

## Seneca Nation History and Alfred University



As part of its formation in 1808, Allegany County, N.Y. was divided into a number of townships including Alfred. Leading up to this time in U.S history, the entirety of Allegany County (and all of Western New York) was territory and the homeland of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy of Nations. Allegany County was part of the lands sold to the United States in the 1797 Treaty of Big Tree. Within the defined borders of Allegany County, the only known permanent settlement of the Onöndowa'ga:' (Seneca People) was located in today's town of Caneadea; the county appears to have been used for hunting grounds, summer camps, and part of a Haudenosaunee corridor where people traveled east to west.

In the Fall, 2020, Alfred University adopted a land acknowledgment statement to publicly recognize the history of the land on which its main campus occupies:

Alfred University consciously and intentionally recognizes, acknowledges, and honors that it sits on the traditional and ancestral lands of the Onöndowa'ga:' or "Great Hill People." With a proud and rich history, the Seneca Nation of Indians, also known as the Keeper of the Western Door, are the largest and westernmost of the Six Nations that constitute the Haudenosaunee Confederacy of Nations, a democratic government that pre-dates the United States Constitution.

This territory is covered by The Dish with One Spoon Treaty of Peace and Friendship, a pledge to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. It is also covered by the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua, between the United States Government and the Six Nations Confederacy, which affirmed the rights and sovereignty of both the United States and the Haudenosaunee.

Today, Alfred N.Y., Allegany County, and New York State at large are still home to Seneca people who continue to assert their tribal sovereignty. They act as caretakers and stewards of this land while actively maintaining their culture, ceremonies, and languages on this territory. By offering this land acknowledgement we reaffirm our commitment to working to hold Alfred University more accountable to the needs of the Seneca and of other First Nations peoples. We acknowledge our gratitude for the opportunity to work for and with First Nations people in this place, as we pay our respects to our Seneca Nation relatives on their lands.

As one reads various histories of the University or walks its campus, references can be found to the Seneca Nation history and presence. Some of the history is true, other is couched in some semblance of truth or is altogether folklore.

One such history was penned in 1894 by Abigail Allen, a faculty member at Alfred from 1846-1902, when she wrote a posthumous, retrospective history of her husband and University president Jonathan Allen. The passage (below) is believed to be referring to the 1850s and/or 1860s. At the time, Alfred University was unique from almost all other institutions of higher education in allowing students of any gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. to attend.

“At one time the chief of the Seneca Indians, himself a Christian, came to us to secure homes for some of the girls of his tribe. Besides book learning, he wished them to learn all things that would go to make Christian homes. He said it was useless to educate the young braves only, for since they came back to marry heathen wives, the future families would be scarcely above the old standard unless the girls were also educated. The mothers of this community heeded this call, and during the next few years some fifteen of these girls were trained in all home arts, while a part of the time was given to school education. A number of the young Indian men were also educated at the same time. We did not lose sight of these maidens of the forest, but afterwards, when visiting them, we found some of them mothers in pleasant homes, while others were engaged in teaching or in missionary work among their own people.”

A narrative written by Elizabeth C. Wright in 1860 corroborates some of the sentiments of Abigail’s story. Elizabeth, an 1855 alumna of Alfred University, accompanied the Allens and three others on a camping expedition in the Great Valley-Salamanca area in 1858 and noted:

“Mr. Purse, who invited us to the festival, besides being President of the Seneca Nation at that time, is a Baptist preacher, a Sunday-School teacher, plays in the brass band, teaching singing school, translates hymns and sets them to music, and sometimes composes both – supervises all the printing done in the language – the prosecutor of those who sell whiskey to the Senecas, makes speeches to the whites in good English – and is not engaged with some three or four others in translating the New Testament into their tongue. In his wilder younger days he travelled over the greater part of North America with a band of musicians, and now seems to be making the best use of all he learned in his peregrinations.”

Edward [Purse] Pierce was president of the Seneca Nation in 1858. (In 1848, the Senecas in Allegany and Cattaraugus founded the Seneca Nation of Indians. In doing so, they abandoned governance by chiefs and formed an elective system). Though he was Christian, it’s likely that Elizabeth extrapolated Purse’s motives when she additionally wrote:

“Appreciating the advantages of true civilization, as well as the difficulty of bringing them home to his people where they are, and as they are, by any means hitherto used, he has now on foot a new project partly executed, for the more thorough instruction of a part, at least of the Senecas. He has

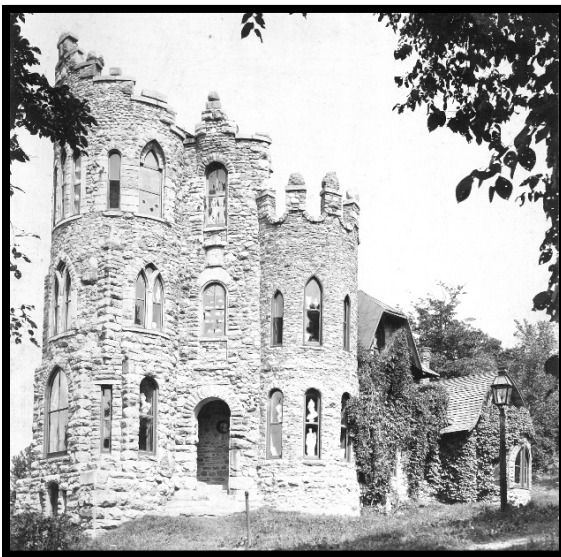
selected thirty young people of both sexes, whom he desires to get into Christian families in decent neighborhoods, to learn the arts and ways of civilized life, and to get a good school education besides. He has already got places for several, and hopes, by sending out his people to learn, to do what a few teachers among them never could accomplish. He hopes they may be able to maintain themselves by their labor, and thus be no expense either to the white or themselves. Those already out are doing well.”

The Alfred University list of matriculates during 1859-1861 includes the names of five students from the Allegany Reservation in Salamanca. Whether they are the result of the meeting between the Allens and Edward Purse remains unknown.

A retrospective look at history brings attention to the ill-informed intentions of people to “civilize” or change others who are different from them; the attention of the whites toward the Senecas was such a case.

### **Steinheim Museum Collection**

At one time, the Steinheim building housed a museum which included native, scientific, archeological and historical artifacts. Today the building houses the University’s Career Development Center and most of the original collection is unaccounted for, including the bulk of the indigenous material which was collected from all over the United States. In 2020, one of the few remaining items was repatriated to the Seneca Nation and three other culturally sacred jars (from the Southwest Missouri) were transferred to their museum for safekeeping. One item not able to be returned is a grinding stone built into the doorway of the Steinheim. Archive records indicate it had been plowed up on a farm in Birdsall, N.Y. and given to President Jonathan Allen during the building’s construction in the late 1870s.



*Figure 1: The native collection was housed on the very top floor, in the front tall tower. The grinding stone is located on the right side of the arched entryway.*

## Kanakadea

The creek that runs through Alfred, the now-defunct student yearbook and one of the academic buildings at Alfred University are all named *Kanakadea*. It was long believed that this was a Seneca word meaning “where the earth meets the sky.” Kanakadea has also been spelled as Canacadea and is likely a derivation of the word and/or town name Caneadea.

An expert who studies the older form of the Seneca language believes it is most likely derived from their word *gëöyadëö'* which means "holding the sky." As there is no word in the language for "horizon" *gëöyadëö'* would be an implied meaning of "the earth meets the sky" because if the sky is being held by the earth then it is meeting it.

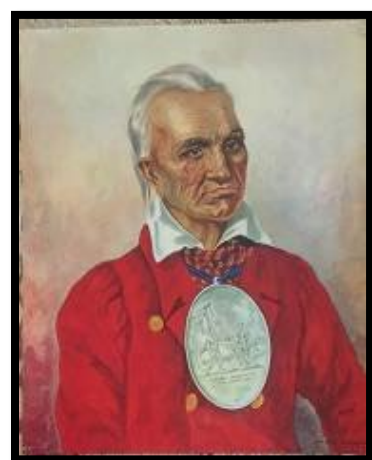
In contemporary Seneca language, the phrase “where the earth meets the sky” would most closely be expressed as *yöëdzagë:ya:d*.



*Figure 2: Kanakadea Hall was built in 1884 as the Alfred village public school. It received its current name when it became University property in 1908.*

## Red Jacket Drive

To better assist emergency responders and campus visitors, Alfred University officially named a number of previously unidentified roads in the Fall, 2020. One received the name “Red Jacket Drive” in honor of the Seneca Chief Red Jacket (c.1750-1830).



### **“Valley of the Insane”**

A folklore story seems to have surfaced in the 1970s that says the Seneca referred to Alfred as “The Valley of the Insane” or “The Valley of Madness” as a result of either it being the location of an old burial ground or because of a long-ago curse. As there is no evidence to support this story, it is disrespectful to continue repeating or using references to it.

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This material was researched and written in 2020 by University Archivist Laurie Lounsberry Meehan with the assistance of student Robert Hillman. Much appreciation is given to both Joe Stahlman, Director, Seneca Nation Museum and Jamie Jacobs, Collections Assistant, Rochester Museum and Science Center for their invaluable research and assistance in helping to accurately understand and depict this history.