Ely Parker

Overview

Ely Samuel Parker, or Hasanoanda (“Leading Name”), was born in 1828 at Indian Falls, on the Tonawanda (Seneca) Reservation in western New York State. He descended from a politically powerful family, and his mother belonged to the Wolf Clan, the same clan as the famed Seneca orator Red Jacket. In 1851 the Seneca formally acknowledged Parker’s role as a community leader and “raised” him to a position as one of the fifty sachems of the Iroquois Confederacy. He was just twenty-three years old. Along with his new status in the community came a new name: Donehogawa, or “Open Door.” This was the customary name bestowed upon the Iroquois sachem who guarded the western door of both the physical and symbolic longhouse against outsiders.

In 1857 Parker negotiated a treaty that ended the decades-long land dispute with the Ogden Land Company, an important victory for the Seneca leader. In 1861 he alleviated some of the community tensions unleashed by the legacy of the land dispute and, in his first attempt at political reform, reshaped the reservation government by instituting a system of elective offices and legislative mandates. In 1863, during the Civil War, Parker was granted a commission in the Union Army at the rank of captain and joined General Ulysses S. Grant at the battle of Vicksburg. After the war ended, Parker worked as Grant’s aide-de-camp and personal adviser on Indian affairs. In this capacity Parker developed a four-point program of reform for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and submitted it to the War Department in 1867. This document served, at least in part, as the foundation of Grant’s peace policy, an important reform movement in post–Civil War Indian affairs. After his inauguration as president, Grant appointed Parker as the first Indian commissioner of the BIA, a post that he accepted, optimistically convinced that his experience working with legislators and policy makers would allow him to implement the reform agenda reflected in his 1867 plan. In his first annual report as commissioner in 1869, Parker wrote about the various ways his reform program had begun to be executed. This report focused closely on developments related to congressional funding, education, and the establishment of an oversight board, all issues that would continue to hold much significance in Indian affairs. It did not reflect, however, the fierce opposition he faced from a group of conservative, Christian, elitist, non-Native reformers.

In 1870 one of these men, William Welsh, filed formal charges against Parker, alleging that Parker had committed fraud and had willfully mismanaged the BIA. Although a House of Representatives investigation exonerated Parker in 1871, he resigned from his position. His resignation letter stated that congressional legislation and the actions of the Board of Indian Commissioners (BIC) had removed all the power and influence of his office and that therefore he could no longer hold the position. Following his career as a public servant, Parker became close friends with Harriet Maxwell Converse, a poet and Indian political activist, and aided her as an informant and confidant. In 1885 he wrote a very insightful and powerful letter to her, in which he reflected upon the history of federal Indian policy and reform. This letter revealed the
frustrations and anger that many Indian policy reformers felt about the direction of Indian policy in the nineteenth century.

**Parker's Milestone Documents**

Parker rose to prominence as a federal policy maker during the Reconstruction era, a moment of potential optimism for a reconfiguration of racial politics in the United States. He was an eloquent writer and orator, and although he based his arguments for Indian policy reform on historical evidence and first-hand observation, Parker perhaps misjudged the level to which legislators and other interested parties would be willing to reshape the BIA, a notoriously corrupt and graft-ridden agency in the nineteenth century. Four documents demonstrate Parker’s initial optimism and resolve to reform Indian policy as well as the ways in which he became frustrated with the system and resentful toward public servants who stood in the way of reform.

- The 1867 *"Report on Indian Affairs to the War Department"* proposed a four-point plan for “the establishment of a permanent and perpetual peace, and for the settling of all matters of differences between the United States and the various Indian tribes.” This lofty statement represented the idea shared by many non-Native policy makers and officials at the time—that such a goal not only was possible but also could be achieved expeditiously.

- In his *"Annual Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs,"* also in 1867, Parker argues that the successes experienced in relations between Indians and whites during the previous months were the direct result of “the concentration of the Indians upon suitable reservations, and the supplying them with the means for engaging in agricultural and mechanical pursuits, and for their education and moral training.” He also refers to increased federal appropriations and the creation of a board of Indian commissioners. It is also important to note that Parker suggests in this report that the treaty-making relationship between Indian nations and the federal government be ended.

- On August 1, 1871, Parker resigned his commission. In his *"Letter of Resignation as Commissioner of Indian Affairs"* of June 29 Parker states that he believes in the reform efforts of the current administration but says that the BIC’s “operating wholly outside of and almost independent of the Indian Bureau” had rendered the commissioner’s office impotent and made his position ambiguous. He left public service at that point.

- The *"Letter to Harriet Maxwell Converse about Indian Policy Reform,"* written to the poet/author/political activist in 1885, is particularly interesting, because in it Parker comments on the support for the allotment program, a federal policy of dispossession that would be established in the 1887 General Allotment Act. While its supporters argued in the campaign leading up to its passage that Indian communities were calling for an
allotment program, Parker asserted that the “Indians, as a body, are deadly opposed to the scheme, for they see in it too plainly the certain and speedy dissolution of their tribal and national organizations.” Although his letter strongly criticizes most Indian policy reformers, it ends on a positive note, with Parker’s personal maxim and solution to the “Indian Problem”—“Education to be made first above all. Other good things will follow.”

**Key Sources**
The New York State Library in Albany; the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society Research Library in Buffalo, New York; the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia; and the Rush Rhees Library at the University of Rochester, in Rochester, New York, hold collections of Parker’s papers relating to his education, his career, and his correspondence with friends, family, and colleagues. Additional materials are held at the Newberry Library in Chicago; the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California; and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The National Archives and Records Administration keeps documents concerning Parker’s career in the federal government. In 2004 the Public Broadcasting Service aired an original documentary about Ely S. Parker entitled *Warrior in Two Worlds* and maintains a corresponding Web site at [www.pbs.org/warrior/](http://www.pbs.org/warrior/).