

Famous New Yorker Arthur Caswell Parker

Tradition and prejudice kept young Arthur C. Parker from being recognized as fully American or Native American, but as a historian, archaeologist and innovative museum director Parker helped define an American heritage that everyone could share.

Arthur Caswell Parker was born on April 5, 1881 on the Cattaraugus reservation of the Seneca nation. His father had a prestigious Seneca bloodline, but Arthur wasn't considered a full Seneca because his mother, a teacher, was white. At the same time, the U.S. government didn't consider him a full citizen because his father was a Seneca. Throughout his life, Arthur strove to forge an identity both fully Native and fully American.

After graduating high school in 1897, Arthur obeyed his parents' wishes by studying for the ministry, but his real interests were history and archaeology. He saw archaeology as a way to showcase Native Americans' place in U.S. history and define his own place as a Native American citizen.

In 1899 Arthur became an assistant archaeologist for the American Museum of Natural History. His mentors encouraged him to earn an archaeology degree, but Arthur was impatient to do hands-on research. He dropped out of seminary school in 1903 to become a full-time archaeologist. Dropping out didn't stop Parker from becoming a prolific and acclaimed author of scholarly articles and popular history books.

As a young archaeologist, Parker had to prove himself to both academia and the elders of the Seneca nation. In 1903, the year he conducted excavations on the Cattaraugus reservation, Parker was made an honorary Seneca and named Gawaso Wanneh or "Big Snakesnake." Important scholarship resulted from his unique access to Seneca secret societies and rituals. The scholarly community eventually honored Parker by electing him the first president of the Society for American Archaeology in 1935.

New York State recognized Parker's talent earlier. In 1904 the NYS Department of Education hired him as an ethnologist to study Native American culture. In 1906 the NY State Museum made him a staff archaeologist. Parker saw that museums were an ideal tool for defining national identity by showcasing both Native and settler history. He helped develop a science of museum organization and coined the words "museologist" and "museist" to describe his new career.

Arthur C. Parker received an opportunity to put his museum ideas into practice when he became the director of the Rochester Municipal Museum in 1924. He implemented innovative ways to catalog and exhibit museum holdings. During the Great Depression he saw museums as a "poor man's university" where all ages and classes could learn the history of their community and better understand the meaning of citizenship.



Cattaraugus Reservation is located in western New York with portions in three separate counties - Cattaraugus, Chautauqua and Erie.



Image from *American Indian Freemasonry* (1919) by Arthur Caswell Parker

Throughout his career Parker was an advocate for Native American rights. He helped start many Native organizations and publications, and helped persuade the U.S. to grant Natives full citizenship in 1924. During the Depression, his Federal Indian Arts Project preserved craft traditions and created jobs for Natives. Dedicated to state history as a whole, he encouraged stronger ties between local historical societies and placed historical markers throughout the state.

After his official retirement in 1946, Parker continued to write extensively on history and folklore. By the time he passed away on January 1, 1955, Arthur C. Parker had made history in more ways than one.

To learn more about paleontology go to the National Museum of Natural History's Paleontology for Kids website at www.amnh.org/explore/ology/paleontology. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2015.