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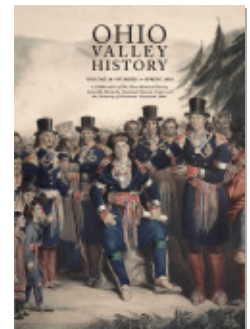
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North America, circa 1500–1760

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# The Ohio Country and Indigenous Geopolitics in Early Modern North America, circa 1500–1760

Elizabeth Mancke

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From the late fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, the North American lands between Lake Erie and the Ohio River were a volatile nexus of alliance systems, confederacies, empires, and states. The major transportation corridors that ran through and encircled them contributed to their transition from a settled zone, to a conflict zone, to a largely depopulated buffer zone and hunting grounds and then to a resettlement zone for diverse Indigenous peoples. As these lands were being resettled in the eighteenth century, they became known as the Ohio Country, a region characterized in part by its physical geography and in part by its human geography, by the diversity of Native peoples who resettled there and began forging a pan-Indigenous, multiethnic polity.<sup>1</sup>

This essay contends that in the early eighteenth century the Ohio Country was defined by the Indigenous peoples who occupied and competed to control it. Their definition was more consequential than is recognized by most scholars, who tend, often unwittingly, to privilege a definition based on French and British competition in the upper Ohio Valley and the role Indigenous peoples played in that European struggle. Rather, Indigenous peoples understood the Ohio Country as “native ground,” to use Kathleen DuVal’s term. By the mid-eighteenth century, it was the crucible in which diverse Native nations were forging a new “common pot,” crafting a politics of pan-Indigenous unity and articulating a nativist ideology that questioned the wisdom of too much accommodation with relentless Euroamerican colonialism and commercialism. Whatever imperial strategists in London or Paris, in Quebec, Pennsylvania, or Virginia might claim, the Ohio Country was an Indigenous convergence zone under Indigenous control.<sup>2</sup>



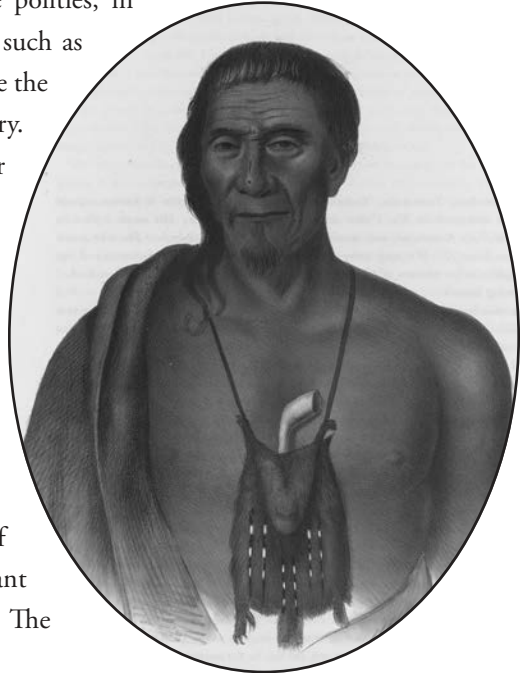
The Ohio Country is included in *A New Map of Louisiana and the River Mississippi* (c. 1720).

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This essay seeks to outline an Indigenous definition and narrative of the Ohio Country, drawing on a diverse body of scholarship about Native North America and framed in terms of Indigenous geopolitics. Its objective is to disentangle the Indigenous narrative of the region from the imperial and American narratives. It conceptualizes the region as a place of Indigenous geopolitical convergence, a transition zone among multiple Indigenous political systems. For much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy, with its core settlements beyond the northeast corner of the Ohio Country, projected their military power and then jurisdictional suzerainty over it. The Wendat (Huron), who abandoned their homelands around Georgian Bay east of Lake Huron and dispersed to live among their Algonquian allies in 1649, also claimed a kind of suzerainty over the western Ohio Country when they resettled at Detroit after the 1701 Peace of Montreal. With those peace negotiations,

the Wendat, Algonquian, and Haudenosaunee agreed to share their respective territories as “a dish with one spoon,” including the depopulated lands between Lake Erie and the Ohio River, which became a large shared hunting territory. South of the Ohio River, Cherokee claims extended to the river and projected their influence into the region. These polities, in turn, negotiated with smaller polities, such as the Lenni Lenape (Delaware), to resettle the Ohio Country in the eighteenth century. When these forces are put at the center of the analysis, it becomes possible to capture the importance of the Ohio Country within the Indigenous geopolitics of North America.<sup>3</sup>

In the last three decades, scholarship on Native North America has exploded and our understandings of the changes in Native societies have grown exponentially. Three bodies of scholarship are particularly important for understanding the Ohio Country. The first is scholarship that analyzes how the cataclysmic upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—epidemics, warfare, and then slaving—“shattered” the sociopolitical



Tish-Co-Han, a Delaware chief (c. 1837). Printed and colored at J.T. Bowen's Lithographic Establishment.

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systems of much of eastern North America, including in the Ohio Country. This scholarship, however, can too easily reinforce the idea that with the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous societies were destined for decline and destruction. Richard White, for example, argues that in the Upper Great Lakes, the *pays d'en haut*, Wendat and Algonquian refugees from the shattering attacks of the Haudenosaunee only reorganized themselves politically as “loose leagues of villages,” “lacking political coherence beyond the village.” In contrast, Andrew Sturtevant argues that despite being “geographically scattered” the Wendat were “socially, economically, and politically integrated” and able to sustain a “geography of solidarity.”<sup>4</sup>

Sturtevant's work illustrates a second field of scholarship that is reassessing how Indigenous peoples understood the relationship between mobility, territoriality, and political vitality. Although Native peoples relocated across much of eastern North America their political and social structures were not necessarily destroyed. The Wendat case, in particular, is a poignant reminder that Indigenous peoples used territoriality in ways quite foreign to European and Euroamerican

sensibilities. Mobility was not intrinsically a sign of social, cultural, or political weakness. Rather, many Indigenous peoples used it strategically to avoid the vulnerabilities that too great of a territorial attachment could create. European observers, for example, puzzled over how the Shawnee could disperse out of the Ohio Valley and into different parts of North America in the mid-seventeenth century and yet retain a coherent identity as a nation.<sup>5</sup>

In light of those first two fields, a third field of scholarship focuses on how Native refugees from war adapted and deployed their political practices to survive the upheavals of the seventeenth century and how they rebuilt, reorganized, or created new political systems in the face of epidemics, war, and displacement. In *Dispersed but Not Destroyed: A History of the Seventeenth-Century Wendat People*, Kathryn Labelle documents how the Wendat chose to leave their homelands east of Lake Huron and how they negotiated and selected resettlement sites. Most moved west to live among their Algonquian allies, but some went east and established a settlement at Lorette, just outside of Quebec, and worked to reestablish relations with the Haudenosaunee without becoming assimilated. The Wendat were agents of their own future and rebuilt their confederacy as a diasporic polity stretching over hundreds of miles. Similarly, the Catawba nation in the Carolinas coalesced from the fragments of numerous tribes and nations that war and disease had left too small to remain autonomous, a remarkable case of ethnogenesis. On the Southern Plains, the Comanche formed a vast and powerful polity around horse-mounted warriors. This scholarship documents Natives' striking ability to adapt and reorganize their political systems even in the face of dispersal, to engage in shrewd diplomacy over vast distances and across major cultural divides.<sup>6</sup>

The history of the Ohio Country, circa 1500–1800, has elements of all three fields: shattering, relocations, and sociopolitical rebuilding. As a major North American transit zone, the history of Indigenous people resettling it as refugees in the eighteenth century makes it an important area to study how Indigenous peoples shaped geopolitical relations so they could survive as distinct peoples. The Ohio Country is where leaders from diverse Native nations began jointly to conceptualize a pan-Native



Hurons of Lorette (1840).  
Created by John Richard Coke Smith.  
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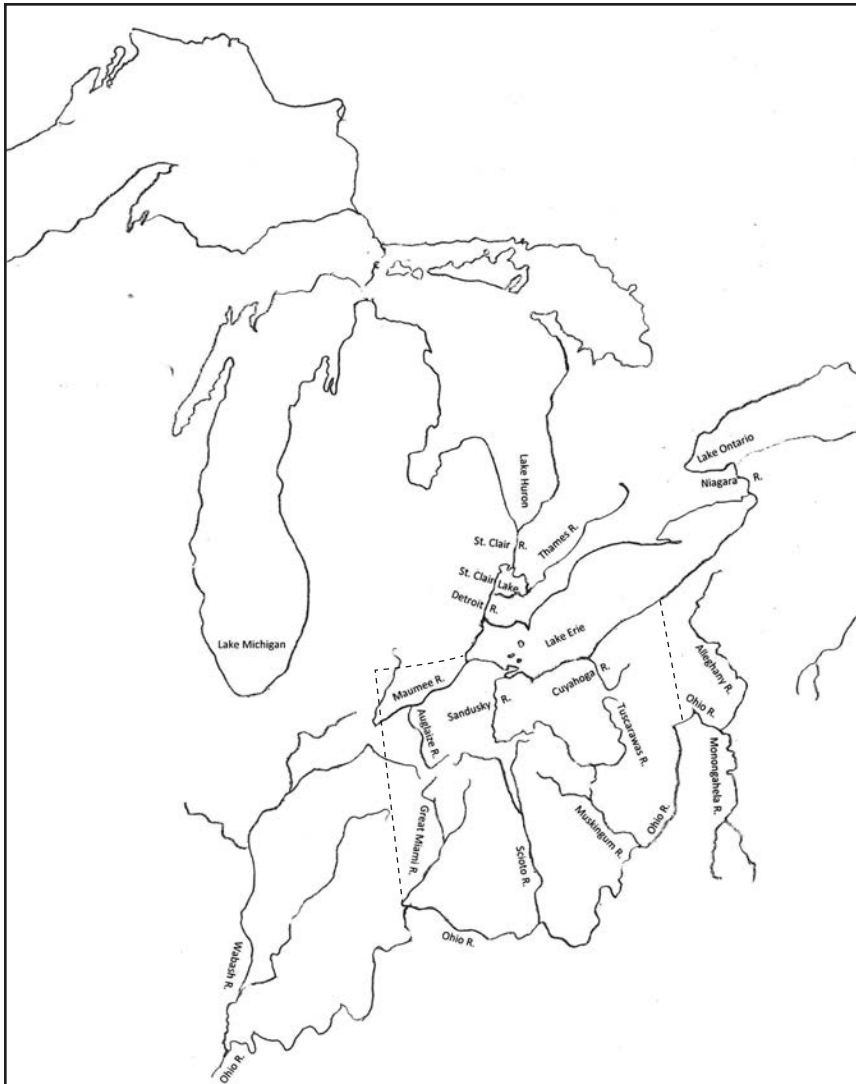


republic, and then after the Seven Years' War they negotiated with the British to recognize territory for a republic, an idea they pursued through the War of 1812, when the British abandoned support of it because the Americans would not countenance the idea.<sup>7</sup>

In eastern North America, waterways shaped Indigenous movements, geopolitics, settlement, and, in many instances, identity. The Ohio Country was geographically defined by the waterways that surround and cut through it and that linked the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence watershed with the Ohio–Mississippi watershed, the Ohio Valley with the Chesapeake Basin, the Deep South and Gulf of Mexico with the river systems of the Midwest. For centuries, if not millennia, those waterways made the region an important North American transit zone. On its eastern and southern sides is the Ohio River, which begins where the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers meet in present-day Pittsburgh. Flowing in a predominantly southerly direction from its origins in the western Allegheny Mountains, it slowly bends in a southwesterly direction and gathers volume from its more than thirty tributaries. By the time it debouches into the Mississippi River at Cairo, Illinois, it is the largest single tributary of the entire Mississippi drainage basin.

The river's name comes from the Seneca (Iroquois) phrase “Ohi:yó,” meaning “beautiful” or “good,” one of many names in the historical record. The French cartographer Jean Baptiste Louis Franquelin gave three names to the Ohio River on his 1684 map of Sieur de La Salle's explorations; “Fleuve St. Louis ou Chucagoa ou Casquinampogamou.” French chroniclers and cartographers, including Franquelin on a 1688 map, translated “Ohi:yó” into French and simply called it the Belle Riviere. The U.S. Geological Survey has compiled a list of eighty-eight names for the river, a reflection of the fact that over the centuries diverse cultural groups have had such an affinity with it that they have named it in their own languages. Those diverse names also speak to how the Ohio Country has long been a geopolitical convergence point.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Ohio Country takes its name from the Ohio River, other rivers were as, if not more, important in three well-traveled north-south corridors that linked the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence watershed with the Ohio–Mississippi watershed. The easternmost route comprises the Cuyahoga, Tuscarawas, and Muskingum rivers, with its northern terminus on Lake Erie at the site of present-day Cleveland, and its southern terminus on the Ohio River at Marietta. Farther west, the Scioto Trail went south on the Sandusky River from Lake Erie, with a portage to the Little Scioto and Scioto rivers, which connected to the Ohio River at Lower Shawnee Town (now Portsmouth, Ohio). On the western side of the Ohio Country is the Maumee River and its tributaries, the St. Mary's River and the Auglaize River, which link by portages to the Great Miami River. It flows 160 miles through western Ohio and empties into the Ohio River just inside Indiana near the present-day state border.<sup>9</sup>

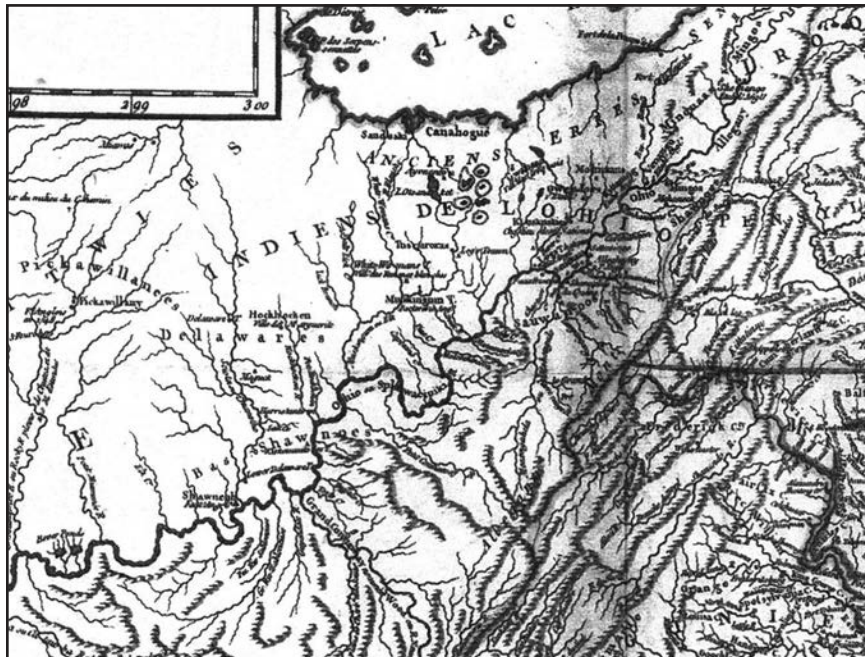


Major riverine transportation corridors of the Ohio Country (2018).

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

These three north-south transportation corridors linked to the east-west waterways of the Ohio River and the Great Lakes and offered transit through some of the most fertile lands in North America. Archaeological sites show that people have settled Ohio Country lands for thousands of years, and its waterways have long been conduits for cultural exchange, innovation, and adaptation. Artifacts made from flint from Indiana, copper from around Lake Superior, shells from the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico, and mica from southern Appalachia offer material evidence, often through objects of exquisite craftsmanship, of extensive networks of diplomacy and exchange. Thus, it is not surprising that as Europeans arrived on the shores of the Americas, their items moved on those networks and into the Ohio Country.<sup>10</sup>

The Ohio Country was both more and less than the Ohio Valley. The Ohio River and the valley on both sides are over a thousand miles long. The Ohio Country, in contrast, about 350 miles wide and comprises land in two distinct watersheds. Its northern section, roughly one-quarter of the total, is in the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence watershed and included major settlement sites such as Cuyahoga and Sandusky, the latter of which was closely affiliated with Detroit. The southern part is largely west and north of the upper half of the Ohio River, from its headwaters near Pittsburgh to the mouth of the Great Miami River near the Ohio–Indiana border, approximately 450 miles. The remaining 650 miles of the Ohio River and Valley to the Mississippi River are not part of the Ohio Country.<sup>11</sup>



Detail of the lands of “Indiens de L’Ohio” (1755).

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As the dozens of names for the Ohio River suggest, the river’s 1,000-mile course, the valley on both sides, and the tributaries that flow into it, had relevance for multiple Indigenous nations and their political, diplomatic, social, and economic relations over centuries, including the last half millennium. Thus “Ohio Valley” is not synonymous with “Ohio Country” when Indigenous people are central to the analysis. The upper Ohio Valley was the focal point for the Anglo-French struggle for the trans-Appalachian West, and so Ohio Valley is a useful synecdoche for that imperial struggle. But the Ohio Country that Natives constructed included lands beyond the upper Ohio Valley. Both before and after the upper Ohio Valley became the tinderbox for festering imperial competition between the French and British, Indigenous people were defining the Ohio Country as a



“common pot.” But that eighteenth-century construct of the Ohio Country had been first shaped by the upheavals and dislocations of the previous two centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Early in the sixteenth century, Indigenous peoples in the interior of North America began to feel the effects of the presence of Europeans on the coasts of the Americas. From islands in the Caribbean Basin, the Spanish were sending expeditions to explore along the coasts of Florida, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. On the northeastern edge of North America, the Newfoundland fishery attracted thousands of Europeans who came for the summer season and returned home in the fall. Along the Atlantic seaboard, explorers and traders exchanged European wares with Native peoples for furs and skins. By the early 1500s, European fishers were exchanging their metal tools—knives, kettles, and hatchets—and other European manufactures for furs Indigenous peoples brought to them. Over the decades, Native nations from as far west as the Great Lakes began sending traders on summer expeditions out to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Native traders often took the goods they acquired in the Gulf of St. Lawrence or along the Atlantic coast back into interior parts of the continent, some of which were reaching Native communities in the Ohio Country. Archaeologists working in northeast Ohio and in Fort Ancient sites in southern Ohio have found glass beads, brass, copper scraps, and reworked metal goods dating from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>13</sup>

South of the Ohio River, the impact of Europeans in the Caribbean Basin and along the coasts of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico reverberated up the continent. Virgin soil epidemics swept through the southeast, resulting in high morbidity and mortality rates and contributing to a collapse of the hierarchical Mississippian cultures. Although there is no archaeological evidence of epidemics reaching the Ohio Country in the sixteenth century, people living there surely knew of the inexplicable deaths of thousands of people from unknown diseases. As well, the large Spanish exploratory party led by Hernando de Soto went as far north as Tennessee. News of the group’s marauding and combative engagements with Native inhabitants would likely have reached villages in the lower Ohio Country.<sup>14</sup>

There is no solid evidence for depopulation from epidemic diseases in the northeast, but resettlement was occurring. When Samuel de Champlain led a French colonizing expedition to Quebec on the St. Lawrence in 1608, he discovered the river valley was largely depopulated, while seven decades earlier (1535), the Iroquoian Stadaconas had helped to keep alive members of Jacques Cartier’s expeditionary group that wintered among them. Scholars disagree on the reasons for the depopulation—warfare over control of the St. Lawrence transit corridor, virgin soil epidemics, or a combination of the two is considered the most likely. From a continental Indigenous perspective rather than a coastal European one, the Ohio Country was a key region in North America where the reverberations originating from the continent’s diverse edges converged, reverberations that would intensify tsunami-like in the seventeenth century, leaving the region depopulated.<sup>15</sup>



Jacques Cartier's first interview with natives at Hochelaga (now Montreal) in 1535 (c. 1850).  
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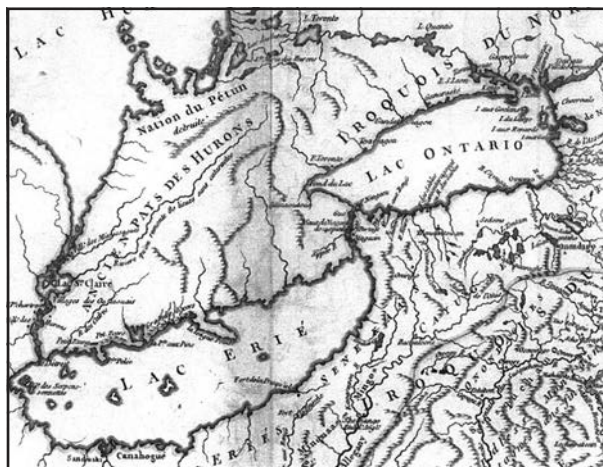
By the time the French, Dutch, and English planted settlements in North America, the impacts the European presence had engendered on Native societies were already apparent in the depopulation of the St. Lawrence River valley and the collapse of Mississippian societies. Three interdependent forces were particularly important. First, an expanding fur and deerskin trade engaged a growing number of Indigenous hunters, trappers, and traders, often triggering violent rivalries; epidemic diseases wreaked demographic decimation on Indigenous communities; and Indigenous warfare intensified to take captives, some to replenish lost tribal members, some for an emerging Native-European slave trade in Indigenous people, some as hostages for negotiations.

By the second decade of the seventeenth century, the intensified fur trade's destabilizing effects were observable. After establishing the colony of New Netherland on the Hudson River in 1614, the Dutch initiated trade with the Iroquois, most particularly the Mohawks, and offered the enticing option of exchanging guns for furs. The French in Canada, in contrast, would not trade guns with an Indigenous trader unless he had converted to Christianity. Thus, while the Iroquois pulled furs from a much smaller region than their Wendat and Algonquian rivals to the north, their access to guns gave them a military advantage that, in turn, could only be sustained with more furs.<sup>16</sup>

Epidemics triggered by virgin soil diseases took a staggering toll on Indigenous populations and morale. In the 1630s, smallpox swept across the northeast from the Atlantic to the Great Lakes, killing thousands and destroying communities. In Iroquoia, the Haudenosaunee launched mourning war attacks against neighboring

nations, up into Wendake (Huron), down among the Susquehannock, west among the Erie on the southeastern shore of Lake Erie, and into the headwaters of the Ohio River against the Monongahela. In the 1640s, during the so-called Beaver Wars, relentless attacks by the Haudenosaunee Confederacy prompted members of the Wendat Confederacy to abandon their villages on Georgian Bay and relocate farther west among their Anishinabeg neighbors and east among their French allies. Haudenosaunee attacks caused thousands of neighbouring peoples to flee, and hundreds, if not thousands more were adopted into the Five Nations, making them evermore polyglot in composition.<sup>17</sup>

The relocation of the Wendat was but one of many seventeenth-century dispersals that would shape the future of the Ohio Country. In 1652, the Haudenosaunee dispersed the Neutrals, an Iroquoian people who lived between the Niagara and Grand Rivers north of Lake Erie. The Wenro, who lived on the east side of the Niagara and were in close proximity to the Seneca, the westernmost nation of the Haudenosaunee, fled their communities in the late 1630s and resettled among the Wendat. Then in the 1650s, the Erie, an Iroquoian people living on the southeastern edge of Lake Erie, fled in the face of attacks by the Haudenosaunee. The Erie appear to have been the same as the Westos; in 1656, a group of about six hundred appeared on the James River fall line on the frontier edge of Virginia settlements. These people quickly established themselves as procurers of Indigenous slaves, first in Virginia and then, in the 1670s, in the Carolinas. In 1680, a war destroyed them, and among their adversaries were the Savannahs, a southern group of Shawnee who were refugees from the mid-Ohio Valley. Shawnees were reported in diverse locations—as slaves among the Haudenosaunee, refugee villagers among the Illinois, guests of the Delaware in Pennsylvania—all testimony to the extent of dispersals from the wars and slaving. They seemed to have fled their homes in the mid-Ohio Valley in the 1660s and 1670s, some by choice, some as captives, leaving their villages empty.<sup>18</sup>



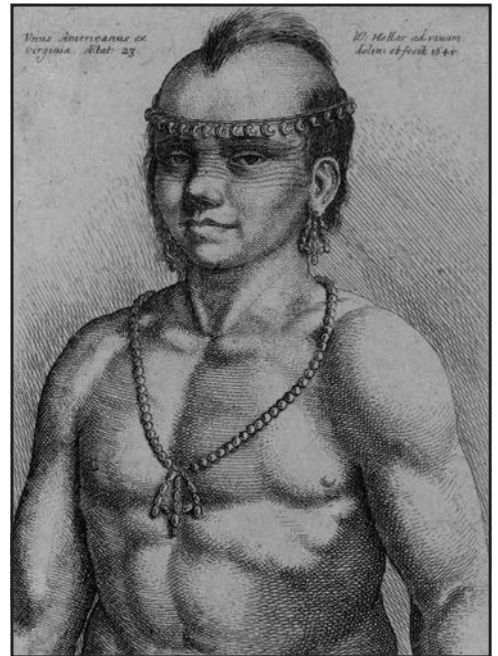
Detail showing the "Ancien Pays des Hurons" (1755).

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By the 1680s, the Ohio Country, as well as the lands north of Lake Erie, were depopulated, leaving them a vast and still volatile hunting grounds, with the Haudenosaunee projecting control over them. Many of the peoples who had lived on those lands had resettled in other parts of North America or had been adopted into Haudenosaunee society. The Haudenosaunee used their control of these lands to protect their ability to move freely despite French and English attempts to control their movements and to shape the volume of furs and trade goods flowing between the Indigenous peoples who produced them and the French and English suppliers of European goods located in Montreal and Albany, respectively.

Despite depopulation, the transit corridors of the Ohio Country continued to be well traveled, especially by the Haudenosaunee. By the last two decades of the seventeenth century, however, many travelers were on diplomatic missions as Native emissaries from the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat and Algonquins began meeting to resolve their differences, often without either French or English negotiators present. By negotiating independently of their European allies, these Native nations signaled that diplomatic relations among Indigenous peoples would continue to be held without Europeans' intervention. Diplomatic relations with Europeans did not, of course, cease. While the Haudenosaunee were negotiating with Natives of the western Great Lakes, they were also doing the same with the English in New York and the French in Canada. With this three-pronged diplomatic strategy, they positioned themselves as autonomous actors across the northeast who were not beholden to either camp of newcomers.<sup>19</sup>

Years of diplomacy culminated in two major treaties in the summer of 1701: one with the English in Albany, New York, in July and a second, the Peace of Montreal, in August. The English–Haudenosaunee treaty involved English officials, led by Governor John Nanfan, and over thirty leaders from the five nations of the Haudenosaunee. In contrast, the Treaty of Montreal involved approximately thirteen hundred Natives representing thirty to forty nations and hosted by the governor general of Canada, Louis-Hector de Callière. The various parties convened the congress to resolve nearly a century of disputes and retaliation that had engendered chronic and debilitating warfare.<sup>20</sup>



Twenty-three-year-old Algonquian man (1645).  
Etched by Wenceslaus Hollar.

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Detail containing a reference to the 1701 Iroquois-English Treaty (1758).

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All parties to both treaties shared the objective of burying the hatchet and planting the tree of peace. The Haudenosaunee also wanted to make clear that in future Anglo-French conflicts, their default position would be neutrality. These two treaties affected the geopolitics of North America at least as much as the Anglo-French and Anglo-Spanish treaties negotiated in Utrecht in 1713, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–13). Like those later European treaties, the 1701 treaties emerged from multilateral negotiations and were complementary.<sup>21</sup>

The Haudenosaunee had much to bring to the table with their overtures of peace. At stake were the vast tracts of territory to the south and north of Lake Erie that Haudenosaunee warfare had depopulated during the previous century. Together, those tracts were estimated to be about four hundred miles from east to west and eight hundred from north to south. According to a deed and map drawn up in Albany in July 1701, those lands stretched east–west from the Allegheny Mountains to Lake Michigan and north–south from the Ohio River to the latitude of Lake Superior. But during the last decades of the seventeenth century, Algonquian nations had been gradually relocating their villages farther south along Lake Huron and west from Lake Michigan. In 1701, in anticipation of peace, the French approved Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac to establish a trading post at Detroit, on the understanding that Haudenosaunee, as well as the traditional Native allies of the French, could trade there.<sup>22</sup>



Within these enormous tracts of land, what remained depopulated in the early eighteenth century were the lands that would become known as the Ohio Country. With a modicum of peace restored to the Great Lakes region, the Wendat/Wyandot established settlements near the western end of Lake Erie, the mouth of the Maumee River, and the Detroit River linking Lake Erie with Lake St. Clair, what would become the northwest corner of the Ohio Country. Along with their erstwhile enemies, the Haudenosaunee, they wished to keep the region between Lake Erie and the Ohio River a common hunting ground. On the southern side of the Ohio Country, the Cherokee, with their homelands in the Appalachian Mountains, had weathered the seventeenth century without being displaced and had expanded their hunting grounds northward to the Ohio River—the parts of the Ohio Valley that are now in Kentucky and West Virginia. Thus, three large Indigenous polities, each of which indicated ambivalence about the French or British entering the region, except to bring trade goods, surrounded the Ohio Country. Their shared concern contributed to the Ohio Country being one of the last regions east of the Mississippi River that European imperial interests were able to penetrate.<sup>23</sup>

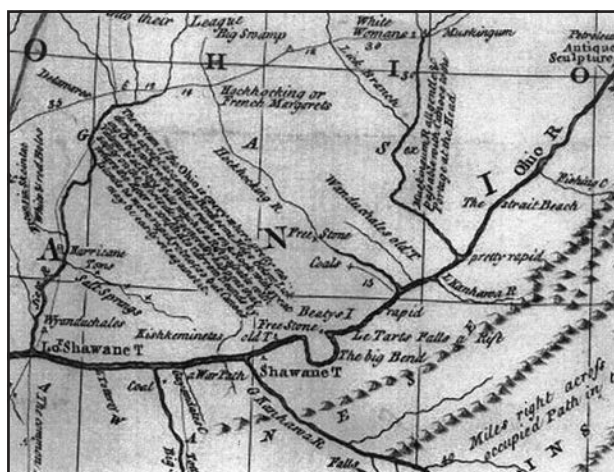
At the beginning of the eighteenth century, after the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat-Algonquians buried the hatchet in Montreal and planted the tree of peace, the Ohio Country ceased to be the dangerous place it had been for most of the seventeenth century. Indeed, it became the opposite, a largely unoccupied Native-controlled region. In 1713, the end of the War of the Spanish Succession that had convulsed Europe and the Atlantic basin reinforced peace in the interior of North America. From then until the 1740s, all Euroamerican settlements experienced dynamic demographic and economic growth, whether the New England colonies, Acadian communities in Nova Scotia, plantations in the Chesapeake, or Canadian settlements along the St. Lawrence. Some Native communities close to those growing settlements found themselves and their lands under increasing pressure and their options limited. The Ohio Country became a refuge, a place where they could resettle, rebuild their societies, or evade an alliance with the French or the British.



Austenaco, great warrior, Commander in Chief of the Cherokee Nation (1762).

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In the 1720s, a group of Delaware living on the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania negotiated with the Haudenosaunee, as a client nation, to settle on the Allegheny River, a tributary of the upper Ohio River. Accompanying them were Shawnee who had also been living along the Susquehanna River but claimed they had been there as guests of the Delaware, not as a client nation of the Haudenosaunee in either Pennsylvania or the Ohio Country. Members of the Seneca nation, the westernmost of the Haudenosaunee Five Nations also settled in the upper Ohio Valley. In the 1720s, the Haudenosaunee considered these Native peoples living in the upper Ohio Valley within the jurisdiction of their Council Fire at Onondaga. With time, however, the community sizes required local leaders, and Seneca half-chiefs assumed authority. Scholars, however, are unclear about whether the Council Fire appointed them or they were locally selected.<sup>24</sup>



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After a particularly severe winter in 1740–41, during which game was scarce, some Haudenosaunee hunters known as Mingos established a settlement at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River, the site of the future city of Cleveland. It was also the northern terminus of one of the transit routes linking the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence watershed with the Ohio–Mississippi watershed. The route went up the Cuyahoga River, over the height of land, and down the Tuscarawas and Muskingum rivers to the Ohio, passing through the lands where the Delaware predominated. Situated strategically on Lake Erie, the Mingos could easily travel east to their Iroquois homelands. Within a short while, Delaware, Mohican, Abenaki, and Ottawa peoples were also living in the area.<sup>26</sup>

In 1743, Wyandots near Detroit sent a group to establish a settlement at the mouth of the Sandusky River on Lake Erie, first negotiating with the Shawnee and Delaware. By reaching out to the Shawnee and Delaware, the Wendat/Wyandot were also manifesting their autonomy from the French and signaling that they did not believe the French had any valid claim to the Ohio Country, that the Wyandot-French alliance that dated back to the early seventeenth century did not extend to affairs in the Ohio Country. Also, by not involving the Haudenosaunee, the Wyandot showed that they considered the Shawnee and Delaware equals in the Ohio Country, beyond Haudenosaunee and British authority and beyond French authority. The Wyandot settlement at Sandusky also anchored the northern end of the Scioto Trail, with Lower Shawnee Town anchoring the southern terminus at the mouth of the Scioto River. On the western edge of the Ohio Country, southwest of Detroit, the Miami were expanding their villages along the Maumee River and the upper reaches of the Great Miami River.<sup>27</sup>



Detail showing Wyandots' land on the southwest side of Lake Erie (1758).

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Traders who traveled through the region reported back to British authorities with knowledge of the growing number of new villages throughout the Ohio Country. In 1747, George Croghan delivered to Pennsylvania's Provincial Council a message from the Wyandots at Sandusky that included a French scalp, a powerful and morbid sign that some of France's former allies from the pays d'en haut were willing to support the British in the War of the Austrian Succession (1744–48). Then in November, a different group of Natives, who identified themselves as "Warriors living at *Ohio*" and connected to the Six Nations, traveled to Philadelphia to meet with officials. Although they indicated they were of the Six Nations, the Haudenosaunee Council Fire leadership at Onondaga had not sent them; they were acting independently as "Ohio Indians."<sup>28</sup>

The movement of Native peoples back into the Ohio Country and their independent outreach to colonial officials, especially without authorization from the Haudenosaunee, triggered anxiety and debates among the British and French about whose territory it was. The French claim of discovery dated back to La Salle's exploration of a stretch of the Ohio River in the summer of 1669. The British had a multilayered claim. One layer was based on the Covenant Chain alliance with the Haudenosaunee, who, the British contended, had conquered the territory over the seventeenth century and driven out the prior inhabitants. This argument served British, but not always Haudenosaunee, purposes, especially given the 1701 Peace of Montreal. A second layer, which derived from Pennsylvania and Virginia's seventeenth-century charters, was reinforced by traders out of Pennsylvania who helped maintain communications between the "Ohio Indians" and colonial officials in Philadelphia.<sup>29</sup>

For both the French and the British, the end of the War of the Austrian Succession was merely a suspension of fighting, and both sides planned for the next war. In North America, that involved major new installations, such as the building of Halifax and a naval base, reinforcing vulnerable locations, such as St. John's, Newfoundland, or securing contested territory, such as the Ohio Country. In June 1749, the French sent Pierre-Joseph Céloron de Blainville with more than two hundred men to mark the perimeter of the Ohio Country with lead plates declaring that the territory belonged to France. On that trip, he discovered how indifferent, if not hostile, to the French were former Indigenous allies now living in Ohio and how casually they traded with the British.<sup>30</sup>

Needing more than lead plates to demonstrate their claim, the French built four forts on the Venango Trail, which linked Lake Erie with the upper Ohio Valley: in 1753 Fort Presque Isle on Lake Erie and Fort le Boeuf on French Creek within the Ohio River watershed; and in 1754 Fort Machault at the confluence of French Creek and the Allegheny River and Fort Duquesne, where the Allegheny and Monongehela rivers converge and become the Ohio

River. As is well known, in 1754 Virginia sent its militia under Col. George Washington to drive the French out of the Ohio Valley, triggering the North American fighting in what would become the Seven Years' War (1756–1763).<sup>31</sup>

For the first five decades of the eighteenth century, from the Peace of Montreal in 1701 to the outbreak of Anglo-French fighting in the Ohio Valley in 1754, Indigenous peoples had determined the Ohio Country's narrative trajectory. It was native ground, a dish with one spoon, a common hunting ground, a refuge for Natives from other parts of North America, a place where a new multinational confederacy of Ohio Indians was forming. With the Anglo-French militarization of the upper Ohio Valley, the imperial narratives of the French and British moved from the negotiating tables in Europe and the planning councils in colonial cities onto Native ground. That shift was triggered, in part, by the French and British recognition in the late 1740s that a new and potentially powerful Native confederacy had developed without their full cognizance. For the French, contingents of former Native allies were relocating to the Ohio Country and expressing a new autonomy. For the British, the Ohio Indians did not consider themselves clients of the Haudenosaunee.

Many histories of the Ohio Country begin with the French and British competition to control the upper Ohio Valley and address which Native nations supported which imperial power. We know from the name the British gave the ensuing war—the French and Indian War—whom they believed the Natives supported. That emphasis, however, can too easily leave the impression that for Native peoples in the Ohio Country and surrounding areas the most important matter was which European empire to support. It almost certainly was not. Indeed, for Native peoples the most important geopolitical issue in the Ohio Country was how much to appease both sides to keep the French and British struggle from threatening their autonomy, their lands, their basic sustenance, and the confederacy they had forged.

For Natives in the Ohio Country, their eighteenth-century diplomacy, compromises, and collaborations had suggested it was possible to be autonomous from the French and British, not unlike what the Haudenosaunee achieved in 1701, and to build a multiethnic confederacy. Pan-Indigenous cooperation became a reality, and Native thinkers could articulate what pan-Indigenous opportunities might include. Thus, after the British defeated the French in North America and Gen. Jeffrey Amherst thought he could dictate terms to Native peoples, the British were met with a series of well synchronized attacks on forts in the Ohio Country and Great Lakes, a pan-Indigenous war led by the Ottawa chief Pontiac, who drew on the pan-Indigenous ideology of greater self-reliance and autonomy as articulated by the Delaware prophet Neolin, who lived along the Muskingum River in the Ohio Country.



The Seven Years' War and Pontiac's War initiated six decades of fighting over the Ohio Country and then lands to the west. But the previous six decades, from 1701 to 1763, are arguably the more important for understanding how those later years unfolded. The resilience of Native peoples in negotiating and fighting for their own autonomous republic has a legacy anchored in the first half of the eighteenth century. The credibility the British gave to their ambitions as late as the negotiations to end the War of 1812 reflected that long history. The new United States' vehement resistance to it was the new development. The Native cooperation, collaboration and ingenuity to build and then defend a pan-Indian Confederacy in the Ohio Country spanned a century, a remarkably long time for a political movement that met such militant resistance before its suppression.



Pontiac, Chief of the Ottawas (1922). Created by Harris & Ewing, photographer.

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This essay responds to the concerns of many students at the University of Akron who took the History of Native North America course and found the scholarship on the Ohio Country unsatisfactory. I do not know if this essay will satisfy them, but their research papers over the years inspired me to try a broad overview. Melissah Pawlikowski and Kathryn Labelle helped with parts of the essay. LeeAnn Whites has an admirably steady hand as an editor, Andrew Frank and an anonymous review pushed me to improve my analysis, and Erin Holman lifted the prose. I am grateful to all of them. Any deficiencies in the essay are mine.

- 1 The single best study of the Ohio Country is Michael N. McConnell, *A Country Between: The Upper Ohio Valley and Its Peoples, 1724–1774* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). Many points of the argument presented here are addressed in detail in his study.
- 2 Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). For a contrary argument, see Shannon Bontrager, “From a Nation of Drunkards, We Have Become a Sober People”: The Wyandot Experience in the Ohio Valley during the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 32 (Winter 2012): 603–32, esp. 605. On the “common pot,” see Jon Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534–1701* (East Lansing: Michigan State University

Press, 2010), 16–17; Victor Lytwyn, “A Dish with One Spoon: The Shared Hunting Grounds Agreement in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Valley Region,” in *Papers of the Twenty-Eighth Algonquian Conference*, ed. David Pentland (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1997), 210–27; Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 106–62. On nativist ideology, see Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); David Dixon, “A High Wind Rising: George Washington, Fort Necessity, and the Ohio Country Indians,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 74 (July 2007): 333–53. Compare Dixon’s Native-centric analysis of the 1754 Anglo-French engagement in the upper Ohio Valley with Ian K. Steele’s more Eurocentric analysis in *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 183–85.

- 3 Lytwyn, “Dish with One Spoon,” 215–19; Kathryn Magee Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed: A History of the Seventeenth-Century Wendat People* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 97–98, 184–85; Raymond D. Fogelson, “Cherokee in the East,” *Handbook of North American Indians (HNAI)*, vol. 14, *Southeast*, ed. Raymond D. Fogelson (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2004), 337–38.

- 4 Robbie Franklyn Ethridge and Sheri Marie Shuck-Hall, eds., *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Charles M. Hudson, Thomas J. Pluckhahn, and Robbie Franklyn Ethridge, eds., *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and History of the Southeastern Indians* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006); Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 16, 17; Andrew Sturtevant, “‘Over the Lake’: The Western Wendake in the American Revolution,” in *From Huronia to Wendakes: Adversity, Migrations, and Resilience, 1650–1900*, ed. Thomas Peace and Kathryn Magee Labelle (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 36.
- 5 For relevant scholarship on these themes, see Parmenter, *Edge of the Woods*; Stephen Warren, *The Worlds the Shawnees Made: Migration and Violence in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Peace and Labelle, *From Huronia to Wendakes*; Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*; Stephen Warren and Randolph Noe, “‘The Greatest Travelers in America’: Shawnee Survival in the Shatter Zone,” in Ethridge and Shuck-Hall, *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone*, 164, 166–68.
- 6 Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 120–40; David G. Moore, *Catawba Valley Mississippian: Ceramics, Chronology, and Catawba Indians* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 185–95; James Hart Merrell, *The Indians’ New World: Catawbans and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 92–133; Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
- 7 Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 417–18.
- 8 Jean Baptiste Louis Franquelin’s map of Louisiana [1684], [s.l., 1896–1901], available online at the Library of Congress Web site, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2001620469/>; Jean Baptiste Louis Franquelin, *Map of Northernmost America—1688*, available online at *Wikimedia Commons*, page last edited November 12, 2016, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean\\_Baptiste\\_Louis\\_Franquelin\\_-\\_Map\\_of\\_Northernmost\\_America\\_-\\_1688.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean_Baptiste_Louis_Franquelin_-_Map_of_Northernmost_America_-_1688.jpg); “Feature Detail Report for: Ohio River,” Geographic Names Information System, US Geological Survey Web site, form updated January 16, 2018, [https://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=gnispq:3:0::NO::P3\\_FID:425264](https://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=gnispq:3:0::NO::P3_FID:425264).
- 9 For a description of the Maumee–Great Miami route, see Helen Hornbeck Tanner, “The Glaize in 1792: A Composite Indian Community,” *Ethnohistory* 25 (December 1979): 16. The Wabash River, another tributary of the Ohio that runs through Indiana, is sometimes considered the western edge of the Ohio Country; see White, *Middle Ground*, 187.
- 10 Parmenter, *Edge of the Woods*, 12.
- 11 Many scholars use Ohio Valley as a synonym for Ohio Country but often with unfortunate consequences. For example, in *Common Pot* Lisa Brooks writes of two Native embassies to the western Indians at Detroit, one undertaken by Joseph Brant, a Mohawk, and a second by Aupaumut, a Mahican, in 1786 and 1792. She characterizes them as embassies to the “Ohio Valley” (121, 143). About Aupaumut’s trip, she writes, “Arriving in the Ohio Valley in July, Aupaumut was greeted enthusiastically by Miamis at the Detroit trading point,” a geographically implausible statement (143). Aupaumut arrived in the Ohio Country to meet with Miamis at Detroit.
- 12 For consistency, I use “Ohio Country” in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century portions of this essay, recognizing that it was not a defined region during those centuries.
- 13 Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada’s “Heroic Age” Reconsidered* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1986), 111–63; Parmenter, *Edge of the Woods*, 12–13, 18–19; Jennifer Birch, “Current Research on the Historical Development of Northern Iroquoian Societies,” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 23 (Feb. 2015): 293–95; Warren, *Worlds the Shawnee Made*, 27–56; Warren and Noe, “Greatest Travelers in America,” 164–66.
- 14 Warren and Noe, “Greatest Travelers in America,” 165; Gregory A. Waselkov, “Exchange and Interaction since 1500,” *HNAI*, 14:687.
- 15 Birch, “Current Research on the Historical Development of Northern Iroquoian Societies,” 265–68, 292–93; Parmenter, *Edge of the Woods*, 13–18.
- 16 Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*.
- 17 On the Wendat, see Labelle, *Dispersed but Not Destroyed*, 1–141; on the Iroquois wars see William A. Fox, “Events as Seen from the North: The Iroquois and Colonial Slavery,” in Ethridge and Shuck-Hall, eds., *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone*, 63–80.
- 18 Jennifer Birch and Ronald F. Williamson, “Navigating ancestral landscapes in the North Iroquoian world,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 39 (2015), 140–41; Marian E. White, “Neutral and Wenro,” and Marian E. White, “Erie,” both in *HNAI*: vol. 15, *Northeast*,

- ed. Bruce G. Trigger (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 407–11, 412–17; Eric Bowne, “‘A Bold and Warlike People’: The Basis of Westo Power,” in Hudson, Pluckhahn, and Ethridge, *Light on the Path*, 123–32; Warren, *World the Shawnees Made*, 27–56.
- 19 Lytwyn, “Dish with One Spoon,” 211–17.
- 20 Scholars give different figures for the number of Haudenosaunee leaders: Parmenter, *Edge of the Woods*, states thirty-two headmen participated (268); Gilles Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701: French-Native Diplomacy in the Seventeenth Century* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2001), gives the figure of thirty-three (“nine Mohawks, five Oneidas, twelve Onondagas, four Cayugas, and three Senecas,” 160).
- 21 This point expands on Havard’s observation, *Great Peace of Montreal*, 179.
- 22 Parmenter, *Edge of the Woods*, 269, 265–67; José António Brandão and William A. Starna, “‘Some Things May Slip Out of Your Memory and Be Forgotten’: The 1701 Deed and Map of Iroquois Hunting Territory Revisited,” *New York History* 86 (Fall 2005): 417–33.
- 23 Lytwyn, “Dish with One Spoon,” 215–18; Havard, *Great Peace of Montreal*; Raymond D. Fogelson, “Cherokee in the East,” in *HNAI*, 14:337–38.
- 24 Warren, *Worlds the Shawnee Made*, 180–84; McConnell, *Country Between*, 47; Dixon, “High Wind Rising,” 335.
- 25 Eric Hinderaker, “Declaring Independence: The Ohio Indians and the Seven Years’ War,” in *Cultures in Conflict: The Seven Years’ War in North America*, ed. Warren R. Hofstra (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 105.
- 26 McConnell, *Country Between*, 80; John W. Parmenter, “The Iroquois and the Native American Struggle for the Ohio Valley,” in *The Sixty Years’ War for the Great Lakes, 1754–1814*, ed. David Curtis Skaggs and Larry L. Nelson (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press), 106.
- 27 McConnell, *Country Between*, 15–47.
- 28 Hinderaker, “Declaring Independence,” 105.
- 29 Warren, *Worlds the Shawnee Made*, 197–202.
- 30 John G. Reid and Elizabeth Mancke, “From Global Processes to Continental Strategies: The Emergence of British North America to 1783,” in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Phillip A. Buckner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); W. J. Eccles, “CÉLORON DE BLAINVILLE, PIERRE-JOSEPH,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*: vol. 3, 1741–1770, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/celoron\\_de\\_blainville\\_pierre\\_joseph\\_3E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/celoron_de_blainville_pierre_joseph_3E.html).
- 31 Steele, *Warpaths*, 183–85.