

Three Sisters

Recovery of Traditional Agriculture at Cayuga, Mohawk, and Oneida Communities

- “In the late spring we plant the corn and beans and squash. They’re not just plants-- we call them the three sisters. We plant them together, three kinds of seeds in one hill. They want to be together with each other, just as we Indians want to be together with each other. So as long as the three sisters are with us, we know we will never starve. The creator sends them to us each year. We celebrate them now.
- The Cayuga have begun to return to their land, to restore the three sisters, their relatives, and in that process to strengthen all that they are.
- “Over 200 years after they were forced from their land, Mohawk, Cayuga, and Oneida people are returning to their land, to their fields. They bring with them the three sisters: the corn, beans and squash.
- They lived in the area known as the New York/ Quebec region
- They have stories of the corn arriving from the spirits and from trade with peoples from the south.
- They have a farm that was purchased for them by local non-Indigenous residents in upstate New York in an attempt for the Cayuga people so that they might return to their heartland, their capital by the Great Gully. However it does say on both ends of the new land, “No Reservation, NO Sovereign Nation, NO to Cayuga Land Claims”
- Major General John Sullivan came to Cayuga territory in 1779 on orders from General George Washington :

The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more...Our future security will be in their inability to injure us, the distance which they are driven
- A subgroup of Sullivan’s force destroyed ONE MILLION bushels of corn during one week\
- The pretext for this scorched earth policy was to punish those members who had sided with the British against the colonists. But according to Jack Rossen, an agriculture archeologist and historian who has studied extensively this period, the real story is that the United States was broke, and it hadn’t paid its soldiers for months. The government was looking for a land grab, and that is exactly what happened: it was given as military tract to the soldiers.
- Sullivan’s terrorism resulted in 3,000 Iroquois refugees walking 120 miles west to British controlled Fort Niagara.
- The state of New York took possession of the vast majority of 64,000 acres of Cayuga territory through an agreement known as the Cayuga Ferry Treaty of 1795; five years after the federal Non-Intercourse Act of 1790 had barred states from signing treaties with Indian nations. The last of the tribe’s land was ceded in 1807.

- The state knew exactly how illegal their actions were; they never intended to send them to Congress for ratification. It was really a question of state vs. federal power
- The Cayuga's are the only Iroquois nation without a reservation; they were made refugees of their own land. In result in 1980 they had a lawsuit against the state of New York: when they filed they sought the return of the 64,000 acres and \$350 million in trespass damages.
- Then there was a protest by a group of non-Native landholders who called themselves the Upstate Citizens for Equality, formed in 97 as a voice for those who face displacement.
- There have been constant bickering back and forth and when the lawsuit remained unsettled in 1992, the federal govt joined in on behalf of the Cayugas. Two yrs later, Judge Neal McCurn ruled that the tribe indeed had a legal claim to 64,000 acres of land b/c Congress had never approved the acquisition of land by the state, as required by federal law.