THE LAKE PLAIN

The Neutral Nation of Indians, an Iroquoian group affiliated with the Eries, were early inhabitants of this area.

16,000 YEARS AGO

After reaching its maximum about 20,000 years ago, the ice covering Ontario gradually melted back. Parts of southwestern Ontario became ice free by 16,000 years ago. This period is called 'the Erie Interstade'. Around 15,000 years ago, during the 'Port Bruce Readvance', it became colder and the ice advanced southwards past the south shore of Lake Erie.

14,000 YEARS AGO

A milder period, called the 'Mackinaw Interstade' followed, again revealing dry land in southwestern Ontario. A further cold period caused the 'Port Huron Readvance' around 13,000 years ago, but this time much of southwestern Ontario stayed ice free. By 12,000 years ago, plants and animals had begun to colonize the newly revealed land. People soon followed.

12,000 YEARS AGO

Approximate Ice Position 12,000 years ago

As the ice sheets retreated a series of large pro-glacial lakes formed between the land to the south, and the edge of the ice. As people followed the retreating ice, they were attracted to the rich environment along the lakes shores. Many of the earliest Palaeo-Indian sites in Ontario have been found along the margins of Lake Algonquin and Lake Iroquois.

AFTER 10,000 YEARS AGO

The ice in the Great Lakes basin continued to melt back, exposing the whole of the Lake Huron basin. A large lobe of ice still occupied parts of the Lake Superior basin until about 9,000 years ago, splitting it into two parts. The first known human occupation in the upper Great Lakes occurred while ice still lay in the Lake Superior basin.

By the time the European explorers and missionaries arrived in the early 1600s, the Iroquoian villages had elected chiefs and were allied within powerful tribal confederacies. The Neutral Indians were the leaders of a group of ten tribes of the Iroquois Nation. Other tribes included the Seneca, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Huron, Petun, Erie and the Susquehannock. The
French explorers, gave this Indian tribe the name "Neutrals", because of their position and status as peace keepers between the warring Hurons and Iroquois. Unfortunately, inter-tribal warfare was made worse by the intrusion of the Europeans.

In May 1535, Jacques Cartier left France to explore the New World, and was told by the Indians he met along the St. Lawrence River about Niagara Falls. When Samuel de Champlain visited Canada in 1608, he too heard the stories, but it was Etienne Brule, who in 1615 was the first European to see the Falls as well as explore Lakes Ontario, Erie Huron and Superior. He was followed shortly by the Recollet missionary explorers, and a decade later by the Jesuits. It was a Jesuit father, Gabriel Lalemant, who first recorded the Iroquois name for the river- Onguiaahra, meaning "the Strait". "Niagara" is a simplification of the original.

In 1641 the Onguiaahra Indians (also called the "Neutral" Indians) were the predominant tribe along the Niagara River. The French initiated a fur-trade rivalry between the Huron and Iroquois, which turned into a 6 year long Indian war which pushed the Huron Nation to the north and scattered them throughout Ontario. The Iroquois moved into the Niagara area, pushing the Neutral Indians eastward to the area of Albany, New York. The wars also managing to keep Europeans settlers away until after the American

Thousands of years ago Niagara was discovered by its first inhabitants, aboriginal peoples. The Neutral Indians have been recorded as one of the earliest native tribes residing in the Niagara region. It is estimated that in the early 1600s there were approximately 12,000 Neutrals living in the area, which made them the largest Native group in the Northeast in the 17th century. Their territory was situated around the western end of Lake Ontario and to the north of Lake Erie, and they claimed the land on both sides of the Niagara River. This entire district was called Onguiaahra, which means, “the strait” or “thundering water”. The name Niagara was derived from this Native word, and was also used to name the thundering waters.

The villages of the Neutrals were situated in the forests not far away from the waterways. This tribe had established semi-permanent villages in the area by the 17th century. The Neutrals like other Indian tribes used their surroundings to survive. They used the bark from local trees to make their homes and to build canoes for usage on the waterways for transportation. The Neutrals also learned how to harness the land. They grew beans, corn, and pumpkins and found many deer, elk, and beavers to hunt. They used the maple trees as a source of sugar and created flour from the acorn of the white oak trees. They also gathered nuts, berries, and herbs. The Neutrals were excellent fisherman and their diet consisted of many types of fish, as the waterways in Niagara were an abundant source of trout, sturgeon, and salmon. The men hunted and fished while the women gathered wild foods and prepared meat and hides. Children also had a role to play as they were expected to gather water and wood for the village.

The Neutrals received their name from, French explorer Samuel de Champlain when he came to the region in 1615. He named them "The Neutrals", because they were neutral in the ongoing battles between the feuding Iroquois, who lived to the south of the Neutrals, and the Hurons who lived to the north.

The Neutral Indians would prove to not be the only Indian tribes residing in Ontario, the Huron and Petun resided north of Lake Ontario, with the Huron living around Lake Simcoe, and the Petun living near Lake Huron.

Because they were neutral in the wars between the Huron and Iroquois, the French called this large Iroquian Confederacy the Neutre (Nation du Neutre, Neuter Nation or Neutrals). Whatever name the Neutrals used for their confederacy has been lost, but most Iroquoian tribes in southern Ontario referred to themselves collectively as the Wendat "dwellers on a peninsula."
The Huron called them the Attiwardaron (Attionondaron or Attiwardaronk) meaning "those who speak a little differently." The Iroquois name, Hatianwarunrh, had a similar meaning. Apparently some of the Neutrals were more closely attached to the Erie than the others, because both the Seneca and Huron often referred to both the Erie and Neutrals as the "Cat Nation." The Seneca name in this case was Kahkwa (Kahqua), while its equivalent in Huron was Yenresh. The Neutrals' territory extended entirely across the Niagara Peninsula of southern Ontario into southeastern Michigan, and to find the necessary furs, they began to expand west for hunting. This soon had the Neutrals encroaching into the lands of the Algonquin-speaking tribes who lived in Lower Michigan and brought war. In 1635 the Huron told the French that the Neutrals had given refuge to the Aouenrehronon, an unidentified Iroquian-speaking tribe from the western end of Lake Erie (possibly Erie or Neutrals).

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The Huron say at the funeral of Joseph Chiwatenhwa, Echon, the Jesuit turned in the direction of the Sonontwehronons (Iroquois) who had killed him, and said aloud "Sonontwehronon, it is all over with thee, thou art dead." Immediately Echon, the Jesuit proceeded to the Neutral Nation, that he might carry the dreaded disease to them. Reports suggest that smallpox was raging fiercely among the Neutrals during Echon's visit.

Other Huron relate that Echon, the Jesuit, visited the Iroquois Nation to instigate their coming to completely ruin like the Huron Nation.

Father (I)-Jean de Brebeuf (1593-1649) with (I)-Pierre Joseph Marie Chaumonot (Chaumonnot, Calvonotti) (1611-1693), a Huron guide, two domestics, one of whom had smallpox, to act as merchants, as without trade the doors would be shut to them, journeyed to the Neutral Nation. The party reached the village of Kandoucho (Lake Medad, Halton County, Ontario) where the Hiroquois called Father (I)-Jean de Brebeuf (1593-1649) 'Echon' who is considered the most famous Black Robe sorcerer or demon, and as predicted caused the doors of the cabins every where were closed. Echon however was correct, the pretext of trade opened the doors for trade and disease. Brebeuf and Chaumonot would spend 5 months in Neutral territory.

The Huron Awenhokwi with another Huron visited the villages of the Neutral Nation at the same time as Echon, the Jesuit, warning the People of their impending doom. The Huron were hoping the Neutrals would execute Echon with no reflection on the Huron Nation. Oentara, a Huron also ventured to the Neutral Country to verify the evils of Echon. Many other Huron arrived to verify the evils of Echon. As a result the Neutrals rejected the gifts of Echon, the Jesuit (I)-Jean de Brebeuf (1593-1649), absolutely. One significant implication of the gift rejection is the removal of safe conduct in the region.

The Neutral said; "we know what you are here to do, and the danger which you are and in which you are putting the country. Echon, the Jesuit and his party were forced to withdraw as he could not deny that he was spreading disease among the People, because his very own words were repeated to the People.

The Iroquois waged war with the Neutral (Cat and Erie) peoples north of Lake Erie driving them into the woods where most died from starvation.

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What the French called the “Iroquois” and “Huron” leagues, who allied with the Dutch and later the English, and the French, respectively; there was also the “Neutral Indians,” so named by the French because their league remained neutral in the Iroquois-Huron conflict that European powers turned into their own proxy war. Together with the Erielhonan, the “Neutral Indians” were called the Cat Nation by other Iroquoian peoples.

[1 Introduction.--The river Niagara was at this time, 1640, well known to the Jesuits, though none of them had visited it. Lalemant speaks of it as the “famous river of this nation” (the Neutrals). The following translation, from his Relation of 1641, shows that both Lake Ontario and Lake Erie had already taken their present names.

"This river" (the Niagara) "is the same by which our great lake of the Hurons, or Fresh Sea, discharges itself, in the first place, into Lake Erie (le lac d'Erié), or the Lake of the Cat Nation. Then it enters the territories of the Neutral Nation, and takes the name of Onguiaahra (Niagara), until it discharges itself into Ontario, or the Lake of St. Louis; whence at last issues the river which passes before Quebec, and is called the St. Lawrence." He makes no allusion to the cataract, which is first mentioned as follows by Ragueneau, in the Relation of 1648.

"Nearly south of this same Neutral Nation there is a great lake, about two hundred leagues in circuit, named Erie (Erié), which is formed by the discharge of the Fresh Sea, and which precipitates itself by a cataract of frightful height into a third lake, named Ontario, which we call Lake St. Louis."

Historical references describe a water route of travel via Lake Ontario to the western basin of Lake Erie, an area rich in beaver pelts. It is assumed it was these pre-historic groups or members of roving bands of Iroquoian peoples (Neutral, Erie, Cat) after 1643 that carved the rock’s markings.
The 32 x 21’ surface of the rock is covered with one of the finest examples of aboriginal art in the Great Lakes region. Known as a petroglyph, no one is sure what the unusual drawings depicted. The most widely accepted theory is that the large rock was used as a "message stone" where various Native Americans would make drawings noting that they’d been there, how the hunting or fishing had been and/or where they were headed next. The markings have been so eroded by exposure to the weather that it is difficult to see them. In 1969 The Ohio Historical Society erected a cover to attempt to preserve the rock. A small-portion plaster replica of the accurate and detailed sketches done in the 1850’s is at the site.

Parker lists her as Djikonsa’se, "the mother of nations", "the peace queen" and states that she was of the Kakwa:ko (Neutral) nation on the east side of the Niagara. Parker, The Kakwa:ko (Neutral) : Iroquois-speaking nation near the Niagara