

WASHINGTON, D. C., JANUARY 15, 1909.

TO THE HONORABLE COMMISSIONER OF INDIAN AFFAIRS,
WASHINGTON, D. C.



Sir:

In writing this letter, I assume, of course, that the Indian Office understands and accepts, as a matter of fact, that the Oneida Indians of Wisconsin, are competent and capable of managing their own affairs with, perhaps, a few individual exceptions.

Sixteen years ago, the lands of the Oneida Indians were allotted to them in severality under the Act of February 8, 1887. Very marked progress has been made by the Indians since that date. In fact, everything has been accomplished which any people could accomplish under the limitations and restrictions intended, of course, for their protection which the law prescribed. In order that this progress and development can go on and continue, there must now be made a change and the restraints and limitations, which have heretofore controlled the progress of the Indians in a measure, removed.

A few years ago the legislature of the State of Wisconsin passed a law to enable the Oneida Indians to organize and erect the towns of Oneida and Hopart, both of which were to be within the boundaries of the present Oneida Indian Reservation. The

town of Hopart has been duly organized, and its officers have all been elected and are now in office. The town of Oneida has not organized, but awaits the result of the experience which will come to the town of Hopart fully launched in the sea of Wisconsin's municipal governments.

It has been recognized all along that the one great obstacle in the path of the town of Hopart, and which naturally will be in the path of the town of Oneida, if it does organize, is the limited amount of land upon the reservation which is subject to taxation. There are about 65,000 acres of land in the two towns of which less than 17,000 are subject to taxation. This number includes all the land which has been sold as inherited Indian lands, and the land which has been patented to the Indians in fee simple under the Act of May 8, 1906.

When one realizes and understands the needs of a town organized especially among reservation Indians, where no system has been followed in the building of roads, highways, and bridges, where it means, perhaps, the erection of buildings for the accommodation of the town district school, etc., the question of raising funds with which to meet such expenses becomes a question, indeed, of such moment that one would almost conclude that the step taken by the Oneida Indians in organizing the town of Hopart, was not entirely justified by the conditions as they now exist.

The progressive element of the tribe, however, is looking to the cooperation of the Indian Office for such moral, if not material, assistance as will enable them to overcome their difficulties.

I began this letter with the statement that I assumed that the Indian Office understood that the Oneida Indians were competent and capable of managing their own affairs. If that is a fact, then it is urgently desired that the influence of the office be exerted to induce as many of the Oneida Indians to apply for their patents in fee simple, not only on the ground that it is policy for the Government to discontinue all relations with Indians who are known to be competent but because such action on the part of the Indians is in accord with the highest ideals of patriotism and public duty.

I understand and fully realize that the Indians holding allotments under Act of February 8, 1887, cannot be compelled either by law or otherwise to take their patents in fee simple unless they apply for same and are granted under the Act of May 8, 1906, so that in consequence the only force that can be brought to bear upon the Oneida Indians, respectively, is moral persuasion. Such persuasion coming from the Office of Indian Affairs, leading the Indians to accept wider responsibility in the life of the nation, their state and town, is of inestimable value in that that it awakens the Indians to a realization that there are other fields of activity, and that their interests are thought of at least once in a while. Too much of the thought controls our Indian Reservations that to make good reservation conditions is the end of all commendable effort.

It should be born in mind in connection with the consideration of this subject that of the 65,000 acres comprising the Oneida Reservation lands, ^{that only} 15,000 acres is being used for farming purposes, and that the balance of the land was at one time timber land, but very much of the timber has been taken. These unimproved lands, at the present time, contribute nothing practically to the support of the Indians owning them and are unoccupied. If the Indians can be induced to accept their patents in fee simple, much of this land will immediately be sold to actual white settlers which would mean the enrichment of the Indians for two reasons:

First. The improvements which the white settlers would bring to the reservation, would mean, eventually, the doubling of the land values on the reservation; and

Second. The experience they would get as neighbors from the thrifty white farmers. In time arrangements should be made whereby white children would be allowed to attend the Oneida Boarding School upon payment of a specified tuition fee.

If the Indians cannot be induced to accept their patent in fee simple, there will be nine years before the expiration of the twenty-five year period, during which time a few, who may have secured their patents, constituting a minority of the voters of the town, will be compelled to support the town and furnish the funds for its improvement subject to the direction and appropriation of the majority of the voters who are not tax payers.

Opposition to this plan will, naturally, come from the Indians who desire to continue the old Indian regime, who desire to hold their positions as leaders of the tribe, or who desire to avoid participating in the responsibilities of a town organization, and pay taxes. And I sincerely hope that these people, who offer the opposition, will not be able to mislead the Department into believing that such opposition is actuated by any belief that the Indians, in question, or any considerable number of them, are incompetent of managing their own affairs.

Yours very respectfully,

Amoson Wheelock

West He Pare, Wis.