THE SENECA OIL SPRING: JUST THE FACTS

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POSTER PRESENTATION

They have squashes, beans, and other vegetables in abundance, and very good oil, which they call Atourronton (a Touronton), so that I have no hesitation in saying that we should settle there rather than elsewhere.

From this single sentence in Fr. Joseph de La Roche d’Allion’s 1627 letter to a friend in France comes the question did he or did he not travel to what is now the Seneca Oil Spring in Allegany County, New York? For centuries, it has been widely believed that Fr. Joseph was the first white man to encounter petroleum in North America. Still today, there are government road signs, books, websites and other sources that claim Fr. Joseph saw the spring in 1627. However, some researchers and historians as far back as 1962 have cast doubt on this claim. Through a bibliographic study of published sources relating to the discovery of the Seneca Oil Spring, we go back to explore when the word oil from Fr. Joseph’s letter was interpreted to mean petroleum.