

The Origin of Maize Farming in Ontario

Gary W. Crawford
University of Toronto

The origins of farming in Ontario...

...is tied to the origins of Iroquoian people (Wendat or Huron, Mohawk, Erie, Cayuga, and related groups), so where did “Iroquoian” people live? What linked them? What’s the problem? We’ll consider language and subsistence, with a focus on maize.

After a quick introduction to the Iroquoian people, we need to ask what “maize” is.

Maize or corn, is a grass (in the family Poaceae) and has the scientific name *Zea mays*. It’s also the same classification as a wild Mexican plant called “*teosinte*.” This means that they are closely related, teosinte being the ancestor of maize. We’ll explore the evolution of maize and the archaeological research behind our understanding. I haven’t worked on the evolution of maize in Mexico, but I’ve had the good fortune to visit the region near Puebla and Oaxaca where it all started.

Maize moves northward: If maize is a tropical, Mexican plant, how did it get to Ontario?

The maize genome originally had considerable variation. It also appears to have been plastic enough for it to adapt and flourish across a range of elevations and latitudes. Evolution of local, successful varieties took time. We’ll trace its movement out of Mexico and northward from the U.S. Southwest into Canada.

Who were the people in Ontario before maize and the Iroquoians appear?

The Iroquoians have a complex history, like most people. Their roots lie in northeastern North America, so we’ll briefly examine their ancestors because they would have been the ones to adopt maize. We also need to understand to what extent they were “ready” to adopt maize and the hard work it would have taken to farm it. The Archaic people were the descendants of the Palaeo-Indian people, a few of whom who lived near Stayner at the Fisher site. The Archaic developed into the Early and Middle Woodland, mainly distinguished by the addition of pottery. Two key sites are McIntyre and the Serpent Mounds.

The story picks up with the Princess Point Culture

Starting in the early 1990s David Smith, Joe Desloges, and I investigated this culture along the Grand River and in Cootes Paradise. I’ll present what we discovered. These were the first people in the province to figure out how to grow maize. It changed their lives, although it took centuries. The oldest maize dates to about AD 500 while the first, clear early Iroquoian culture crystalizes about 1000 AD.

Recommended Reading

http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/~crawfor7/gcrawford_site/North_America_Publications_files/migration.pdf

<http://diggingontario.uwo.ca/Woodland.html>

<http://www.ontarioarchaeology.on.ca/summary-of-ont-arch>

https://voices.nationalgeographic.org/2009/03/23/corn_domesticated_8700_years_ago/