

# INVADERS CAME

**T**hree hundred years ago, on July 10, 1687, Sea Breeze was invaded by the largest army North America had ever seen. A 350-boat French armada had left Montreal a month earlier bringing 3,000 men and their supplies to the Ontario shore. Their goal: the destruction of the Seneca Indians of the Irondequoit Valley.

Unprepared to meet the invaders, the Senecas sent a small scouting party to the lake bluff at Sea Breeze Park. They watched in silence as the French invaders dragged their flat-bottomed boats onto the sandbar that today is lined with hotdog stands. On the narrow strip of land that separates Irondequoit Bay from Lake Ontario, the French set about securing their beachhead, and in the next few days built a crude rectangular fort, with a 10-foot-high palisade using more than 2,000 trees cut from the Webster shore of the bay.

To protect their boats from the Senecas and the intense summer heat, the French scuttled them in the shallows of the bay. The soldiers also built scores of ovens to bake 30,000 loaves of bread to feed the troops.

The expedition leader was Jacques-Rene de Bresay, the Marquis de Denonville, son-in-law of one of France's richest noblemen, an experienced military commander and governor of New France, the large struggling colony the French had planted in the New World. It stretched from Montreal in a great arc all the way to the Mississippi Valley and New Orleans.

New France survived on the fur trade, an enterprise which was dependent on the Indians to help trap the retreating supply of animals as the white men pushed westward. The Senecas served as middlemen, their warriors terrorizing the other Indian tribes of the Ohio Valley to maintain a steady supply of pelts which they traded either to the French in Montreal or the English in Albany, depending on who paid better.

Because upstate New York was strategically located at the headwaters of the major river system of the American northeast, Seneca warriors and traders were able to use the rivers to reach colonists and other Indian tribes over an area of almost a million square miles reaching as far south as the Carolinas and as far west as the Mississippi River. Wedged between rivals, New France and the British colonies of the Atlantic coast, Seneca country had become the political fulcrum of eastern Indian America.

**D**enonville had brought 1,500 French colonial troops and 1,500 of their Indian allies to the Irondequoit Valley, as he put it, "to enter through the Western chimney of the Iroquois longhouse" to end Seneca interference in French plans for colonizing America.

In the pale dawn of July 13, French troops knelt for Christian blessing as their Indian allies looked on. After breakfasting on bread and creek water, they began the final leg of their march on the Seneca villages, following Indian trails which can be traced today by existing landmarks.

They worked their way down the west shore of the bay along what today is Interstate 590, passed Indian Landing near Ellison Park, then marched along Landing Road toward East Avenue.

Guided by a map of Seneca trails prepared during an earlier, unsuccessful French raid, Denonville was able to move swiftly through the rough terrain.

News of the invasion spread quickly among the Senecas as their scouts reported the steady advance of the French columns. The Senecas had at most only 1,200 warriors with which to face Denonville, but how many had fled or were elsewhere on raids and hunting parties was uncertain. They understood immediately that Denonville's aim was the destruction of their two major villages, Ganagaro, at what is now Boughton Hill near Victor, and Totiakton, at what today is Rochester Junction just south of Mendon Ponds Park.

The Senecas weren't sure which village Denonville would strike first, and, with their limited forces, defending both would be impossible.

The Seneca strategy was to attack the French forces before they could reach the village, but until they were sure of which route the French would take, they couldn't prepare an ambush.

In their uncertainty and confusion, the Senecas had allowed Denonville's men to pass safely through the terrain where they would have been most vulnerable, the areas at Indian Landing, Palmer's and Corbett's glens. But they knew that when Denonville arrived at the fork where East Avenue meets Allen's Creek, his intentions would be plain: If he went left, he was taking the East Ave-



*Jacques-Rene de Bresay, the Marquis de Denonville led the French attack against the Seneca Indians.*

nue trail to Ganagaro; if he went right, it was the Clover Street trail to Totiakton.

**S**eneca scouts saw Denonville take the East Avenue trail and raced back to the villages with the news. By then the French were only 12 miles from Ganagaro. The Senecas had almost twice the distance to cover — nearly 23 miles to get to Totiakton and bring its braves to defend Ganagaro.

Determined to reach Ganagaro before the Senecas could reinforce it, Denonville pushed his men mercilessly.

While a few Indian women worked the cornfields to suggest the village was still inhabited, the Senecas prepared an ambush. Their hopes rested on a group of warriors hidden in a steep ravine just north of Victor.

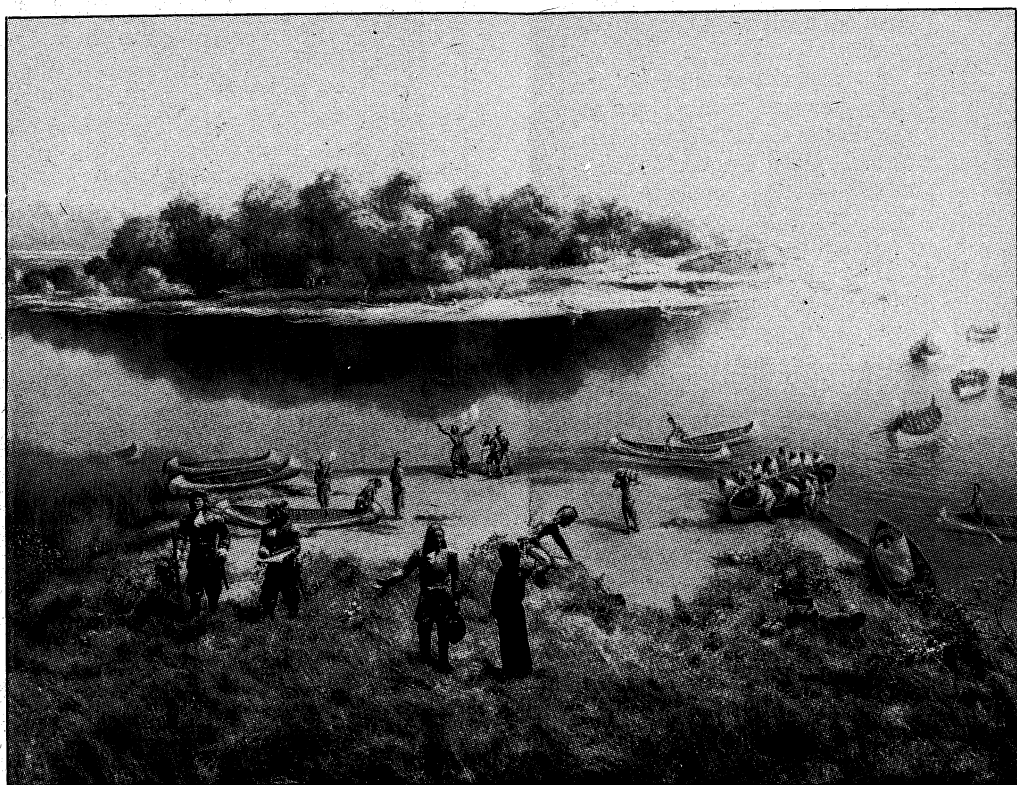
After a forced march of more than 17 miles, the first group of French troops reached the ravine in midafternoon. Exhausted, they had eaten nothing since breakfast, and in the heat and humidity of the forest most had stripped off their armor. Even Denonville, sword in hand, was clad only in his underwear and boots. From the crest of a ridge, they saw below them the swamp and small stream which offered enticements of fresh water and rest.

Just as the first soldiers reached the stream, the Senecas struck.

The French soldiers struggled to establish a defensive position on the uncertain footing

# FROM THE NORTH

*It was 300 years ago that the French launched what they hoped would be a final assault against New York's Seneca Indian tribe*



*This diorama shows Denonville's landing at Irondequoit Bay with 3,000 men and supplies. A Rochester Museum and Science Center photograph.*

of the steep incline and vast swamp of the Victor valley. As the Senecas moved in with their tomahawks, it seemed their ambush might succeed, but with the arrival of reinforcements, Denonville was able to rally his troops and drive the Senecas off.

By dusk, one of the French soldiers recorded in his journal the bloody picture of what had occurred, describing how the Ottawa allies of the French butchered and scalped the dead Senecas, then dined on the flesh of their enemies "whose carcasses they had put into kettles" to cook.

On the morning of July 14, it became clear that the Senecas had abandoned their village. But that didn't deter Denonville. He knew he would have to move quickly and remain constantly on guard against counterattack. To avoid mistaking his Indian allies for Seneca warriors he had each tie a tree branch to his back.

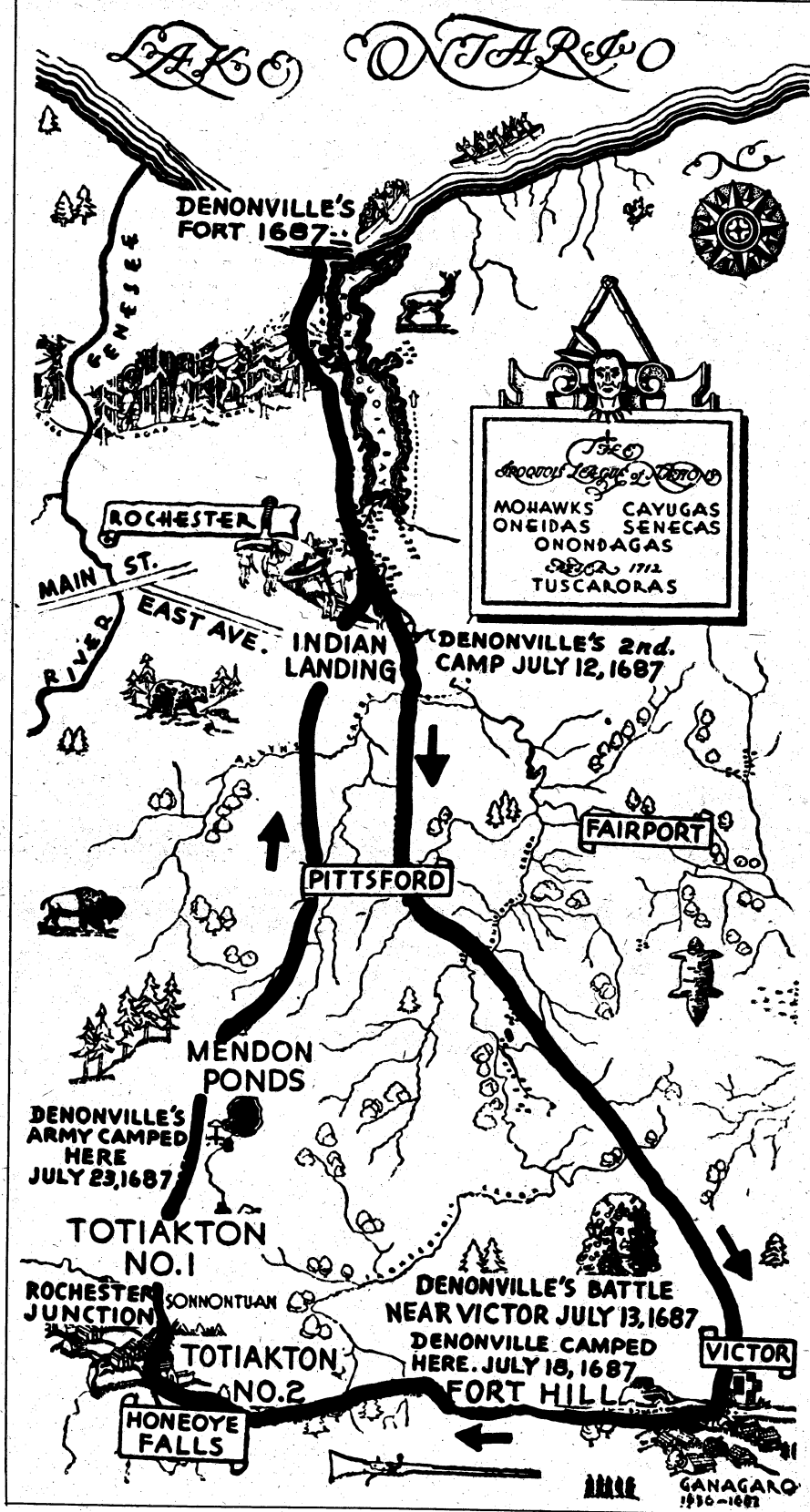
Ganagaro was the first target.

Like its sister village, Totiakton, it contained about 120 longhouses, a log-palisade

fortress, underground storehouses and extensive cornfields. Though the Senecas had rejected one aspect of European culture, namely Christianity, they had become accustomed to European tools and weapons and grown rich plying the fur trade. From among the Indians' possessions the French looted much of these European products manufactured especially for the American Indian market: cooking and hunting equipment, tomahawks and calico shirts, silver jewelry, metal hair curlers and steel springs to pluck out unwanted body hair. Even the warpaint with which the Senecas decorated themselves was made by Europeans. It was these European-made products that induced the Senecas to bring their valuable beaver, mink and other pelts out of the forests.

Denonville was intent on destroying it all.

**W**ith Ganagaro in ruins, the French marched on a small Seneca village nearby, just northwest of what is currently East Bloomfield, then called Gan-



This 1934 map by Alexander M. Stewart shows the route Denonville followed.

## By Peter Pappas

abomination, and they had begun to desert the French and to return to their homes.

Made uneasy by these desertions, weighed down by the sick and wounded and fearful of a Seneca counterattack, Denonville decided to lead his men back to the base at Sea Breeze. He was anxious about the security of the 400-man garrison he had left there, concerned that the fort might have been overrun leaving him without boats or an avenue of retreat.

Denonville spent a restless night at Mendon Ponds, which he described as "three exceedingly pretty lakes." The next day he brought his forces into the Sea Breeze stockade greatly relieved to find everything secure.

On July 26, the French set fire to their stockade and sailed westward on Lake Ontario.

Convinced he had broken the back of Seneca power and eliminated their threat to the interests of New France, Denonville thought himself victorious.

But he was mistaken.

Though he had burned the Seneca's corn crop, the Indians survived the winter on supplies from their Iroquois allies. Destroying their villages had failed to cripple them because the Senecas often abandoned settlements when the soil around them was depleted. They resettled in new villages at the southern ends of Canandaigua and Seneca Lakes and continued their prosperous fur trade with the Europeans.

The following summer the Senecas went on the offensive against the French, launching a retaliatory strike against Montreal. While Seneca warriors laid waste the surrounding countryside, Denonville and hundreds of besieged Frenchmen cowered behind the city walls. The Senecas killed hundreds of Frenchmen and scores were burned alive within earshot of the terror-stricken citizens of Montreal.

But the fighting didn't end there.

The French and English continued their struggle for control of America, while the Senecas continued to trade with both rivals, skillfully playing one off against the other.

But the Senecas never forgot Denonville's raid and 70 years later they allied themselves with the English, and it was with the Senecas' help that England finally drove France out of North America.

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nogarae. In order to meet Seneca manpower needs, it had developed into an "adoption center" for captives from the nearby 20 tribes whose homes were situated from Alabama to the Hudson Bay. While at Gannogarae the captives were taught Seneca ways and eventually were adopted into the tribe.

The French went on to destroy Totiakton

in the valley of Honeoye, and then Gannounata, located about two miles north of present-day Lima.

For a week, they indulged in an orgy of looting, burning villages and destroying crops. The Frenchmen's Indian allies found all this work to be reprehensible. To them, making war on the longhouses and cornfields that were sacred to the Great Spirit was an