

HEAR UR
SEASON 6: Rapid History: Tales of the Genesee River
EPISODE 604: Erasure and Existence: Histories of the
Haudenosaunee

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PERRY GROUND

Telling stories is what makes us
human beings. There's so much
communicated in stories for all
cultures...

MUSIC Fade In: *Cranberry House - "The
Furthering"*

ALEXA ROSENBLOOM

Perry Ground, a Turtle Clan member
of the Onondaga Nation, is a local
storyteller. As a part of the
Haudenosaunee, he has a breadth of
knowledge about their past,
culture, and values that he shares
at events in the Rochester area,
which has been home to this group
of Indigenous people for
centuries.

GROUND

Stories are something that make us
uniquely human in the way that we
pass on our thoughts, our
feelings, our beliefs, and
everything that can be
communicated in stories.

ALEXA

Today, more and more Indigenous
people like Perry Ground have the
platform to tell people stories
about the Haudenosaunee. He's been
playing an intergenerational game
of telephone that has allowed for
the authentic passage of
information across centuries. But
Indigenous people have not always
been allowed to be the loudest
voices in the retelling of their
stories to white Americans.

PERRY

Stories really are important
because of the way that they pass
on belief systems.

ALEXA

Which means that when white people
tell stories about Native people,
it's *their* beliefs about Native
people getting passed down. It
doesn't take much historical
knowledge to know that this should
concern us.

In asking who gets to tell
Indigenous history, we need to
consider the motivations, values,
and influences that go into each
story. Moreover, it is imperative
that we recenter the Seneca and
the Haudenosaunee in the history
of Rochester and the Genesee.

ALEXA

I'm Alexa Rosenbloom, and you're
listening to HEAR UR, Season 6:
Rapid History: Tales of the
Genesee River. This is Episode
Four: "Erasure & Existence:
Histories of the Haudenosaunee."

MUSIC Fade Out: *Cranberry House* - "The
Furthering"

ALEXA

Nineteenth Century narratives
about the Haudenosaunee were
dominated by white men, who were
considered by their fellow whites
to be doing a great service to
Native people by recording their
stories.

Lewis Henry Morgan, who is mostly
known for his contributions to
sociology, researched the
Haudenosaunee in the mid-19th
century. He relied on Ely Parker,
a member of the Seneca Nation who
later became the first Indigenous

person to serve as the
Commissioner of Indian Affairs.
However, the most prominent
'historian' of the Seneca was
George Harris.

MUSIC Fade In: *Duck Lake* - "Idle Ways"

ALEXA

Harris grew up on what is now the
River Campus of the University of
Rochester. He frequently
interacted with the local Seneca
community and wrote a lot about
their myths, artifacts and how
they interacted with the Genesee
and the surrounding nature before
white people settled in the
region. He placed the Seneca as
characters in Rochester's past,
but not so much in the present or
future.

MUSIC Fade out: *Duck Lake* - "Idle Ways"

ALEXA

White authors of local historical
narratives all across the country
did this. Historian Jean O'Brien
explains in her book *Firsting and
Lasting: Writing Indians out of
Existence in New England*, that in
order to set the stage for stories
of progress and expansion for
white Americans, Native Americans
were labeled as a prehistoric,
barbaric, and vanishing race.
Simultaneously, they were murdered
and forcibly removed from their
homeland.

But there was a shift in the
methodology of erasure around the
time of Harris's death in the
1890s. Assimilation was the new
government stance on how to fit
Indigenous people into American
society moving forward.

MUSIC Fade In: *Eltham House* - "Temperance"

ALEXA

And in that context arose Arthur Parker, grand nephew of Ely Parker, who served as director of the Rochester Museum and Science Center. He was instrumental in the museum's collection of Native American artifacts, art, and educational material.

MUSIC Fade Out: *Eltham House* - "Temperance"

But at the same time, he believed it was necessary for Indigenous people to assimilate into American culture if they wanted to thrive in their ever-changing environment. Adapting for the future was just as important as preserving their past ways of life.

MUSIC Fade In: *Sour Mash* - "Blue Wind Blow"

ALEXA

There's no doubt that the context of settler colonialism influenced the beliefs and values in Harris and Parker's narratives. The key question is how exactly it did so. Oftentimes, it sought to remove Indigenous people from the story of modern America. But the reality is that Native Americans have always and will continue to be here.

MUSIC Fade Out: *Sour Mash* - "Blue Wind Blow"

SFX CUE 01 IN: Sound of the Genesee flowing. The sounds of a canoe paddling through the southern end of the river can be heard, followed by a bubbling swamp and then water rushing over a waterfall in present-day Rochester.

PERRY

All rivers and lakes around this area, particularly the Genesee, were used for travel, navigation, trade...
When we look at settlement patterns of the Seneca people, it

was really all throughout the
Genesee River Valley, from about
where Henrietta is today and south
of there.

ALEXA

Perry has learned that what is now
Rochester used to be swampy,
and the northern part of the river
has an abundance of waterfalls,
so using the Genesee for
transportation was impractical.

SFX CUE 01 OUT

PERRY

Everything had to be communicated
from older people in the community
to younger people in the community
because there was absolutely no
written form of communication that
existed among the Haudenosaunee.

Within the stories there were so
many lessons about... how to
interact with each other, how to
interact with nature... And how do
people live around the river, and
how do they use the resources
around the river.

ALEXA

But when Europeans arrived in the
Americas, things changed.

PERRY

During the entire 17th century...
both English and French people...
they were really striving to
explore what we now call New York
state and really find ways to
establish trade relationships to
trade for beaver pelts. Which was
the whole reason why people
colonized New York, and the French
of course wanted to spread their
religion as well. So, the
different settlements that started
to happen in the 17th century were

almost exclusively about trade or missionizing.

ALEXA

Territorial disputes were the norm as expansion continued. Viewing Indigenous communities as obstacles to wealth would become a virtually permanent source of tension. And eventually, the Seneca were forced to turn over their land to the State of New York as punishment for siding with the British in the American Revolution.

PERRY

And then, as we get to 1794 and the treaty that is signed at Canandaigua, which is a foundational treaty between the Haudenosaunee and the United States that establishes reservations and places where we would live...

ALEXA

Many of these reservations were in the Buffalo region or close to the New York-Pennsylvania border...

PERRY

but that's *absolutely* not where they started. They started right here *laughs* in what is now Rochester and south of Rochester and also in the Finger Lakes region.

ALEXA

Yet for white people, the Indigenous history of the region has largely been an afterthought.

MUSIC Fade In: *Duck Lake - "Idle Ways"*

ALEXA

Born in 1843, George Henry Harris was a historian of the Greater Rochester Area. Harris dedicated much of his life to studying the Seneca Nation, who have lived

along the Genesee River for centuries.

The Seneca is one of the six nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Most people know the Haudenosaunee as the Iroquois, which was a name given to them by their enemies, the Algonquins, and eventually popularized by French colonists.

MUSIC Fade Out: *Duck Lake* - "Idle Ways"

ALEXA

Harris claimed his interest in Indigenous History began along the banks of the Genesee. Growing up on what is now the University of Rochester River Campus, Harris recounted:

HARRIS

(quill pen scribbling)

"Indians frequently passed through the neighborhood. Several of their old trails, or paths through the wilderness, centered on the river banks... The Indians... occasionally begged of the white people, or bartered game, furs, baskets, and wild fruits... Many of the settlers feared the Indians, but my parents always treated them kindly and never refused them food or shelter."

HARRIS

(quill pen scribbling)

"I sought for information regarding the life and customs of Indians, learned the course of their trails in our vicinity, visited their former haunts, and added to my collection many relics of their early residence..."

ALEXA

Harris loved to pretend he was Haudenosaunee too.

HARRIS

(quill pen scribbling)

"In my play I assumed the character of an Indian, and endeavored to emulate my supposed forest ancestors in all their habits. I practiced shooting with the bow and arrows made by my Indian friends, and usually returned from a 'hunt' in the neighboring woods with some kind of small game as a trophy of my skill."

ALEXA

This notion of emulating the Seneca certainly raises some questions about his perception of the group. Yes, Harris describes the Seneca as his friends, but we should doubt that this relationship was completely innocent. To an extent, Harris fixated on the Seneca as an object of the past to be studied.

HARRIS

(quill pen scribbling)

"[Their] rude implements, adapted to war, the chase, and domestic use, [are] dumb yet eloquent chronicles of by-gone ages."

ALEXA

Except this age hadn't quite gone by. The Seneca may not have lived the same lives as they had prior to the colonization of the Genesee Valley, but they were still there. Harris grew up alongside Seneca people.

MUSIC Fade In: *Cranberry Lake* - "The Furthering"

ALEXA

As Dr. Jean O'Brien reveals the effects that white narratives have on how we view Indigenous history in her book, *Firsting and Lasting*,

she defines the concept of
"lasting" as "a rhetorical
strategy that asserts as a fact
the claim that Indians can never
be modern...".

MUSIC Fade Out: *Cranberry Lake* - "The
Furthering"

Dr. O'Brien explains that
"lasting" could entail a claim
that Indigenous people have simply
disappeared from a given region.
Or, lasting could be done by
implying that Indigenous people
are merely a precursory group to
European colonists. According to
Dr. O'Brien, "local historians
regularly included an Indian
presence woven into the landscape,
especially in an intense interest
in Indian relics and remains. Like
much of local history writing,
such portrayals situate Indians
securely in the past, separating
them neatly as part of nature
instead of culture."

Harris was guilty of this
practice.

MUSIC Fade In: *Duck Lake* - "Idle Ways"

HARRIS

"Our own race was the successor of
others. We speak of ourselves as
the inhabitants of a new world,
and yet we are confronted with
these evidences of antiquity, We
clear away the forests, and speak
familiarily of subduing the virgin
soil; and yet our plows upturn the
skulls of those whose history is
lost."

MUSIC Fade Out: *Duck Lake* - "Idle Ways"

ALEXA

Shrouding the Seneca in mystery
through this vague statement about
how they used to live among nature
and have since died in this

untouched environment doesn't feel very academic. In fact, it simply doesn't feel true. The "evidences of antiquity" that Harris refers to are from a group of people who still existed. And their history was not lost – it was ongoing.

Harris wrote extensively about how the Seneca once lived, not how they lived in the present, and certainly not about how they could fit into America's future.

SFX CUE 02 IN: Rochester's 19th century development, including the river being used for a water wheel, horses on cobblestone, bells ringing, and a streetcar going by.

ALEXA

Erasure served as a defense for perhaps the most significant American ideal of the 19th century: Manifest Destiny.

SFX CUE 02 OUT

ALEXA

Pioneers began to populate the Rochester area in the 1790s, which coincides with how the Haundenousaunee were forced to turn over their land in the years following the Revolutionary War. Just as beaver pelts once drew colonizers to New York, the flour industry drew settlers to the Genesee Valley. Its economic boom gave Rochester its original nickname of the flour city, flour spelled f-l-o-u-r, before it became the *flower* city, f-l-o-w-e-r.

But where were the Seneca during this era of prosperity? Archives suggest that they allegedly agreed to give up more of their land in the early 1800s. But other than that, we don't know much about how, or even if, they were active participants in the Rochester

community. Again, the emphasis was on the Haudenosaunee's past. Only after Harris's lifetime would narratives about the Seneca go beyond history to discuss their lives moving forward.

MUSIC Fade In: *Chopin - Piano Sonata No. 2, mvmt 3 ("Funeral March")*

SFX CUE 03 IN: Soundscape of Harris' funeral, complete with feet shuffling, sniffing, and people milling about.

R.E. LAWTON

"In the death of Mr. Harris, the Seneca Nation lost a valuable member, and the Six Nations at large a true friend. No man ever possessed more of the respect and reverence of the Indians who knew him than George H. Harris. His knowledge... helped him in many instances to show the Indians where they were being misled and deceived by unprincipled whites."

SFX CUE 03 OUT

ALEXA

This eulogy, presented by Rochester Historical Society member R.E. Lawton, is just one example of how Harris's local white community showered him and his work with praise following his death. Harris died around the same time that the era of "Indian Wars" – that is, regular violent conflict between white and Native Americans over land – came to an end.

MUSIC Fade Out: *Chopin - Piano Sonata No. 2, mvmt 3 ("Funeral March")*

ALEXA

The US government had a new answer to the question of how to cohabitate with Indigenous people.

Instead of just pushing them off their land or killing them, white America would pressure Indigenous people to become more "American." One of the most significant assimilation policies was the establishment of "Indian Boarding Schools," which removed Indigenous children from their communities and immersed them in education that promoted Western culture, language, and values. Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, summed up how boarding schools aimed to 'educate' the Native American child in just a few words: "kill the Indian in him, save the man"

MUSIC Fade In: *Eltham House* - "Temperance"

ALEXA

Just as this viewpoint came to prominence, Arthur Parker's life began.

ALEXA

Born in 1881 to a Seneca mother and Anglo-American father, Arthur Parker was born on the Cattaraugus reservation in Western New York, where he developed a deep connection to his Seneca heritage. He later moved to White Plains, a New York City suburb, when he was 11 years old, but he continued to immerse himself in his culture throughout his education and career. In 1925, he became director of the Rochester Museum.

MUSIC Fade Out: *Eltham House* - "Temperance"

While serving as director, Arthur Parker was dedicated to ensuring that the Haudenosaunee were not left out of local historical narratives.

Perry

Parker truly believed in writing things down, and so he wrote as much as he could and encouraged other people to write as much as they could about these traditions and about this history and about this culture. He paid Native Americans to preserve their culture. To make their artwork was a way of preserving that artwork, in the same way I get paid to tell stories.

ALEXA

Despite his aims to help preserve Haudenosaunee culture, Arthur Parker ultimately believed that Native Americans needed to integrate themselves with the rest of the US.

ARTHUR PARKER

"The Indian of our country, is destined to become an element in and of the new American race. The Indian cannot always remain an Indian. Either he must continue to suffer and to witness the degeneration of his tribe and its individuals, or he must become so imbued with the spirit of the new America that he will absorb its teachings and save himself."

ALEXA

At first glance, this stance seems contradictory. If Parker wanted the Seneca to engage in the record-keeping of their art, traditions, and culture, why would he also want them to abandon their current lifestyles?

It would be remiss to just call Parker a hypocrite and move on. Though violence between white and Indigenous people still occurred, the turn of the 20th century marked an important shift in white rhetoric towards Native Americans: Instead of just slaughtering Indigenous people, we can allow

them to exist in the 20th century
if they culturally convert
themselves.

ARTHUR PARKER

"The old America with its
traditions is forever beyond his
grasp. The new America with its
wealth of opportunity is before
him, and he must grasp it with a
grip that knows no breaking."

ALEXA

To Parker, assimilation was a
survival tactic, and it was the
only practical way for Indigenous
people to move forward as the
country continued to evolve.
Economic expansion, which was once
the context in which historians
wrote Indigenous people out of the
modern United States, was now
something that Indigenous people
could partake in, given that they
Americanized and left their old
lives behind. It's a tough choice
to have to make, but Parker wanted
Indigenous people to find their
footing in the present and future,
not get lost in history.

(beat) Ultimately, Parker got his
wish.

SFX Cue 04 IN: Time moving forward on the
Genesee from the late 19th century to today,
from bustling downtown to urban renewal
construction and car traffic, to the
hollowing out to the lull of downtown today.

PERRY

We continue to exist today. We are
modern, contemporary, 21st century
human beings that live like
everybody else.

SFX CUE 04 OUT

ALEXA

There have even been some
positive changes in how we
acknowledge the history of
misrepresentations of Native

American communities. We often learn about these with high profile news stories about the Washington Football Team's name change or Harvard giving back stolen indigenous artifacts.

But these apologies and corrections are just the beginning.

PERRY

I think that it is important to go to the people that have this cultural knowledge, and most of them would be Haudenosaunee people, but there are people outside of our communities that are gathering this knowledge in a good way. One of the guiding principles among the Haudenosaunee is "thinking with the good mind" and there are non native people thinking with the good mind.

ALEXA

Perry reiterated to us that when we pass down stories, we pass down our beliefs.

PERRY

For the Haudenosaunee and the way that we have told stories forever, it was truly a means of retaining history and maintaining community beliefs and standards.

ALEXA

So, it's important that the storytellers we listen to are the ones who will genuinely and respectfully pass down these stories, traditions, and values for the generations to come.

PERRY

We are Haudenosaunee, the people building the long house, because it's about building peace, because that's who we are. We've joined ourselves together in this union to be peaceful with each other and

to live in a peaceful way,
thinking with the good mind. And
when we use a term like
Haudenosaunee, when we understand
that it means people building the
long house so that we can join
together and live peacefully, it
changes the way that we think
about that group from the other
things we learn: "they fought
against the English or the French,
or they were war like," or all the
other things that have been taught
in schools.

MUSIC Fade In: *Cranberry House* - "The
Furthering"

People have this image of Native
America that they've learned over
centuries, and it's a very common
misperception of Native Americans
today that, you know, we are not
storybook characters come to life,
we are not relegated only to
history. They think we got stuck
in some specific time period and
stopped changing. It's unfortunate
that that's what people think, but
that perception is changing. I
hope that everybody that listens
gains a better understanding of
who we are as native people both
in the past, today, and tomorrow.

MUSIC Fade Out: *Cranberry House* - "The
Furthering"

MUSIC Fade In: *Milford Fargo* - "The River
Genesee"

Alexa

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students at The University of
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MUSIC Fade Out: *Milford Fargo* - "*The River Genesee*"