

Revisiting the Fake Tawagonshi Treaty of 1613

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“With ink, anyone can write anything.” An eleventh-century country squire of Lorraine quoted in Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*.

A fake treaty document, whose fraudulence was first exposed by us twenty-five years ago in the pages of *New York History*, is about to be celebrated, however misguided, despite the fact that it is a piece of fiction. Press reports and a website have recently advertised “The Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign,” an initiative of the Onondaga Nation, the organization NOON (Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation), and the Syracuse Peace Council. The stated goal of the campaign is to mark the 400th anniversary of the so-called 1613 Tawagonshi treaty between the Dutch and the Haudenosaunee (five-nation Iroquois) and to “polish the chain of friendship” allegedly embodied in the precepts of the “Two Row Wampum.” Events in Albany and New York City to mark the occasion are in the planning stages. Honorary advisory committee members of the campaign are Syracuse University chancellor Nancy Cantor, Tom Porter (Mohawk), British anthropologist Jane Goodall, Onondaga County Executive Joanne Mahoney, Oren Lyons of the Onondaga Nation, singer Pete Seeger, and other notables, while campaign co-sponsors include Ithaca College, Wells College, SUNY Cortland, Environmental Consortium of Colleges and Universities, All Saints Catholic Church in Syracuse, the Syracuse Community Choir, and the Indian Affairs Committee New York (Quakers) Meeting.²

Posted on the campaign’s website, and purporting to authenticate the 1613 Tawagonshi treaty, is the text from a Dutch-language docu-

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2. See www.honorthetworow.org, click on “Our Campaign.”

ment translated by “Dutch friends of the Onodnagas [*sic*]” along with an accompanying introductory essay by former Cornell historian Robert Venables dated 2009.³ The document from which the Dutch-language text is taken, however, is a fake, the same fake we wrote of in 1987.

While preparing our translation and annotation of the 1634-1635 journal of Harmen Myndertsz van den Bogaert, published in 1988, we examined two related documents—a letter and map said to have been produced by Jeronimus dela Croix, a member of Van den Bogaert’s party. Both documents had been translated and published by L. G. van Loon, M.D., then of Reading, Pennsylvania, in the 1939-40 volume of *Dutch Settlers Society of Albany Yearbook*. However, the letter and map, now in the New York State Library, turned out to be fakes, a finding that we published in *New York History* in 1985.⁴

We continued to follow Van Loon’s trail as other bogus seventeenth-century documents came to our attention: a deed to Manhattan, an early map of Albany, and another of the Hudson River.⁵ One of the more curious items was the Tawagonshi treaty, dated April 21, 1613, that Van Loon published in 1968. On its face the treaty appeared to be an agreement between certain Dutch traders and four “chiefs of the Long House” that provided for Dutch purchase of “parcels of land,” mutual assistance in the event of food shortages, and for the settlement of differences before “a meeting of Commissaries.” To seal the agreement, a “silver chain” was exchanged “for a fathom of beadwork [in the document, “*Seewant*,” i.e., wampum].”⁶

However, the document that Van Loon had “discovered” was also

3. See www.honorthetworow.org, click on “Learn More,” then “Two Row History,” then scroll down to “Two Row Translation and Context.”

4. Charles T. Gehring and William A. Starna, trans. and eds., *A Journey into Mohawk and Oneida Country, 1634-1635: The Journal of Harmen Myndertsz van den Bogaert* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988) [rev. ed. forthcoming, spring 2013]; Charles T. Gehring and William A. Starna, “A Case of Fraud: The Dela Croix Letter and Map of 1634,” *New York History* 66, 3(1985):249-61.

5. In his effort to authenticate another Van Loon related document, linguist Jan Noordegraaf, who spoke with family members, acquaintances, and other parties in his research, reported: “He [Van Loon] was very open with his wife’s nephew, who lived with them for a long time, about the seventeenth-century Dutch documents that he had fabricated himself and had published. Together they had a good laugh about it. Also Van Loon’s daughter Tina related that she was aware of her father’s falsifications.” “Schuim en asch. Nederlands wat verdween,” *Nieuwsbrief voor afgestudeerden van de opleiding Nederlands van de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, 35 (Nov. 2010):25 (translation by Charles Gehring).

6. L. G. van Loon, “Tawagonshi, the Beginning of the Treaty Era,” *Indian Historian* 1(1968):22-26.

a fake, a finding that we, along with the late William N. Fenton, published in *New York History* in 1987. Briefly, we demonstrated that the Dutch text of the treaty was marked by problematical linguistic and orthographic anomalies. The vocabulary and phraseology were untypical of comparable seventeenth-century documents. And the script was suspicious in the extreme. One example: the signature of one of the Dutchmen did not match an authentic autograph from the notarial archives in Amsterdam. In addition, there were obvious historical slips. The names of the “four chiefs” are not personal names but place-names; actually, they are the names of clan villages found in a late nineteenth-century publication. The reference to a “silver chain” is a fatal anachronism, the term not being in use or documented until the 1670s.⁷ In fact, the first mention of any kind of chain is one made of iron in September 1659, the sequence over time, according to native witnesses, being first, a twisted withe of bark, followed by a rope, an iron chain, and then a silver chain.⁸ A second anachronism in the treaty text is the word “*Seewant*,” which we correctly translated as “wampum.” *Seewant* (various forms) is from Pidgin Delaware, a contact language that did not develop until the 1620s.⁹

With the appearance of the “Honor the Two Row” website, public announcements, and the presentation of Venables’s essay and the “new” translation “authenticating” the treaty, we felt obligated to contact members of the honorary advisory committee, several of the co-sponsors, and a Syracuse newspaper, advising all concerned that the treaty document is a fake.

The outcome of our correspondence has generally been silence, with

7. Charles T. Gehring, William A. Starna, and William N. Fenton, “The Tawagonshi Treaty of 1613: The Final Chapter,” *New York History* 68, 4(1987): 373-93. Rather than clutter our text with citations to information that we draw from our just cited 1987 article, readers are asked to go to the article.

8. See E. B. O’Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York; Procured in Holland, England, and France by John R. Brodhead*. 15 vols. (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1853-1887). See also Charles T. Gehring, trans. and ed., *Fort Orange Court Minutes, 1652-1660* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 457. Here a Mohawk headman situates the iron chain in the mid-1640s. For the chain sequence see Francis Jennings, William N. Fenton, Mary A. Druke, and David R. Miller, eds., *The History and Culture of Iroquois Diplomacy: An Interdisciplinary Guide to the Treaties of the Six Nations and Their League* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 116-17. See also William A. Starna, “Retrospecting the Origins of the League of the Iroquois,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 152, 3(2008): 279-321.

9. Ives Goddard, “Pidgin Delaware,” in Sarah G. Thomason, ed., *Contact Languages: A Wider Perspective* (Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1997), 43, 77, 81.

the exception of a few acknowledgments of receipt from committee members and co-sponsors amid charges in the *Syracuse Post-Standard* of being anti-Iroquois. Venables appears to have suggested that unnamed “other scholars say that any inconsistencies in language and pen strokes would be explained by the fact that it had been copied by hand long after 1613.”¹⁰ The only scholar we know of who has made such an assertion is Cornell historian Jon Parmenter, who maintains that the treaty document “may well be a twentieth-century copy of another text.”¹¹ Such a claim, of course, is absurd. Why would someone well after the fact, indeed, in the twentieth century, create a copy of an early seventeenth-century document by mimicking seventeenth-century handwriting? And, of course, we wonder on what evidence Parmenter based his supposition.¹²

The news article was soon followed by a letter-to-the-editor by Vernon Benjamin, a resident of Saugerties.¹³ In it, Benjamin mentions that some years ago we had declined, following his request, to revisit our essay on the treaty. That part is true. He also states that he had “queried Norman Rice,” the then director of the Albany Institute of History and Art, who, Benjamin claims, “had long contended that the agreement was valid.” We have since spoken with Rice, who did not recall having any contact with Benjamin. However, Rice allowed, even if he had been “queried” by Benjamin he would never have offered an opinion on the legitimacy of the document as he has no knowledge of the Dutch language nor of the history of the period.¹⁴

In his letter, which has undoubtedly found a large audience, Benjamin leveled a personal attack on us and charged that in his reading

10. See the news article at http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2012/08/400_years_later_a_legendary_ir.html

11. Jon Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534-1701* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 22.

12. Parmenter was a presenter at the “Talk on *Guswentha* (Two Row Wampum)” held at the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, on May 22, 2012. The announcement for the talk read in part: “The Two Row Wampum treaty, also known as *Guswentah*, is an agreement made between representatives of the Five Nations of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) and representatives of the Dutch government in 1613 in what is now upstate New York.” There was no Dutch government in 1613 in what would be called New Netherland, and the alleged agreement mentioned is the fake Tawagonshi treaty.

13. See the letter at http://blog.syracuse.com/opinion/2012/08/historic_dispute_review_of_art.html

14. Norman S. Rice, personal communication with the authors, Aug. 13-14, 2012.

of our 1987 article he had been “stunned by the number of errors” he found, referring readers to a 1999 essay he had published and later posted online. In that essay, Benjamin declared, he was able to demonstrate that we “had not only not proved [our] forgery claim, but had treated L. G. van Loon and the whole subject in a derisive and uncivil fashion.”¹⁵

Benjamin’s critique of our work occupies a bit more than two paragraphs of the article’s twelve pages of text. What precedes his discussion is essentially an irrelevant, frequently uninformed, often mistaken, and sometimes bizarre take on Algonquian and Iroquoian archaeology, ethnography, linguistics, and history that is deserving of no comment from us. Insofar as the treaty is concerned, Benjamin misses a great deal, and moreover, fails to make the case that our essay was marred by errors.

It first must be said that, to the extent of our knowledge, Benjamin has no demonstrated expertise in seventeenth-century Dutch, the Dutch language, or evaluating period Dutch documents; no demonstrated skills translating seventeenth-century Dutch; no demonstrated knowledge of historical linguistics; and no demonstrated familiarity with period Dutch-language orthography, phraseology, script styles, or use of vocabulary. He is neither a recognized nor an emerging authority on the Dutch language or period history. On this basis alone we reject categorically any of his challenges having to do with the Dutch language, handwriting, and period documents.¹⁶

In his article Benjamin misses the two anachronisms mentioned before: the terms “silver chain” and “*Seewant*.” He asserts that the chiefs’ names were “also the names of Iroquois villages,” arguing that “the writers imply that naming Iroquois lords after ancient Mohawk villages is proof that the text is bogus, yet they do not document the assertion or account for Beauchamp’s observation on such a practice among the Iroquois” (p. 11). Benjamin misunderstands Beauchamp. However, if he had consulted with contemporary Iroquoian linguists or was at all familiar with the authoritative literature on the application and use of names in Iroquoian, he would have learned that historically in those languages

15. Vernon Benjamin, “The Tawagonshi Treaty of 1613: A Chain of Friendship in the Dutch Hudson Valley,” *Hudson Valley Regional Review* 16, 2(1999):1-20; http://www.mindsERPent.com/American_History/federal/treaties/Indian/tawagonshi.html

16. From all indications, Benjamin also lacks expertise or scholarly standing in Iroquoian and Algonquian history, ethnology, linguistics, and archaeology.

personal names are not used as place-names, nor is the reverse true. Even so, our discussion on the Indian names found on the treaty is not as Benjamin reports it. We cited Fenton's letter where he wrote: "The names are in the orthography of the Anglican missionaries who commenced work in the Mohawk Valley in the second quarter of the 18th century." Benjamin fails to include the complete sentence and ignores the date when this orthography first appeared—the 1720s—rendering its use in the alleged 1613 treaty an impossibility. Fenton (as did we) also pointed out that the orthography was also employed by Horatio Hale writing in 1883, from whom Van Loon got the names for his "treaty," names that he took care to disguise. Again, Benjamin does not provide his readers with this information. That is, these names had first been recorded by Hale, and indeed, are not found in any other document or publication that we know of.¹⁷

Benjamin writes: "The critics tout the use of a handwriting expert in the 1959 inquiry, but only relate that the expert, J. Howard Haring, was 'the star witness at the 1935 trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann . . . '—and the most dubious prosecution link in that trial, as I recall" (p. 11). The "critics" did no such thing. We were reporting on the activities of the editors of *de Halve Maen* in their evaluation of the photostat of the treaty Van Loon had sent them.

Finally, and in his rush to judgment, Benjamin provides the following (p. 12):

In an analysis of the text, the authors [Gehring, Starna, and Fenton] criticize the phrase, *soolangh t' g[r]as groen* is (so long as the grass is green), as "a metaphor familiar to present-day Americans from film and fiction" but not of seventeenth-century vintage; yet Victor Hugo Paltsits found "'as long as grass grew or water ran'" in Rensselaerswyck leases of 1630s vintage, so even if the Indians did not know how to speak like Indians in the seventeenth century, the Dutch did.

17. See Horatio Hale, ed., *The Iroquois Book of Rites* (1883; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 119, 121.

Paltsits neither found nor did he report any such phrase in leases from Rensselaerswijck. The passage in Paltsits that Benjamin quotes—"as long as grass grew or water ran"—is from a memorandum written by one Howard Townsend, Esq., in 1923, transferring to the New York Public Library a gift from Stephen van Rensselaer of an inventory of the papers from the colony and manor of Rensselaerswijck.¹⁸

The 1613 Tawagonshi treaty that Van Loon "discovered" remains a fake.

18. Victor Hugo Paltsits, *Inventory of the Rensselaerswijck Manuscripts: Edited from the Original Manuscript in the New York Public Library* (New York: New York Public Library, 1924), 3. The sources referenced in Paltsits's footnote are general histories of the patroonship and offer nothing on the phrase in question. To the best of our knowledge, the earliest form of the phrase documented in colonial New York—"so long as grass shall grow and waters run"—is from 1768. O'Callaghan and Fernow, eds., *Documents Relative*, 8:118.