

Dispersed but Not Destroyed

*A History of the Seventeenth-Century
Wendat People*

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A Brief Chronology
Selected Wendat Events and Migration,
1400-1701

Wendake

- ca. 1400 The Bear and Cord join to create the Wendat Confederacy
- ca. 1570 The People of the Deer join the Confederacy
- 1609 Samuel de Champlain meets the Wendat in Wendake for the first time
- ca. 1610 The People of the Rock join the Confederacy
- 1634 The Jesuits establish residence in Wendake; first epidemic
- 1636 The Feast of Souls at the village of Ossossane
- 1637 The headmen Taretande and Aenon die
- 1648-49 The Wendat are attacked by the Iroquois and their villages are abandoned
- 1649-51 The Wendat seek refuge at Gahoendoe Island

Wendat Migration and Settlement in the East

- 1651 Île d'Orléans
- 1656 Quebec City
- 1657 Some Wendat decide to join various Iroquois communities
- 1660 Fort of the Huron
- 1668 Beauport
- 1669 Notre-Dame-de-Foy
- 1673 Ancienne Lorette
- 1697 Jeune Lorette

Wendat Migration and Settlement in the West

- 1651 Mackinac Island
- 1653 Green Bay
- 1659 Chippewa River
- 1661 Chequamegon
- 1671 Michilimackinac
- 1701 Fort Pontchartrain/Detroit

Introduction

THIS BOOK BEGINS WHERE the Wendat world begins, with the Legend of Sky Woman.¹ In 1912, Catherine Johnson, a descendant of the seventeenth-century Wendat Confederacy, shared her people's Creation story, which she called "The Young Woman Fallen From Above." According to Johnson, Sky Woman, or Aataentsic, fell from her home in the clouds at a time when the world was a vast ocean inhabited only by sea animals. These animals gathered together in council upon witnessing the falling woman. In order to save her life, they agreed to create a landmass on the back of a giant turtle. Toad led the initiative by diving to the bottom of the ocean, retrieving mud and placing it on the back of Turtle. By the time Sky Woman reached the water, they had formed an earthly continent. Wild geese grabbed hold of Aataentsic's feet and arms to cushion the fall, guiding her to her new home, which we now call North America. The Wendat believe themselves to be the descendants of Aataentsic and they have structured their society in relation to these cosmological origins.² In many ways, the Legend of Sky Woman highlights some of the most significant features of early modern Wendat society; it emphasizes the important roles of leaders (Toad), women (Aataentsic), and communal systems of power (the council). By the 1600s, the Children of Aataentsic had formed one of the most important polities in seventeenth-century North America.³

Situated within the territory stretching from Georgian Bay in the north to Lake Simcoe in the east (also known as Wendake), the Wendat Confederacy flourished for two hundred years by the time of European contact.⁴ The Confederacy consisted of four or five autonomous nations: the Bear Nation (Attignawantan), the Nation of the Rock (Arendaeronnon), the People of the Cord (Attigeenongnahac), the People of the Deer (Tahontaenrat), and perhaps a fifth group, the People of the Marsh (Ataronchronon).⁵ Every nation included several villages, organized around twelve matrilineal clans – Big Turtle, Little Turtle, Mud Turtle,

Wolf, Bear, Beaver, Deer, Porcupine, Striped Turtle, Highland Turtle, Snake, and Hawk. While politics remained a predominantly local affair, with decisions reflecting village-level interests, village representatives frequently came together for general meetings of their nation, and at least once a year delegates joined to discuss matters concerning the Confederacy at large. Within this multifaceted association, each village and nation remained free to create separate agreements in terms of trade, military, and diplomatic policies, although they often made collective decisions concerning these aspects as well. At most, the Confederacy consisted of an estimated 30,000 people, occupying roughly twenty to thirty palisaded longhouse villages that changed location about every ten to thirty years.⁶

The Wendat were part of a larger Nadowekian ethnic heritage.⁷ They shared a common Nadowekian language, matricentric social order, and agricultural tradition with other groups, such as the Iroquois, Mingo, Cherokee, Erie, Neutral, Petun, and Susquehannock. The Nadowek were matrilineal and matriarchal; thus, they structured clans around the female line, and women controlled community fields, activities around the home, and domestic life. Clan mothers also exercised significant influence concerning the selection of leaders and their community's participation in warfare. By the sixth century A.D., most Nadowek had transitioned to maize agriculture, supporting relatively large and sedentary villages in comparison to Native societies centred on hunting and gathering.

Although one might suspect that the similarities between the seventeenth-century Nadowek would foster close relations, the Wendat often chose alliances with groups outside this cultural category. From the thirteenth century on, the Wendat maintained robust trading networks with their Anishinaabe neighbours through the exchange of corn for furs.⁸ This system extended beyond economic and subsistence partnership, developing into an official alliance that connected the Wendat and Anishinaabeg through marriage, diplomacy, and cultural rituals. The so-called Coalition dominated the geopolitics of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence corridor for centuries.

The Wendat expanded their alliance system with the arrival of French colonists and missionaries. Beginning with Samuel de Champlain's expedition in 1603, and later the establishment of Quebec City (1608), Trois-Rivières (1634), and Montreal (1642), the founding of New France presented innovative opportunities for Wendat confederates. These sites

became not only seventeenth-century hubs for French commerce, culture, and colonial political power but also points of interest for the Wendat concerned in extending trade and diplomatic initiatives. Missionaries were a key component to the French–Wendat alliance. Jesuits became permanent residents of Wendake by the 1630s. Through their Christian faith and a desire to convert Natives, these men dedicated years, if not their lives, to the Wendat people. Missionaries and the Wendat exchanged intellectual capital, discussing not only spiritual beliefs but also secular policies connected to trade and politics. Often the Jesuits acted as interpreters and middlemen between French administrators and Wendat headmen, facilitating treaty negotiations between the two. In addition, French citizens such as lay workers for the missionaries, fur traders, judges, and notaries, as well as colonial administrators including governors, intendants, and soldiers, became well-known figures to the Wendat community. In many cases, French colonists forged intimate ties with the Wendat, becoming their husbands, landlords, and godparents. Governors in particular engaged in face-to-face meetings with Wendat diplomats and traders, and forged long-lasting and personal relationships with them. This type of intricate association remained an important component to Wendat foreign policy and alliance making for over a century.

If the Wendat viewed the Anishinaabeg and French as their foremost allies, then unequivocally the Nadowek nations comprising the Iroquois Confederacy (Mohawk, Seneca, Onondaga, Oneida, and Cayuga) were their principal enemies. Iroquois territory included most of present-day central and upstate New York, which led to frequent encounters with the Wendat along the Ottawa and St. Lawrence rivers. Much like their Wendat foes, each Iroquois nation remained autonomous while still loyal to their overall alliance. The Iroquois frequently campaigned (both independently from each other as well as in unified fronts) against the Wendat to avenge blood feuds and because of a desire to repopulate communities by adopting captives. The central location of Wendake in respect to river systems and commercial depots of the northeast, along with the regular trade of the Wendat with the Anishinaabeg, further motivated Iroquois aggression. During the seventeenth century, the Wendat orchestrated an elaborate geopolitical strategy, making them powerful diplomats and traders and thereby the targets of envious Iroquois adversaries.

By the mid-seventeenth century, many customary features of Wendat society, including leadership roles, women's status, and power dynamics, were under attack. Within the span of only a few decades, European

encounters set in motion a series of deadly epidemics throughout Wendake that killed many of its leaders. The combination of Christian patriarchal influences, as well as a lack of choice in community headmen, destabilized women's authority, and incessant warfare threatened their ability to maintain trade and an agricultural surplus. Then, in 1649, the Iroquois executed a number of successful attacks on Wendat villages. Despite concerted efforts by Wendat warriors, many lost their lives in battle, while others became Iroquois captives destined for torture or forced adoption. Those left behind witnessed the ruin of Wendat homes and fields, as well as widespread expressions of panic and despair. As a result, survivors reconsidered the security of Wendake. After much deliberation, they resolved to evacuate their homeland and recreate their communities in new territories. The Wendat packed up their belongings, dismantled their villages, and tried to avoid any further Iroquois encounters as they set out to start anew. This Wendat dispersal, according to conventional accounts, marks the "destruction" of the Confederacy.⁹

Scholars have contributed greatly to our knowledge of Wendat society and in particular their history before 1650. In fact, the most influential studies focus on the pre-dispersal period.¹⁰ Notwithstanding their importance, this temporal framework tends to constrict Wendat history and implies a declension model typically used to describe the experiences of Native Americans in the post-contact period. This model portrays Native peoples as passive casualties (in this case, the victims of Iroquois aggression and European disease), which leads to the assumption that the Wendat experienced destruction as a people. With the Iroquois conquest of 1649 as the climax, Wendat history beyond the dispersal becomes an epilogue perpetuating the belief that whatever happened afterwards is marginal to the overall understanding of the early modern Wendat. As a result, the extermination of one of the most powerful polities of seventeenth-century North America remains an emblematic conclusion – or allusion – to the story of first encounters.

By refocusing the historical lens on the dispersal and its aftermath, this book is an attempt to extend the seventeenth-century Wendat narrative. The Wendat re-emerge in the historiography as important leaders, interpreters, and signatories during the negotiations of the famous Great Peace of Montreal in 1701 – fifty years after their evacuation from Wendake. Their presence indicates that they retained their status as influential diplomats and traders despite the dispersal, and complicates the notion of a destroyed people. The following chapters trace Wendat resistance,

evacuation, and relocation from 1630 to 1701.¹¹ Through this framework, notions of identity, cultural continuity, and diaspora formation unique to Wendat society after 1650 are explored. Overall, I contend that the Wendat remained culturally and politically “Wendat” throughout the seventeenth century. By extension, I counter the declension model in terms of Native political organization, women’s power, and cultural assimilation after European encounters. The power of the Confederacy did not cease to exist in the latter half of the century; Wendat leaders continued to present themselves collectively at councils, trade negotiations, and diplomatic ventures, relying on old, established customs of accountability and consensus. Similarly, despite the fact that women may have lost ground in terms of political influence due to Jesuit persuasion towards a patriarchal society, they nonetheless found solace and strength as Christians, which gave them a powerful place within their new communities as lay ministers, seminarians, and nuns. Last but not least, the Wendat retained cultural traits that maintained their unique “Wendat” identity after 1650. For the most part, they did not become French, Anishinaabeg, or Iroquois, as scholars have suggested.

Although situated in the seventeenth-century Great Lakes region, a time and space often framed by European–Native American encounters, this is not a typical “contact” narrative. Clearly focused on the Wendat experience, Europeans, particularly the French, are present but are given no more weight than the Anishinaabeg or Iroquois. Through this approach I dissect Wendat foreign relations in terms of multiple systems of power and within a North American rather than Eurocentric context.¹² It is my hope that this type of research will contribute to several scholarly discussions beyond the Wendat and with broader scope.

First, this research demonstrates that Europeans were not the only ones who transplanted their societies in seventeenth-century North America in an attempt to recreate and impose familiar structures within a new homeland. Native Americans did this as well. The Wendat uprooted their population, packed up their material and cultural capital, and re-established themselves in far-off lands according to Wendat customs. While important research has been done on the ability of Native refugees to create new worlds and cultural matrix, the Wendat experience highlights how Natives based additional removal strategies on old systems and traditions.¹³

The Wendat dispersal also contributes to our knowledge of indigenous forced migrations. The most comprehensive studies of North American Native removals and relocations focus on the infamous Trail of Tears and

the American Indian Removal Act of 1830.¹⁴ Yet, many Native Americans underwent similar situations of relocation two hundred years earlier. In the northeast alone, the Wendat joined many other groups, such as the Ottawa, Erie, Neutral, Potawatomi, and Miami, who fled Iroquois violence and European disease. The Wendat experience is, therefore, an investigation into Native diasporas of the colonial period, offering a detailed portrait of the strategies, tactics, and cost of removal within a seventeenth-century context.

A third aim of this book is to redefine early North American societies into systems of power. These systems were based on multifunctional networks rather than static organizational frameworks rooted in ethnic, tribal, or regional similarities.¹⁵ Understandably, politics, military defence, ethnicity, trade, and religion fundamentally shaped European political organizations in the seventeenth century, thus making them logical points of reference for historians engaging with European and Euro-American sources.¹⁶ In reality, Native systems looked very different from European ones, as the contrast between metropolises in Europe and the lack of identifiable centres in North America demonstrates.¹⁷ The prevalence of these seemingly ambiguous Native networks, often functioning outside the realm of the popular Wendat or Iroquois Confederacy framework, suggests that they were some of the most prevailing systems of alliances within the North American context. A “system” paradigm, therefore, questions the validity of confederacies as an appropriate analytical tool for Native North America, offering diasporic polities as an alternative.¹⁸

Finally, in writing this history, I give considerable weight to the personal biographies of Wendat individuals as a means to offset the widespread “faceless” history of Native North America. Historian Daniel Richter attributes the lack of research on Native individuals to evidentiary problems, noting, “It is much easier to reconstruct the abstract forces that constrained the seventeenth-century Native world than it is to recover the personal experiences of the people who struggled to give the world human shape.”¹⁹ Like the European imperial sources they draw upon, historians privilege group actions and pan-Indian policies rather than individual agency. By including biographical accounts of Wendat people, this work gives voice to the individuals who influenced this period of Wendat history. The initiatives of particular male and female Wendat leaders allowed them to survive their dispersal; whether relocating to Anishinaabe territory, sending daughters to convents, or replacing civil headmen with war chiefs, Wendat strategies rested on the ideas and actions of specific people.

This book is organized into three sections. In Part 1: Resistance, I offer a thematic analysis of disease, diplomacy, and warfare before the dispersal, emphasizing the factors that led to the Iroquois victory. Chapter 1 begins in the 1630s with the introduction of European disease in Wendake, and examines Wendat civil leaders and their policies to address the loss of life and social unrest before the dispersal. The actions of influential Wendat leaders such as Taretande and Aenon illustrate the diplomatic successes, political divisions, failed military strategies, and secret meetings that reveal Wendat responses to the crises they faced. This chapter also assesses the impact that the deaths of key leaders had on the community during an era of epidemic disease, and explores the ways in which leadership changes affected Wendat decision making. Ultimately, in contrast to accounts that stress Wendat disorganization and cultural decline, I argue that the 1630s was simultaneously a time of collaboration and renewal.

Chapter 2 explores Nadowek warfare in the 1640s and charts the emergence of what I term “a culture of war” during the heightened conflict with the Iroquois. The Wendat military defeat in 1649 did not result from a single decisive attack by the Iroquois, but rather was the culmination of a decade of battles between the two groups. Military strategy and leadership changed during this period. Most strikingly, war chiefs replaced the civil headmen who had traditionally led the Confederacy. This shift in political power, from civil leaders to those charged to lead in times of war, helps to explain some of the more frequent violence of the 1640s. Although the Wendat experienced extreme levels of conflict and captivity, they won notable battles as well, presenting a strong opposition to the Iroquois throughout the period despite their loss in 1649.

Part 2: Evacuation and Relocation, explores the people, ideas, and motivations behind the community’s decision to abandon the Wendat homeland in 1649, as well as the experience of migration itself. Each of the five chapters – “Wendat Country,” “Anishinaabe Neighbours,” “The West,” “The East,” and “Iroquois Country” – focuses on destinations the Wendat chose for relocation. Chapter 3 examines the decision to leave Wendat villages and take refuge in other parts of Wendat country – most notably the relocation of thousands to Gahoendoe. During the interim settlement of this island, many Wendat experienced famine, fear, and death. Out of an estimated six thousand initial residents, only one thousand survived. Ultimately, this chapter looks at the internal decision-making process that preceded the move to Gahoendoe in 1649, and the circumstances that pushed the Wendat to reconsider their choice a year later. The island

relocation formed an integral part of a calculated plan to overcome the military defeat by the Iroquois and keep a foothold in the geopolitical world of the northeast. Indeed, while disease and the Iroquois factored into the Wendat resolution to leave their homeland, the food crisis on Gahoendoe in 1649-50 was the most important issue shaping the future of the Wendat and their subsequent exodus from Wendat country.

Chapters 4 to 7 examine the processes and experiences of the Wendat survivors who relocated outside traditional Wendat territory. Many Wendat chose to move east towards Quebec City, while others went west, travelling towards Lake Michigan and settling near Michilimackinac. Still, the majority of the Wendat chose to relocate within existing Native societies, ranging from their rivals, the Iroquois, to their allies such as the Petun and Ojibwe. One of the surprising elements of this story is that as a survival tactic, the Wendat consciously decided to become geographically divided. This strategy expanded Wendat geopolitical boundaries; spreading themselves throughout the Great Lakes allowed the Wendat to re-establish their regional position as influential diplomats and traders. In contrast to the central and confined parameters of Wendake, the diaspora extended Wendat spatial power from Quebec City to Michilimackinac. Despite the changed geopolitical realities and Iroquois ascendancy, Wendat acceptance of Christian conversion and continued economic activity helped them maintain crucial ties with the French, which in turn gave the Children of Aataentsic leverage with both their allies and enemies.

The third and final section of this book, Part 3: Diaspora, outlines the societies that the Wendat created in exile by exploring key themes in diaspora Wendat culture. It revisits the communities discussed in Part 2, and offers an extended analysis and concluding remarks on the persistent Wendat concepts of leadership, women, and power. In Chapter 8, "Leadership," I contend that despite the dispersal, with its various migrations and resettlement strategies, as well as changes in geography, demography, and community, the nature of Wendat leadership remained intact. Continuing the emphasis on individual Native stories, this chapter includes biographical sketches of Wendat leaders in the post-dispersal period. Leadership provides a prism for understanding how the Wendat maintained their polity, because headmen exercised their duties in relation to their community and formal alliances. The cults of personality that emerged around certain exemplary leaders also offered the Wendat a means of maintaining cultural values across generations.

Chapter 9 examines another important leadership class – women. Many accounts insist that Wendat women lost political and social status due to the dispersal. Although this might be true in the long run, it was not immediate; also, this teleological argument does not reflect the numerous ways women continued to project their influence in the post-dispersal period. Women instigated relocations and shaped the early stages of diaspora formation. At the same time, the dispersal created unique new opportunities for women to assume leadership roles, enter trade, and acquire formal education. On the whole, Christianity did not constrain women as in the pre-dispersal period, but provided a vehicle for unity, spirituality, and social mobility.

Concluding this section is a chapter called “Power,” in which I analyze the sources and systems of power made available to the Wendat after their dispersal. Power can be used as an indication of strength and prosperity as well as a sign of societal struggle and disadvantage. The ways in which people gain, use, and lose power often reflects their social, economic, and political standing. The Wendat drew from a range of sources to survive their plan of resettlement. In turn, these sources translated into multi-dimensional systems of power based on long-standing relationships, reformulated to meet the needs of the Wendat post-1650. Overall, Wendat power did not wane during this period, but grew in terms of regional reputation for economic and diplomatic skill.

This book ends with an epilogue, “Reconnecting the Modern Diaspora, 1999,” centred on a gathering of the modern Wendat diaspora in their ancestral homeland of Wendake in 1999. The meeting signified a renewal of the Wendat Confederacy among contemporary Wendat groups residing in Quebec, Ontario/Michigan, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Notwithstanding the important and complex history of these separate nations throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, one may argue that these people, along with their connection to Wendake, and their ability to identify and unite as “Wendat,” originated during the period immediately after their ancestors’ dispersal in 1649. Within the span of fifty years, generations of Wendat came to understand their place as both individuals living within the physical territory of the French, Iroquois, or Anishinaabeg while preserving a connection to a larger community connected by a common heritage. The modern Wendat, like many other Native groups, exist within a flexible system of citizenry. Based on seventeenth-century notions of alliances, the present-day Wendat root the contours of their

ethnic identity in relation to their homeland of Wendake; even as most reside outside those geographic boundaries.

Several key terms used extensively throughout this study require clarification. Although there is some ambiguity to the meaning of Wendat, as scholars debate whether it translates into “the islanders” or “the people of the peninsula,” the seventeenth-century Wendat used this word to describe themselves, and therefore I use it to designate the people of the seventeenth-century Wendat Confederacy and their descendants.²⁰ The territory occupied by the Wendat before their dispersal was referred to by the Wendat as “Wendake” and is identified as such throughout this study. The popularized term “Huron” has also been used to describe the Wendat and “Huronian,” their country. Huron is a European-derived label. For this reason, I use Wendat instead of Huron, unless quoted in an original source.

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