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The Most Valuable Lands: Seneca Oil, Seneca's Oil, and the Struggle for Land Rights at the Birthplace of an Industry

Randy A. John and Alicia Puglionesi

INTRODUCTION: UNCERTAIN GROUND

The town of Oil City, Pennsylvania, at the juncture of Oil Creek and the Allegheny River, was awash in profits from its namesake commodity in the mid-1890s. On Seneca Street, the bustling commercial thoroughfare, a new annex was nearly completed for the National Transit Building, the nerve center of John D. Rockefeller's sprawling Standard Oil Company. Despite its impressive edifices, Oil City stood on uncertain ground. Though Seneca Street, like many US places, was named as a sort of memorial for vanished Indians, the Seneca were not gone and had not relinquished their claim to Oil City. Seneca leader Andrew John Jr. traveled to Harrisburg in the winter of 1896 with evidence for the Pennsylvania legislature that this Seneca land had never been paid for, and thus Oil City still belonged to the descendants of Cornplanter, who was granted title by the legislature a century earlier.¹ This was hardly the first nor the last instance of Seneca political leaders requesting return of land taken illegally, in this case land that housed an important hub of the oil economy.

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While oil industry magazines reported on leasing transactions between Seneca and US parties during the boom era, popular understanding of the Seneca relationship to Pennsylvania and New York oil was more mythical than legal. In 1859, Edwin Drake drilled the first successful commercial oil well in the United States near Titusville, Pennsylvania, on behalf of the New Haven-based Seneca Oil Company. The company took its name from the regional term for petroleum, "Seneca Oil." Settlers had observed Seneca people collecting petroleum that seeped from natural oil springs, and purchased it from them to sell as a commodity as early as 1761.² White residents adopted it as a cure-all home remedy and it was sold in pharmacies, playing upon the US settler belief that Indians were eager to gift their secret medicines to whites.³ It was important to white promoters of the oil boom to relegate Indians to the prehistory of oil to dismiss their treaty rights and to justify the exploitation of the remaining resources on Seneca lands. Seneca sovereignty and the inability of whites to buy Indian land after 1871, when Congress ended treaty-making, was a formidable legal barrier for American individuals and corporations who sought economic gain through questionable dealings with Indigenous groups.

The Seneca Nation, or Onöndowa'ga:, was once the largest and most powerful member of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy). The five original members are the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca. The Tuscarora, from North Carolina, joined the Haudenosaunee by 1722. The Seneca were known as the "Keepers of the Western Door." As the westernmost nation, they protected the western front of the Confederacy. They once held claim to all fourteen counties of the lands known now as western New York State, as well as parts of western Pennsylvania, a small part of southern Ontario, and dominion through the Allegheny and Ohio River systems.⁴ In the early historic period (1525–1687), their territory extended from their residential centers of the Genesee Valley and Seneca Lake region to Chemung River going south, southwest to the Allegheny River and into Ohio country, north to Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, and to the northwest in the Niagara peninsula.⁵ In the seventeenth century, four main Seneca villages were sited south of Lake Ontario near modern-day Rochester, New York. The Senecas abandoned these villages during the French raid by Denonville in 1687 and moved to the areas described as the eastern and western Seneca villages along Seneca Lake and the Genesee Valley. Haudenosaunee villages remained relatively stable until their dislocation by the Sullivan, Clinton, and Brodhead campaigns during the American Revolution. They took refuge near Fort Niagara until the war ended and returned to portions of their homeland. From the 1780s to 1842, federally approved and illegal treaties took a major amount of their remaining lands.

The vast majority of Seneca lands were lost in treaty proceedings beginning in 1784 with the Treaty of Fort Stanwix and continuing in the 1797 Treaty of Big Tree, when nearly 3.5 million acres were purchased by financier Robert Morris and conveyed to the Holland Land Company, leaving 200,000 acres reserved for the Seneca.⁶ Western New York was sparsely populated by Euro-Americans until after the completion of the 1797 treaty, when many of the villages and towns that exist today were established. In 1838, the Senecas lost all of their remaining territories in the Buffalo Creek Treaty. In

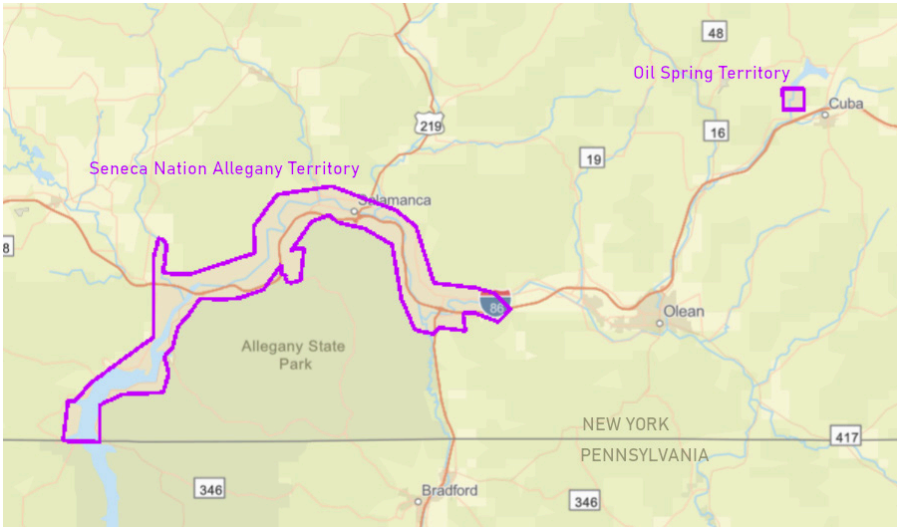


FIGURE 1. Map of Seneca Nation Allegany and Oil Spring territories. Courtesy of Seneca Nation Geographic Information Services public GIS application.

1842, the Compromise Buffalo Creek Treaty returned the present-day Onöndowága’ territories, excluding the Buffalo Creek and Tonawanda territories. The Tonawanda Seneca Nation won a federal lawsuit that returned 7,500 acres of their earlier land holdings from the Ogden Land Company between 1857 and 1861.

After treaty-making ended, allotment and citizenship legislation became the core strategies for those companies and individuals who sought the remaining Seneca land and resources. “Vanishing Indians” narratives proliferated during this time, and well-intentioned Christians and altruistic organizations often supported allotment and citizenship plans, believing that the Seneca needed to give up their communally held lands and assimilate into US society. The notion that Indians had vanished and left behind rich resources enhanced the mythology of the oil boom: prospectors believed that “Indian spirits” appearing in dreams or speaking through spiritualist mediums would lead them to successful wells.⁷ Common cultural tropes that rendered Indigenous people as ghosts, guides, or givers both expressed and reinforced ideologies of racism and colonialism, and were cited by the very industries actively engaged in Indigenous dispossession. The reality in Pennsylvania and New York oil fields was that the Senecas waged active legal and political battles to protect their rights to land, resources, and sacred sites. Their historical relationship with oil as a healing natural substance led leaders to preserve the Oil Spring Territory in the 1797 Treaty of Big Tree; a century later, Seneca leaders were engaged in ever-more-complex negotiations with white-owned oil companies, and wound up in another existential fight against the unremitting attempts by state and federal governments to liquidate their treaty-protected territories.

SENECA OIL

The commercial exploitation of oil must be understood in the context of the geopolitical relations between the United States, New York State, capitalists, and the Senecas in western New York state and northwestern Pennsylvania. Oil had a place within the worldview of Seneca and other Indigenous people prior to European immigration to North America. In the Ganö:nyög (Thanks giving address), the Senecas give thanks to all natural elements and life on earth and in the universe provided by the Creator.⁸ Being respectful is paramount and this philosophy of life recognizes the interconnected natural and spiritual world alongside other natural entities. Seneca leaders' regard for oil as a culturally significant substance is reflected in the effort of Handsome Lake, the famous Seneca spiritual leader, to secure the Oil Spring Territory during treaty negotiations in 1797.

Written records show the "first" European mention of oil by the Récollet priest, Father de la Roche d'Allion, in 1627; he described "a good kind of oil, which the Indians call Anonontons," likely from Seneca Oil Spring, now the Oil Spring Territory of the Seneca Nation.⁹ Other Jesuit missionaries would follow and visit the site of Anonontons. In 1676, on September 19, the head Seneca warrior, who lived near the Seneca settlement at Ga-o'-ya-de'-o (Caneadea), brought some "curious Oyl" to the conference at Fort Niagara with Sir William Johnson.¹⁰ Johnson, a British first Baronet, served as the British Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the northern district from 1756 until his death in 1774. The oil was most likely a gift for the Superintendent as there was normally a gift exchange at these proceedings. Moravian missionary David Zeisberger described attending an annual March gathering of Senecas at Oil Creek in 1770, where people collected oil "from the hundreds of oil-pits on the flats," cooked sugar, and made canoes.¹¹

The Oil Creek Valley in modern-day Pennsylvania is a historic oil deposit area; ancestral inhabitants used the springs medicinally and as fuel for their fires. Hundreds of timber-lined pits near oil seeps indicate Indigenous utilization and trade during the fifteenth century. Europeans who observed its Indigenous uses saw oil as a "scalable commodity." There are records of Europeans purchasing oil from Senecas circa the 1760s. This "Seneca oil" was marketed as a home remedy, lamp oil, and lubricant in East Coast markets such as Philadelphia.¹² In 1791, American soldiers waging war on the Haudenosaunee reported using oil as a topical cure for fatigue, pains, and rheumatism.¹³ In 1814, when salt-well drillers released one of the first gushers of oil at a site thirty-five miles north of Marietta, Ohio, it was called "Seneca Oil," indicating that this Seneca association was widespread.¹⁴ Coincidentally, Cornplanter and other Seneca chiefs attend a treaty council with the Americans at Fort Harmar, near modern-day Marietta, where Cornplanter, Gayahsö:dö' (Guyasuta), Big Tree, New Arrow, Halftown, and Twenty Canoes signed the 1789 treaty.¹⁵ Cornplanter was rewarded by the Ohio Company of Associates one square mile of land near Marietta, although his descendants say the deed was stolen on his trip home and no land claim has ever been awarded. For Cornplanter descendants this land is still in dispute today.

Herrick notes that oil springs and seepages were utilized in western New York prior to Euro-American immigration to North America before the “discovery of oil” as commonly thought of in American history.¹⁶ The Indian lands that became Ontario and Yates counties had ten to fifteen natural oil springs which had been used for centuries. Petroleum was used as a liniment to treat rheumatic pains and old ulcers.¹⁷ Allegany and Cattaraugus Counties contained springs as well, including the oil spring near modern-day Cuba, New York. At the 1797 Treaty of Big Tree, the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake demanded the retention of their oil spring and the square mile of land around it.¹⁸

The Seneca Oil Spring was left off the official 1797 treaty documentation as an oversight and was not recognized until 1856, when Daniel Sherman, the Indian agent, filed a suit for recovery on behalf of the Senecas. White squatters had erected structures on the Oil Spring Territory hoping to claim timber and mineral rights. Governor Blacksnake, the Seneca Confederacy sachem and nephew of Handsome Lake and Cornplanter, testified against them at the age of 107 and produced an original Holland Land Company map proving that the oil spring was part of the land retained by the Seneca Nation.¹⁹ He secured the Oil Spring Territory of the Senecas during the same era the Tonawanda Seneca Nation reacquired federal recognition of a significant portion of their stolen lands in 1838 and 1842.²⁰ Blacksnake had inherited the map from his uncle Handsome Lake, and used it to save the Oil Spring Territory.²¹ Despite Blacksnake’s victory, some squatters refused to leave the Oil Spring Territory until ejected by the New York State of Appeals’ 1861 ruling in the case *Seneca Nation v. Philonus Pattison*.²²

The tale of Handsome Lake and the ancient oil spring is well known. Another Seneca oil story exists involving Handsome Lake’s brother, Cornplanter, the warrior chief of the Seneca Nation, and the oil springs at Oil Creek, Pennsylvania. Following the United States’ victory over Britain in the Revolutionary War, Cornplanter became an emissary of peace between the Senecas and the US government.²³ His diplomatic efforts came with a reward: initially he was promised 1,500 acres of land in the Erie Triangle, but this did not work out. During a 1790 trip to Philadelphia with five other Seneca leaders, Cornplanter met with President George Washington and later the Pennsylvania Council, and requested three plots of land on the Allegheny River in lieu of the Erie Triangle promise.²⁴ Pennsylvania governor Thomas Mifflin recommended a gift of three tracts of land, and an act was approved on February 1, 1791. Cornplanter was gifted 1,500 acres, and 300 acres of the gift was on Oil Creek. This Oil Creek land included an oil spring and is now the site of Oil City, Pennsylvania. Cornplanter sold this land on May 29, 1818, to William Connelly of Venango County and William Kinnear of Centre County for \$2,120.²⁵ He was paid \$250 in cash and the lore is that it was counterfeit. Five months later, Connelly quit-claimed his half back to Cornplanter for half of the original \$250 currency and \$75 of legal Pennsylvania tender. However, Cornplanter did not pay Connelly the full \$250 (in part because the original payment was counterfeit currency), and the sheriff sold out his interest to Alexander McCalmont on November 22, 1819.²⁶ In 1819 and 1828, a judge ruled in favor of Cornplanter, however the land was not returned. Cornplanter died in 1836,

but his heirs revived the claim the next year without success. In 1895, Andrew John Jr. served as interpreter for Solomon O'Bail, a grandson of Cornplanter, in an attempt once again to reclaim a portion of Cornplanter's land in Oil City, Pennsylvania. They traveled to Harrisburg to present their case to the Commonwealth's governor, Robert E. Pattison. Pattison referred them to the authorities of Oil City to propose a settlement; however no settlement occurred.²⁷ Continued lobbying resulted in a 1908 act of Congress that gave Cornplanter's heirs the right to bring action in the circuit court for recovery of title, but no suits were brought.²⁸

As these and other instances show, efforts to remove the Seneca from their territories throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were not related to oil, but to other valuable resources such as timber and agricultural land. Some Euro-Americans had taken an interest in oil as a medicinal substance, but it had a limited market and could not be exploited on an industrial scale. It was originally seen as a waste product of other extraction processes, such as the drilling of salt wells. In New York, the first recorded "oil strike" occurred in 1832 in Cattaraugus County, where prospectors were digging for coal, yet they did not make use of the oil they found.²⁹ In 1858, a Connecticut investor, James Townsend, hired former railroad conductor Edwin Drake to explore oil prospects in western Pennsylvania based on the recommendation of chemist Benjamin Silliman that petroleum could be refined into a safe lamp oil. Townsend and his partners incorporated that year under the name "Seneca Oil Company." Drake chose a location on Oil Creek, near Titusville, only a dozen yards away from a group of Indigenous oil pits. Employing the same technology used to bore for salt water, along with a casing system invented by Drake, workmen struck oil on August 28, 1859. Word of the discovery spread quickly, inspiring the first US oil rush. Similar to the gold rush of the 1840s, stories of immense fortunes created a frenzied and insatiable thirst for Seneca oil. New oil wealth transformed the region into a rapidly industrializing and significant economic zone in the United States.

Just as Drake's well triggered an oil rush, the Seneca Nation was defending its Oil Spring Territory against an attempt by local businessmen to claim squatter's rights. Despite the testimony of the 107-year-old Governor Blacksnake and a court ruling in the Senecas' favor, one squatter, Philonus Pattison, in fact leased out part of the Seneca Oil Spring for drilling in 1861 while his case was on appeal. Herrick asserts that this well, contracted by illegal squatters, was the first drilled on the Oil Spring Territory, although it was dry. Pattison's oil lease was voided after he lost his appeal later the same year.³⁰ The interplay of these events illustrates how threats to Seneca sovereignty were exacerbated with the onset of aggressive oil speculation in the region.

PETROLEUM AND MANIFEST DESTINY

The oil boom that began in 1859 captured national attention and became the focus of intensive media coverage and myth-making. Some of this was patterned on the California Gold Rush of the previous decade: promises of immense fortune for the common man produced mass migrations of prospectors. This, in turn, justified the forcible displacement of Native peoples to make way for a new, value-producing

white industrial segment of the American population. Unlike gold, which had to be painstakingly mined or panned, petroleum flowed with an ease that evoked the biblical promise of “oil from the flinty rock.”³¹ Mass media of the period, mainly newspapers, magazines, and books, quickly adopted a salvific vocabulary when describing oil “gushing up to illumine distant cities, and spiritually enlighten human minds.”³² They often considered this substance as intentionally placed under US soil by providence: “Millions of years before the earth was prepared for the habitation of man, nature’s great laboratory was at work,” creating stores of “inexhaustible wealth, only waiting for the necessities of man to unlock their doors and bear away the treasure.”³³ Such progressive narratives posited the replacement of “savage” by “civilized” population groups that would maximize the economic potential of resources. These narratives spring from the ideology of manifest destiny, deploying racist ethnocentrism in service to the accumulation of wealth.

Because of the national excitement over Drake’s success, a large literature on the history of oil and the oil regions emerged by the mid-1860s. Many of these works were authored by leading local residents, including journalists, clergy, and oilmen. Literary regionalism and business history merged during the oil rush. Before launching into a chronological or geographical account of great oil discoveries and entrepreneurs, these writers almost invariably grounded their narrative in the Indigenous uses of oil prior to the arrival of Europeans. Some used explicitly racist rhetoric in reference to Indians, while others adopted a more subtle framework of racial hierarchy in which Indigenous ways of life and practices were depicted as inferior to the “enlightened” ways of Christian settlers.

The previous section discussed multiple accounts in the settler written record of oil use among Seneca and other Indigenous people of the region. These described oil being used in healing and trade, alongside other materials and traditional practices. However, one of the most widely cited stories about the Seneca during the oil boom was that of a sensationalized “fire ritual,” which was likely a fabrication by local journalists. It first appeared in a Franklin, Pennsylvania, newspaper in 1842, was reprinted in Sherman Day’s 1843 *Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania*, and after 1859 was included in many books and articles about the oil region. The story is based on a purported 1750 letter from the French general Montcalm to his superiors, and describes a Seneca gathering at which the “thick scum” on the surface of Oil Creek was ignited and “burst into a complete conflagration,” accompanied by a “triumphant shout” from the audience “that made the hills and valleys re-echo.” The writer proclaims, “here is revived the ancient fire-worship of the east.” This image of “Oriental” fire-worship spoke to contemporary debates about the geographic origins of North America’s Indigenous peoples, possibly supporting the argument for descent from central Asian populations.³⁴

However, with the advent of industrial oil extraction, the story took on a different meaning, most clearly exemplified in J. T. Henry’s *Early and Later History of Petroleum* (1873). Henry reprints the Montcalm letter, and then asserts that “the ‘thick scum’ which the Indians gathered, and which careful, prudent men now guard against conflagration, flows into peaceable tanks, and, instead of lighting up the wilderness for

exhibitions of uncouth savages, sends joy and comfort into thousands of distant homes." For Henry, the incident demonstrates the inability of Indians to correctly utilize resources and the godlessness and backwardness of their cultures, in contrast to industrious settlers who use oil for the benefit of society. This is the same racist view that was later applied to support imposition of allotment and citizenship legislation upon the Senecas.

The realities of the oil boom significantly undermined Henry's point. As the Reverend Samuel Eaton highlighted in his 1866 oil history tome, the "complete conflagration" described in the Montcalm letter prefigured the modern industrial accidents that frequently occurred along Oil Creek due to leaks, spills, shoddy storage, and use of explosives, and which set entire towns ablaze.³⁵ In 1896, journalist John McLaurin exposed the "French commander's letter" as a hoax perpetrated by local newspapermen who first printed it in 1842, a "fictitious article . . . designed to whet the public appetite for historic and legendary lore." The authors of the 1842 article may have been aware of incidents such as the 1818 and 1829 fires on the Cumberland River, which occurred when salt well drillers accidentally struck oil and released hundreds of thousands of gallons down the river as a waste product. The oil then ignited, and the apocalyptic appearance of the burning waterway struck fear into onlookers.³⁶ The original Montcalm letter has never been located.

Senecas collected and traded oil; however there are no ethnographic illustrations beyond the Jesuits' descriptions. Later accounts from the nineteenth century contain unrecognizable embellishments that are likely false. The point of examining the "fire ritual" trope is to track the racist theory of "civilizational succession" embedded in oil narratives, as in Henry's explicit contrast between "uncouth savages" and "careful, prudent men." Philip J. Deloria and other scholars have termed this approach primitivism, characteristic of a progressive racial replacement ideology that combines "an urge to idealize and desire Indians and a need to despise and dispossess them."³⁷

Such sentiments appear often in popular oil histories. Eaton repeats a romantic view of the Seneca as "lords of the forest" who "never employed themselves in manual labor of any kind. They scorned it as unworthy of their dignity and independence."³⁸ He asserts, contrary to what was known about extensive Native trade networks, that "they never even dreamed of trade or commerce," and thus their use of oil was not significant. Fundamentally premodern peoples could not, such stories assert, have any place in modern industrial society, nor any claim on lands full of valuable resources. US authorities and Indian advocates disagreed about whether Native peoples could be assimilated, or should be exterminated, but both approaches assumed that Native community, culture, and identity were consigned to the past.

In reality, all Indigenous groups had made significant accommodative changes to their lifeways in order to survive the European invasion, and it is often overlooked that, at first contact, European immigrants underwent greater economic accommodative changes than the Native Americans who taught them how to survive on Turtle Island. Eaton, a lifelong resident of western Pennsylvania, had easy access to information about contemporary Seneca people in regional newspapers that flourished in the mid-nineteenth century. While some journalists covered Seneca affairs with

derogatory, primitivist language, others reported on the community in a positive light as “kind-hearted, law-abiding, agricultural Indians.”³⁹ This coverage emphasized the Senecas’ adoption of white norms and depicted them as good neighbors. Yet it also evoked the dominant stereotype of Indians as lawless, nomadic hunters that was ubiquitous in the American media, especially during the western “Indian Wars” of the 1890s. The news media played a crucial role in promoting the ideology of manifest destiny and rarely considered Indigenous perspectives.

Renewed interest in the timber-lined oil pits found in the vicinity of Oil Creek emerged amid the oil boom of the 1860s, as these pits suggested extensive, organized precolonial utilization of oil. Most white observers agreed that this was not the work of the “Red race,” and instead called upon popular theories of a “lost race” that had supposedly inhabited North America prior to the arrival of Indians. Historians such as Jason Colavito, Michael F. Robinson, and Terry Barnhart have traced these theories, which emerged in association with the ethnological and archaeological study of Indigenous earthworks in the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, from the eighteenth century through the present day.⁴⁰ Lost race theories were symbiotic with the emerging race science of the mid-nineteenth century, exemplified by Samuel G. Morton’s 1839 *Crania Americana*, which claimed to classify and rank human races based on inherent physical and mental characteristics. Some argued that the massive earthworks of the Mississippi Valley, and the oil pits of Pennsylvania, could not belong to Indians, but must be the work of “a race possessing intelligence” which had “arrived at a sufficient state of civilization.”⁴¹ This race was often termed the “Mound Builders.” Though the lost race was shrouded in mystery and intrigue, ethnocentric antiquarians suggested that it may have been European in origin, which provided a ready justification for European aggression against Indians in the present day as a matter of reclaiming a usurped heritage.

Oil promoters recognized the utility of this narrative and used it accordingly to dissociate oil pits from histories of Indian habitation. “People who did such work and filled such receptacles with oil were not slouches who would sell their souls for whiskey,” opined McLaurin, evoking stereotypes of Indians as dissolute and lazy.⁴² James Peebles, a Spiritualist involved in oil speculation, cited “an ancient race, that inhabited this country many thousand years ago . . . leaving behind unmistakable evidences of art, science, and manufactures,” and Eaton concurred that the pits were created by the superior “race of people . . . sometimes called mound-builders.”⁴³

Other scientists and historians of the period contested lost race theories, and argued for continuous Indian habitation of the continent. Geologist Henry E. Wrigley, writing for the Pennsylvania Geological Survey in 1875, showed a clear understanding of how oil fit in to Indigenous trade networks: “It seems important to a comprehension of the earlier history of this product, to recognize fully the intelligence of the Indian. . . . [T]here was no bar to [oil’s] transportation throughout the entire range of connected tribes in all parts of the country.”⁴⁴ An 1894 report by Smithsonian archaeologist Cyrus Thomas finally discredited lost race theories among academics, affirming that the continent’s earthworks were Indigenous in origin.⁴⁵

However, lost race theories persisted in popular culture and fringe science long after they were dismissed by academic archaeology. A 1940 advertisement by the Pennsylvania Grade Crude Association asked, “Who dug Pennsylvania’s 2,000 Mysterious Oil Pits?” “Scientists disagree,” the copy stated, “but most evidence points to the Mound Builders who preceded the Indians in North America.” A 1959 article in *Popular Science* hinted that oil pits “may have been the work of a race preceding the Indians.”⁴⁶ Fringe archaeologists today continue to expand upon this story of a prehistoric “advanced” race that used oil for elaborate technologies.⁴⁷ This lineage of racially charged oil imaginaries provides another, even stranger layer to manifest destiny, as it turns ruthless attempts to dispossess Indians of their land into justice on behalf of an imagined prior race.

One further insight into the racial thematics of early oil narratives comes from the practices of Spiritualist prospectors who relied on “Indian spirits” as guides to locating oil. These practices again figured Indians as part of a remote past, with the addition that they portray Indian spirits eagerly assisting in the advancement of white dominion over the land. The geological science of the 1860s offered no reliable insight into where wells should be drilled, and a variety of supernatural methods were deployed by characters whom J. T. Henry terms “oil wizards”—individuals who used dowsing, doodlebugs, smell, or dreams to locate subterranean oil deposits. Spiritualist mediums, who claimed to communicate with spirits of the dead in the afterlife, joined the fray in western Pennsylvania and New York. A central practice of Spiritualism was the channeling of “Indian spirits,” seen as effective “guides” to resource extraction because of their presumed intimacy with nature and the land.⁴⁸

Jonathan Watson, the region’s first oil millionaire, became a Spiritualist and relied on the advice of mediums to locate wells; this practice was widespread, with some mediums such as Edgar Cayce offering their services remotely by telegraph.⁴⁹ Rochelle Raineri Zuck details the case of Abraham James, a medium who headed a Spiritualist oil enterprise. Like many of his colleagues, James “played Indian” when in a trance, and these performances persuaded audiences that his predictions were authentic.⁵⁰ Popular histories often included mention of James and Spiritualist oil-finders; even when authors scoffed at the Spiritualists’ nonscientific premise, they reinforced “the equation of progress with the communication of Native wisdom from Indian spirits to a white medium.”⁵¹ These promotional texts infused oil with spiritual properties as a “gift” from the continent’s original inhabitants. Gift narratives serve to deny and obscure the manipulative methods settlers used to access Seneca oil.

Historians of the oil industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth century helped to construct celebratory narratives about US industrial progress; these narratives depicted Indigenous peoples as primitive and relegated them to a distant past, even though multiple Indigenous communities were present and involved in the earliest period of oil leasing in western Pennsylvania and New York. Such “ghosting” obscured the continued political agency of Indigenous people. While distant readers could remain ignorant of the Seneca Nation’s role in the region, oil companies were very much aware of the legal conflicts that arose when they sought to exploit Seneca lands. The uncertain status of Oil City is emblematic in this regard: the industry’s symbolic

center stood on land claimed by the heirs of the Seneca leader Cornplanter, and their claim has never has been resolved.

OIL LEASES AND SENECA SOVEREIGNTY

Popular narratives of savagery, lost races, and the progress of civilization provided justification for treating the land titles held by the Seneca Nation differently from those of white landholders. Seneca leader Andrew John Jr. observed in 1902 that his people were denounced as “a clog on the wheels of progress and an eyesore to civilization” when they stood in the way of white financial interests.⁵² Oil companies and other industries sought cheap access to Seneca resources and attempted legal and illegal means to obtain it. Predominantly local New York prospectors, some of whom held political office, allied with oil companies and state and federal politicians in seeking federal legislation to dispossess the Senecas of their oil resources. The Senecas lobbied state and federal governments themselves and repeatedly faced political enemies in their fight to maintain their sovereign land rights. Internal political differences on these issues existed, with many Senecas rejecting and some supporting oil leasing. Four-time Seneca Nation President Andrew John Jr. was the most vocal lobbyist from the 1870s to the first decade of the twentieth century. He opposed the original land leases to non-Indians in Salamanca and the oil leases of the 1890s and early 1900s.

By the mid-1800s, the expansion of the railroads through the Allegany Territory attracted non-Indian workers and businessmen involved in the railroad and timber industries. These industries relied on leases of Seneca land to harvest resources, and on settlers to provide labor. Workers needed places to live, and individual Senecas leased land to them although individual leasing was not allowed under Seneca Nation law. The non-Indian town of Salamanca, located on Seneca Nation land, soon emerged as an economic center for exporting timber and, later, oil. Highways, roads, and canals were built to enable capitalistic access to Seneca resources. In 1836, New York State passed legislation that authorized railroad companies to contract with Indian tribes to obtain rights of way, an unconstitutional act as such contracts required Congressional approval. From 1826 to 1850, 151 railroad charters were granted in New York State; of these, thirty were constructed, spanning the Hudson River to Lakes Erie and Ontario. In the 1840s, non-Indian squatters arrived on the Allegany Territory to exploit the area’s timber reserves, including Philonius Pattison, who squatted on the Oil Spring Territory.

On June 28, 1850, the New York and Erie Railroad obtained a lease from the Seneca Nation of Indians to build its railroad line on the Allegany Territory with a station in Salamanca. New York State confirmed this lease, despite the unconstitutionality of doing so without Congressional approval. One year later, the New York and Erie Railroad was completed and traversed the Allegany Territory, connecting goods from Seneca territories to the national economy of the United States. This expansion of the national railroad industry provided infrastructure for resource exploitation, planting the seeds for future settler land-grabbing for the rest of the nineteenth century and beyond.

When Edwin Drake successfully demonstrated a method for industrial-scale oil extraction, the railroads provided the means to export oil and grew into the core infrastructure of the new economy. Oil excitement quickly spread from Pennsylvania across the border to western New York. Within four months of Drake's oil strike, Colonel Bradford H. Alden had leased mineral rights for the entire Allegany and Oil Spring territories, which Herrick notes as "the largest lease ever granted for oil exploration in the state."⁵³ This twenty-year lease provided a one-third royalty for the Seneca Nation. It included salt springs and the timber needed for building infrastructure; if oil or salt were not found, the lessee could remove his machinery but had to forfeit any improvements, e.g. buildings, made on Seneca land. Alden immediately transferred a third of his enterprise to Jonathan Watson, a lumberman from Titusville, Pennsylvania, who had become the first petroleum millionaire by securing extensive oil leases at the very start of the boom. By the end of 1861, the enterprise, now called Jonathan Watson & Company, drilled three test wells on the Allegany Territory and three on the Oil Spring Territory, none of which produced oil in paying quantities. Watson, perhaps influenced by the strong association between Indians and oil in his Spiritualist faith, remained confident, and he formed the Seneca Reservation Oil Company in 1864, incorporated at one million dollars. He bought out the remainder of the Alden lease, and renegotiated another twenty-year lease to extend his oil rights until 1899.⁵⁴

For the next ten years, leasing on the Allegany Territory became a legal, political, and economic hotbed of conflict between the Senecas and Americans. In 1866, New York State illegally passed legislation again to confirm existing leases on the Allegany Territory. In 1870, Judge Barker of the New York Supreme Court Eighth District invalidated the 1864 leases; three years later all of the leases on the Allegany Territory were ruled illegal by Judge William Daniels in New York State Court.⁵⁵ The federal government, not a state, held the right to validate treaties and leases offered by an Indian tribe to a non-Indian.

Meanwhile, in 1873 the Erie Railroad unsuccessfully tried to obtain a ninety-nine year lease with the Senecas for land in West Salamanca. This was the first attempt to acquire a long-term lease of this length. The lease's legal challenges moved to the federal political system, opposed by the Seneca Nation and promoted by Salamanca residents and state oil and timber magnates. The Seneca Tribal Council, on June 3, 1874, unanimously rejected the Salamanca Leasing Act and the federal government's actions to legalize these illegal leases.⁵⁶ However, as leasing activities continued despite their ambiguous legal status, management and accounting of land rights, mineral rights, and rights of way became important functions of the Seneca Nation tribal government, further enmeshing the Seneca in US economic interests.⁵⁷

A major antilease Seneca leader emerged in 1874, when Andrew John Jr. was appointed by Seneca Nation Council to go to Washington, DC, to challenge the Sessions Act that would authorize the sale of land to white lessees who rented on the Allegany Territory.⁵⁸ The leased land was assessed at \$15,000. Congress prevented the proposed land sales but ignored Seneca protest and legalized the illegal Salamanca leases. The 1875 Salamanca Bill authorized the approval of five- and twelve-year

leases, disregarding the sovereign wishes of the Seneca Nation government.⁵⁹ These leased lands made up one-third of the Allegany Territory.

Another major Seneca leader, William “Willie” C. Hoag, rose to prominence in Seneca politics in 1882 as treasurer. Andrew John Jr. served four one-year terms as Seneca Nation president (1886, 1887, 1888, and 1890) while Hoag served as president eleven times. Hoag (Allegany) and his ally Frank Patterson (Cattaraugus) would control the presidency for seventeen terms from 1893 to 1926, benefitting from a dense network of financial and political ties with local white elites.⁶⁰ For the next three decades, John became the reformist voice of protest against Hoag’s political agenda, which included long-term leasing of Seneca lands. Hoag sanctioned the ninety-nine-year Salamanca leases in 1892 and the oil leases in the 1890s and early 1900s.

As Andrew John Jr. exited the presidency in 1891, Hoag and his allies took over control of the Seneca government. This was a pivotal moment for the Seneca Nation, as the short-term leases that had been sanctioned by the 1875 Salamanca Act expired. John sought a *terminal* twelve-year renewal for the leases with rates adjusted for inflation, but Hoag’s government approved ninety-nine-year leases with no inflation mechanism. The federal government, on September 30, 1890, approved a ninety-nine-year lease for the non-Indian lessees almost two years prior to any Seneca Nation approval; it was not until April 9, 1892, that the tribal council formally approved 1,080 leases for ninety-nine-years. Hoag’s regime rejected the previous council’s lease committee recommendation of a twelve-year-lease and approved a long-term lease with no inflation clause. This locked in the outdated 1875 lease payment rates for nearly a century.⁶¹

In the 1890s, oil was discovered in Chipmunk on the Allegany Territory and oil leasing reemerged into the economic and political arena of the Senecas. On January 3, 1893, William Barker secured an oil lease from the Seneca Nation. Three years later it was transferred to the Seneca Oil Company, a new company composed of prominent local Salamanca businessmen. Andrew John asked the United States Congress to investigate the deal. On March 5, 1897, Senate committee members debated the allegedly fraudulent 1893 Barker oil lease, whether it had lapsed, and the legality of the subsequent transfer to the Seneca Oil Company. In February 1896, John protested this lease to the Congress on the grounds that “said William B. Barker’s oil and gas lease has been forfeited once by failure on the part of the lessee not fulfilled in pursuance to their agreements.” He pointed out that the “Barker lease includes 55,000 acres of the most valuable lands, upon which the Seneca Indian people are now living and peaceably enjoying the products of the soil.”⁶² The oil industry is a dangerous enterprise and indeed, within two years of John’s protest, newspapers reported an oil fire that burned 5,000 acres “on the Chipmunk oil field and the Seneca reservation.”⁶³

The US Interior Department sent inspector Province McCormick to Olean on May 4, 1897, to investigate John’s claim of bribery by the Seneca Oil Company. Eugene McElwain, a disgruntled bidder, testified at the hearing that “they had it all fixed.”⁶⁴ Complainants stated that there were five bids (there were actually seven written bids) and some of them were more favorable than the oral bid of the Seneca Oil Company. Albert T. Fancher, Salamancan and interest-holder of the Seneca Oil

Company, testified against these accusations. Fancher was a powerful local and state politician, rising to the New York State Assembly in 1899 and State Senate in 1903. He later started a major wood factory, Fancher's Furniture Company, in Salamanca. He claimed that the offer of his Seneca Oil Company was the most favorable and that a bonus of \$1,000 was paid in full. Fancher confirmed that the \$3,000 due after striking oil was paid four months late. He denied corporate knowledge of the Seneca Oil Company's attorney paying the Seneca Nation government to suppress his company's bid from competitors. In the 1897 federal hearing, testimony by Seneca councilors and bidders denied "grease money."⁶⁵ While the other bids coveted oil rights to the entire Cattaraugus and Allegany territories (55,000 acres), the Seneca Oil Company had reduced their request to approximately 3,000 acres.

The Seneca Oil Company was allowed to purchase the Barker lease and would accumulate tremendous wealth in a short amount of time. Oil was struck on this leased property in 1897, and two years later 75,695 barrels were produced. In 1900, the company sold its leases to the South Penn Oil Company (a Standard Oil subsidiary) for two million dollars.⁶⁶ The forty oil wells were producing 200 barrels a day at the time. In 1897, the Seneca Oil Company paid the Seneca Nation a bonus of \$3,000 and a royalty of \$742.76. In 1898, Hoag did not provide the treasurer's book for the federal Indian agent to record, and the 1899 treasurer, Eli Jimerson, had his home and the treasurer's book destroyed in a fire. The payments received in these years are unknown.

In June 1898, John continued to attack the Hoag administration, this time accusing them of lease money embezzlement. Special United States Indian Agent G. B. Pray indicated that "scarcely" 10 percent of the fifteen to twenty thousand dollars that came in annually from land and oil leases was expended for the benefit of the people. Pray wrote, "I think the Treasurer, Mr. Hoag, is the dominant character and the power that organizes the political forces."⁶⁷ Hoag had kept his books "neatly, but when you recur to the figures and note that more than one-half of all the funds received have, by this same council, been voted either to themselves or to the executive officers. I am not surprised that the Indian people complain." John was successful this time in changing US policy so that the federal Indian agent was put in charge of dispersing lease royalties, a provision included in the Ryan Act of 1901. Although this marked a victory in John's efforts to expose the Hoag administration's misdeeds, it was also a controversial stab in the back to Seneca sovereignty and self-government that would remain intact for decades.

Oil capitalism continued to contaminate the Seneca Nation polity at the turn of the twentieth century, when another set of oil and gas leases transferred to the Standard Oil Company, known as the John Quilter leases, were contested by different Seneca entities, including Andrew John. The Quilter leases comprised an 1897 lease for oil and gas rights in Elko and South Valley (4,000 acres) and an 1899 lease covering the entire Cattaraugus Territory. These lease transfers were part of the 1901 Ryan Act, a rider in the Indian Appropriations Act. The elected representatives of the Seneca government supporting the transfer were William C. Hoag, Frank Patterson, T. F. Jimerson, William Patterson, and Hiram Cooper. The opponents were Lester Bishop and Andrew John; the ratification of these leases occurred five years later. The leases provided the Nation

a royalty of one-eighth; plus \$500 every year and \$100 for every successful well drilled. Free gas for domestic purposes was to be provided for any family on the Cattaraugus Territory living within three-fourths of a mile of any well. The bill was delayed two times prior to March 1905, when President Theodore Roosevelt exercised a pocket veto leaving the bill unsigned as Congress adjourned sine die.⁶⁸ It was later approved at an unknown date, as it is referred to as “law” in other federal hearings in the 1930s.

Throughout the high-stakes leasing disputes of the late 1890s an informal group of local businessmen and politicians worked to wrest control of their territories away from the Seneca Nation. Historian Laurence Hauptman refers to them as the “Fancher ring”; its leaders included Albert T. Fancher and Edward B. Vreeland (a banker from Salamanca elected to Congress in 1899) who quickly sold their Seneca Oil Company to Standard Oil for two million dollars. These influential politicians and businessmen of western New York were connected through financial dealings, marriages, and Republican Party politics.⁶⁹ They wanted to purchase Indian land and, when denied that, became promoters of allotment legislation targeted at the Seneca Nation and the other Haudenosaunee nations of New York. Andrew John distilled these political machinations in an 1889 newspaper interview: promoters of allotment “require a title to the land instead of the leases. They are not satisfied with the leases. They know we do not want to sell, and the only way they can get that title is to dissolve the Seneca Nation.”⁷⁰

The Haudenosaunee, including the Senecas, faced major allotment legislation as these local power-brokers rose to prominent positions in the state and federal governments at the turn of the twentieth century. Proponents of allotment hoped to dissolve tribal sovereignty and eliminate communal ownership of tribal lands as a strategy to divide tribal lands into private lots and allow sale of Indian land to non-Indians. The Dawes General Allotment Act (Severalty Act) passed by Congress in 1887 intended to destroy sovereignty and communal property ownership by Native governments; the Seneca Nation was specifically excluded from the 1887 allotment legislation because the Ogden Land Company held preemption rights (the first right of purchase) to Seneca territories. A stated intention of the Dawes Act was to break up Indian extended families and replace them with small farming plots run by Indian nuclear families. However, in practice the Dawes Act allowed non-Indians to obtain ninety million acres of sovereign Indian land across the country.

In coordination with allotment, the US implemented other efforts to extirpate Indigenous cultures. Government agencies took Indian children from their families to “kill the Indian and save the man” through forced assimilation in boarding schools, such as the Thomas Indian School on the Seneca Cattaraugus Territory. The drive for assimilation was justified by racist ethnological assessments discussed earlier.⁷¹ The misconstrued “lazy male” stereotype for Seneca men may be explained by the traditional division of labor where women, rather than men, tilled the fields in the Seneca world. Even so, by the eighteenth century Seneca men were farmers and worked in the wage economy for family sustenance. Andrew John Jr. and Willie Hoag were two of the prominent farmers on Seneca territories.

The push to impose US citizenship on Indians accompanied allotment, and this became another method to end Indian sovereignty and tribal control of resources. White religious missionaries and charitable groups supported this policy because they saw it as uplifting, “saving the Indian” through incorporation into the American polity. Citizenship and allotment created a new risk for Indians: state and federal taxation and the possible foreclosure of allotted land. Once again, Andrew John forcefully predicted these economic consequences: allotment “will make a great many Indians much poorer, or put them in a helpless condition,” he warned. “We think, naturally, our people would be put out of their property in a short time.”⁷² Such policies eroded political sovereignty and sovereign control of Indian territories, thus they were steps towards termination, a policy introduced in the 1940s to completely end federal recognition of tribal nations.

Andrew John protested allotment in New York and called the perpetrators “rich land-robbers,” noting that assemblymen and senators involved were holders of Seneca leases. In 1886, he spoke against an allotment bill in Washington, remarking, “We have but little [land] in New York and we only ask to be allowed to enjoy that small portion of the earth without being harassed and driven from the last remaining lands of our people.” John’s political rival Willie Hoag and other members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy lobbied side-by-side with him on this existential issue.⁷³ However, a numerical minority of Senecas supported allotment as the best path forward for their community, believing that US citizenship promised greater benefits than retaining tribal identities.

A series of New York allotment bills were advanced starting in the 1880s, with the most serious put forward by New York congressman Edward Vreeland (the oil businessman and banker from Salamanca) after the turn of the twentieth century. In 1902, Andrew John traveled to Washington, DC, with a delegation of Haudenosaunee activists, to testify against the Vreeland bill. Haudenosaunee activists gained important allies in the House and Senate, including Pennsylvania senator Matthew Quay, who considered himself an advocate for Indian welfare. Other opponents of the Vreeland allotment bill were antagonistic toward Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company, which was increasingly despised for its monopolistic practices and had an obvious interest in gaining title to Seneca lands. Years of advocacy by Haudenosaunee leaders and their allies inspired popular support for the Seneca; this, combined with political disdain for Standard Oil, forced Vreeland to abandon his bill by 1906.⁷⁴

The initial frenzied state of the Chipmunk oilfield rush dissipated by the early twentieth century, and the center of the petroleum industry shifted to Texas and California. On Seneca land, oil leases waned in economic importance compared to natural gas, and the failure of allotment meant that mineral leasing remained a routine function of the Seneca government and a valuable source of income. Oil continued as a defining feature of local identity even as the supply dwindled. In 1927, the New York Oil Producers Association drew up plans to honor the tercentenary of the “discovery” of petroleum at Oil Spring, collecting substantial donations from the public for a monument. The planning committee brought together old leasing allies Albert T. Fancher and William “Willie” Hoag, then serving what would be his last term as Seneca Nation president. On the day of the celebration, a Seneca representative and a Franciscan monk gave

speeches at the site, both affirming that this was the oily pool to which Senecas led early Franciscan missionaries in 1627. This was followed by a “war dance” and a pageant in the nearby town of Cuba.⁷⁵ Members of the white and Native communities took part in constructing an origin story for American oil that gave their region a claim to “national and international moment”; indeed, coverage of the tercentenary was syndicated and distributed across the United States.⁷⁶ The pageant reproduced a false narrative of white inheritance, yet it occurred on Seneca land with participation by Senecas who saw value in asserting their place at the mythical beginning of the oil industry, as well as exhibiting their political prowess on their land on a state and national level.

RESOURCES AND SOVEREIGNTY TODAY

Though the oil boom in western New York and Pennsylvania is now a distant memory, its environmental impacts continue to be felt locally. In Pennsylvania alone, more than 200,000 abandoned oil wells emit significant levels of methane and other pollutants.⁷⁷ More broadly, the boom of the 1860s established a process for large-scale, rapid extraction of fuels that has defined the twentieth century’s industrial and consumer economies. As industry moved westward into states like Oklahoma and New Mexico, companies once again exploited Indigenous land (and land belonging to Black and Hispanic people) using a rationale of white supremacy, often with support from US government policies.⁷⁸ They set a precedent for exposing local populations to the risks of extraction and waste disposal that continues into the twenty-first century. The recent boom in natural gas extraction through hydraulic fracturing layers another set of environmental hazards over the remnants of previous eras. However, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities have become increasingly reluctant to trade environmental health and safety for economic gain, reflecting the emergence of environmental justice as a political issue from the 1960s onward.

As the preceding material affirms, Indigenous nations developed complex relationships to capitalist resource extraction when that system penetrated into their homelands and restructured the means of community survival. American Indians were not “natural environmentalists” inherently opposed to extraction, as depicted in romantic stereotypes propagated by the white-led environmental movement.⁷⁹ Yet as land-based peoples, many were committed to long-term sustainability and securing a healthy environment for future generations. Seneca leader Andrew John seems to allude to this in his 1896 testimony about the Barker lease, which encompassed “the most valuable lands, upon which the Seneca Indian people are now living and peaceably enjoying the products of the soil.” At the 1927 Oil Spring tercentenary, former Seneca Nation president Theodore F. Jemerson told the crowd, “This lovely spot is ours to enjoy, ours to preserve, ours to transmit. Generations past and generations to come hold responsibility for this trust.”⁸⁰ By that time Oil Spring had the bucolic appearance of a wooded grove, with few traces of previous active wells. To Jemerson, it seemed to represent both stewardship of Seneca lands and pride in the role that Senecas had played in the oil industry.

Environmental consciousness had not yet taken the specific contemporary political form of *environmentalism*, but Indigenous activists would be at the forefront of this shift in the mid-twentieth century. As historian Paul Rosier argues, growing public concern about industrial disasters, pollution, and degraded ecosystems led Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists of the 1960s to exchange ideas and political support. Indigenous leaders were successful in linking environmental concerns with demands for sovereignty, for example, in the fight against the construction of the Kinzua Dam in the Seneca Nation's Allegany Territory, and in the "fish wars" over salmon fisheries in the Pacific Northwest.⁸¹

These early environmental-justice efforts paralleled and intersected continued commercial resource extraction by Indigenous nations. Active Seneca oil and gas leases were among the legal hurdles that stalled the Kinzua Dam project in the late 1950s, and leases were transferred and renegotiated throughout the following decades.⁸² In 1980, the Seneca Nation won \$896,000 from the US Department of Energy for renewed oil and gas exploration on its lands; speaking to a local paper, Seneca Nation president Robert C. Hoag praised the economic independence that gas wells provided. There was no mention of environmental risks, but this news story ran just above an impassioned commentary about the Love Canal toxic waste disaster in Niagara Falls, New York.⁸³

These two threads—economic independence and environmental threat—crossed a few years later, as the Seneca Nation signed a new oil-gas lease with Colorado-based Energy Oil, Inc. Seneca officials told the press that they had "visited the oil company's wells in Colorado and New York to evaluate the care shown to the environment," and received a pledge "to keep land and vegetation damage to a minimum."⁸⁴ Their demand that the company demonstrate its environmental responsibility, even superficially, reflects growing concern about polluting industries. However, this did not prevent ongoing petrochemical extraction, which was limited mainly by the declining profitability of wells. Other industrial practices, such as the dumping of nuclear waste, provoked protest from the Seneca Nation government; then president Barry E. Snyder Sr. cited growing scientific knowledge about "the long-range effects of this type of dumping on our fish, our medicinal herbs, our wild onions, our ground-waters." Wielding scientific evidence could enable a break from the past when Seneca leaders "bore such insults in silence."⁸⁵ The introduction of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, in the first decade of the 2000s provoked a heightened awareness of risky tradeoffs between environment and economy in the Seneca Nation and in the region more broadly.

Even before the advent of fracking, environmental hazards from the previous era of fossil fuel extraction had hardly disappeared. Both abandoned and active oil infrastructure were a persistent part of the landscape, with mishaps normalized as isolated incidents, or as only affecting isolated communities. In 1990, the Knapp Run Creek oil pipeline owned by Buckeye Partners broke and washed oil downstream for a twenty-five mile stretch. Small communities between Freeport and Pittsburgh closed their water treatment plants as cleanup workers used floating booms to contain the oil and cotton batting and vacuums to absorb it. Yet a *New York Times* reporter asserted that "concern . . . diminished almost as suddenly as the pollutant appeared" when the spilled oil "slipped past Pittsburgh on Monday night without causing any problems here."⁸⁶

In 2013, an oil spill was found in the Delaware County village of Hancock, New York. The oil pooled underground beneath a former Louisville Slugger baseball bat factory. The spill came from a Standard Oil pipeline built in 1881, which had been shut down in 1925. The 140-year-old line begins in Olean and travels 315 miles to a refinery in Bayonne, New Jersey.⁸⁷ Petroleum megacorporation Exxon Mobil now owns the line; Exxon Mobil has been responsible for 3,500 oil spills in New York over the past several decades.⁸⁸ Exxon Mobil agreed to clean up off-site contamination in New York, including Olean, at their own cost. Six years later, in Chipmunk, the area of the original Seneca Nation/Seneca Oil Company lease, a 150-gallon oil spill caught fire. The company responsible, Vertical Energy, claimed the spill was not a threat to the Allegheny River or major water supplies.⁸⁹ The Chipmunk oil well sits above the waterway that runs the next thirty-five miles through the Allegheny Territory.

Today's pursuit of natural gas through hydraulic fracturing poses new environmental risks for western Pennsylvania and New York, as does the long-distance transport of shale oil through pipelines, tanker trucks, and rail cars. The most prolific shale that is fracked using high-volume methods is the Marcellus shale and similarly aged strata. Regulations in New York State have banned high-volume fracking of deep horizontal wells. However, the Marcellus shale lies at shallow depths in western New York (hundreds of feet, versus thousands of feet deep in central New York State), so low-volume fracking of this shale is still permitted, with regulators concluding that it is safe at shallower depths.⁹⁰ The process still leaves some residents uneasy, as households in southern New York have documented flammable tap water that researchers linked to the seepage of contaminants from fracking wells.⁹¹

The debate over fracking also involves the chemical waste products generated by the process. Nationally, between 2008 and 2011, more than 2.9 billion liters of oil and gas wastewater was released into waterways after treatment at municipal sewage facilities; journalist Kristina Marusic reports that “the practice was common in Pennsylvania until it was halted in 2011.”⁹² Pennsylvania State University researchers found chemicals in the bodies of freshwater mussels from fracking wastewater dumped into Pennsylvania's Allegheny River; even after dumping was banned, the chemicals continued to accumulate in mussels in subsequent years.⁹³ Sadly, freshwater mussels are currently undergoing a mass extinction due to degradation in water quality related to the disposal of wastewater from oil and gas, as well as from other pollutants and the overall warming of the climate. According to Marusic, “at least thirty-five of 297 species of America's freshwater mussels have gone extinct since 1900.” Many of the Allegheny River's forty-nine species are endangered.⁹⁴ As pollution indicators accumulated in western New York, Seneca leaders connected their environmental concerns with the resurgent environmental justice movement.

The 2016 construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline through the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota provoked a reinvigorated Indigenous environmental justice movement encompassing Indigenous sovereignty, protection of land and water, and liberation from colonial and capitalist oppression.⁹⁵ While these ideas had been central to the 1970s Red Power movement, the high visibility of the ten-month-long Standing Rock encampment and the participation of groups from many

Indigenous nations helped fuel a new wave of activism. Seneca Nation members made the journey to Standing Rock in 2016, among them then president Maurice John. John connected the concerns of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation and the Seneca Nation: “We cherish the land, we live off the land, and we cannot replace it. And it’s the same thing in North Dakota.”⁹⁶

The Seneca Nation and Seneca-led activist groups such as Defend Ohi:yo’ have been active in land and water defense in subsequent years. In Seneca, Defend Ohi:yo’ is the phrase *Deyögwě’nega:nyadó’* (we who defend the waters). *Deyögwě’nega:nyadó’* emerged as the name for the grassroots Seneca-led community organization of Native and non-Native people, and also the official Seneca Nation response to the threat in 2018 of fracking wastewater being treated and released at the headwaters of Ohi:yo’ ([Lit. beautiful river], the Allegheny River). The community group has remained active, serving as an ongoing example of a strong coalition of Native and non-Native neighbors committed to working together on environmental concerns.⁹⁷

This group, in coalitions with other environmental organizations, has pushed for fracking bans, protested fracking wastewater disposal, and opposed the construction of the Northern Access Pipeline across their land. Activists assert that these industries endanger the health of Ohi:yo with possible releases of chemical pollutants, while proponents of hydrocarbon development boast of “employing American workers with good paying jobs,” a remedy for the economic downturn that followed the withdrawal of oil and manufacturing companies in the late twentieth century.⁹⁸ Attempting to circumvent such tradeoffs between environmental and economic health, the Seneca Nation has sought growth in the alternative energy sector through wind and solar installations.⁹⁹

The problems of abandoned oil wells still exist today; the environment of the Senecas is not free from the methane hazards these old wells pose. In Pennsylvania, the Cornplanter State Forest in Forest County has old open oil wells that have not been sealed properly for environmental safety. Many of these wells are left by oil companies that have gone bankrupt, leaving cleanup for state agencies. These wells can leak gas into people’s homes, cause explosions, pollute groundwater, and leak stray oil, brine, or methane, a greenhouse gas that has seventy-two times the environmental impact as carbon dioxide.¹⁰⁰ Once the epicenter of an economic boom driven by the promise of massive petroleum windfalls for entrepreneurs, Pennsylvania is now receiving federal funds to subsidize the slow and unprofitable process of capping wells.¹⁰¹

CONCLUSION

The traditional Seneca regard and respect for the natural environment includes the natural elements of Mother Earth, Water, Small Plants, Three Sisters, Trees, Animals, Birds, Four Winds, Thunder, Sun, Moon, Stars, and others. Certainly oil and mussels are part of the ecosystem that traditional respect is granted to, and this type of thought is exactly what industrialized cultures have lost in the pursuit of capitalist gain. Centuries of capitalism in league with extraordinary technological manipulation of the earth’s resources has shaped the economic organization and the value structures of populations whose livelihoods are dependent on organic-based energy. There are

environmental justice challenges to the fossil fuel industry and its means of production, but making money at the expense of our climate, water, animals, and earth is still the first world's dominant way of life.

While the days of major oil prospecting on the Seneca Nation's land are over, the Nation still has one oil lease to date with CNG Development, a reminder of the significant, though controversial, revenues once generated by that substance. Historically, energy companies leased lands to circumvent the treaty rights of the Senecas, taking advantage of the legal complexity and power asymmetry of such negotiations. Andrew John Jr. described Seneca relations with US interests as "one constant struggle against fraud, corruption, and depravity."¹⁰²

Overlooked in historical accounts of the "birthplace" of oil is the prior relationship that Seneca people had with this resource, and their struggle to maintain sovereignty over their land when it became a highly desirable site of resource extraction. Instead, promoters of the early oil industry depicted Native peoples as uncivilized and racially inferior, helping to make the case for allotment. Understanding the ideological structures of such narratives is important because Indigenous land and water rights are still sometimes depicted as obstacles to "progress" rather than as positive forces in determining just forms of land use.

The Seneca still harvest deer, game, and fish to supplement their diet seasonally. Hazardous chemicals from oil and gas facilities are still a risk to the entire ecosystem. The Seneca Nation operates its own walleye hatchery on the Allegany Territory and a bison farm as sustainable resources in the local economy. Deyögwě'nega:nyadō' has led paddle trips down the river to educate the public about environmental quality, and in October 2021, the Seneca Nation Emergency Management Department initiated and participated in multiagency pollution response training with the City of Salamanca Fire Department and first responders, practicing spill equipment deployment in the Allegheny River.¹⁰³ Only 150 years earlier, the region's waterways were catching fire amid the chaos of the first oil boom. The Seneca Nation was coerced into the exploitation of its mineral resources and was exploited by industry in the intervening time, but by preserving its sovereignty it retained the ability to protect the land and water in a new context of environmental awareness.

NOTES

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