

# The Lake George Examiner

## The Land Doesn't Forget: Historian discusses Lake George Area Indigenous Nations and the removal of Natives from their lands

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"It's important to acknowledge that the land we're all standing on right now, this land, is native land — always has been," says Jay Levenson. Levenson, a Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance trustee, says this while standing in the Conference Center at Fort William Henry Resort at the head of Lake George. He made this remark in his introduction of historian and Oneida Nation of Wisconsin citizen Heather Bruegl.

The Alliance, in partnership with the French and Indian War Society, hosted a presentation by Bruegl titled "A History of the Lake George Area & the Nations Who Called It Home: The Land Doesn't Forget." The program was held on Wednesday, July 5 and is part of a series of presentations designed to increase awareness of the region's early history.

In his introductory remarks, Levenson noted that the story of Lake George's indigenous population goes back at least 8,000 years, yet the story is mostly untold. People's introduction to Native Americans, he says, is often "The Last of the Mohicans," James Fenimore Cooper's romanticized tale of the 1757 siege and surrender of Fort William Henry. Bruegl says she wants to "drop some knowledge" on her audience as the history taught in schools leaves out so many people.

She opened her program with startling statistics: "Throughout the 1300s, as estimated by some scholars, the indigenous population was around 10 million. By 1900, that dropped to just under 240,000...by 2021, it's just under 6.8 million, but guess what? That's only 2 percent of the population of the United States."

The Lake George region, Bruegl says, was home to the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy of Nations – Onondaga, Mohawk, Oneida, Seneca, Cayuga, and later, Tuscarora), Abenaki and Mohican.

The Haudenosaunee, People of the Longhouse, were established in the area centuries before the first European contact. According to the Haudenosaunee Peacemaker Story, as told by Bruegl, the original five tribes were continually at war with each other. The Great Peacemaker and Hiawatha visited each tribe bringing a vision of Peace. The league was established with a representative form of government, a form, she notes, not unlike the one created by Hamilton and Madison with the U.S. Constitution.

"For nearly 200 years, the Confederacy was powerful in policymaking...aligning yourself with them offered great advantages to European colonies. You wanted them to be on your side," says Bruegl.

Bruegl's ancestors are the Muh-he-con-ne-ok (Mohican), The People of the Waters that Are Never Still. They settled along the Hudson River with their seat of government on Schodack Island. Their territory covered from Southwest Vermont through the entire Hudson River Valley — from Lake Champlain to Manhattan — Western Massachusetts, Northwest Connecticut and portions of Pennsylvania and New Jersey.



"In 1609, the Mohican people had their first encounter with colonists by a man named Henry Hudson who arrived at present-day Castleton, New York, and the trading started," Bruegl explained.

The influx of Europeans, the expansion of the colonies and the European wars fought on Native lands disrupted the lives of the area's original nations. Bruegl gave a summary of the French and Indian War, which she characterizes as a battle between the British and French to determine who would control land that had been under the care of the Indigenous people for centuries. She explained that Native Americans had to align themselves with either the French or the British based on which outcome they believed would best protect their interests. "I think it's important that we talk about what happened here because, of course, the French and Indian War was a precursor to the American Revolution, which was a precursor to removal."

Bruegl dedicated much of her program to the topic of removal, the forced relocation of native people from their homelands. She displayed maps that illustrated how they were driven from the East Coast onto reservations and their culture fragmented under U.S. Government programs such as the Dawes Act of 1887, which broke up reservations into allotments.

Under the Dawes Act, members of a tribe could receive an allotment if they met certain requirements. The effect of Federal Policy was to push Native Americans onto lands unsuitable for agriculture and, when enough qualified tribe members could not be found to take an allotment, allotments were sold to non-Native people, reducing total tribal acreage. Reservation lands, says Bruegl, now make up only 2 percent of the land in the United States. "If you took all the reservation lands, they'd fit into the state of Idaho."

While the Dawes Act was touted as a way to offer Native Americans security, its true purpose, says Bruegl, was to destroy Native cultures and force assimilation. "If they give you an allotment," says Bruegl, "you'll *magically* dress in European style. You're going to *magically* farm the land, a noble profession. You'll give up your Indian ways."

President Andrew Jackson's 1830 Indian Removal Act forced Native Americans westward. "Who wants to leave their homeland?" Bruegl asks. Many Indigenous people attempted to fight removal through the court system. "By 1838, 16,000 Cherokees still remained on their land, so Jackson sent in 7,000 armed U.S. military troops to move them at gunpoint." This action became known as The Trail of Tears, a trail along which 4,000 Indigenous people died. By 1840, says Bruegl, except for a few pockets, there were no Native Americans in the Southeast between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River.

Bruegl concluded her presentation by discussing the Landback Movement, which launched in 2020. "It (the movement) came on the heels of the former administration holding a rally in the Black Hills of South Dakota." The Fourth of July political rally was held in front of Mount Rushmore, sacred land Bruegl compares to a church. The rally was a desecration, and Native people gathered to block the road in protest. Bruegl noted the irony of counter-protesters shouting, "Go back to where you came from" at the Lakota and other Native Americans protecting their homeland.

One aim of the Landback movement, says Bruegl, is to return indigenous lands to Indigenous people. No one wants to seize private property, she explains, they merely want the care of public lands put back in the hands of the original caretakers.

During a question-and-answer period, when asked how non-Natives should feel knowing they live on lands taken from Native Americans, Bruegl says, "I don't want you to feel bad," however, you should "recognize the privileges you've had because of removal...I want to have you know my ancestors lived on this land. They died on this land. They died for this land. Just see us," she added.

The connection Lake George Area Indigenous people and Native Americans across the country have to the land is summarized in the sub-title of her presentation, "The Land Doesn't Forget."

"The first time I came up to the homeland of my ancestors was in the summer of 2021... and the first time crossing over the Mahicannituck (Hudson River), I didn't realize I was missing something until I saw it. The land remembered who I was."