



The Weekly Historical Note

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Early Explorations into the Oneida Homeland

The Oneida Nation, like many other native tribes across America, had no written history. The only possible exception to this rule is the use of wampum belts, but even wampum depends greatly on the use of oral history to pass on the information represented by the symbols on the belts. Like many other First Nations across America, the Oneida have lost large quantities of their oral history due to cultural assimilation. As a result, some of the only accounts that we have of early contact between the Oneida and Europeans comes from the journals and publications left behind by the Europeans. One such explorer was Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert.

Van den Bogaert was a young Dutchman who came to the Americas in 1630 when he was only 18 years old. Just four years later he was asked to lead an expedition into the Iroquois Homelands. The Dutch had received word that the French were trading with the Iroquois (which explained why trade between the Dutch and the Iroquois was going so poorly).

Van den Bogaert left Fort Orange on December 11th, 1634, and headed straight into the heart of the Mohawk homelands, following the Mohawk River for a large duration of his journey. Van den Bogaert, as well as many other Europeans, called Iroquois villages “castles” because they were always enclosed by a wood stockade, sometimes double layers of stockades encircled a village. Without adequate provisions for the length of their journey, van den Bogaert and his two companions were left at the mercy of their Mohawk and Oneida hosts to provide them with food. While journeying from the Mohawk territories to their first stop at an Oneida village, van den Bogaert made the following observations.

“A woman came along the way, bringing us baked pumpkins to eat. This stretch is mostly full of birch wood and flatlands cleared for sowing (agricultural fields). Just before reaching the castle, we saw three graves in the manner of our graves: long and high. Otherwise their graves are round. These graves were surrounded with palisades that they had split from trees, and were so neatly made that it was a wonder...”

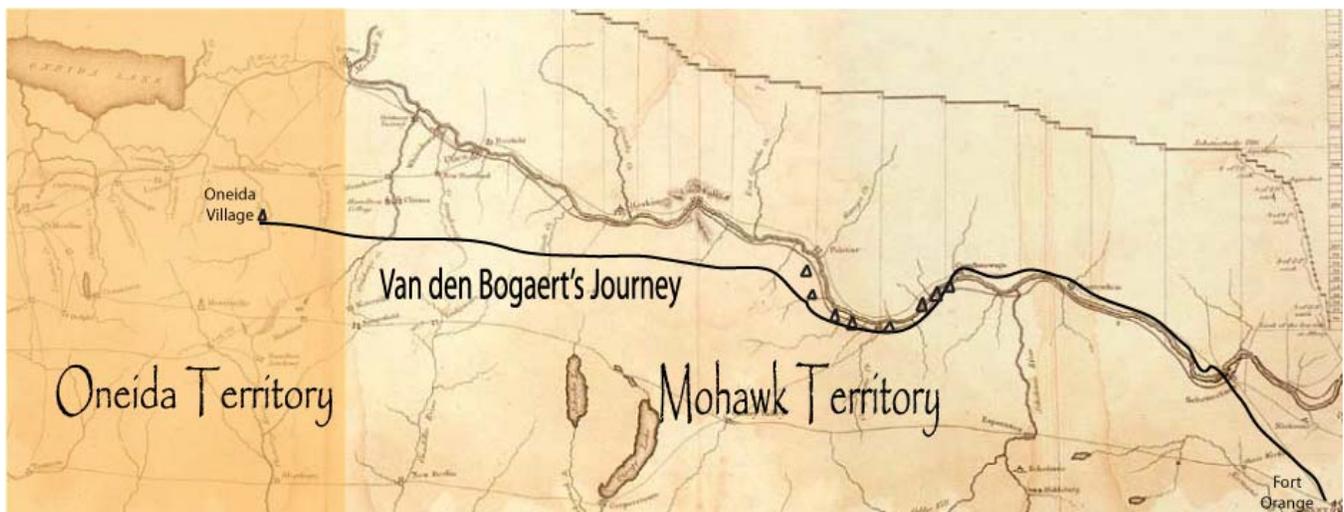
Once inside the Oneida village, van den Bogaert described the hospitality and interiors of the village as such:

“We were put in the place where the chief was accustomed to sit because he was not home at the time. We were cold, wet, and tired. We received food immediately, and they built a good fire. This castle is also located on a very high hill and was surrounded with two rows of palisades, 767 steps in circumference, in which there are 66 houses; built much better and higher than all the others



(referring to villages he had previously visited). There were many wooden gables on the houses which were painted with all sorts of animals. They sleep here mostly on raised platforms, more than any other Indians.”

Van den Bogaert continued his journal speaking about the remainder of his visit to the Oneida and his return trip to Fort Orange. One of the Chief's councilors called Bogaert and his companions scoundrels for the first few days. After one of Bogaert's companions "became so angry that the tears ran from his eyes," van den Bogaert called the Oneida man a scoundrel in return. At that point the Oneida man laughed and said, "You must not be angry. We are happy that you have come here." From then on the mood between them improved. Before leaving the Oneida, van den Bogaert made an agreement that the Dutch would trade with the Oneida for their Beaver furs and that the Oneida would no longer trade with the French. The Oneida agreed since the Dutch were closer, but only on the condition that they receive more for the value of the furs. Using their leverage, the Oneida pointed out that were currently receiving more per fur from the French. Van den Bogaert promised them they would receive more and returned to the Dutch colony having successfully re-established trade with the Iroquois.



This map shows the approximate journey that van den Bogaert took from Fort Orange (near present day Albany New York), through the Mohawk Territory, and then into the Oneida Territory. The triangles represent the villages the van den Bogaert visited. His Journey began on December 11th, 1634 and ended on January 21st, 1635.

Sources:

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Seamon, Tobias. *The Morning News*, "The Strange Case of Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert." Part One, accessed from <http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/profiles/>, March 27th, 2007, accessed on July 13th, 2009.