

# Ohio Country Calling Children of Colonization



*We need to understand the subject... {of slavery}  
In its length & breadth; height & depth...  
We want to understand its character,  
As it has existed in other nations,  
& in days gone by...*

*Betsey speaking to abolitionists in 1843*

*October, 2023*

*Dear Betsey –*

*I touch the dusty and tattered deer skins wrapped  
around a trunk that protected your family's bedding  
in a wagon train over 200 years ago.*



*Its wooden frame crafted  
from pine trees  
in Connecticut, today  
preserving your clothes  
in the attic of your house  
in Ohio.*

*Cobwebs catch the light  
Mirror the mystery  
And the interconnectedness*



*I imagine you, Betsey,  
barely a year old,  
swaddled in a willow basket,  
crammed into a horse-drawn carriage  
leaving Bristol, Connecticut  
for the “unknown land  
of the so-called [“Western Reserve.”](#)*

*Your mother picked you up to breastfeed,  
anxious that you and your seven siblings  
in the two oxen-driven wagons behind  
had enough to eat.*

*Though she had brought along oats, corn, rye, bread and bacon,  
you and your sister Cornelia fell sick with a “mysterious illness.”  
Your parents stopped in upstate New York  
to seek medical attention and gather more food.*

*Were the thick forests you passed through  
a source of any sustenance, Betsey?*

*The caravan carrying your family, furniture  
and your father’s immense library  
made the treacherous journey,  
crossing forests, rivers and mountains.*

*Sometimes the rain churned the path into mud and swamps.  
At one point the larger wagon overturned, delaying your voyage.*

*Five weeks of forging through challenging terrain,  
and your family finally arrived in Ohio Country.*

*I was almost three when I was packed into a Studebaker, sharing the back seat with my four-year-old brother Mike while mom held my baby sister Kathy in the front.*

*Our journey in 1948 was much longer than yours, Betsey, almost 1,000 miles from Ashland, Maine to northeastern Ohio, and yet we got there in less than a week.*

*By then, many forests had been cleared the paths paved the horses long since replaced by motor vehicles.*

*While you were leaving a New England small town with a growing manufacturing industry in the early 1800s, I was leaving the backwoods of northern Maine, still a land of loggers and farmers, a geography more akin to the heavily forested land south of Lake Erie where you were headed.*





*As infants, neither of us had any idea where we were going,  
and yet we landed in the same pioneer town of Austinburg, Ohio.*

*The same land, with its rolling hills,  
winding rivers and meandering creeks,  
was our playground.*

*Though, thanks to deforestation,  
which you witnessed over your lifetime,  
the landscape I knew was dominated  
by farmers' fields and manicured lawns.*

*The same evolving community  
shaped our childhoods, Betsey,  
even if your arrival was in 1811  
and mine in 1948.*

*137 years later.*



# Going Underground in 2025: Indigenous History of Ohio

*As a kid, I learned very little of the Indigenous history of our hometown.*

*What did you know, Betsey, about the original inhabitants of Ohio?*



*It's not too late to unearth the history of this land we grew up on.*

*In 2024, I explored the [Seip Earthworks](#) of the Hopewell Culture in southern Ohio with my 76-year-old sister Kathy and 80-year-old brother Mike.*

*[Haudenosaunee knowledge-keeper Rick Hill reminds me that soil](#) is merely the remains of all that have gone before, the ancestors, animals, plant life, and the trees of previous centuries.*

*Only recently, in my 70s, have I learned about the underground connections between trees. Did you know that they communicate with each other, Betsey? Today we call them the internet of the soil.*

*What stories are travelling along that ["wood wide web"](#) in Ohio?*



*Monique, my Indigenous mentor of land-based research, has visited mounds all over the U.S.*

*Lie down and listen to the Earth, she suggests.*

*I stretch out in the field around a mound, my back pressed into the ground...  
Feeling the texture of the soil that holds the ancestors and artifacts of earlier inhabitants.*

*Listening for the heartbeat of the Earth  
merging with my own beating heart.*

*Looking up,  
the wildflowers take on the stature of trees.*

*The sky opens to a universe.*

*The Hopewell culture created mounds that aligned  
with the cycles of the Sun and the Moon.*

*I imagine the lives lived on this land.*

*Conventional archeology speculate that humans were present at least 10,800 years ago. An [Indigenous archeologist suggests it was 130,000 years ago.](#)*

*The [Hopewell mounds](#) (built between 2000 and 1600 years ago) bear the name of the settler farmer on whose land they were first [unearthed in 1890s.](#)*

*The Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks are the largest geometrically shaped mounds on the planet, named a World Heritage Site, of the same stature as Stonehenge and Machu Picchu.*

*Why did we not learn that in school, Betsey?*



February, 2025

Dear Betsey –

*In your parlour, I eye a birchbark box  
decorated with porcupine quills.*

*Did you know the Indians who made it?*

*What did you know about the [Proclamation of 1763](#)  
that preserved a massive swath of land  
east of the Mississippi  
and south of the Great Lakes  
as an Indian reserve  
“for exclusive use of Indigenous peoples”?*

*Within decades, families in your Connecticut town  
were offered land and a future in Ohio Country.*

*The Missionary Society of Connecticut  
that sent your family to Ohio was formed in 1798  
“to christianize the Heathen in North America  
and to support and promote Christian knowledge  
in the wilderness areas of the west.”*

*Did your family make contact with local Indians?*

*Were you taught to see them as heathens?*





*What did you know as a kid, Betsey, about the lives of Indians?*

*We played in the surrounding forests, recreating our notions of “tribes.”*

*The boys in our neighbourhood formed a Sumac Tribe, created elaborate lean-tos constructed from spruce branches, twigs, and rope.*

*Our girls’ group created the Hickory Tribe, claiming a small room in a local barn as a home base.*

*The boys invited us to their secret site in the woods and served us sumac tea – so tangy on the tongue!  
They dared us to climb the tower they built to send semaphore signals with makeshift flags.*

*We girls were early entrepreneurs:  
Gathering hickory nuts,  
Smashing them open with a hammer,  
Offering the precious nut meat to neighbours – for a price.*

*For me and my sisters and brothers in 1950s Ohio, any consciousness about “Indians” came through cartoon images of men in feathered headdresses, TV shows like the Lone Ranger with his subservient Indian side kick Tonto, or the logo of the closest baseball team, the Cleveland Indians.*

*In 2021, the team changed its name to Cleveland Guardians. Using Indian names for mascots, Betsey, has been considered by many as offensive, even racist. Though the current [U.S. President wants to reclaim the Indian name.](#)*

# Whose land? Colonial encounters (1700s-1800s)



*The stories I heard of “cowboys and Indians,” as a child of the 1950s midwestern U.S., either romanticized them or portrayed them as brutal savages.*

*Always relegated to the past, never thriving in the present.*

*Three decades before you arrived to Ohio in 1811, Betsey, the first “pioneers” encountered thousands of people from diverse Indigenous tribes: Erie, Wyandot, Cherokee, Delawares, Shawnees, Ottawas, Chippewas, Senecas, Potawatomies, Miamis, Tewas, Kicapooos, Ouiatenons, Iroquois.*

*A veritable UN of First Nations..!*

*Yet while you were still alive, Ohio was declared officially emptied of all Native Americans. Not true, according to Haudenosaunee scholar Barbara Mann.*

*Many just escaped to undesirable swamp land or “hid within their skin, altering dress and language.”*

*What did you witness, Betsey, as the land was ravaged and its original stewards forced west?*

*The primary witnesses, the trees, were uprooted, transformed into tall ships, homes, churches, schools, furniture. Leaving the soil exposed. The deforestation of Turtle Island was called “settlement.”*

*Trees were things to be used rather than relationships to be nurtured.*

*What would our “landscape” look like and our climate feel like if the newcomers had adopted the ethics of the [Dish with One Spoon covenant](#) which governs the Great Lakes region where I live now?*

*“Take only what you need;”*

*“Leave some for others;”*

*“Keep the dish clean.”*

*In 1662 an English royal charter granted your home colony of Connecticut all the “unexplored” land extending to the Pacific Ocean...!*

*After 1776 and the formation of the United States, Connecticut ceded most of the western lands, but retained a patch of 3.3 million acres in the northeastern corner of Ohio. That became known as the [Connecticut Western Reserve](#), or New Connecticut.*

*The state then sold it to a group of investors who formed the Connecticut Land Company, who then sold it to European settlers in 25-square mile townships.*

*That was the land that your family was gifted, Betsey.*

*I imagine those men drawing a rectangular grid on a map, without regard for the undulating rivers and forests they divided, claiming the land as “property” with the stroke of a pen.*

*Without any sense of connection to, or reverence for, the land or trees.*

*Did you see this, Betsey, as an expansionist project, similar to what your government did decades later in the Mexican war?*



*I can't find any of your writings that reveal how you understood this process of colonization that your family was part of.*

*But recently I discovered a speech by one of your suffragette colleagues, Frances D. Gage, opening the the Women's Rights Convention in Akron in 1851.*

*You were present at the first gathering, Betsey, so you must have heard her glorify settler history, brutal to both the land and the Indigenous peoples:*

*They went forth, and pitched their tents in the wilderness.  
An herculean task was before them—  
the rich and fertile soil was shadowed by a mighty forest,  
and giant trees were to be felled.*

*The Indian roamed the wild, wide hunting-grounds,  
and claimed them as his own.*

*He must be met and subdued.  
The savage beasts howled defiance  
from every hill top and in every glen.*

*They must be destroyed.*

*Gage lauded the work of her European forefathers, acknowledging long struggling, toiling, painful years which they saw in the prospection a great and incalculable good.*

*Ultimately, she summarized their victory:*

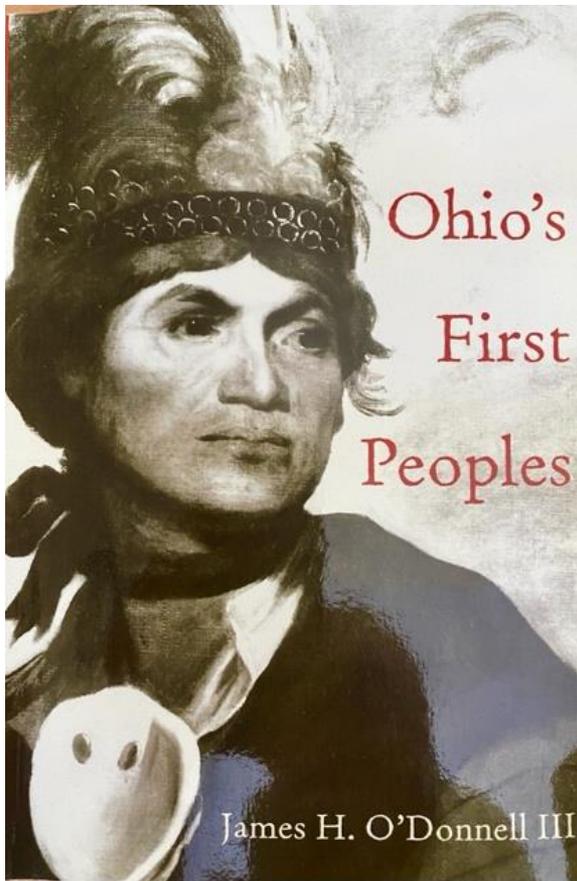
*The forest faded away,  
the savage disappeared,  
the wild beasts were destroyed,  
and the hopes and prophetic visions  
of their far-seeing powers  
in the new and untried country,  
were more than realized.*



*This is the same Frances D. Gage who [applauded the speech of black activist and orator Sojourner Truth](#) at that convention.*

*I am left puzzled by how she could express such racist views against native peoples, while supporting abolition and women's rights.*

*Betsey, how did you reconcile these views?*



While this is the first I'm digging into the Indigenous history of my hometown, I have been learning from [My Indigenous Teachers](#) over much of my lifetime, captured in nine photo stories of my experiences, from the Peruvian Amazon to the Canadian Arctic in the 1970s, to Mexico and Ontario in the 2000s. Stories that resonate across continents, across centuries.

Like the familiar face on the cover of Ohio's First Peoples: [Joseph Brant](#), Mohawk chief born into a Mohawk Protestant family in Cuyahoga, Ohio in 1742.

Educated in upstate New York and Connecticut, he learned English, translated the Bible into Mohawk, and interpreted for British generals.

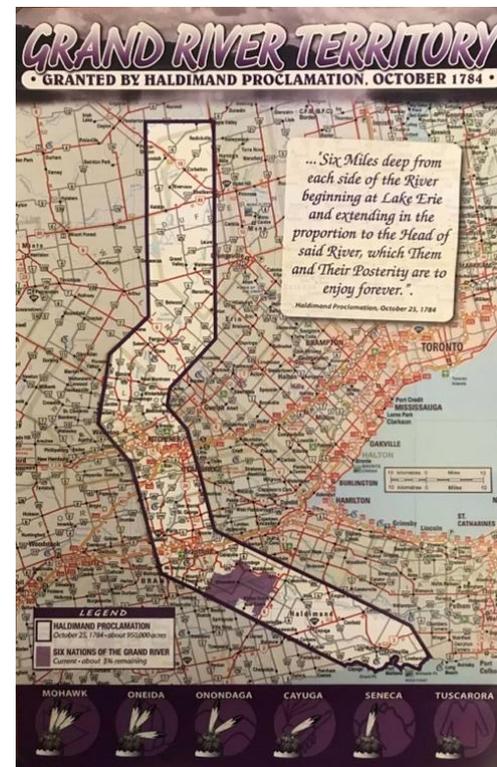
As a military captain, he led several incursions against American settlements in Ohio country. As a diplomat, he represented the Haudenosaunee confederacy in negotiations with George Washington and King George III. He fought as a Mohawk war chief, and a British loyalist in the Revolutionary War.

When the Americans won, Brant led other Indigenous loyalists north, across the new border, to the Haldimand tract on the Grand River in Ontario.

That's where I first encountered Brant in the early 2000s. I was co-facilitating a community artists workshop with Haudenosaunee architect Bill Woodworth in the Brant Museum in Brantford, Ontario, near Six Nations of the Grand River Territory.

Since 2015, I've been learning about Joseph Brant from our Haudenosaunee collaborators in the [Earth to Tables Legacies Project](#) (2015-2025).

[Chandra Maracle taught us](#) about how the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy in French and Six Nations in English) influenced the formation of both the United States and Canada, my two nations.





*In early 2025, as that border is being challenged by the U.S. President, I offer a [cross-border land acknowledgment](#) to senior climate justice activists that outlines the many gifts the Haudenosaunee offer us, from the Great Law of Peace, which centres around a White Pine, or the Tree of Peace, to the [Thanksgiving Address](#).*

*I see the Thanksgiving Address as a kind of opening prayer, Betsey, challenging any notion of “land” as “property” or of “trees” as “resources.”*

*Through this opening ritual, we greet and thank all the beings and elements which sustain our lives, “all our relations.”*

*How serendipitous that this historical digging I am doing here connects my childhood home in Ohio (a Seneca word - ohi:yo’ - for “great river”) and my home for the past 50 years on the shores of Lake Ontario (from the Iroquois word kanadario or “sparkling water”).*

*All Haudenosaunee territory and names from the Iroquois language family.*

*All homages to water, to Mother Earth.*

*Studying Mohawk in 2019 with Haudenosaunee professor Ryan DeCaire revealed to me a language that describes processes and relationships, rather than nouns, or things, fixed and unchanging.*

*I wonder how “trees” are conceived in Mohawk – I imagine not as as things or isolated entities but as part of an ecosystem in evolving relationship with other beings.*

## 1800s to 1950s: the colonial package

*Your family and other European settlers, Betsey,  
were offered a package:  
Land for farm, school, and church.  
The trinity of European colonization.  
Body, mind, and spirit.*

*I had seen this trifecta in the 1970s in the [Peruvian Amazon](#):  
Nomadic Indigenous hunters and gatherers  
forced to settle to attend missionary schools.  
Then began farming as well,  
A pattern repeated all over the world.*

*This trio rested on the notion  
that Indigenous peoples were inferior and  
did not have souls,  
but they could be saved by Christianity.*

*White Supremacy.*

*Your anti-slavery work, Betsey,  
was one response to that.*

*Racist colonization was reinforced by  
violence and incarceration.  
Churches, schools and prisons designed to control,  
ultimately to bind body, mind and spirit.*

*The tangled roots of church, farming, education  
and white supremacy were superimposed  
on the deep history of the land,  
negating other ways of knowing, being, and acting.*

*The dialectic of colonization and resistance to its destructive impact  
offer a scaffolding for my dialogue with you, Betsey,*

*As your spirit inspires my pen, two centuries later.*



## 2025: Redrawing the map

*While I'm looking back at the early 1800s and the mid-1900s, I'm thrust into the current moment, the first tumultuous months of 2025. The dominant map of the world, carved up by colonial powers 500 years ago, and a global economic order put in place since my birth at the end of World War II in 1945, are all up for grabs in the hands of a big business deal-making U.S. president.*

*Two flags sit in your parlour, Betsey, reminding me that the country of our birth has been through several re-mappings.*

*The Confederate flag represented the 11 southern states who lost to the Union Army in the Civil War. One of your nephews lost his life fighting for that northern Union. The flag on the left had 36 stars at the end of that war in 1865, with many added until 1960, reaching 50 stars.*



*Today, the current empire-building president is on the prowl for new stars and states, including my current home of so-called Canada.*

*This is a moment to rethink how we understand "land," whose land, and our relationship with the land.*

*The man-made geopolitical border, the [Medicine Line](#) between Canada and the U.S., does not represent the relations central to the identity of the First Peoples on this land.*

*Our challenge is to reconcile not only with Indigenous peoples but to reconnect with the Earth, to reweave the relationships that our mutual surviving and thriving depend on.*

*To deepen our respect for the animals, the plants, and the trees.*

*How can we, in the midst of this nationalist flag-waving torrent, keep that message alive?*

# Mother Nature Speaks Back

*Today a pinkish-gray haze hangs over Toronto, my Canadian home.  
It wafts its way to my U.S. family's home 700 kilometres south.  
Wildfire smoke respects no borders.*

*My son's asthma is triggered by the smoke  
Which now covers large swaths of Canada's prairie and western provinces*

*Wildfires burning out of control  
Indigenous communities forced to evacuate  
Southern cities struggling to offer refuge to the thousands fleeing*

*Every year the fires swallow more forests  
Ravage more whole communities*

*How did we get to this moment, Betsey,  
That the land is so parched, the forests like kindling awaiting a spark?*

*When our colonial ancestors deforested North America centuries ago,  
they failed to learn how to manage the remaining forests,  
ignoring Indigenous practices of prescribed burns that cleared the  
underbrush and protected the homes of animals, insects, plants.*

*In recent years, a unique collaboration has sprung up  
between the forestry department of the City of Toronto  
and the Indigenous Land Stewardship Council in High Park,  
just a few blocks from where I live.*

*The prescribed burn now integrates  
the ceremonial practices of Indigenous traditional burns.*

*Volunteers attending the ceremonies do a wildlife scan,  
removing animals temporarily during the burn.*

*Forestry workers see firsthand the interconnections of all beings.*

*This protocol is part of a broader process  
to restore the Black Oak Savannah,  
a unique ecosystem that also has important  
cultural significance for Indigenous peoples.*





*What would you think, Betsey, of Jennifer Grenz's interpretation of the iconic Adam and Eve story in the Bible?*

*A Nlaka'pamux Indigenous scholar, she looks at the landscape devastated by the wildfires and suggests that Eden Ecology separated humans from the land, expelling Adam and Eve from the garden.*

*[Indigenous Ecology](#) sees humans as an integral part of an interconnected ecosystem, with a role to play in maintaining a dynamic balance.*

*We Are Nature, Betsey.*

*Returning to my body and my trees in the prologue:  
Can I accept my own changing and decaying body  
as part of a natural process?*

*Trees and forests are always changing.*

*Life and death and life, in constant transformation.*

