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Introduction: Historians and the Public Debate about the Past

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The writing of history comes with many challenges—dealing with an overabundance or a paucity of sources, reading through bias in the sources, facing disagreements among historians, and the need to communicate historical findings effectively. Most of the time, historians find themselves alone in their task, influential in only modest or indirect ways, and generally removed from the public light. But on occasion, current events touch on the past in such a way as to thrust historians onto the public stage. Often when this happens, groups of people who rarely interact suddenly find themselves on opposite sides of a public debate and engaged in a war of words that neither of them anticipated nor desired. Oddly enough, these groups often share a common impulse—historians write about the past to serve society by providing them with historical knowledge while the public recognizes the importance of the past to their daily lives. The rub comes when the two groups do not agree on what happened in the past, why it was important, or how best to commemorate it. Something like this happened in August, 2012, further complicated by disagreements among scholars themselves.

On 9 August of last year in the *Syracuse Post-Standard*, journalist Glenn Coin revealed that supporters of the Two Row Renewal Campaign—an initiative to draw attention to environmental concerns and native sovereignty rights on the anniversary of an agreement between the Dutch and the Iroquois on 21 April 1613—had been contacted by anthropologist William Starna and linguist Charles Gehring who advised them that the so-called Tawagonshi Treaty establishing the date upon which the four-hundredth

anniversary was being calculated was a forgery.¹ Starna, Gehring, and William Fenton (now deceased) had examined this document and published an article in 1987 demonstrating that it was not genuine.² After that, others weighed in. Vernon Benjamin, who had argued in a 1999 publication that the Tawagonshi document warranted another look, wrote to the *Syracuse Post-Standard* applauding the coverage of the issue of its authenticity.³ Sociologist Robert Venables then published “An Analysis of the 1613 Tawagonshi Treaty” on the Onondaga Nation website arguing for the authenticity of the document.⁴ Numerous public statements ensued including a further publication by Starna and Gehring on the document’s provenance in *New York History*.⁵ The Tawagonshi document was not the only point of debate. For many, this document—forged or not—nonetheless pointed to an actual event that was recorded in Iroquoian oral tradition and kept alive until today. Known as the *kaswentha* or *guswhenta* tradition, it represents the Iroquoian belief in an early accord between the Dutch and the Iroquois in which they agreed to respect one another’s sovereignty and follow parallel paths of non-intervening development. The *kaswentha* tradition is further reinforced by the Two Row Wampum Belt. Not literally a belt that is worn, the Two Row Belt is made of wampum beads—crafted from marine shell in white and purple—and comprises two parallel purple rows against a field of white beads. These two rows represent the parallel paths of Dutch and Iroquoian development.

The regular editors of this journal were intrigued by this debate but also a little troubled by it. While the debate has not received widespread attention outside of New York State, let alone on the international stage, it is nonetheless significant because it is representative of public debates that occasionally erupt at the intersection of scholarly inquiry and public concern. In this case, there were questions on the one hand about the wisdom of professional scholars engaging in what might be seen as lobbying

¹ “400 years later, a legendary Iroquois treaty comes under attack,” http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2012/08/400_years_later_a_legendary_ir.html; accessed 27 March 2013.

² “The Tawagonshi Treaty of 1613: The Final Chapter,” *New York History* 68 (1987), pp. 373-93.

³ http://blog.syracuse.com/opinion/2012/08/historic_dispute_review_of_art.html; “The Tawagonshi Agreement of 1613: A Chain of Friendship in the Dutch Hudson Valley,” *Hudson River Valley Review* XVI, No. 2 (September, 1999), pp. 1-20, http://www.hudsonrivervalley.org/review/pdfs/hvrr_16pt2_benjamin.pdf; “Tawagonshi Revisited; An Exchange of Letters”, http://www.hudsonrivervalley.org/review/pdfs/hvrr_18pt1_tawagonshirevisited.pdf.

⁴ http://www.onondaganation.org/aboutus/history_two_row_wampum.html.

⁵ Charles T. Gehring and William A. Starna, “Revisiting the Fake Tawagonshi Treaty of 1613,” *New York History* 90 (Winter 2012), pp. 95-101.

activities. On the other hand, the editors wondered about the number of public statements regarding the historical record that did not seem to be informed by historical scholarship. Furthermore, the public comments, especially those posted by readers of the various news and opinion items, lacked respect for scholarly disagreement and often degenerated into ad hominem attacks, especially against Starna and Gehring. The debate also raised interesting questions about the basis for historical scholarship—documentary-based research versus oral traditions, for example. But the most significant concern of the editors was simply that the investigations into what really happened, or might have happened, in 1613 were being overshadowed both by an argument over the authenticity of the Tawagonshi document and by the current political and social significance of the 1613 date as it related to the Two Row Renewal Campaign. Finally, there appeared in the public discussions a lack of confidence in scholarly inquiry or the belief that scholars such as Starna and Gehring were driven more by political concerns than by professional standards. Inspired by these concerns, the editors asked us to serve as co-editors of this special issue of the *Journal of Early American History* in order to explore the veracity of the Tawagonshi document along with the historical context for the treaty purportedly represented by it and for the *kaswentha* tradition and the Two Row Wampum Belt.

As we set out to do this, we very quickly decided upon a strategy aimed to bring broad historical understanding to bear on the question as well as to create a true forum of scholarly discussion. Our purpose was not to take sides in the public debate but to shed as much light on the historical context as possible through scholarly inquiry since we believe that appreciation for this has suffered most in the ongoing public dispute. We began by developing a set of questions that we believed needed to be addressed. This led to a plan to invite experts to write about different aspects of the presumed 1613 treaty. It was obvious that someone unconnected with the public debates about the document's authenticity as they emerged late last summer should be invited to contribute an essay on the document itself. For the rest, we chose scholars who could discuss the historical context in various ways, so we sought someone to examine Dutch-Indigenous relations in the Atlantic World, another scholar to look specifically at the early years of Dutch trade in New Netherland, an expert on Iroquois diplomacy to explore that crucial piece of the puzzle, and finally a person knowledgeable with the history of wampum to provide background on that aspect of early Dutch-Native contact.

All of the authors are trained specialists in their respective fields with substantial records of published peer-reviewed scholarship. To insure

further a significant degree of scholarly integrity, we established a double-blind review process that was overseen by one of the regular editors of the journal. Since we as co-editors each contributed an essay to this issue and also specifically invited individual experts to write for this issue, we felt it particularly prudent to remove ourselves from the review process. Furthermore, we should note that the work of most of the scholars here is primarily based upon documentary analysis and integrated with other data sources such as archaeological evidence, linguistic analysis, and oral traditions. This is important to note since the public debate has partly turned on the issue of whether or not the Iroquois people's oral tradition is valid in (Western) historiographical terms. While the scholars represented in this forum may disagree on the relative merits of oral traditions, all would argue that such oral histories must be handled as are other sources of evidence, with care and respect, but also under a critical eye of scholarly inquiry.⁶

As editors, we have not been disappointed with the results of the forum. The essays that follow all speak to the Tawagonshi document and Two Row Wampum history in different ways and provide much food for thought. In the first essay, "The Tawagonshi Tale: Can Linguistic Analysis Prove the Tawagonshi Treaty to be a Forgery?", Harrie Hermkens, Jan Noordegraaf, and Nicoline van der Sijs, linguistic experts, conclude the answer to be "yes."⁷ More thoroughly than any earlier work, this essay establishes the provenance of the document, the history of its apparent creator Lawrence G. Van Loon's interest in Dutch New York and his connection to the document, and the authenticity of the document itself. A careful study of the spelling and grammar within the document reveal a significant number of anachronisms making it impossible for the text to have originated in 1613. Nor is it possible that it is a later copy of a document since lost. But as supporters of the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign have pointed out, the legitimacy of the treaty tradition does not rest on the authenticity of the

⁶ Much literature has been produced on the use and significance of oral traditions and oral history. A useful entrée into the discussion, albeit with a focus on the twentieth century, is James B. LaGrand, "Whose Voices Count? Oral Sources and Twentieth-Century American Indian History," *American Indian and Culture Research Journal* 21, no. 1 (1997), pp. 73-105.

⁷ Van der Sijs is the author of *Cookies, Coleslaw, and Stoops: The Influence of Dutch on the North American Languages* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), Noordegraaf of *The Dutch Pendulum: Linguistics in the Netherlands, 1740-1900* (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 1996), and Hermkens of 'Spraeck van huijden, toon van strael.' *Opstellen over taal en Constantijn Huygens, bijeengebracht door Ad Leerintveld met een Ten geleide door Marijke van der Wal* (Amsterdam, Stichting Neerlandistiek VU; Münster, Nodus Publikationen, 2011).

document alone. So while the first essay in our forum should end the debate about the Tawagonshi document itself, the remaining essays provide helpful insights into the history of Dutch and Native treaty making.

The first of these, “The States-General and the Stadholder: Dutch Diplomatic Practices in the Atlantic World before the West India Company”, offers an important comparative perspective. Mark Meuwese examines Dutch-Indigenous relations in two West African locales and in Brazil.⁸ The author concludes that before the creation of the Dutch West India Company in 1621, Dutch traders did not conclude treaties with Native peoples in the Atlantic world. Various agreements and alliances were made, but these took place only when specific factors were involved—the threat of Iberian intervention and the presence of centralized political orders among Indigenous peoples, factors that were not present in North America.

The next essay, by Jaap Jacobs, provides a careful overview of the history of early Dutch trade voyages to the Hudson River and other geographical targets of Dutch traders in the mid-Atlantic region.⁹ Based upon thorough investigation of Dutch language sources, “Early Dutch Explorations in North America” highlights what can be substantiated about these early points of contact and what is only conjecture. The conclusion of this essay concurs with that of its predecessor—Dutch traders would have had no need to make a treaty with local Indian groups on behalf of the Dutch nation and there is no indication that they did so. On the other hand, there is good reason to believe that Dutch traders and local Native people would have made some sort of agreement as indicated by the Dutch building of the Fort Nassau on native lands and the Kleyntjen affair.

“The Meaning of Kaswentha and the Two Row Wampum Belt in Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) History: Can Indigenous Oral Tradition be Reconciled with the Documentary Record?” comes at the issue from a Native perspective and explores the intersection of oral history and written sources. Jon Parmenter argues that “undertaking such an exercise reveals substantial documentation in support of Haudenosaunee oral tradition concerning *kaswentha*”.¹⁰ As early as 1656, references to an early treaty can

⁸ Meuwese is the author of *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade: Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595-1674* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁹ Jacobs is the author of *New Netherland: A Dutch Colony in Seventeenth-Century America* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

¹⁰ Parmenter is the author of *The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534-1701* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

be found in the written records and Parmenter argues that they support Iroquois claims that a longstanding treaty existed between the Dutch people and the Iroquois. The author further argues that the example of the *kaswentha* tradition demonstrates the need for scholars working on Native history to integrate oral traditions with documentary records.

In the last essay in our collection, “Wampum, Tawagonshi, and the Two Row Belt”, Paul Otto approaches the issue from a material culture perspective.¹¹ Since wampum figures in both the Tawagonshi document and in the *kaswentha* tradition, Otto asks what the status of wampum was in 1613. He argues that wampum was an evolving product that experienced much change after contact with Europeans. Those changes, particularly the widespread adoption of dark or purple shell beads, made possible belts like that of the Two Row, but did not occur until circa 1630. Otto is quick to add, however, that such a reality does not undercut the Two Row tradition, but merely challenges the 1613 date.

Readers will discover that the essayists do not agree on all the particulars, such as the role of Jacob Eelkens. But given the work that has been done here, we believe it is fair to offer the following conclusions. First, the Tawagonshi document is a forgery and not a later copy of a lost original. Second, whatever agreements or negotiations traders such as Jacob Eelkens and Hendrick Christiansen may have made with Native peoples, these could not be construed, at least in European terms, as diplomatic treaties between sovereign nations. Establishing both of these realities does not, however, discredit the tradition of an agreement between Dutch and Iroquois representatives that would later become the basis for Anglo-British and then American negotiations with the Iroquois. The historical context does make it unlikely, at best, that such an event happened in the 1610s. The claim that 2013 is the four-hundredth anniversary of a first covenant is therefore not corroborated by historical research. However, after the 1621 establishment of the West India Company and particularly after the end of the Mohawk-Mahican War four years later, the context for such an enduring agreement is far more probable.

Having said this the nature of scholarly inquiry is such that new discoveries and new interpretations are always possible, insofar as their evidentiary

¹¹ Otto is the author of *The Dutch-Munsee Encounter in America: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Hudson Valley* (New York: Berghahn Press, 2006) and “Wampum: The Transfer and Creation of Rituals on the Early American Frontier,” in Gita Dharampal-Frick, Robert Langer, and Nils Holger Petersen (eds.) *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual*, vol. 5, *Transfer and Spaces* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), pp. 171-88.

basis is sufficient to revise standing interpretations that are heretofore well-founded. Even beyond that, more work can and should be done. It would be useful to all researchers and readers of early Hudson Valley history if a comprehensive exposé was completed on the work of Van Loon and the many other documents that he likely forged. The history of wampum is still to be written in full, and much more research, particularly in archaeological sources and ethnographic evidence, is necessary for a fuller picture. Furthermore, building upon Parmenter's essay, an exhaustive account of the Two Row Wampum Belt and *kaswentha* tradition might help better pinpoint its exact origins. So although this special issue of the *Journal of Early American History* does not offer an exhaustive account of the historical context for the Tawagonshi document and the *kaswentha* tradition it does reflect current scholarly thinking on these subjects and should serve to inform the public about the history of early Dutch-Iroquoian relations.

