



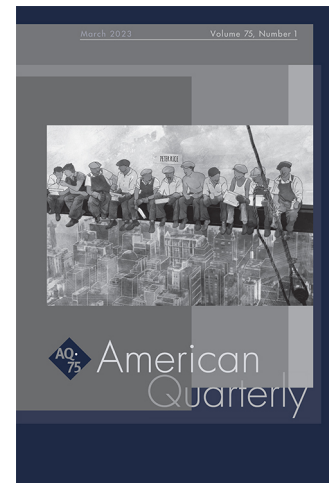
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Indigenous Brooklyn: Ironworking, Little Caughnawaga, and Kanien'kehá:ka Nationhood in the Twentieth Century

Allan Downey

Unknown to most people who are accustomed to speak with condescending pity of the American Indian as a dying and vanishing race in the struggle for existence, a respectable little company of real aboriginal redmen lives and thrives in the midst of New York City, the heart of the most complex civilization in the world, where competition between individuals and racial types is fiercest, prices highest, rent steepest, and conditions of living in general as far from the conditions in which the early Indians lived as anything could be. And yet, somehow, these Indians have managed to adapt themselves to the conditions they find around them making an honest living and a good one, and winning the respect of their neighbors on their merits as members of the community irrespective of their descent from the quondam owners and rulers of the land . . . Joe Delile [Delisle?] of the Iroquois descent, and from the St. Regis Reservation [Ahkwesáhsne] in Northern New York, is a structural ironworker in the city, and Walter Deer of the Caughnawaga [Kahnawà:ke] is hewing his way here.

—“Indians Do Well in City: Sons of Chieftains Now Live in New York’s Tall Apartment Houses,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1912

On May 10, 2013, eighteen hundred feet above the city streets of Manhattan, workers erected the crowning spire of One World Trade Center, marking the completion of the first of six towers that would replace the buildings destroyed on September 11, 2001. Atop that tower stood one of the latest generation of Haudenosaunee ironworkers to follow in the footsteps of Indigenous families who, for the last 140 years, have helped create some of North America’s most iconic landmarks. Yet, despite their presence in the “heart of the most complex civilization in the world” and in other major urban centers throughout North America for more than a century, American popular culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries held that these spaces—urban and cosmopolitan—were antithetical to Indigenous existence and largely void of an Indigenous presence. This notion of Indigenous absence led generations of scholars and policymakers to relegate Indigenous existence and history to the periphery of these “civilized sites of modernity” and disregard the central significance that these spaces and associated livelihoods had

in cultivating and reimagining Indigenous nationhood, self-determination, and, at times, sovereignty throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹

Beginning in the 1880s, Haudenosaunee men—particularly from the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) nation—entered the high-steel industry, and within thirty years ironworking had become a principal source of employment for Haudenosaunee men, who traveled to jobs in Montreal, New York City, Buffalo, Detroit, and other urban centers throughout the northeastern United States and across Canada.² By 1907, men from the Kanien'kehá:ka community of Kahnawà:ke—located just south of Montreal—had become prominent and active union members locally in the International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers Union and a few short years later would do the same in places such as Jersey City, New York City, and Brooklyn.³ In New York City, Haudenosaunee ironworkers first appear in the historical record in 1912—although it is relatively certain they were there earlier—and by the 1920s, Haudenosaunee families from Kahnawà:ke and Ahkwesáhsne were relocating to downtown Brooklyn, where they established the community of “Little Caughnawaga”—an anglicization of Kahnawà:ke.⁴ Within thirty years, about seven hundred Kanien'kehá:ka nation members alone—that is, not including other Haudenosaunee or Indigenous community members—relocated to Little Caughnawaga and helped form this new community, which would thrive until the early 1970s.⁵ Significantly, from the 1920s onward, Haudenosaunee women played an integral role in the community's formation, acting as critical intermediaries as they operated boardinghouses, worked in factories, assisted transient Indigenous workers from across North America, and extended the web of Kanien'kehá:ka nationhood into these urban spaces.⁶

Employing Chris Andersen's theorization of nationhood as an “imagined community” and Audra Simpson's argument that nationhood is “constituted (and constitutive of) political postures, experiences and discourses . . . articulated through the apparatus of history, power, and experience,” the present essay examines the history, power, and experience at the intersection of ironworking and urban space and how these apparatuses served to articulate Kanien'kehá:ka nationhood and Haudenosaunee self-determination in the twentieth century.⁷ Construction of these postindustrial skylines—together with the multifaceted, connective role of Haudenosaunee women's work—transformed existing articulations of Kanien'kehá:ka nationhood within urban spaces that served as active sites for the cultivation and reconditioning of Indigenous identities. One consequence was the formation of Little Caughnawaga as a “Mohawk place,” in effect, an extension of Kanien'kehá:ka nationhood. A second outcome was

the use of ironworking as a modern vehicle by which the Haudenosaunee affirmed their continued sovereignty and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy asserted their border rights.

The extension of Kanien'kehá:ka nationhood into this modern urban space is particularly significant when we consider, as Coll Thrush reminds us, that Indigenous peoples—despite having centuries of urban histories before colonization—were physically and conceptually removed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the urban spaces that existed on their territories. In New York City, the Lenape nation experienced removal firsthand.⁸ These spaces were reframed as “modern,” associated with settler capitalism and cosmopolitanism, and then contrasted with ideas about where the Indian should and would exist as well as with perceptions of Indian “authenticity.” As Thrush observes, “The city, as the ultimate expression of colonial modernity, seems to offer little space for Indigenous presence. This has been replicated in both popular culture and most academic studies,⁹ in which urban Indigenous people, if they are acknowledged at all, are often portrayed as little more than the collateral damage of settler colonialism: as husks, shells, ghosts, and otherwise inauthentic manifestation of some lost past.”¹⁰ Contrary to this conceptual erasure, Haudenosaunee community members were at the center of building these iconic symbols and sites of a supposed “modernity.” They occupied these spaces while reformulating their own articulations of identity, kinship, and nationhood within them.¹¹ It is, however, not enough to state that Indigenous nationhood helped form or contributed to a notion of “modernity”—to do so would place Indigenous articulations of nationhood within a settler-colonial intellectual tradition and its discourse of temporality. Rather, this essay examines Kanien'kehá:ka ironworking and the subsequent formation of Little Caughnawaga on its own terms, as a collective experience that expressed the modes of Kanien'kehá:ka life through new forms.¹²

Canadian Settler-Colonialism and the Beginnings of Indigenous Ironworking

The genesis of Kanien'kehá:ka entry into the ironworking industry owed itself to the settler colonial project of dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their lands through infrastructural projects carried out in the name of “national development.” At the same time, the influx of Indigenous ironworkers constituted a counteractive political response by Kahnawà:ke aimed at maintaining control over their community in the face of seemingly endless encroachments. In 1885, the Dominion Bridge Company proposed building a railway bridge for the Ca-



Figure 1.

Representative still from animation showing Kanien'kehá:ka ironworkers helping to construct the New York City skyline. Kanien'kehá:ka ironworkers helped construct some of New York's most famous buildings and bridges, including the Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, George Washington Bridge, Waldorf Astoria Hotel, Radio City, Rockefeller Center, United Nations, and World Trade Center. Artwork by Saki Muratani from Allan Downey and Carlee Loft, dir., *Rotinoshón:ni Ironworkers* (Independent, 2020), digital animation, 6 min.

nadian Pacific Railway in Kahnawà:ke, linking the south shore mainland to the island of Montreal. The project formed part of a decade-long series of encroachments that combined, as Daniel Rueck has documented, “intensified and inter-related incursions into Kahnawake lives and lands . . . in the form of the Canadian Pacific Railways (CPR) bridge and line, a serious political incursion in the form of the introduction of the

band council system, and a cadastral incursion with wide-ranging cultural and ecological consequences in the form of the Walbank Survey,” which sought to eliminate Kanien'kehá:ka land practices in Kahnawà:ke through privatization of land ownership.¹³ As the CPR prepared for the bridge's construction, the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs, ignoring the blatant conflict of interest, hired the Dominion Bridge Company's vice president, James P. Dawes, to oversee the settlement of compensation claims for the land expropriated by the project.¹⁴

In the discussions for the bridge construction, Kahnawà:ke negotiated to have several community members employed by the company during the project. As the local Indian Agent would record in the Department of Indian Affairs annual report that year, “The excellent stone quarries on the reserve

have afforded many of the Indians lucrative employment, as has also the construction of the bridge in course of erection by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company across the river from Lachine to Caughnawaga [Kahnawà:ke]. . . . The proposed construction of the railway through the reserve by the same company will likewise give them an opportunity of gaining a livelihood at their doors.”¹⁵ Not unexpectedly, the official failed to mention that these newfound economic “opportunities” presenting themselves at the doors of Indigenous communities stemmed from the dispossession of the land on which Indigenous homes stood. Nor did the official mention that the Department of Indian Affairs in partnership with the Dominion Bridge Company had facilitated this dispossession. Within a year, the Indian Agent’s prediction was realized. Kahnawà:ke community members participated not only in this project but also in construction of a bridge in Sault Ste. Marie connecting Michigan to Ontario in 1887, where fifty men from Kahnawà:ke were employed as ironworkers, solidifying their presence in the industry for the next century.¹⁶

The story of the Kanien’kehá:ka ironworkers’ entry into the industry in Ahkwesáhsne (adjacent to Cornwall, Ontario) was not unlike that of Kahnawà:ke, where the flood of “national development projects” worked simultaneously to swallow Indigenous lands and generate employment locally as meager compensation. For instance, in 1898 several workers from Ahkwesáhsne—and possibly some from Kahnawà:ke—were employed by the Phoenix Bridge Company to build a steel and timber railroad bridge across the St. Lawrence River near Cornwall, Ontario, until it tragically collapsed shortly before completion, killing several workers.¹⁷ Death or serious injury in the industry was ever present and would remain so for decades—with devastating consequences for numerous Indigenous communities, including Ahkwesáhsne and Kahnawà:ke.

There is no better example of the human cost of ironworking than the 1907 Quebec bridge disaster that killed seventy-five workers, including thirty-three men from Kahnawà:ke.¹⁸ On August 29, 1907, workers employed by the Phoenix Bridge Company were erecting a new cantilever bridge just outside Quebec City when, due to a series of engineering miscalculations, the bridge’s southern extension collapsed, plunging both the extension and the workers on it into the St. Lawrence River. Workers were crushed by falling wreckage or trapped amid the twisted steel and drowned by the incoming tide. Of the thirty-eight ironworkers from Kahnawà:ke on the bridge at the time, only five would survive—nearly everyone in Kahnawà:ke was affected by the tragedy.¹⁹ In the small community of about two thousand people at the time, twenty-five women were widowed and fifty-three children lost their

fathers.²⁰ The collapse, known as Shontoskwenne in Kanien'kehá, or "when the bridge fell,"²¹ captured international headlines, and a Royal Commission was established to investigate the disaster.²² In Kahnawà:ke, where the Quebec bridge disaster is still prominent in the community's memory and marked by multiple community memorials including the most recent one established in 2007, the women decided soon afterward that for any future projects, the men from Kahnawà:ke should split up to disperse risk, a phenomenon that became known as "booming out." This decision led to ironworkers serving as transient workers to different job sites across North America.²³ Death or serious injury remained ever present well into the mid-twentieth century, as evidenced by the notices of major injuries and job site deaths that appeared in issues of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers' monthly *Bridgemen's Magazine*.²⁴

Despite the risks, Kanien'kehá:ka men from Kahnawà:ke remained prevalent in the industry, with many Kanien'kehá:ka ironworkers quick to become prominent union members. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Kanien'kehá:ka unionists of Local 87 of the ironworkers union from Montreal were visiting job sites throughout central Canada. By 1907, union officials such as the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers' president, F. M. Ryan, began visiting the community, his visit during this particular time owing to the Quebec bridge disaster.²⁵ Further speaking to Kahnawà:ke's active engagement in labor organizing, the Buffalo union representative J. T. Butler described Kahnawà:ke as a thriving hub of union activity:

On February 6th I attended an open meeting in the Indian reservation at Caughnawaga [Kahnawà:ke]. We had a fairly large meeting. Quite a number of our Indian brothers were present; also a number of ex-card men, several showing books from locals 35 [Brooklyn, New York], 40 [New York, New York] and 45 [Jersey City, New Jersey]. My chief reason for visiting them was to line up and advise them against shipping away from around their jurisdiction unless they received the scale called for by the local into which they were shipped. The various bridge companies of Canada, when they have jobs in the West or other isolated points, invariably send in a call to Caughnawaga [Kahnawà:ke], and ship men from there. From my own personal observation, also from what I hear, these Indian brothers make first-class workmen and staunch union men, once they are enlightened regarding the ideas, need and purposes of trade organizations. I am pleased to report that everyone not members made application.²⁶

As a result of their experience in the industry in Canada and, highlighted here, their active membership in local unions in Brooklyn, New York City, Jersey City, and elsewhere, major steel companies, including U.S. Steel and the

McClintic-Marshall Company (later known as Bethlehem Steel), increasingly recruited Indigenous ironworkers to job sites in the United States, including in New York City. Into this urban space, they would extend their nationhood.²⁷

“Little Caughnawaga” and Extending Kanien’kehá:ka Nationhood

First landing in Astoria, Queens, in the early twentieth century, Kanien’kehá:ka ironworkers began to congregate in greater numbers in Brooklyn in the early 1920s, where they helped form a new Indigenous community.²⁸ Located on Atlantic Avenue, in the heart of downtown Brooklyn, the offices of Local 361 of the Ironworkers Union attracted Kanien’kehá:ka ironworkers and their families, who established themselves within a ten-block radius.²⁹ Soon, Kanien’kehá:ka ironworkers dominated the neighborhood, which became affectionately known by the local press as the “suburb of the Indian Reservation.”³⁰ A local reverend,



Figure 2.

What is suspected to be Peter Rice from Kahnawà:ke, identified in the famous 1932 “Lunch atop a Skyscraper” photograph. Artwork by Saki Murotani from Allan Downey and Carlee Loft, dir., *Rotinonshón:ni Ironworkers* (Independent, 2020), digital animation, 6 min.

David Cory, called Brooklyn “the most popular center for Mohawks off their reservation,” and it would become known to community members as “the downtown of Caughnawaga [Kahnawà:ke].”³¹ The link between Brooklyn and Kahnawà:ke would remain central throughout Little Caughnawaga’s history. Before long, the neighborhood would feature Indigenous-owned boardinghouses (the first opened in 1920), grocery stores that catered to their Indigenous clientele by carrying a specific type of cornmeal for making cornbread, the Cuyler Presbyterian Church, with sermons in Kanien’kehá, and two taverns that served as a hub for transient Indigenous workers.³²

Despite ironworking’s significant influence, the neighborhood was not limited to men or to what were exclusively at that time male ironworkers. After numerous Kanien’kehá:ka individuals had established themselves in the community, Indigenous women from Kahnawà:ke and other Haudenosaunee communities moved of their own accord to the Brooklyn neighborhood in search of employment in factories, as nurses, schoolteachers, housemaids, and significantly, as boardinghouse owners and operators.³³ Indigenous women carved their own Indigenous city from these spaces. For instance, at the age of eighteen, Little Caughnawaga resident Helen Skye, from Kahnawà:ke, was heralded by the *Globe and Mail* as “the first—and only—member of the Iroquois tribe enrolled in the school of nursing at Long Island College Hospital.” According to the newspaper, Skye hoped to retain her language so that she could return to Kahnawà:ke as a public health nurse.³⁴ In this reordering of Indigenous experience and work in urban spaces, Indigenous women found opportunities but, as Mishuana Goeman points out, did so within the limiting structures of colonialism, capitalism, and gender.³⁵ At times, these opportunities were determined by domestic (i.e., US settler) notions about women, home, and private and public spheres, while in other cases, they reflected uniquely Indigenous experiences through which women forged new connections that supported Indigenous culture, community, and identity.³⁶ In Little Caughnawaga, Indigenous women were key to the formation of this Indigenous space, serving as interlocutors of language, Haudenosaunee history, and networking between Kahnawà:ke and Brooklyn.

One important site of this work was the Presbyterian church in Little Caughnawaga. After the arrival of Kahnawà:ke community members, the Presbyterian church quickly became a gathering place not only of Protestant but also of Roman Catholic and Longhouse community members. Known as Ononsatokentiwatenroshens, or “the church that makes friends” in Kanien’kehá, the church drew so many Kanien’kehá:ka congregants that by 1938 the pastor,

Rev. Cory, who had learned Kanien'kehá, began offering monthly services in the language and using a Kanien'kehá translation of the Gospel of Luke for his sermons. Little Caughnawaga residents Margaret Lachine and Josephine Skye would be instrumental in providing the translation and further encouraging the use of Kanien'kehá at the church.³⁷ Maintaining the Kanien'kehá language and Kanien'kehá:ka culture was a priority throughout Little Caughnawaga's history, as Cory would remember: "The Mohawks tell me they want the young people protected from the hazards of a great city, but they also want to maintain their Mohawk language and traditions. They are very proud and want to be known as Indian even if intermarriage with white mates occurs."³⁸ Key in this endeavour, as Reaghan Tarbell explains, were the women of Little Caughnawaga, who continued to carry on their matriarchal society in this new space "as keepers of the home" and play a critical role in preserving the Kanien'kehá language and Kanien'kehá:ka culture.³⁹ It was through their work and effort that Little Caughnawaga would become a thriving Mohawk space. As Brenda J. Child has documented in the case of Anishinaabeg, Indigenous women who moved to urban centers in the twentieth century developed new ideas concerning labor but did so while also reimagining tradition.⁴⁰ For Kanien'kehá:ka women, that meant taking on new positions such as becoming nurses or working in factories while continuing to play an instrumental and traditional role in the preservation of language.⁴¹

As community members, particularly Kanien'kehá:ka women, became actively involved in the church, they used this space to help realize their cultural aspirations: three women, including the nurse Helen Skye and the schoolteacher Doris Diabo, became Sunday school teachers; Michael Diabo was elected a deacon; and community members hosted widely popular community events and "Indian pageants" to raise funds for church activities.⁴² In addition to religious training, the church, encouraged by its new parishioners, placed a strong emphasis on teaching Haudenosaunee history and strengthening the connection between Little Caughnawaga and Kahnawà:ke by establishing a relationship with the United Church back in Kahnawà:ke. As Cory would write in 1955,

Many and valuable lesson[s] both for the general field of social and economic adjustment and for the more specific church interest may be learned from the Caughnawaga [Kahnawà:ke]–Brooklyn experience, a relationship existing for some fifteen years. A small overpopulated reserve finds its chief economic salvation in a skilled trade that takes its men off the reserve for their livelihood but also affords them the welcome opportunity to rehabilitate the reserve itself in terms of better housing and other facilities. Two churches, one on the reserve, the other in the new urban area, have established a mutually helpful, reciprocal relationship.

Perhaps Caughnawaga [Kahnawà:ke] and Brooklyn have indicated in both economic and ecclesiastical terms a technique for conserving the values of the reservation and adjusting to modern life.⁴³

The significance here is not that Little Caughnawaga was defined by a relationship to the church—certainly, the majority of Little Caughnawaga residents were not active in this institution, as the Indigenous congregation only numbered around fifty individuals. Rather, the sum of all these parts—teaching Haudenosaunee history, using the Kanien'kehá language, the work and effort of Kanien'kehá:ka women to reimagine tradition, and reinforcing connections between the two communities—underscores community members' commitment to maintaining place-based relationships grounded in Kahnawà:ke as an articulation of Kanien'kehá:ka nationhood and made Little Caughnawaga a "Mohawk place."

Here in this urban space, Little Caughnawaga and ironworking developed into what Simpson has termed "feeling citizenship," which, despite the workings of the state or of governance structures, is the "affective sense of being a Mohawk of Kahnawà:ke."⁴⁴ Little Caughnawaga and ironworking, despite having no official status as an extension of Kahnawà:ke and its formation outside traditional Kanien'kehá:ka territory, developed into a "Mohawk experience." As Kanien'kehá:ka filmmaker Reagan Tarbell describes, the legacy of ironworking and Little Caughnawaga became a significant piece of Kanien'kehá:ka family life and an extension of Kanien'kehá:ka identity:

[Ironworking] has been woven into the fabric of [Kanien'kehá:ka identities] over the past 150 years. It has become part of our contemporary history of who we are and I think it has definitely played a role. One thing I can think of for sure is that a lot of the men used to use the language on job sites, so I think it definitely [contributed] and we also brought our values into that as well. Men would bring their sons, their nephews, family, or friends on the job with them to teach them. They would teach them to do the job and it was all passed down and these are things that become part of the fabric of the family, and thus it becomes such a family thing. . . . So I think it has definitely played a large role in the rebuilding of our identity. The men have become renowned for the work they do. . . . It has definitely become part of who we are.⁴⁵

This new urban space and industry offered an alternative space for articulations of Indigenous nationhood to be expressed through Indigenous bodies, history, language, and urban Indigenous kinship connections repositioned and formed in Little Caughnawaga while remaining connected to Kahnawà:ke.⁴⁶ In his biography of the Indigenous rights activist Richard Oakes, who was raised in Little Caughnawaga, the historian Kent Blansett reaffirms this sociopolitical

connection and of “feeling citizenship”: “Brooklyn, unlike any other major city in the state, meant more than just an economic opportunity or a fresh start; it meant keeping her [Irene Oakes, mother of Richard] children closely tied to their culture within a thriving Mohawk City.”⁴⁷ To Irene Oakes, according to Blansett, Little Caughnawaga was effectively a “Mohawk place.”

While Little Caughnawaga may have been unique as a Mohawk site, Indigenous urban spaces, as Renya Ramirez has shown, often serve as “hubs” that offer a mechanism “to support Native notions of culture, Community identity, and belonging away from tribal land bases.”⁴⁸ This was the case in Little Caughnawaga, too, where Kanien’kehá:ka people who lived there saw both the community and ironworking as representing cultural traditions carried on in a new place. As one Little Caughnawaga resident remembers,

When you live in that community, I am talking about a community where everybody helped each other, everybody sought to each other’s needs, when you live like that it’s not a question of whether we’re sacrificing our men for something that is dangerous [ironworking], it’s not, he has to go to work. Hundreds of years before that they would go hunting for days maybe weeks at a time, so it was kind of the same thing, it was cultural, it was a tradition where men did things together—don’t forget Mohawk are a matriarchal society—so the women are the backbone of the nation.⁴⁹

In this instance, Little Caughnawaga and the presence of Indigenous families were not merely an example of “Indians in unexpected places,” inverting expectations of Indian “authenticity.”⁵⁰ Rather, this urban space was being claimed, at least temporarily, as a Mohawk place to which Kanien’kehá:ka nationhood extended and Kanien’kehá:ka tradition could and did take place. As the above quote demonstrates, and as Tarbell alluded to earlier, the move to Little Caughnawaga did not serve as an abrupt end to a supposed former way of life; rather, through the work and effort of Kanien’kehá:ka women, it witnessed the carrying on of tradition, the continuation of a Kanien’kehá:ka matriarchal society, and the preservation of language.

Certainly, this Kanien’kehá:ka hub and expression of nationhood existed in relation to multiple forms of Indigenous inhabitation and hubs in the city and ultimately to Lenapehoking (Lenape territory).⁵¹ As Ramirez reiterates, travel by Indigenous peoples to urban environments does not overwrite the existence of persistent Indigenous communities that recognize these spaces as their territory and Native hubs—such as powwows, meeting, and ceremonies—can and do exist concurrently that support “the creation of Native American culture, community, identity, and belonging within interconnected relationships across space.”⁵² For instance, in addition to the formation of these Kanien’kehá:ka—

and Haudenosaunee—hubs, other Indigenous community members such as Otoe-Pawnee citizen Mifaunwy Shunatona Hines were creating their own hubs through organizations such as the Indian League of the Americas and eventually the American Indian Community House.⁵³ These hubs in New York City and Brooklyn, while existing on Lenape territory,⁵⁴ certainly witnessed interconnected relationships while pursuing their own set of goals and sense of community. For the Kanien'kehá:ka, all of this would further be supported by networks established through the local taverns.

Within Little Caughnawaga, several local taverns, serving as the kind of hub described by Ramirez, were instrumental in connecting the community back to Kahnawà:ke and Ahkwesáhsne. As Blansett documents, the Wigwam Bar on Nevins Street, owned by Irene Vilis (Delisle) from Kahnawà:ke and her Spanish husband, Manuel “Manny” Vilis, and the Spar Bar at the corner of Nevins Street and Atlantic Avenue served as a critical nexus for transient ironworkers in terms of communication, prospective employment, and other community services.⁵⁵ As a former Little Caughnawaga resident, Verlain White, remembers, “[The Wigwam] was a lot more than just a bar; it was like Grand Central for the Mohawk Indians who came here. . . . People sometimes picked their mail up there. They got rides back to the reservation there. They found out about jobs there.”⁵⁶ In his *New York Times* interview with Little Caughnawaga resident Paul Cross, who had lived in the neighborhood since moving there during the Great Depression twenty-one years earlier, Gay Talese comments on the tavern’s significance: “Every Friday afternoon, a group of Mohawk Indians gathers at the Spar Bar on Atlantic Avenue near Nevins Street in Brooklyn to begin their 400-mile weekend pilgrimage to the Caughnawaga [Kahnawà:ke] Reservation [Reserve]. . . . The Indians, all ironworkers, have been leading this two-country existence since the nineteen-thirties, when they were attracted to Brooklyn by the promise of jobs across the river in the construction of Radio City.”⁵⁷

This “two country” existence did not always work perfectly. Despite Little Caughnawaga being an extended “Mohawk experience” to those who lived there, as Tarbell recalls, this view was not always shared by people in Kahnawà:ke: “Most families who lived in Brooklyn came home every summer as soon as school let out. I remember my mother and aunts telling me how as children they weren’t always welcomed back into the fold so to speak. ‘Brooklyn bums’ was a common taunt, ‘go back to Brooklyn’ was a familiar refrain but to them Kahnawà:ke was always home. For those raised in Brooklyn, these short summer months provided their only real insight into life on a small reserve, *their real home* [emphasis added].”⁵⁸

Despite the taunts, here in this urban space the *New York Times* unabashedly proclaimed in 1912 to be “the heart of the most complex civilization in the world” in which “somehow, these Indians have managed to adapt themselves to the conditions they find around them,” Kanien’kehá:ka individuals did more than adapt. Whether by establishing a connection between church denominations, using the Kanien’kehá language, or building personal and communal connections between Kahnawà:ke and Brooklyn in its taverns, Little Caughnawaga represented a radical break from settler colonial spaces perceived to have absorbed Indigenous existence within their frameworks and, by doing so, erased Indigenous peoples from the map. Little Caughnawaga and ironworking became, at least temporarily for those connected to this space, the heart of their Indigenous world, the place where they would continue Haudenosaunee tradition. This should hardly be surprising when one considers the emphasis placed on maintaining tradition, adaptation, and transition throughout Haudenosaunee history. As the historian Susan Hill argues,

One cannot be truly Haudenosaunee without a historical consciousness of the collective experiences of our ancestors. The very core of our existence is formed around the historic inheritance passed down through the generations. This inheritance was meant to guide the Haudenosaunee for all time, as established at the time of creation. The lessons contained within our historical consciousness constitute the roadmap for a sustainable, balanced life for the current generation and the “coming faces” of our future.⁵⁹

In a similar vein, Rick Monture adds, “Like Sky Woman in her journey from one world to another, First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities are also now moving from one political era into another; and like her transition from one time and place to another, these communities need to make adjustments to their world by employing those traditions that will sustain them in the future creation of their new environments, whether they be physical, social, or political.”⁶⁰ Movement and adaptation in a Haudenosaunee context, as Hill and Monture affirm, is “traditional.” Thus, establishing an extended network of nationhood, language, and culture in a new place did not represent a radical break from Haudenosaunee tradition. Through travel and movement, Little Caughnawaga community members consciously and actively extended certain notions of Kanien’kehá:ka nationhood and, as discussed in greater detail below, encouraged further articulations of Haudenosaunee sovereignty. While Little Caughnawaga offers a specific Kanien’kehá:ka experience, as Ramirez points out, travel by Indigenous peoples to urban centers “can be a purposeful, exciting way to transmit culture, create community, and maintain identity” when a

traveler “is a carrier of knowledge who catalyzes change by weaving networks of relationships across great distances.”⁶¹ The networks of relationships spurred by Little Caughnawaga, ironworking, and travel would be at the fore of the Haudenosaunee attempt to activate their sovereignty.

The Axis of Labor and Haudenosaunee Sovereignty

Beyond the institutions such as taverns or the Presbyterian church that served as hubs of Kanien’kehá:ka culture and as critical links between Kahnawà:ke and Brooklyn, one of the most significant legacies of Little Caughnawaga and ironworking was their central role in the affirmation of Haudenosaunee self-determination and the right of Haudenosaunee individuals to cross the imposed international border. As the Haudenosaunee scholar Theresa McCarthy notes, numerous Indigenous scholars have helped advance our understanding of Indigenous, and specifically Haudenosaunee, sovereignty over the past three



Figure 3. “Boarders Welcome.” A Kanien’kehá:ka family stands in front of a typical Brooklyn brownstone representing the families that set up boarding-houses to host Indigenous ironworkers in the city. Artwork by Saki Murotani from Allan Downey and Carlee Loft, dir., *Rotinoshón:ni Ironworkers* (Independent, 2020), digital animation, 6 min.

decades and including the distinction between Haudenosaunee and Western European notions of sovereignty. Rather than focusing on individualism, hierarchy, absolute authority, materialism, and domination, Haudenosaunee sovereignty “has been continually articulated as the right to determine citizenship, leadership, and freedom of movement within territorial homelands.”⁶² The relatively new livelihood of ironworking reasserted Indigenous movement, even outside their territorial homelands, as a cornerstone of Haudenosaunee sovereignty.

As Chantal Norrgard has argued in the case of the Anishinaabeg, Kanien’kehá:ka citizens enacted their nationhood and sovereignty “around the axis of labor . . . [where Indigenous livelihoods] were intertwined with their sovereignty and self-determination.”⁶³ After the arrest of several Haudenosaunee ironworkers in Little Caughnawaga as “illegal laborers” from Canada, it was a Kanien’kehá:ka ironworker from Kahnawà:ke named Paul Diabo who in 1928 successfully articulated Haudenosaunee self-determination in US federal court and defended Indigenous peoples’ treaty right to freely cross the international border. As the historian Gerald Reid reminds us, the 1924 Immigration Act, which sought to limit immigration from Asia and southern and eastern Europe, also targeted Indigenous peoples, who were now considered “trespassers and illegal aliens” when they crossed the imposed international boundary. In the months after the act’s passage, the US Department of Immigration began arresting Haudenosaunee ironworkers who had crossed the border—arrests that were featured prominently in the *New York Times*. For instance, in the summer of 1924, three Kahnawà:ke ironworkers—George Land, George Moracle [Maracle?], and Joseph Moracle [Maracle?—were arrested in New York City by the Bureau of Immigration and taken to Ellis Island for traveling from Kahnawà:ke into the United States “illegally” and charged under the new immigration and alien labor law.⁶⁴

Their arrest was also a response to strike action in May 1924 by several local unions in the greater New York City area. The unions opposed a move by a conglomeration of steel companies organized under the New York Iron League and the National Erectors’ Association banners to hire nonunion laborers.⁶⁵ Among the striking locals were Newark (no. 11), New York (no. 40), Jersey City (no. 45), Perth Amboy (no. 373), and Brooklyn (no. 376). The Iron League, which was reported to be helping defend the three accused Kanien’kehá:ka ironworkers at their hearing, was actively recruiting nonunion ironworkers as strikebreakers. Among these “scabs” were ironworkers from Kahnawà:ke hired in the early months of the strike, including the three accused. The International

Association of Bridge, Structural and Ornamental Iron Workers countered by attempting to intercept incoming ironworkers, raise awareness of the strike action, recruit nonunion workers into the locals of their organization, and draw attention to the hiring of strikebreakers by the league.⁶⁶ Unionized and nonunionized Kanien'kehá:ka ironworkers in the city quickly found themselves on both sides of the picket lines, but for the Bureau of Immigration this labor action provided the initial impetus to use the 1924 Immigration Act to target Indigenous workers crossing the imposed international border. This obstruction of the movement of Haudenosaunee citizens across the boundary fit within a larger trend during the 1920s by both Canadian and American officials to impede Haudenosaunee border crossing. Such was the case in the summer of 1921, when Canadian border officials and the Department of Indian Affairs refused entry to a Seneca lacrosse team from Cattaraugus en route to a game in Six Nations of the Grand River. Unbeknownst to those officials, these lacrosse games had been organized in support of Deskaheh Levi General and the Confederacy Council's burgeoning sovereignty movement, which would approach the League of Nations a few short years later.⁶⁷

In response to increasing violation of their sovereignty, several Haudenosaunee community members from across the Confederacy, particularly Clinton and Elizabeth (Patterson) Rickard from Tuscarora (Niagara Falls, NY) and David Hill from Six Nations of the Grand River, mobilized to secure the Haudenosaunee's right to freely cross the international boundary line as guaranteed in the Jay Treaty of 1794. As Rickard states in his autobiography, "Our people were continually stopped when trying to cross the border, despite the fact that no order had come from Washington to bar Indians. Just the contrary, in fact, for the letter I had from Immigration Commissioner Hull indicated that Indians might be admitted on a temporary basis. This discrimination against our people was directly the result of race prejudice on the part of some immigration officers. They held the power, and they were using it to humiliate and distress us."⁶⁸

Over the course of 1925, the Rickards began writing letters to the US Bureau of Immigration, Indian Affairs, and various senators to harness political support and to remind authorities of the Haudenosaunee's right to self-determination. In the following year, Clinton Rickard and David Hill cofounded the Indian Defense League of America—originally known as the Six Nation Defense League—which had as its main objective to "redeem our border crossing right as they were before the border became restricted."⁶⁹ While the Indian Defense League of America was a new organization, it followed the political doctrine

set out by Deskaheh Levi General during the early 1920s. In his now famous manifesto to the League of Nations on behalf of the Confederacy Council in Six Nations, “The Redman’s Appeal for Justice,” Deskaheh appealed to the international community to officially recognize Haudenosaunee sovereignty and, as members of the League, to intervene in the colonial violence perpetrated by the Canadian state and protect the Haudenosaunee against said violence, to assist in recovering the trust funds appropriated by the Canadian state, and significantly, for the purpose of the argument here, to safeguard “Freedom of transit for the Six Nations across Canadian territory to and from international waters.”⁷⁰ Deskaheh’s focus on free movement of the Haudenosaunee both within and across Canadian colonial borders would be relayed in a much more direct way by the Indian Defense League of America, particularly regarding the international boundary between Canada and the United States. Clinton Rickard would later recount, “For my part, I am determined not to rest until the victory was won. The last words Chief Deskaheh had said to me before he died were: ‘Fight for the line,’ meaning the border. And I intend to do just that.”⁷¹ As Simpson articulates so well in *Mohawk Interruptus*, “For Iroquois peoples the border acts as a site not of transgression but for the activation and articulation of their *rights* as members of reserve nations, or Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy peoples. Thus the people who are crossing borders are reserve members or Iroquois before they cross, they are especially Iroquois *as* they cross, and they are Iroquois when they arrive at the place where they want to be.”⁷²

Central to this historical articulation, beyond the work of the Confederacy leadership, was the arrest of Paul Diabo and his wife, Louise Diabo, in Philadelphia in 1926. The Diabos were arrested in Philadelphia, where Paul was employed as an ironworker, under violation of the Immigration Act of 1924, and deported back to Kahnawà:ke. In response, Paul Diabo hired a lawyer and in late 1926 proceeded to challenge their deportation.⁷³ Instrumental in this case, as Gerald Reid has shown, were five ironworkers from Kahnawà:ke and living in New York City who encouraged Diabo to “test the application of American immigration laws to the Rotinonhsionni [Haudenosaunee in Kanien’kehá].”⁷⁴ With the passage of the Alien Immigration Act, Reid explains, “Many of these early ironworkers considered the new immigration policies not only inconvenient, but a violation of their rights as Rotinonhsionni and a threat to their very livelihood. Threatened politically and economically by the immigration controls . . . they had an obvious concern with Diabo’s deportation and clear interest in challenging it.”⁷⁵

Here, Little Caughnawaga and ironworking combined to galvanize further reassertion of Haudenosaunee sovereignty before the colonial authorities. After a meeting of the six ironworkers at Peter Atawakon Rice's apartment, likely in Little Caughnawaga, Diabo decided to pursue the case, and the group began organizing in the community to raise financial support for the legal fees.⁷⁶ Additionally, in February 1926 Clinton Rickard began corresponding with Diabo's friend and fellow Kanien'kehá:ka ironworker James Ross, further encouraging Diabo to test his case against the US federal law, and offering to supply his legal team with documents collected by the Defense League concerning Haudenosaunee border crossing rights.⁷⁷ All these things—ironworking, Little Caughnawaga, Paul Diabo's arrest, the introduction of the Alien Immigration Act, as well as the legacy of Deskaheh's League of Nations appeal and the subsequent founding of the Defense League—coalesced to produce one of the most important Indigenous rights cases in US history.

In March 1927, US District Court judge Oliver B. Dickinson ruled in favor of Diabo, upholding the Jay Treaty and stating, "The boundary line to establish the respective territory of the United States and of Great Britain was clearly not intended to, and just as clearly did not affect the Indians. It made no division of their country. . . . From the Indian view-point, he crossed no boundary line. For him this does not exist. This fact the United States has always recognized, and there is nothing in this legislation to work a change in our attitude."⁷⁸ Of course, during this time, as Simpson has argued, these Haudenosaunee actors were not simply engaging in a struggle for recognition from the nation-states of Canada or the United States. Rather, they were articulating their sovereignty and refusing the exclusive and absolute sovereignty of these two nation-states and their borders.⁷⁹ Through Haudenosaunee movement, facilitated by ironworking, and these various sites of political activation, Haudenosaunee people were asserting their *own borders* and their right to self-determination.

While the Diabo case was significant, it was not the last time Haudenosaunee ironworkers were targeted; as a result, both Haudenosaunee laborers and the Indian Defense League of America ramped up their appeal to US authorities concerning their sovereign status, using gendered forms of employment in the construction industry as their linchpin. Although assertions of nationhood were influenced by notions about gender (in this instance it was the occupations of Indigenous men used to assert forms of self-determination), shifts in the wage labor economy, and capitalism, these factors did not extinguish the preexisting understanding of Haudenosaunee self-determination that both predated and coexisted with this livelihood. For instance, in May 1940, the

New York Times broke the news that sixty Haudenosaunee steel workers from Little Caughnawaga were denied federal employment by the Work Projects Administration to work on the Criminal Courts Building in Manhattan due to the “unclarified status” of their citizenship. The denial came despite the group having employed an attorney a month earlier to testify on that status before a congressional subcommittee on April 15, 1940. As the *Times* reported,

L. William Santasiere, attorney for the Indians, declared that while the Indians were not citizens, they are not, on the other hand, aliens according to the country’s immigration laws. . . . [He] added that in his plea for clarification of their status, he suggested an amendment to the relief act including in relief preference groups, North American Indians. . . . Declaring that the Indians are considered wards of the United States while residing here, he said Congress recognized the right of Indians to cross the border at will and that the courts have upheld the contention of the Indians that they never lost or abandoned rights, privileges and immunities granted them under the Jay Treaty of 1794.⁸⁰

Soon thereafter, in December 1940 Clinton Rickard,⁸¹ Angus Horn, and Ivan A. Burnham, in representation of the Indian Defense League of America, traveled to federal court in Philadelphia to pay tribute to the late Judge Oliver B. Dickinson.⁸² The purpose of their trip was twofold: to remind federal authorities in Philadelphia of their legal responsibility to uphold the Jay Treaty of 1794, and to continue on to Washington, DC, to “seek the relaxation of the Alien-Registrations Law under which Indians are classed as aliens.”⁸³ As the *New York Times* observed, “Because of the alien-registration requirements many companies in the United States have hesitated to employ Indians.”⁸⁴

Such hesitations were clearly at play in December 1941 when long-time Kahnawà:ke ironworker and AFL union member James P. Monture was refused work on a defense contract building project in Rochester, New York, after local industrialists claimed that he was not an American citizen and was therefore excluded from defense contracts.⁸⁵ Monture, who had arrived in Rochester weeks earlier from a separate defense-contract job in Boston, worked on several job sites before he was refused employment. At issue was Monture’s “citizenship”: he had not relinquished his Haudenosaunee citizenship—referred to as “Indian citizenship” or “status” in the local press—and become enfranchised as a US citizen. A second, unnamed Indigenous ironworker who was refused work alongside Monture was allowed to return to the job after producing his US citizenship and US Army World War I discharge papers.⁸⁶ To resolve Monture’s case, the local AFL union office sent him to an attorney, Mario Ventura, to seek out legal counsel. Although available historical records do not reveal the outcome, Monture’s case nonetheless illustrates how labor, citizenship, travel,

and nationhood were intimately intertwined at all times. While press coverage of the status of Indigenous nation members and their eligibility to travel and work freely in the United States fell off after Monture's denial of employment, in 1948 during hearings of the Subcommittee on the Interior and Insular Affairs, Clinton Rickard would once again remind federal authorities about the Indian Defense League of America's work to assert their border rights:

This league was organized particularly to defend what we believe to be the rights that belong to us. In 1924, I believe, the late Senator Hiram Johnson passed an Act of Noneligible Citizens to the United States shall not enter. At that time we knew there was an existing treaty, and that we had the right to go across, back and forth, without being subject to the immigration rules. At that time we organized to defend this treaty, and I came here a number of times, and the bill was presented by Senator King, of Utah, and passed, that gave the Indians that right. That is one thing that our league undertook to do and accomplished, besides other minor things.⁸⁷

By describing the Defense League's work, Rickard once again brought forth a clear defense of Haudenosaunee sovereignty in relation to Indigenous mobility within and among settler states and cities. Entangled within this modern articulation of nationhood was ironworking as the axis from which Haudenosaunee assertions of sovereignty would stem.

Conclusion

In many ways, the history of the skylines of North America's cities is a story about Indigenous kinship, identity, and nationhood that has expanded all these aspects of Indigenous life. The various buildings that make up the New York City skyline exist, in part, because Indigenous peoples articulated and activated their nationhood, networks, and self-determination to make sure they were there to build them. Over the course of a century, Kanien'kehá:ka nationhood and Haudenosaunee self-determination were reimaged through ironworking and through Indigenous women's labor in and around the urban community ironworking gave rise to. Little Caughnawaga became a critical identity marker tied to the Kanien'kehá:ka nation and Haudenosaunee Confederacy. From the early 1920s well into the 1970s, Little Caughnawaga thrived as an Indigenous space, with an overwhelming presence of Kanien'kehá:ka nation members and a significant presence of other Indigenous nation members as well. As Little Caughnawaga caught the attention of newspapers across the United States in the 1950s, including several feature articles by the *New York Times* and *National Geographic* (1952), the Indigenous presence in Brooklyn

helped spur the establishment of new pan-Indigenous organizations such as the United Association for the Advancement of the American Indian.⁸⁸ Founded around 1934 by Jules Haywood and headquartered at 1492 Pacific Street, in “Brooklyn’s Indian sector where an estimated 700–800 Indians, chiefly of the Iroquois nation reside,”⁸⁹ the organization was established “to assist American Indians throughout the nation to rehabilitate and improve themselves socially . . . to help meet their welfare, educational and employment needs.”⁹⁰

Outside Little Caughnawaga, Indigenous women in the 1960s were active in forming Indigenous spaces in other parts of the city. One example is the American Indian Women’s League founded by Otoe-Pawnee citizen Mifaunwy Shunatona Hines (also called Willard Hines) in Midtown Manhattan. Hines sought to provide Indigenous residents of the city with a gathering space at the Community Church of New York and organized monthly lectures with the ultimate goal of establishing the American Indian Center that would follow in 1969, with Louis Bayhille as its first president and Hines as secretary.⁹¹ These initiatives demonstrate that, although this article had examined one important instance, there were multiple Indigenous New Yorks. When New York’s construction boom ended, Indigenous ironworkers moved on to work elsewhere. Completion of the highway between Montreal and Albany in the 1970s further allowed those who wished to continue working in New York to travel between Kahnawà:ke and New York City rather than permanently relocate.⁹² Today, the community of Little Caughnawaga is not as prominent as it once was, but the buildings erected as a result of Haudenosaunee activating their nationhood and self-determination still stand, and the latest generation of ironworkers continues to walk the high steel of New York City and other North American skylines.

Notes

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