

By: Kalhaku' McLester

What does it mean to be Oneida in today's world? Oneidas share the same origins, the same language, culture, teachings and ceremonies, and they share some of the same traditions. But after the Revolutionary War, land loss, and relocation, their history and realities started to diverge. Now there are three distinct Oneida communities in Oneida, Wisconsin, Oneida of the Thames in Canada, and the remaining homelands in Oneida, New York. Since separating, each community has maintained and grown their own land base, their own sovereign governments, and their own distinct histories and norms but still share and identify as Oneida.



[\[1\]](#)

Oneida Nation of Wisconsin has the largest community population of over 16,400 and held fast to the cultivation of the corn and food sovereignty. Here they have adapted to their new surroundings creating many new businesses that benefit the community which include preschool to high school, elderly services and housing, casinos and gas stations, as well as historical preservation programs. As relayed from L. Gordon McLester III his conversation with Mohawk chief Tom Porter “there are no single millionaires in Oneida.” The community benefits from the businesses and care given to the members of Oneida Nation of Wisconsin.[\[2\]](#) In pursuit of history, identity, and understanding L. Gordon McLester III, gave this thought: “If you look at the spokes of the wheel on a bicycle they all come from different points but they all point to creator.” Each one of us comes from a different place a different background but we all connected through our beliefs. [\[3\]](#)



[4]

Oneida Nation of the Thames has a small community that deeply cares for one another. This is where the majority of today's fluent Oneida speakers come from and those learning the Oneida language in other communities will often travel to Canada to work with fluent speakers. They will welcome you into their home and treat you just as they would their own family. They have held on to the traditional beliefs of the longhouse and continue to share that knowledge with others who seek it. They are responsible for reviving the longhouse traditions and practices that had disappeared from Oneida, Wisconsin. Because of their kindness and their roots in the old ways, many people have found their way back to those traditions who had lost their way. The Oneidas in Canada still have the titles and positions of the hereditary clan system and traditional chiefs. They face unique challenges dealing with the Canadian government instead of the United States government but have a similar modern history to the other Oneida communities in boarding schools, government and church mistreatment, and the struggles of reservation life.



[\[5\]](#)

Oneida Nation of New York has a small community with a large economic presence in upstate New York with the Turning Stone Casino. The people have worked hard to hang onto the little that they have against overwhelming odds, but it is through their determination that Oneida exists in their original homeland at all. Their reservation was once as small as 32 acres but their land base has since expanded after repurchasing lands that are a part of their original territory.

The Customs of The Oneida's

Tsi? nibotilihota'hné ne?n Lanukwehu'wé Tkana'alóhale? tshithatinákele
The ways of the Oneidas, Oneida Castle they still lived,

wabatikhuní kás wa?thutánuhwelá'tu. Tsi? níku kukwité'ne nale? yakáhe'we
they would have a of Thanksgiving. Every spring when it was time

tsi? ná nibatitsi?khetu'nibe? khale? tsi? nibatiyáthos okhale? o'ná
for them to make maple sugar and when they start planting and now

awatahyuní awáhihte?, khale? tsi? ná nikanástóthá, khale? tsi? ná
they will start to ripen the strawberries, and now then corn will ripen and now

nibatiyáthókwas. Ya?teyoké'tohte? o'ná ohsla'sé o?yan ní twana'túkhwa? tho
harvest time. Most important one now is the New Year as we call it about

úhte? níka'win owiskla níkaya'tó'tá é'lbal wa?kuwaya'tatsa'áte,
that time, white in color, a dog they burned the dog sacrifice,

thó niyolihota'hné ot nahte? Tahuwanuhwelá'tu. Akwe'kú kás
was the custom to for giving thanks to our Creator. Everyone was

wahuwatikwáhte? oskánhne ahutekhu'ni. Yah né' tebotináktobte? ahutkáttho
invited together to the feast. Not allowed were they to see

ne?n ukweho'kú ot nibatiyé'ha tsi? wakuwáyo ne?n é'lbal.
the people how it was prepared for the sacrifice this dog.

Oneida Castle

It was the custom of the Oneida's, while they still lived in Oneida Castle, New York. *Tsi? Tkana'alóhale?*, to give thanks in the spring when they finished making Maple Sugar and Syrup. They gave thanks when it was planting time and when the strawberries became ripe, when the corn became ripe and most of all when the harvesting was done.

The biggest ceremony is when the New Year comes in, New Years or Dawn of Light, that is when the people celebrate and give Thanks by sacrificing the burning of the white dog. This was their custom of giving Thanks for whatever they were thankful for, when this Ceremony takes place everyone is invited. Together they would feast, but not everyone knew how this was prepared for the sacrifice. This custom is no longer practiced, now we use the white basket with burning of tobacco for sacrifice.

Told by Jim Antone to Tillie Baird (5-10-39)
Transcribed and Taped by Maria Hinton (6-6-92)

Although these communities have their differences and at time have been at odds with each other, there have been times of great cooperation between them. In 1970 and 1974 all three communities came together to file suit of land claims against New York State that were illegally taken into possession without Congress' approval which is federal policy.[\[7\]](#) Since the three Oneida communities have grown and developed separately, it is unlikely that the Oneidas will be unified as one nation and one government any time soon. Aside from local, state, federal, and international obstacles to such a unification, the Oneida people are still reconnecting and rebuilding relationships after being separated for two hundred years. Understanding their painful history and where they come from is essential to understanding who they are today and where they are heading.

Ukwehu·we Okhale? KayotΛ'sla
Oneidas and Work

Kwah nya?tekú wahotiy·ta kah nu tsaha·néwe Ukwehu·wé. Otyahke?
Just all kinds of work did, here when they arrived, the Oneidas. Some

wahutyΛtahni·nú okhale? ka·lúte? wahutΛhni·nú okhale? kanehushúha
sold wood and logs they sold and hides.

ótyahke? uni? Kanatá·ke yahutsyo?tΛhslo·lá·ne? latinastalukó·nehse?
Some of them in Green Bay they found work where they went to shell corn.

Kahu·wáku ka?i·ká nitku·néhse? onáste? tahnú né· laonatkalayá·ksla? onáste?
In the boats they came in corn also that was their pay corn

yotitshe?nútslayΛ? yakΛ? kunúkwe. Né· ka yakΛ?
they had baskets, they say, the women. It was that they say,

tΛtakuthle·náhkwe tsi? nahie? ataná·tsli?
they carried their bundles on their back what groceries and staples

wa?tbutΛ·tsá·ne.
they needed and had received for pay.

Oneida's and Work

When the Oneida's first arrived here from Oneida Castle, New York. They were ambitious people, they did all kinds of work to make a living, such as cutting wood and selling it, they sold logs, they hunted and sold the hide and some even found work in Green Bay, they shelled corn which came on the boats and this was part of their pay. The women had baskets, they filled this with their groceries and other staples they needed, this they bought with their pay which was part of the corn they had shelled. They always carried whatever load they had on their backs.

Told by Rachel Swamp to Dennison Hill (12-17-39)

Transcribed by Maria Hinton (1-9-78)

Taped by Maria Hinton (11-6-80)

[8]

At times the road has been difficult and long for the Oneida people and yet there are growing communications and connections being made amongst the people in each community. This is often done without much government involvement, the people are gathering around longhouse

matters, ceremonies, language, art, etc. and sharing knowledge. Although a fractured nation, each Oneida community has something to offer that makes the Oneida identity whole: New York has the homelands, land being essential to indigenous identity, Canada has the language and many of the traditional titles, chiefs and clan mothers are the knowledge keepers, and Wisconsin has the majority of the people and consequently has made great strides in reviving traditional food sovereignty. Together the Oneida identity is intact and that strength in identity continues to grow as the Oneida people continue to travel and meet with each other.

Indian Country Today > News

For two centuries these lands have not heard the songs or felt the Oneida's feet on the ground



One woman from each Oneida community after the stomp dance. (Photo by Michelle Schenandoah)

[9]

As Oneidas continue to revive their identity as one people, more generations of Oneidas are starting to see some form of unity as a real possibility. In 2019, a small group of women from all three Oneida communities came together to form a nonprofit called *Akwéku Ohshá'he Yukwayóte*, which in Oneida means, "We work together."^[10] They received a small plot of land in the original Oneida territory from a Quaker woman that learned of their history and wanted to return the land to its original titleholders, the Oneida women. For the first time in 200 years a

piece of the Oneida homelands is held by the Oneida women for all the Oneida people. Their efforts paint a picture of how the future can move forward, “We don’t have to distinguish where we come from, now we can say we are just Oneida(Lisa Latocha).”^[11] Having a shared space held in common where cultural revitalization and healing can take place is their vision of unity.

Only time will tell how Oneidas will fare, but today the story of the Oneida Nation has come full circle. From their origins in the creation story, to thriving as part of the powerful Iroquois Confederacy in their homelands, to being torn apart by colonial warfare and relocation, to survival and adapting apart, to starting the process of healing in hopes of rebuilding their nation. The Oneida have a long, hard story to tell. But it is one full of resilience and hope. Lisa Latocha cannot say it any better, “Home for us.”^[12]

Picture of field at top of page is of actual Oneida Homelands in New York.

^[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oneida_Nation_of_Wisconsin

^[2] Interview L. Gordon McLester III April 21, 2020

^[3] Interview L. Gordon McLester III April 21, 2020

^[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oneida_Nation_of_the_Thames

^[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oneida_Indian_Nation

^[6] McLester III, L. Gordon. Hauptman, Laurence. *The Oneida Indian Journey*. 1999. pg.112

^[7] <https://web.archive.org/web/20061112004911/http://www.madisoncounty.org/motf/fed128.html>

^[8] McLester III, L. Gordon. Hauptman, Laurence. *The Oneida Indian Journey*. 1999. pg.122

^[9] Logan, Leslie. “For two centuries these lands have not heard the song or felt the Oneida’s feet on the ground.” *Indian Country Today*. July 22, 2019. May 3, 2020. https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/for-two-centuries-these-lands-have-not-heard-the-songs-or-felt-the-oneida-s-feet-on-the-ground-mdeEFNplZES5raKBEBz-pA/?fbclid=IwAR3-Qe1DTqQIWgP1mTEMRv1Cuq6DrwJtu45bh_wAT-9MwM_Mp1gXR28EOqY

^[10] Logan, Leslie. “For two centuries these lands have not heard the song or felt the Oneida’s feet on the ground.” *Indian Country Today*. July 22, 2019. May 3, 2020. https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/for-two-centuries-these-lands-have-not-heard-the-songs-or-felt-the-oneida-s-feet-on-the-ground-mdeEFNplZES5raKBEBz-pA/?fbclid=IwAR3-Qe1DTqQIWgP1mTEMRv1Cuq6DrwJtu45bh_wAT-9MwM_Mp1gXR28EOqY

^[11] Interview Lisa Latocha April 16, 2020

[\[12\]](#) Interview Lisa Latocha April 16, 2020

[\[1\]](#) Interview with L. Gordon McLester III

[\[2\]](#)

<https://web.archive.org/web/20061112004911/http://www.madisoncounty.org/motf/fed128.html>

[For two centuries these lands have not heard the songs or felt the Oneida's feet on the ground](#)

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Interview of Bill Gollnick by L. Gordon McLester III on life in Oneida WI .

<https://youtu.be/e87xeEINi-w>

Dedicated to L. Gordon McLester III and Chaz Wheelock 2020