 215  
 Buffalo, NY 14213  
 716-816-3183

### **Buffalo State Native American Student Organization**

<https://www.bengalconnect.com/organization/NativeAmericanStudentsOrganization/>

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