

— THE STORY OF —
AMERICA

SPIRIT OF THE CORN



by Shantel Gobin



1650—New York

Orenda is the oldest woman of our people.
We are the Wolf clan of the Keepers of the
Western Door. Many know Orenda as the
wisest of all Haudenosaunee clan mothers. I
know her as Grandmother.

1650

My grandmother is a powerful woman. She decides who becomes chief and if there will be war. Those are only two of her many jobs. Grandmother loves bossing the men around. But that is not what brings her the most joy.

“My favorite thing is naming all the people in our clan.” I have heard this more times than I can count.

Grandmother named me Onatah after the Spirit of the Corn.

“You were born on the last day of the Corn Ceremony,” she says. “That was 15 years ago. I knew you would bring a bountiful harvest like the great Spirit of the Corn. That is why I gave you her name. Some of her lives within you.”

Grandmother tells me this story every August.
Then she shares the tale of the Three Sisters,
always ending with the same joke.

“If your mother has any more daughters, I will
name them Squash and Bean!”

Grandmother, my mother, and my aunts teach
me the great balance of the Three Sisters.
Corn, squash, and beans keep our family
alive. The women are in charge of farming
these gifts from the Creator. Women have
many jobs, except the one I really want.

“Grandmother, may I learn to hunt?”

“My child, women gather. Men hunt. This is
how we keep balance.”

Balance keeps me stuck in the same old
routine.

Farm.

Cook.

Repeat.

At This Time in History

This story takes place in what is now New York state. The Seneca were one of five Native American nations that formed the Iroquois Confederacy more than 500 years ago. By the mid-1600s, this group of Indigenous clans was a powerful force. They had defeated weaker tribes and controlled a large territory. The Iroquois were skilled in growing crops, hunting, and fighting.



1650

Seneca Culture

For the Seneca, daily life was based around a division of labor. Men hunted and fought in battle. They were skilled warriors. Women tended to matters of the village. They grew crops and made household goods. But women also made key decisions for the clan. This included electing leaders. When a man married, he became a part of his wife's family.

Artist F. O. C. Darley illustrated this scene from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha* during the mid-1800s. Like the Seneca hunters, this Ojibwe warrior uses a bow and arrows to kill a deer.



This image from an electron microscope shows the smallpox virus. The highly contagious disease sickened and killed many Indigenous people.

Then European explorers arrived. This led to enormous change for the Seneca. The explorers brought an invisible enemy: diseases. Smallpox, bubonic plague, and scarlet fever were some of the worst. Indigenous people had no natural immunity to these illnesses. That let the diseases spread quickly. So many villagers died that the culture had to change. Survivors had to learn skills that they had not previously known. Some ceramics from that time show uneven work. This is likely because many of the skilled crafters had died.

— 1600–1763 —

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