

Early History of Kendaia

Much has been written of the Sullivan Campaign of 1779. This was a major Revolutionary War military offensive initiated by General George Washington to stop the Iroquois tribes from continuing to give aid to the British. This article focuses on the history of an area that was the Indian village of Kendaia in what is today mid-Seneca County. This Indian village was known by different names such as “Appletown,” “Thendara,” “Candaia,” “Conday,” “Kendae,” but the most frequently used was “Kendaia.” It appears that the name is derived from a Seneca Indian chief by the name of Kendaia.

It was on Sunday, September 5, 1779, that the military forces under General John Sullivan reached the Indian village of Kendaia. Lieutenant Barber, one of the soldiers involved in the Sullivan Campaign, described the Kendaia village as appearing “to be oldest town we have passed, here being a considerable orchard, trees very old as are the buildings, very pleasantly situated about a quarter of a mile from the lake on a high piece of ground.” We believe that this Indian village consisted of some 20 to 30 houses. Based on the various soldiers’ accounts, these houses were of hewn logs, covered with bark. It was not unusual for one of these “long houses” to be used by eight families, each living in a big room with the fireplace in the middle. Nearby there were as many as 80 fruit trees—mostly apple and some peach. Corn was grown in several small fields surrounding the village.

The Sullivan forces found a white at Kendaia when they arrived. He was Luke Swetland who had been captured along with Joseph Blanchard at Nanticoke, Pennsylvania on August 24, 1778, and taken to Kendaia. In the little over a year that he had been there at Kendaia, he had been given to an old squaw who kept him as her son. He had been employed in the making of salt some twenty miles from Kendaia, probably at Watkins Glen. Swetland said that about 500 male Indians and about 300 Tories fled from Kendaia two days before Sullivan forces arrived.

Sullivan’s army found plenty to do at Kendaia. They destroyed the buildings and burned the cornfields. The fruit trees were girdled or cut down. The soldiers found about 60 to 70 livestock.

Kendaia became part of Lot 79 in the Romulus township of the Military Tract. According to *The Balloting Book*, this land was granted to Lieutenant Colonel Cornelius Van Dyck, and eventually became owned by Elkanah Watson. Early settlers on Lot 79 were Joseph Falwell, William Seeley, James Watrus, Walter Watrus, Dr. Ethan Watson, and John Caten.

In 1823, the land was purchased by Gerard Van Vleet and remained in the Van Vleet family for several generations. Behind the log house Gerard built was an “Indian Spring” that “never ran dry and ran in a stream as large as a man’s arm.” Clarence Van Vleet, the great grandson of Gerard, recalled finding Indian artifacts in great numbers while plowing the fields on the banks of the ravine. Gerard made a verbal vow with the Seneca Indians that their burying grounds would not be molested. The old Van Vleet burying grounds with the graves of Gerard, Edward, Sarah and Henry Van Vleet, were preserved in what became known as the “Y” area of the Sampson Naval Training Station when it was created in 1942.

The hamlet of Kendaia was actually about two and a half miles to the north of the Indian village site. Before the Seneca Army Depot and the Sampson Naval Training Station, this was an active little village with 2 stores, 1 blacksmith, 2 churches, a post office, 1 school, and many scattered houses. The post office was established in 1862, with Amos Crane in charge. According to the 1876 Everts history of Seneca County, Kendaia's location was a problem for many postmasters who "sent its letters to and fro without rest, and out of the States into Canada; and one letter returned from its journeys, bearing the impress of indignation from baffled search in the inscription, 'Where in h—l is Kendaia?'"

In the area between the Indian village of Kendaia and the hamlet of Kendaia were many farms producing large quantities of peaches, grapes, apples, pears and cherries.

The historical importance of this area was noted with the erection of historic markers by the State Education Department in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Just a few feet north of the Van Vleet site is a large stone marker with a map of the Sullivan-Clinton Campaign and the inscription: "An expedition against the hostile Indian Nations which checked the aggressions of the English and Indians on the Frontiers of New York and Pennsylvania. Extending westward the Dominion of the United States." In the hamlet, in front of what was the old school, was placed a stone with a bronze marker reading: "Kendaia. General John Sullivan and army of 3,500 men, September 5, 1779 destroyed the Indian Village of Kendaia, two miles to the southward and on the following day passed this spot."

[Much of this information is courtesy of Mrs. William (Phyllis) Hudson who is so knowledgeable of this entire area's rich history. This article is the first in a series of articles dealing with the history of the Kendaia area that will be printed periodically in this newspaper.]