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SCHOOLCRAFT'S VOCABULARY OF ONONDAGA

by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Abraham La Fort



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Preface to the 2000 Edition

The storied League or Confederacy of the Iroquois was comprised of five original members who lived adjacent to one another in what is now Upstate New York. On either end were two of the League's "Elder Brothers": the Mohawks who were "Keepers of the Eastern Door", and the Senecas who were "Keepers of the Western Door." Next to these respectively were the two "Younger Brothers," the Oneida and the Cayuga.

The key central position in the League however, was held by a third "Elder Brother," the Onondagas, who were not only given the honor of calling and hosting the League councils, but also entrusted with the valuable wampum records of council decisions. Thus the Onondagas were designated the "firekeepers" and the "wampum keepers" of the Confederacy, and their main town became its capital. Moreover, their tribe boasted the most important League chieftainship under the name Thadodaho or Atotarho, as well as a total of 14 representative chiefs in council, the largest number of any Five Nations tribe (Tooker, 1978).

The whole of the original Confederacy spoke closely related Northern Iroquoian languages, which have traditionally been classed in a Five Nations-Susquehannock subgroup (see the table on pg. 37). Each of the languages within this subgroup appear to have descended from a single branch of Northern Iroquoian about 1000-1500 years ago, although it bears stating that Mohawk and Oneida are closer than the rest, and questions have been raised as to the degree with which Cayuga fits this model (Chafe 1981).

But assuming the traditional classification, Onondaga's position remains firmly established as an independent member of the Five Nations-Susquehannock subgroup. Seneca and Cayuga influenced its later historic development, but "while it is possible that Onondaga may have shared a period of continued common development with either the Seneca or Oneida-Mohawk branch [of Northern Iroquoian], there is no clear evidence supporting either of these possibilities." (Chafe 1981). The oldest examples of Onondaga are quite similar to Susquehannock, though these similarities are "the result of common retentions rather than joint innovations." (Mithun 1981).

The Onondagas were first visited in the 17th century by French missionaries, and the first recordings of their language date from the latter half of the same century. Its early written history is particularly rich in dictionaries: an anonymous one from the late 1600's (published in 1860 by John Gilmary Shea), and three in the 1700's by François-Auguste Magnon de Terlaye, Johann Christoph Pyrlaeus, and lastly David Zeisberger, who also prepared the first grammatical description of Onondaga.

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (1793–1864), one of the great American Indian scholars during the 1800's, obtained the 211 word vocabulary printed here from an Onondaga chief named Abraham (or Abram) La Fort, whom he had interviewed several times in 1845. It is not clear however whether the Onondaga words were collected in the 1845 interviews or subsequent ones, nor if La Fort filled out some or all of the words himself. In any case, the information was obtained using a questionnaire devised by Schoolcraft, featuring several hundred English words whose translations could then be easily elicited.

Schoolcraft mentions in his *Report to the Secretary of State* (1846) that La Fort accompanied Ondiyaka the "ruling chief of the Confederacy" on a journey to the Oneidas in 1839 and was subsequently present at Ondiyaka's death. He is called by Schoolcraft "an educated man" and by a recent scholar as one of the two most learned New York Onondaga chiefs of his time (Tooker 1978). Besides this vocabulary of his native tongue, La Fort also contributed toward posterity some important accounts of the traditions and ceremonies of the Iroquois Confederacy, including the story of its founding.

The La Fort vocabulary of Onondaga was printed twice by Schoolcraft, first in his *Notes on the Iroquois* (1847), as the third column in a seven language table. A note appended at the end of the table, however, shows that this is actually a composite list: "By H.R.S. and Mr. Gallatin's Vocab., in Archaeologia Americana." Albert Gallatin was the author of *A Synopsis of the Indian Tribes of North America* (1836), a monumental work of scholarship which in many ways anticipated Schoolcraft's; his *Synopsis* included a "Comparative Vocabulary of Fifty-Three Nations" (p. 307-367) pieced together from both published and manuscript sources. He states that the Onondaga portion "was extracted by Mr. Duponceau from Zeisberger's Manuscript Dictionary." (Gallatin 1836, p. 80). By a simple comparison we can determine which words of the Onondaga vocabulary in the *Notes* were original to La Fort's list, and which words were taken from the earlier source. The numerals and a few other words match the ones printed in Gallatin's work—but the rest of the vocabulary differs and therefore must have come from La Fort.

Schoolcraft printed the La Fort vocabulary a second time in volume II (pp. 482-493) of his encyclopedic *Indian Tribes* (Schoolcraft 1851-1857), this time as the last column in a four language table introduced only by "Onondaga. By Abraham Le Fort." In Volume IV of the same work (p. 368), the vocabulary is jointly ascribed, cited as "by Abraham La Fort, H.R.S." No acknowledgement of Gallatin is given here, but since this version did not include any numerals, Gallatin's contribution was only limited to a handful of words anyway.

Rather atypically, La Fort's list was not printed at all in Schoolcraft's *Report to the Secretary of State* (1846) which contained other Iroquoian vocabularies similarly elicited from his schedules. Presumably he did not yet have a complete vocabulary by the time the manuscript went to press.

The headwords in this new edition follow the list printed in the *Indian Tribes*; this is the version without the supplementary numerals from Gallatin/Zeisberger. Although these numerals are not part of the La Fort list *per se*, for the sake of completeness they are included here supplementally on the numerical table on page 35, exactly as they appear in the *Notes*. All spelling discrepancies between the two versions have here been listed, though in the Onondaga–English section only. Where the *Notes* spelling differs from that of the *Indian Tribes*, it is listed immediately after; in the event that a word does not occur in the *Indian Tribes*, the entry is marked (Notes) in parentheses.

No special citation has been made of the difference in spacing between syllables, except incidentally whenever more substantial spelling variations occur. This intersyllabic spacing is a peculiarity of the *Indian Tribes* that is entirely lacking in the *Notes*, and is more of a layout issue than one of orthography; it does not seem to have been part of the original manuscript vocabulary. Schoolcraft's orthography of Onondaga follows that of English; he uses no special symbols or characters.

The Schoolcraft/La Fort vocabulary has not attracted very much scholarly attention, but Marianne Mithun (1981) has used it to fix the date of an important sound change in Onondaga. She traces the loss of the r phoneme in the language to sometime between 1800 and 1852 (actually 1845 or 1847), since the recordings of the 1700's all show r while it is conspicuously absent in La Fort's vocabulary and all subsequent ones. Mithun's analysis is a perfect example of how repeated recordings of the same language has already been well documented, as was certainly the case with Onondaga in the mid 1800's.

The Onondaga have been particularly fortunate among not only the Iroquoian tribes, but among all the Eastern

Woodlands tribes, having remained in part of their ancestral homeland right up to the present day. The modern reservation housed a population of around 1000 in 1978, located just south of the city of Syracuse along the Onondaga Creek. Like all of the other Five Nations languages, Onondaga continues to be spoken, though it is no longer in use by significant numbers of children (Goddard 1996: p. 3).

-Claudio R. Salvucci, series ed.

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Excerpt from Schoolcraft's "Notes on the Iroquois"

Onondaga was, from the remotest times, the seat of the Iroquois government. Granting credence to the account of their own origin, on the high grounds or falls of the Oswego, they had not proceeded far up the course of the widely gathered waters of this stream, when a portions of them planted their wigwams in this fertile region. Whatever was the cause of their migrating from their primary council fire, nothing was more natural than that, by pursuing this stream upward, they should separate into independent tribes, and by further tracing out its far spread forks, gradually expland themselves, as they were found by the discoveres and first settlers, over the entire area of western New York. On reaching the grand junction of Three River point, a part went up the Seneca river, who subsequently dividing, formed the Senecas and the Cayugas. The bands who took the eastern fork, or Oneida river, pushed forward over the Deowainsta or Rome summit, into the first large stream flowing east, and became the Mohawks. The central or Onondaga fork was chosen by the portion who, from the hill country they first located in, took this name; and from them, the Oneidas, pursuing in fact the track of the Mohawks, were an off-shoot. That such was the general route, and causes of the separation, appears as evident as strong probabilities, in coincidence with their own traditions and modern discovery, can make it. That the whole of the original number who started from the south banks of Lake Ontario, did not keep together till they reached the valley of the Hudson and the sea, and then go back to the west-for so their general tradition has it-is also both reasonable and probable to suppose. Large bodies of hunters cannot keep long together. They must separate to procure food, and would separate from other causes. The first effect of their separation and spread into various rich valleys, abounding in game, nuts and fish, was a rapid increase in population. The next, to become overbearing, quarrel about territory, and fight. They were compelled to build forts to defend their stations, or secure their women and children, at night, and, by this system, kept down their population to about its first point of increase. It is altogether probable that they did not more than maintain, for ages, a stationary population, which occasionally went down by disease and other calamities, and again revived, as we know that natural causes, in the laws of vitality, will revive a people quickly, after the scourge of pestilence.

The idea of a confederation was, it is believed, an old one with this people, for the very oldest traditions speak of something of this kind, among the lake and St. Lawrence tribes of older days. When the present league was formed, on the banks of the Onondaga lake, this central tribe had manifestly greatly increased in strength, and distinguished itself in arms, and feats of hunting and daring against giants and monsters, for in such rencontres their traditions abound.

Most distinguished, however, above all others, east or west, was a leader of great courage, wisdom and address, called Atotarho; and when they proposed to form a league, this person, who had inspired dread, and kept himself retired, was anxiously sought. He was found by the Mohawk embassy, who were charged with the matter, as he is represented in the annexed specimen of picture writing, composedly sitting in a swamp, smoking his pipe, and rendered completely invulnerable, by living serpents. These



animals extended their hissing heads from all parts of his head and body. Every thing about him, and the place of his residence, was such as to inspire fear and respect. His dishes and spoons were made of the skulls of enemies, whom he had slain in battle. Him, when they had duly approached with presents and burned tobacco in friendship, in their pipes, by way of frankincense, they placed at the head of their league, as its presiding officer. They collected a large quantity of wampum, and invested him with a broad belt of this sacred article. I found the original drawing of this personage, from which the above is reduced, in the summer of 1845, in the house of a Seneca on the Cattaraugus reservation. The owner of this curious pictorial relic, on being asked, proceeded to a chest and carefully took it from its envelope, and allowed me to make a copy. It represents Atotarho, at the moment of discovery, by the Mohawk delegation.

The right thus awarded to the Onondagas, to furnish a presiding officer for the league, has ever been retained, and is still possessed by that canton. To the Mohawks, at the same time, was awarded the *tekarahogea*, or chief war-captain; an office, however, of the general recognition of which, there is a disagreement among interpreters.

A singular tradition may here be added. It is said that the thirteenth Atotarho reigned at Onondaga when America was discovered.

Giving to each Atotarho a rule of fifteen years, and taking Hudson's voyage as the period the Indians allude to, we should have A.D. 1414, as the era of the present confederacy, in place of 1539, before mentioned on the authority of a general tradition recorded by Pyrlaeus. We cannot, however, place much reliance on Cusick's chronology.

-Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, 1847

ONONDAGA — ENGLISH

A dai da weht sa, coat. A gon le, handsome. Ah ain da, bow. Ah wai a sa, heart. A je nuh kah kwa, breechcloth. A ju dish tah, spear. A nik ha, sun. A tah kwa, shoe. As kwa sa, axe. As so he ka, moon. As soh wa, night.

E eh, *I*. Ee noo, *far off*. Ee sah he, *thou*.

Hai gahtsh eek, morning. Hain ha, life. Haing wee, man. Haiw nah, my husband. Ha sha, knife. Ha wa ne uh, God. Ho ha wa, his son. Ho ho sa, basswood. Hoh se no wahn, chief. Hoh yo ne, wolf. Hourh, he. Hux sa ha, boy. In hah a kwuh, bladder. Ior ha na, tomorrow. Is ka hug wuh, ye. Ixe sa ha, girl or maid.

Jach te, no.

Ka ai wi a, sky. Ka ai wi a ga, heaven. Ka gah ha, shirt. Ka gai tah, sash. Ka hais ka. arrow. Kah kah, crow. Ka hoon i sa nah, ship. Kah wa na o. island. Kah whee sea, strong. Kah wish to nooh. silver. Notes kahwishtonoo. Kais, legging. Kais to wah. head-dress. Kai un ta, tree. Ka jeeh kwa, war-club. Ka kho a, owl. Ka soon tah. bark. Ka wun do ta te. thunder. Ka yu hah, bird. Ka yut kwa, elm. Kih un i ag wa sa, enemy. Ki on da ga, oak.

Ki u ad a dee. river. Kne hah, my father. Koh sah gih, winter. Ko niew. ash. Ko nih wa. skin. Ko non a weh ta, pipe. Koonk, goose. Ko sa dus. horse. Kuan, great. Kug en ha gee, summer. Ku gus we nu sa, valley. Kug we deh kee, spring. Kuh ha go, forest. Kun a dai a. town. Kun a tia. kettle. Kun a wa konh, bog. Kun e a da. lake. Kun e a e tah. boat. Kun o sai a. house. Kun un ah kee, autumn. Kwēas kwēas, hog. Notes kweaskweas. Naingahah, this. (Notes)

Ne dush, polecat. Ne ka yun wa hia, stream. Ne tah ain chwa, turkey. Ne wu ah, small. Noos kwa kwi au to, toad.

O a ta. nail. O a tah. heel. O ah. wind. O ah sah, breast. O dae hah. hot. O dih tah. claw. O djis tah, fire. O dug wun zhi ag wi o shoo, plain. O e a ta, wing. O e un ta. beak. O ga hah, eye. O gai sah, evening. O ga yoon ghe, old. O gook sah, face. O goon whah, hare. O hak wuh. bread. O he ag wi a, toe. Oh nag o noos, water. Oh neet shah, thigh. Oh ni a. hand. O hooh tah. ear. Oh sah. mouth. Oh see tah, foot. Oh sunk wah. back. O hun ta, shrub. O hun wa, windpipe. Oh waie. bear. Oi a tah, body.

O jis tan ah kwa, star. **O kah**. snow. O kah e nah. knee. Ok wa neet, copper. **O na dia**. *oats. wheat.* **O** na hah, corn, maize. **O nah kwa**, feather. O nah kwa. liver. **O** nah sah. tongue. O naih tah, pine. O nai tah, leaf. O na ka yah ke, beaver. On e ag ie he, partridge. O neh sah. shoulder. O nen at sha. arm. **Ongeunhage**, we. (Notes) On hus ka, egg. **O** nia. stone. O ni a ah. neck. **O ni o nus**, *lead*. [the metal.] O ni u sah. nose. O nish onk na in nuk, devil. Notes onishonhnainnuh. O no ji, muskrat. O non kwi eh. hair. O non tah, leg. O non uh kwa, potato. O non wa. head. O noo ah, scalp. Notes onoohah.

O noos ka. beard. O no tia. tooth. O nuh kwah sa. nettle. O nun do wahn nah, mountain. O nun ha ge, they. O oh nat sa. seat. O on ha, life. O shaish ta. snake. Osh ta. rain. Os ti an tah, bone. O sun tah. black. O tait sa, flower. O tak at shah, iron. Ot gu a tah, navel. O ti a ain da, yellow. Ot kwai seh, blood. Ot she wa ga, sour. Ott she nu li a ta, sinew, vein. O wa hai oo, dead. O wah ai yut, death. O wa heh. meat. O wee soo. ice. O we nuh ka soo eh. weed. O we soon di ix. hail. O whain je ah, earth. O wik aish ta. white. O win o ka, grass. O wi uh hea. blue.

Ow kah, she. O yai kwa, tobacco. O yon wah, stomach.

Ra ne ad a e wah, *sea*. Ru na do ta, *hill*. Notes kunadota.

Sa go ha wa, his daughter. Shah nux a, fox. Skan o do, deer. Skau je din nah, eagle. Skwa ai e a, otter. Soak, duck. Ston da ok tah, meadow.

Tag i ah tah kwah, hawk. Tai ak e ad a non da, brother. Tai o he ad a non da, sister. Ta wish ta wish, snipe. Ta won neh wus, lightning. Notes tawonnehwhus. Teh ne taiw, wife. Te o di nak ai un ta, sheep. Te oh ah i aih, light. Te o kaus, darkness. Te un hos kwi, cow. Thogee, that. (Notes) Tsh ech ha, dog. Tsheet kwa, green. Tshe kwi gos ta its, Indian meal. Tsh u ha, pigeon. Tsh uk a ta kee, squirrel. Tus ka ha, near. Notes tuscaha. Tut kwa ih ta, red.

Ug wa he, all. Uk no hah, my mother. Un gwa hon gwa, an Indian. U no whahl, tortoise, turtle. Unt shee, friend. Us kast, bitter. Us twa sah, young. Ush ta ha, rock. U tho we, cold.

Wa hait ka, ugly. Wa thoon wix sus, woman. We an dah, wood. We hait kee, bad. Notes wahaitkee. Wei un ta, flesh. Win i wain dah, sweet. Wun da da, day. Wus kwa ka, lodge.

Yan lee, good.

ENGLISH — ONONDAGA

All, ug wa he. Arm, o nen at sha. Arrow, ka hais ka. Ash, ko niew. Autumn, kun un ah kee. Axe, as kwa sa.

Back. oh sunk wah. Bad. we hait kee. Bark. ka soon tah. Basswood, ho ho sa. Beak. o e un ta. Bear, oh waie. Beard. o noos ka. Beaver, o na ka yah ke. Bird, ka yu hah. Bitter. us kast. Black. o sun tah. Bladder. in hah a kwuh. **Blood.** *ot kwai seh.* Blue. o wi uh hea. Boat, kun e a e tah. Body, oi a tah. **Bog.** kun a wa konh. Bone. os ti an tah. Bow. ah ain da. Boy, hux sa ha. Bread. o hak wuh.

Breast, *o ah sah*. **Breechcloth**, *a je nuh kah kwa*. **Brother**, *tai ak e ad a non da*.

Chief, hoh se no wahn. Claw, o dih tah. Club, war, ka jeeh kwa. Coat, a dai da weht sa. Cold, u tho we. Copper, ok wa neet. Corn, o na hah. Cow, te un hos kwi. Crow, kah kah.

Darkness, te o kaus. Daughter, his, sa go ha wa. Day, wun da da. Dead, o wa hai oo. Death, o wah ai yut. Deer, skan o do. Devil, o nish onk na in nuk. Dog, tsh ech ha. Duck, soak.

Eagle, skau je din nah. Ear, o hooh tah. Earth, o whain je ah. Egg, on hus ka. Elm, ka yut kwa. Enemy, kih un i ag wa sa. Evening, o gai sah. Eye, o ga hah.

Face, o gook sah.
Far off, ee noo.
Father, my, kne hah.
Feather, o nah kwa.
Fire, o djis tah.
Flesh, wei un ta.
Flower, o tait sa.
Foot, oh see tah.
Forest, kuh ha go.
Fox, shah nux a.
Friend, unt shee.

Girl, ixe sa ha. God, ha wa ne uh. Good, yan lee. Goose, koonk. Grass, o win o ka. Great, kuan. Green, tsheet kwa.

Hail, o we soon di ix.Hair, o non kwi eh.Hand, oh ni a.

Handsome, a gon le. Hare, o goon whah. Hawk, tag i ah tah kwah. He, hourh. Head, o non wa. Head-dress, kais to wah. Heart, ah wai a sa. Heaven, ka ai wi a ga. Heel, o a tah. Hill, ru na do ta. Hog, kwēas kwēas. Horse, ko sa dus. Hot, o dae hah. House, kun o sai a. Husband, my, haiw nah.

I, e eh. Ice, o wee soo. Indian, an, un gwa hon gwa. Iron, o tak at shah. Island, kah wa na o.

Kettle, kun a tia. Knee, o kah e nah. Knife, ha sha.

Lake, *kun e a da*. Lead, *o ni o nus*. [the metal] Leaf, o nai tah. Leg, o non tah. Legging, kais. Life, hain ha. Life, o on ha. Light, te oh ah i aih. Lightning, ta won neh wus. Liver, o nah kwa. Lodge, wus kwa ka.

Maid, ixe sa ha. Maize, o na hah. Man, haing wee. Meadow, ston da ok tah. Meal, Indian, tshe kwi gos ta its. Meat, o wa heh. Moon, as so he ka. Morning, hai gahtsh eek. Mother, my, uk no hah. Mountain, o nun do wahn nah. Mouth, oh sah. Muskrat, o no ji.

Nail, o a ta. Navel, ot gu a tah. Near, tus ka ha. Neck, o ni a ah. Nettle, o nuh kwah sa. Night, as soh wa. No, jach te. Nose, o ni u sah.

Oak, ki on da ga. Oats, o na dia. Old, o ga yoon ghe. Otter, skwa ai e a. Owl, ka kho a.

Partridge, on e ag ie he.
Pigeon, tsh u ha.
Pine, o naih tah.
Pipe, ko non a weh ta.
Plain, o dug wun zhi ag wi o shoo.
Polecat, ne dush.
Potato, o non uh kwa.

Rain, osh ta. Red, tut kwa ih ta. River, ki u ad a dee. Rock, ush ta ha.

Sash, ka gai tah. Scalp, o noo ah. Sea, ra ne ad a e wah. Seat, o oh nat sa. She, ow kah. **Sheep**, te o di nak ai un ta. Ship, ka hoon i sa nah. Shirt, ka gah ha. Shoe, a tah kwa. Shoulder. o neh sah. Shrub. o hun ta. Silver. kah wish to nooh. Sinew. ott she nu li a ta. Sister, tai o he ad a non da. Skin. ko nih wa. Sky, ka ai wi a. Small. ne wu ah. Snake, o shaish ta. Snipe, ta wish ta wish. Snow. o kah. Son, his, ho ha wa. Sour, ot she wa ga. Spear, a ju dish tah. Spring, kug we deh kee. Squirrel, tsh uk a ta kee. Star, o jis tan ah kwa. Stomach, o yon wah. Stone. o nia. Stream, ne ka yun wa hia. Strong, kah whee sea. Summer, kug en ha gee. Sun. a nik ha. Sweet. win i wain dah.

That, thogee. (Notes) They, o nun ha ge. Thigh, oh neet shah. This, naingahah. (Notes) Thou. ee sah he. Thunder. ka wun do ta te. Toad. noos kwa kwi au to. Tobacco. o vai kwa. Toe, o he ag wi a. Tomorrow, ior ha na. Tongue, o nah sah. Tooth. o no tia. Tortoise, u no whahl. Town. kun a dai a. Tree. kai un ta. Turkey, ne tah ain chwa. Turtle, *u* no whahl.

Ugly, wa hait ka.

Valley, *ku gus we nu sa*. **Vein**, *ott she nu li a ta*.

War-club, ka jeeh kwa.
Water, oh nag o noos.
We, ongeunhage. (Notes)
Weed, o we nuh ka soo eh.
Wheat, o na dia.

White, o wik aish ta.
Wife, teh ne taiw.
Wind, o ah.
Windpipe, o hun wa.
Wing, o e a ta.
Winter, koh sah gih.
Wolf, hoh yo ne.
Woman, wa thoon wix sus.
Wood, we an dah.

Ye, is ka hug wuh. Yellow, o ti a ain da. Young, us twa sah.

Numerical Table*

- 1. Skata
- 2. Tekina
- 3. Achso
- 4. Gajeri
- 5. Wisk
- 6. Achiak
- 7. Tschoatah
- 8. Tekiro

- 9. Watiro
- 10. Wasshe
- 11. Wassheskatagachera
- 12. Tekeni
- 20. Twasshe
- 30. Achsonewasshe
- 100. Wasshenewasshe
- 1000. Wasshenetwoenniawe

* Note: numerals taken by Schoolcraft from Gallatin 1836, ultimately fom Zeisberger's Onondaga Dictionary.

CLASSIFICATION OF THE IROQUOIAN LANGUAGES

NORTHERN IROQUOIAN Tuscarora-Nottoway *Tuscarora Nottoway* Huronian *Huron Wyandot*

wyanaof Laurentian Five Nations-Susquehannock Seneca Cayuga Onondaga Susquehannock Mohawk Oneida SOUTHERN IROQUOIAN Cherokee

Sources: Lounsbury 1978, Mithun 1979, Goddard 1996.