

1784. Joseph Hodge, the First “American” to Settle in the Buffalo Region

Sources: <http://www.buffalonian.com/history/articles/%3C1800/whitebjoe.html>

Ontario County in western New York State was created by the state legislature in 1789. Since that time it has been divided into fourteen counties including Genesee (1802), Allegany (1806) Chautauqua (1808), Cattaraugus (1808), Niagara (1808), Erie (1821) and Orleans (1824). The first federal census in 1790 listed 105 White families in Ontario County, but none in the area near Buffalo Creek that later became Erie County.

While there was a Seneca Village and a British fort in Erie, there is some dispute over who was the first “American” to settle in the area. The leading candidates are Joseph Hodge, also known as “Black Joe,” and Cornelius Winney, a “Dutchman” who migrated from the Hudson River Valley.

Joseph Hodge was taken prisoner by Seneca Indians during a Revolutionary War-era raid. He was released to the United States authorities at Fort Stanwix in December, 1784. Hodge then returned to Seneca Nation where he married in the tribe and became a fur trader. His presence at Buffalo Creek was noted in a report on a council meeting of the Seneca tribe by the Rev. Mr. Kirkland in 1788. According to contemporary accounts, by 1792, Hodge was established as an Indian trader on Cattaraugus Creek. In 1796, Perry Smith wrote that Hodge was a “negro” who “had an Indian wife, who bore him children. He understood the Seneca language and was often employed as interpreter. He was supposed to be a runaway slave, and died at an advanced age, on the Cattaraugus Reservation.”

Cornelius Winney is referred to in a number of written accounts from the era starting in 1791. Winney’s small log store was about four miles from the Seneca Village. Hinds Chamberlain, who visited Buffalo Creek in 1792, described the settlement. “We arrived at the mouth of Buffalo Creek the next morning. There was but one white man there. I think his name was Winney, an Indian trader. His building stood first as you descend from the high ground. He had rum, whiskey, Indian knives, trinkets, etc. His house was full of Indians. They looked at us with a good deal of curiosity. We had but a poor night’s rest. The Indians were in and out all night, getting liquor.” There is also a letter signed by Winney to General Chapin, the local Superintendent of Indian Affairs dated August 3, 1792. “I inform Gen. Chapin that about seventy-nine of the Canadian Indians is gone to Detroit. They seem to be for war, and a number of Indians to go up. I further inform you that the Indians of this place are to go up in the first King’s vessel that comes down. Prince Edward is arrived at Fort Niagara. Should I hear anything worth while to write, I shall let you know.”