History and Analysis of:

THE CODE OF HANDSOME LAKE

by ARTHUR C. PARKER

The following document reproduces a single entry comprising pages 1120-29 in:


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23 cm. 148, [12 (ads)] pp. + plates. First published 1912 (same imprint, series note and pagination); also issued both years (Albany, 1912, 1913) as New York State Museum Bulletin 163. Re-issued by Syracuse University Press in 1968 and later as part of a compilation entitled *Parker on the Iroquois*. Also reprinted 1967 and later from the 1913 edition considered here, by Iroqrafts, Ohsweken, Ontario, Canada. —OCLC

Parker's manuscripts and typescripts of Iroquois legends are preserved at the New York State Library as part of the William Martin Beauchamp collection; see the related biographical note on Beauchamp near the end of this entry.

Religious myths and instructions of Ganio’dai’io (Handsome Lake), the Seneca Indian prophet who died at Onondaga, New York, in 1815, just south of Syracuse; he is buried near the council house (or "Long House") in Onondaga Nation territory a half-dozen miles from my home. The publication considered here is an excellent anthropological gathering of accounts by leading Native Americans, together with analysis and commentary by a respected scholar. Material of Mormon interest includes the story of the young preacher ordered by a queen to clean some old books "which she had concealed in a hidden chest," the last of which told of Christ and His resurrection. When He did not come again to start His kingdom, "Then said one chief follower, 'surely he will come again sometime, we must watch for him.'” p. 16.

The Mormon concept of the Three Nephites (see MP 109, Croly) is brought to mind by Handsome Lake's vision of the three messengers. Four are called for throughout these accounts, but the fourth was absent during this event:

Never have I seen such wondrous visions! Now at first I heard some one speaking. Some one spoke and said, "Come out awhile" and said this three times. . . . and there standing in the clear swept space I saw three men clothed in fine clean raiment. . . . all three were alike and all seemed middle aged. Never before have I seen such handsome commanding men and they had in one hand bows and arrows as canes. . . . Now the messengers spoke to me and said that they would now tell me how things ought to be upon the earth. [pp. 24-25; the full account is heavily invested with Native American culture and folk medicine]

Now one of the messengers turned to him and said, "... Three times we assist every one who believes to continue in the faith of the Gai’wiio' [teachings of Handsome Lake]. At this division in the great road we guide the spirits of the earth into Tain’tciade (heaven land). At the forks of the road the spirits of the dead are divided. The narrow road leads to the pleasant lands of the Creator and the wide and rough road leads to the great lodge of the punisher.” So they said and he said. [p. 69]
The text for the Iroquois White Dog Sacrifice is preserved in this book, pp. 85-94. In 1822, Mrs. Sigourney, arguing for Hebrew origins of American Indians, pointed to the Seneca practice of "annually sacrificing a white dog, as if in rude imitation of the paschal lamb." (Traits of the Aborigines of America, MP 381). The dog had to be perfectly white, without a single black hair.

At length the solemn moment arrived, and so impressive were the proceedings that the only two white men permitted to be present felt themselves compelled to uncover their heads and cease their labors. Rising slowly and majestically, bearing a long white wand in his right hand, Captain George commenced a chant in the Onondaga language; passing slowly around the typical [i.e., archetypal] dog from his position at the east, he proceeded to the south, west, and north, and then returned to his former position, where he consulted
with one of the chiefs. This proceeding was repeated three times; and then, as if he had gathered all the sins of the people, he approached the dog and uttered a pathetic lament. After this the body of the victim, which was laid upon a rough bier, was gently lifted up and borne to the place of sacrifice by the hands of chiefs of the nation. The high-priest then, standing at the east side of the altar of sacrifice, solemnly committed the victim to the flames. The sacrifice was completed; the atonement made. By some peculiar method that, probably, the hierophant himself has never been able to understand, the sins of the Onondagas, concentrated upon the head of a victim, pure, spotless, and without blemish, had been expiated, and the general joy was manifested by the firing of guns and mutual congratulations. [Harper’s Weekly for February 17, 1872, p. 142; illustration from p. 141]

Some reminiscences of Joseph Smith’s money digging activities in Pennsylvania included the proposed sacrifice of a white dog, beginning with an account relayed by Emily Blackman in her history of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, 1873 (MP 59). "The account given in the said history at page 580," agreed two of Emma Smith’s cousins in 1879,

of a pure white dog to be used as a sacrifice to restrain the enchantment, and of the anger of the Almighty at the attempt to palm off on him a white sheep in place of a white dog, is a fair sample of Smith’s revelations, . . . [Joseph and Hiel Lewis statement in the Amboy Journal 24 (30 April 1879), p. 1, in EMD 4:302-3]

Judging from the date, this first of several articles appeared a few hours after Emma Smith died in Nauvoo. It is almost as if the Lewis brothers waited until they heard that their cousin was failing and could not be offended, then held their peace no longer. Encountering resistance for this and similar statements, Hiel Lewis offered a rejoinder in a subsequent number of the same newspaper, opening with the following colorful language . . .

Friend Cadwell, you say Messrs. Lewis would have us believe that [Joseph] Smith, [Josiah] Stowell, and others were such idiots as to offer in sacrifice a white dog, etc. Whether fools or idiots, or not, we would have you believe that they did just such absurd things. And it is no greater stretch of credulity than it is to believe what you and others do of Joseph Smith. The facts are that the sacrifice of white dogs, black sluts [female dogs], black cats, and such like was an indispensable part or appendage of the art which Smith, the embryo prophet, was then practicing. [Hiel Lewis rejoinder in the Amboy Journal 24 (4 June 1879), p. 1, in EMD 4:308]

For further accounts to this effect, in context and with analysis, see EMD 4:299-321 and Vogel 2004, 73-74.
ANOTHER PROPHET OF THE ONONDAGA

The Onondaga, by virtue of their geography, were in every sense the central tribe of the disproportionately powerful Iroquois League or Confederacy who, including the Mohawk and Oneida to the east, and the Cayuga and Seneca to the west, controlled much of present New York State for centuries. Onondaga was not only the capitol of these "Five Nations" - the figurative "Great Council House," but its people held tie-breaking power in confederacy votes, and are called the "firekeepers" of all the Iroquois to the present day. "The Iroquois Confederacy," explains Dr. James A. Tuck,

was originally composed of five nations which were drawn together in a league under the influence of Deganawidah, called the "Law Giver," and Hiawatha, a reformed cannibal who persuaded the terrible wizard, Atotarho, a chief of the Onondagas, to bring his people into confederation thus completing the "longhouse" which ran from the Mohawk to the Genesee Rivers. In return for joining the Confederacy the Onondaga were made "Keepers of the Wampum," a position which they continue to enjoy, and Atotarho was made the head chief of the League of the Five Nations, a position also held by an Onondaga sachem since the very beginning of the League. [Tuck, 5]

Living so close as I do to the Onondaga Nation Territory (established following the American Revolution), I feel particularly inquisitive about one aspect of a well-documented incident which took place on Tuesday, June 3, 1834 while Joseph Smith and some two hundred followers comprising the bulk of "Zion's Camp" were traveling incognito through central Illinois on their way to support beleaguered Mormons in western Missouri. The episode was evidently first recorded by my great, great-grandfather's youngest brother, who wrote the following in his diary . . .

Tuesday 3 [June 1834] visited the mounds. A skeleton was dug up . . . Joseph, said his name was Zelph a great warrior under the Prophet Omandagus. An arrow was found in his Ribs—

His name was Zelph a warior under the Prophet Omandagus Zelph a white Laman[ite . . .

. . . Said he was a man of God and the curse was taken off or in part he was a white Lamanite /was known from the atlantic to the Rocky Mountains/ . . .

[Reuben McBride diary, 3 June 1834, in Godfrey 1989, 34, citing "LDS Church Archives"]

"Uncle Reub" was then but thirty years old (for a few more days) and a Mormon of just less than a year. He had been recruited personally in western New York that March by Joseph Smith, with others, as a volunteer "to go up to redeem
Zion,” as Reuben’s granddaughter would tell it many years later. Her version of the curious excavation should probably be set down here . . .

June 2, they crossed the Illinois River and camped on its banks. The following day three of the company visited the mounds. A skeleton was dug up. Joseph said his name was Naphi [sic], a great warrior under the Prophet Omandagus. An arrow was found in his ribs. Suffice it to say this caused his death.92

Joseph Smith and crew had quite enjoyed themselves the previous Sabbath, just before the Zelph incident. They were particularly praised by local citizens who had come to hear "Squire Cook" and his fellow anonymous ministers preach (see MP 320, Pitts, The Gospel Witness), and I suspect that Joseph was feeling effusive that week. "During our travels," Joseph is portrayed as writing in the official History of the Church,

we visited several of the mounds which had been thrown up by the ancient inhabitants of this country—Nephites, Lamanites, etc., and this morning I went up on a high mound, near the river, accompanied by the brethren. From this mound we could overlook the tops of the trees and view the prairie on each side of the river as far as our vision could extend, and the scenery was truly delightful.

On the top of the mound were stones which presented the appearance of three altars having been erected one above the other, according to the ancient order; and the remains of bones were strewn over the surface of the ground. The brethren procured a shovel and a hoe, and removing the earth to the depth of about one foot, discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire, and between his ribs the stone point of a Lamanitish arrow, which evidently produced his death. Elder Burr Riggs retained the arrow. The contemplation of the scenery around us produced peculiar sensations in our bosoms: and subsequently the visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty, I discovered that the person whose skeleton was before us was a white Lamanite, a large, thick-set man, and a man of God. His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet ONANDAGUS, who was known from the Hill Cumorah, or eastern sea [p. 79 ends] to the Rocky mountains. The curse was taken from Zelph, or, at least, in part—one of his thigh bones was broken by a stone flung from a sling, while in battle, years before his death. He was killed in battle by the arrow found among his ribs, during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites. [HC 2:79-80, emphasis added]

92 "History of Reuben McBride  Arranged by Mrs. Seraph Noyes Jackson, a Granddaughter," in Belnap, 19. No further details of the incident, or background on this “History” by Mrs. Jackson, are given. However, she refers to him as "Grandfather," and recalls a few rather particular details including the following: "He was the first man baptized for the dead in the font of the Temple of Nauvoo, and heard the exclamation from the lips of the prophet, "Blessed is he who is first baptized for the dead in this dispensation." p. 21; cf. HC 4:454 (November 21, 1841), which does not identify the forty persons baptized in the font that first day. There were earlier baptisms for the dead “in this dispensation,” but not in the font.
"The location of this incident," according to Stanley B. Kimball, "appears to have been what is now called the Naples-Russell Mound #8, about one mile south of present-day Valley City, Illinois, in a typical prehistoric Middle Woodland mortuary complex of the Hopewell culture." (Stanley B. Kimball 1981, 31)

Joseph Smith's seemingly Latinized adaptation of "Onondaga" recurs with various spellings in most of the accounts. (It reminds me of his Latin-sounding "Egyptus" name for a woman who "first discovered" the land of Egypt in Joseph's Book of Abraham 1:23; 1835 or later.) "Onondaga" was a name which Joseph would have heard frequently in the Indian lore which B. H. Roberts felt influenced him during his early days in Palmyra. For Roberts' general comments, see MP 371 (Seaver, my pp. 1499-1500). Indeed, in order to reach Palmyra in company with Lucy Mack Smith and his siblings when they emigrated from Vermont, Joseph had to traverse the important township of Onondaga (Spafford, 372), through which the original Genesee and Seneca Turnpikes still run to the present day; I cannot buy groceries or get a haircut without first crossing the pioneer path of young Joseph Smith.

Wilford Woodruff emphasized that Joseph learned about Zelph and "Onandagus" in a vision. "Three persons dug into the mound," wrote Woodruff in his now-famous journal,

& found a body. Elder Milton Holmes took the arrow out of the back bones that killed Zelph & brought it with some of the bones in to the camp. I visited the same mound with Jesse J Smith. Who the other persons were that dug in to the mound & found the body I am undecided.

Brother Joseph had a vission respecting the person. He said he was a white Lamanite. The curs[e] was taken from him or at least in part. He was killed in battle with an arrow. The arrow was found among his ribs. One of his thigh bones was broken. This was done by a stone flung from a sling in battle years before his death. His name was Zelph. Some of his bones were brought into the Camp and the thigh bone which was broken was put into my waggon and I carried it to Missouri. Zelph was a large thick set man and a man of God. He was a warrior under the great prophet /Onandagus/ that was known from the hill Camorah /or east sea/ to the Rocky mountains. The above knowledge Joseph receieved in a vision.

[Woodruff 1:10; "Onandagus" and "or east sea" added between the lines]

Notice how careful Woodruff was to preserve every detail. As late as 1879 (while hiding from federal authorities and speaking at Kanab, Utah Territory) he was still relating the story: "Joseph had a vision which showed him this mans name was Zelph who lived in the days of Onandagus (he was a Lamanite and was white), he was a great Warrior." (The Journal of L. John Nuttall, entry for
March 9, 1879, describing "a circumstance" "related" by "Bro. W." Copied from NMS CD-ROM; not verified against the original.)

"The longest and most detailed near-contemporaneous account" notes Kenneth W. Godfrey, "was written by Levi Hancock, later one of the Presidents of the Seventy." I find it to be perhaps the most remarkable record of all:

On the way to Illinois River where we camped on the west side in the morning, many went to see the big mound about a mile below the crossing, I did not go on it but saw some bones that was brought with a broken arrow, they was layed down by our camp Joseph addressed himself to Sylvester Smith, "This is what I told you and now I want to tell you that you may know what I meant; this land was called the land of desolation and Onendagus was the king and a good man was he, there in that mound did he bury his dead and did not dig holes as the people do now but they brought there dirt and covered them untill you see they have raised it to be about one hundred feet high, the last man buried was Zelf, he was a white Lamanite who fought with the people of Onendagus for freedom, when he was young he was a great warrior and had his th[igh] broken and never was set, it knited together as you see on the side, he fought after it got strength untill he lost every tooth in his head save one when the Lord said he had done enough and suffered him to be killed by that arrow you took from his brest." These words he said as the camp was moving off[f] the ground; as near as I could learn he had told them something about the mound and got them to go and see for themselves. I then remembered what he had said a few days before while passing many mounds on our way that was left of us; said he, "there are the bodies of wicked men who have died and are angry at us; if they can take the advantage of us they will, for if we live they will have no hope." I could not comprehend it but supposed it was all right.

[Levi Hancock diary, in Godfrey 1989, 37, citing "photocopy in LDS Church Archives"

"Most sources agree," concludes Godfrey,

that Zelph was a white Lamanite who fought under a leader named Onandagus (variously spelled). Beyond that, what Joseph said to his men is not entirely clear, judging by the variations in the available sources. Therefore, those who try to support a particular historical or geographical point of view about the Book of Mormon by citing the Zelph story are on inconclusive grounds. [Godfrey 1989, 47]

The story of Zelph and Onandagus would be displayed as more conclusive by more LDS writers if only it were more faith-promoting. As it stands, however, if requires several levels of accommodation in terms of its ethnographic, archaeological, Book of Mormon-geographical, and now - as must become obvious in this entry - linguistic content. Judging from the early
accounts, I will presume that Joseph Smith did not venture to spell the unusual names for the benefit of his hearers. The various renditions of the prophet/leader’s name were Onandagus (the spelling given by Wilford Woodruff and the History of the Church), Onendagus (Levi Hancock), and Omandagus (Reuben McBride).

**LINGUISTIC ORIGINS OF "ONONDAGA"**

No matter how one spells this name, it strikes me as difficult to separate from that of the modern Native Americans representing the remnant of the Iroquois living at the center of New York State, the Onondaga (or, as people would have said in Joseph Smith’s environment, the "Onondagas"). To get some feel for how the Onondaga got their name, I will turn once again (as with Oneida, in MP 88 [Case]) to an undisputed authority:

William Martin Beauchamp (1830-1925), archaeologist and historian, "became, among white men, the greatest authority on the history and institutions of the Iroquois. In a sense he was the successor of Lewis Morgan in this field. His interest in the Indians . . . was increased by his friendship with Albert Cusick, an Onondaga in orders in the Episcopal Church. From him he received much valuable information. In 1904 he was himself adopted into the Eel Clan of the Onondaga as Wah-Kat-yu-ten, the "Beautiful Rainbow." He was the author of many books and papers . . ." Beauchamp was an Episcopal priest, and lived nearly all his ninety-five years in Onondaga County. His father was a local printer who founded the Skaneateles Democrat in 1840, and William learned the love of writing from an early age. Some of his best work, nonetheless, was done after the age of seventy, and he was "one of the first (1897-1902) to discover Eskimo influence and culture in New York State dating from a very early period . . ." (—DAB). Beauchamp's extensive papers and ethnographic photographs and drawings are preserved at the New York State Library in Albany (71 cubic feet, microfilmed in 1994 as an alternative format, 35 reels). Included in his collection are some seventy-five manuscripts or typescripts of Iroquois legends recorded by Dr. Arthur C. Parker.

The following analysis of "Onondaga," perhaps the most authoritative summary available, is transcribed in its entirety below from Beauchamp's *Aboriginal Place Names of New York . . .*

On-on-da’-ga, on the mountain, and thence people of the mountain or great hill. To express people in full Ronon was formerly added. Among themselves the Indians now pronounce it On-on-dah’-ka, but in talking to white people they usually give the long instead of the broad sound to the third vowel. The name was first known to the whites in 1634. The Relation of 1656 says that ‘Onontae’, or, as other[s] pronounce it, Onontagué, is the principal dwelling of the
Onontae'ronons." In the Relation of 1658 is an explicit and correct definition: "The word Onnonta, which signifies a mountain in the Iroquois tongue, has given name to the town called Onntaucée’, or, as others call it, Onnontaghé, because it is on a mountain, and the people who dwell there call themselves Onnontaeronnons from this, or Onnontagheronnons."

In his Essay of an Onondaga Grammar Zeisberger uses gachera for on or upon, and gives ononta for a hill, or mountain, and onontacher as upon the hill. The latter meaning he gives to onontacta. Spafford said: "Onondaga is purely an Indian word, signifying a swamp under or at the foot of a hill or mountain." This is erroneous, but he added: "Onondagahara, a place between the hills. I wish the people of Onondaga Hollow would take a hint from this, and let their village be 'Onondagahara,' and that on the hill 'Onondaga,' the capital of the county of Onondaga." In the earlier edition he said: "Onondaga on the authority of Mr [Beauchamp, p. 147 ends] Webster, interpreter to the Oneidas, signifies in the dialect of the Indians, a swamp under, or at the foot of a hill or mountain." Mr Clark referred to this and made special inquiries about the word. He said: "From the best information we have attained we set it down as the 'residence of the people of the hills,' the word swamp having no connection with it." The successive towns were at first on the hills near Limestone creek, but the name followed the later sites on lower lands. The Oneida and Oswego rivers once had this name, and Onondaga lake and creek retain it.

O-nun-da’-ga, on the hills, is Morgan’s name for the creek.

[Beauchamp, 147-48. The works by Spafford (Gazetteer of the State of New-York) and Clark, which Beauchamp cites above, can be identified in the Sources Cited list at the end of this Bibliographic Source. Beauchamp's other references above are to "Relations des Jésuites. Quebec 1858," "Zeisberger, David. Essay of an Onondaga Grammar. Pa. Mag. of Hist. & Biog. Phila. 1889," and "Morgan, Lewis H. League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois. Rochester 1851."]

**GEOGRAPHIC ORIGINS OF THE ONONDAGA**

For centuries, the origins of the Iroquois, of which the Onondaga are the central tribal group or nation, were debated (described in Tuck, 11-18). Early theories contemplated, particularly, migrations into what is now the New York-centered region from points north, or even from the extreme West (suggested ca. 1901), beginning at Puget Sound and settling into agriculture-based villages in the Mississippi Valley. By the mid-twentieth century, however, advanced archaeological investigation and analysis had begun to favor an on-site theory, whereby the Iroquois culture developed from the earlier Owasco and collateral cultures in this very region.

In 1971, Professor Tuck summarized the results of a series of Onondaga area excavation projects of 1965-67 designed to answer the question of Onondaga
origins. The study included detailed identification of specifically differentiating, local artifact characteristics, along with "non-material" aspects such as the social, dietary and economic Onondaga traits which the artifacts, site locations and related ethnography displayed (Onondaga Iroquois Prehistory; A Study in Settlement Archaeology).

A continuity of specific factors from Owasco to Iroquois communities, traced locally over many centuries, allowed Dr. Tuck to state, "beyond the slightest doubt that Onondaga Iroquois culture was, in fact, the result of a long in situ development in central New York." (Tuck, 204, with extensive technical data and discussion). The Onondaga came together in the narrow area where they were found by the early European settlers, and where they are still centered today - in Onondaga County, New York. Tuck explains that,

in the early fifteenth century [A.D.], a symbolic alliance between two communities was probably consummated for reasons of mutual defense. This can be interpreted as the founding of the Onondaga Nation, at least in an informal way. At what point a feeling of common identity or [Tuck, p. 215 ends] assumption of a common name came about cannot be said, but these things must not have been far behind the other developments indicated by the archaeological record. [Tuck, pp. 215-16]

"Moreover, we . . . see," notes Dr. Tuck,

that there was nothing very mysterious about the development of Onondaga culture, and presumably all Iroquois culture as well, and that the Onondaga were simply one manifestation of a pattern of cultural development—including agriculture, stockaded villages, warfare, certain ceramic and other technological traits, and even [Tuck, p. 19 ends] tribal confederations—which was becoming widespread over the Northeast at the time of European exploration and colonization and whose roots lie much farther back in time than any migrationary theory will allow. Hence all but an in situ hypothesis of Iroquois origins must be finally set aside. [Tuck, 19, 21 (p. 20 is a diagram of site locations)]

Contrary, then, to widespread assumptions during Joseph Smith's lifetime that the Onondaga migrated to the New York region, it becomes clear that they originated here as a small, narrowly localized amalgamation of a few villages near Onondaga Lake, during the century before Columbus' discovery of America. Significant among early Onondaga communities was the group whose antiquities around Pompey, New York, were discussed by DeWitt Clinton in MP 101.