

From Peril To Perserverance: Dr. Arthur C. Parker and the Seneca Arts Project



Dr. Arthur C. Parker circa 1912

With the surge of residential schools and forced assimilation beginning in the late 19th century, the culture of the Haudenosaunee was in jeopardy. However, by the 1960s and 70s there was a renaissance of this culture during the Red Power Movement. What laid the groundwork for this revitalization of Haudenosaunee culture during Red Power?

Background

- The **Thomas Indian School** operated on the Cattaraugus Seneca Reservation from 1856 to 1957.
- Students were forbidden from speaking Native languages and practicing their culture, a form of cultural genocide
- From 1925-1945 a Seneca archeologist named **Dr. Arthur C. Parker** was the director of the Rochester Museum and Science Center

Why Does This Matter?

- Native history is often neglected or simplified in textbooks
- Even residents of New York State are often ignorant of the history that took place here
- Parker was responsible for uplifting both museum culture and Native American culture and he is seldom credited
- It is an ethical duty to uplift histories that empower groups of people, especially today where so many are being purposefully erased

Methodology

- Examined archives of the Democrat and Chronicle, the leading newspaper in Rochester, NY. Identified first hand accounts of Parker's activity
- Explored books from the Rochester Museum on Parker's archeological excavation to understand his expansion to Native research
- Cross-references primary sources with scholarships such as Joy Porter's biography of Parker, "To Be Indian"

The Seneca Arts Project

- Parker directed the **The Seneca Arts Project** from 1935 to 1941
- The project built a collection of Seneca **artifacts** and contemporary Seneca **art**
- Was inspired to make meaningful collections of Native knowledge after witnessing the New York State Museum Fire of 1911
- Native artist like Ernest Smith were given platforms to display their art
- Instead of being located in the Rochester Museum, it was located in smaller museums on the **Tonawanda** and **Cattaraugus** reservations
- Parker was also an early advocate for **publicizing museums** and making them more appealing and open to everyday people

Analysis

- The Seneca Arts Project was crucial for reinstalling Seneca Culture
- Parker was responsible for delivering accurate Native education directly to Native American reservations
- I argue that Parker's educational initiatives for the Seneca Nation, and Haudenosaunee at large, helped seed the Red Power Movement due to influx of knowledge and culture that was displayed in the project
- Red Power was a display of cultural identity and education
- It can be argued that because the project was one of the only sources of Native cultural education, it had to of led to the influx of knowledge and culture in the Red Power Movement
- It also fostered new displays of culture by inviting Native artists to practice and celebrate their culture



Rochester Museum and Science Center

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Conclusion



"Sky Woman" Ernest Smith (1936)

- One of Parker's enduring impacts was to make museums a public good rather than exclusive academic institutions
- This allowed for museums to showcase and honor cultural knowledge of diverse groups of people
- Being a local historical figure, Dr. Parker makes it very special to be from Rochester and Upstate NY in general
- It is important to uplift local history in order to empower those who live here and give the proper credit to Parker's achievement

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