

Iroquois and their History

The Iroquois Confederacy (also known as the "League of Peace and Power", the "Five Nations"; the "Six Nations"; or the "People of the Long house") is a group of Native Americans that originally consisted of five nations: the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca. A sixth tribe, the Tuscarora, joined after the original five nations were formed. Although frequently referred to as the Iroquois, the Nations refer to themselves collectively as Haudenosaunee.

At the time Europeans first arrived in North America, the Confederacy was based in what is now the northeastern United States and southern Canada, including New England, upstate New York, Pennsylvania, Ontario, and Quebec.

Name

The word Iroquois has two potential origins. First, the Haudenosaunee often ended their oratory with the phrase hiro kone; hiro translates as "I have spoken", and kone can be translated several ways, the most common being "in joy", "in sorrow", or "in truth". Hiro kone to the French encountering the Haudenosaunee would sound like "Iroquois", pronounced *ibokwa* in French. Another version is however supported by French linguists such as Henriette Walter and historians such as Dean Snow. According to this account, "Iroquois" would derive from a Basque expression, *Hilokoa*, meaning the "killer people". This expression would have been applied to the Iroquois because they were the enemy of the local Algonquians, with whom the Basque fishermen were trading. However, because there is no "l" in the Algonquian languages of the Saint-Lawrence Gulf region, the name became "Hirokoa", which is the name the French like Cartier understood when Algonquians referred to the same pidgin language as the one they used with the Basque. The French then transliterated the word according to their own phonetic rules, thus providing "Iroquois".

History

The members of this Confederacy speak different languages of the same Iroquoian family, suggesting a common historical and cultural origin, but diverging enough so that the languages have become different. Every Indian tribe has at least one other language than just their home tribe language.

The Union of Nations was established prior to major European contact, complete with a constitution known as the *Gayanashagowa* (or "Great Law of Peace"), with the help of a memory device in the form of special beads called wampum that have inherent spiritual value (wampum has been inaccurately compared to money in other cultures). Most anthropologists have traditionally speculated that this constitution was created between the middle 1400s and early 1600s. However, recent archaeological studies have suggested the accuracy of the account found in oral tradition, which argues that the federation was formed around August 31, 1142, based on a coinciding solar eclipse (see Fields and Mann, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 21, #2).

The two prophets, Ayonwentah (frequently misspelled as Hiawatha due to the Longfellow poem) and Dekanawidah, The Great Peacemaker, brought a message of peace to squabbling tribes. The tribes who joined the League were the Seneca, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga and Mohawks. Once they ceased most infighting, they rapidly became one of the strongest forces in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century northeastern North America.

According to legend, an evil Onondaga chieftain named Tadadaho was the last to be converted to the ways of peace by The Great Peacemaker and Ayonwentah and became the spiritual leader of the Haudenosaunee. This event is said to have occurred at Onondaga Lake near Syracuse, New York. The title Tadadaho is still used for the league's spiritual leader, the fiftieth chief, who sits with the Onondaga in council, but is the only one of the fifty chosen by the entire Haudenosaunee people. The current Tadadaho is Sid Hill of the Onondaga Nation.

Dealing with Europeans

By 1677, the Iroquois formed an alliance with the English through an agreement known as the Covenant Chain. Together, they battled the French to a standstill who were allied with the Huron, another Iroquoian people, but a historic foe of the Confederacy.

The League engaged in a series of wars against the French and their Iroquoian-speaking Wyandot ("Huron") allies. They also put great pressure on the Algonquian peoples of the Atlantic coast and what is now the boreal Canadian Shield region of Canada and not infrequently fought the English colonies as well. During the seventeenth century, they are also credited with having conquered and/or absorbed the Neutral Indians and Erie Tribe to the west as a way of controlling the fur trade, even though other reasons are often given for these wars.

According to Francis Parkman, the Iroquois were at the height of their power in the seventeenth century, with a population of about twelve thousand people. League traditions allowed for the dead to be symbolically replaced through the "Mourning War", raids intended to seize captives to replace lost compatriots and take vengeance on non-members. This tradition was common to native people of the northeast and was quite different from European settlers' notions of combat.

Four delegates of the Iroquoian Confederacy, the "Indian kings", travelled to London, England, in 1710 to meet Queen Anne in an effort to cement an alliance with the British. Queen Anne was so impressed by her visitors that she commissioned their portraits by court painter John Verelst. The portraits are believed to be some of the earliest surviving oil portraits of Aboriginal peoples taken from life.

Eighteenth century

In 1720, the Tuscarora fled north from the British colonization of North Carolina and petitioned to become the sixth nation. This is a non-voting position, but places them under the protection of the Confederacy.

During the French and Indian War, the Iroquois sided with the British against the French and their Algonquin allies, both traditional enemies of the Iroquois. The Iroquois hoped that aiding the British would also bring favors after the war. Practically, few Iroquois joined the galloping, and the Battle of Lake George found a group of Mohawk and French ambush a Mohawk-led British column. The British government issued the Royal Proclamation of 1763 after the war, which restricted white settlement beyond the Appalachians, but this was largely ignored by the settlers and local governments.

During the American Revolution, many Tuscarora and the Oneida sided with the Americans, while the Mohawk, Seneca, Onondaga and Cayuga remained loyal to Great Britain. This marked the first major split among the Six Nations. After a series of successful operations against frontier settlements, led by the Mohawk leader Joseph Brant and his British allies, the United States reacted with vengeance. In 1779, George Washington ordered Col. Daniel Brodhead and General John Sullivan to lead expeditions against the Iroquois nations to "not merely overrun, but destroy," the British-Indian alliance. The campaign successfully ended the ability of the British and Iroquois to mount any further significant attacks on American settlements.

In 1794, the Confederacy entered into the Treaty of Canandaigua with the United States. After the American Revolutionary War, Captain Joseph Brant and a group of Iroquois left New York to settle in Canada. As a reward for their loyalty to the English Crown, they were given a large land grant on the Grand River. Brant's crossing of the river gave the original name to the area: Brant's ford. By 1847, European settlers began to settle nearby and named the village Brantford, Ontario. The original Mohawk settlement was on the south edge of the present-day city at a location favorable for landing canoes. Prior to this land grant, Iroquois settlements did exist in that same area and elsewhere in southern Ontario, extending further north and east (from Lake Ontario eastwards into Quebec around present-day Montreal). Extensive fighting with Huron meant the continuous shifting of territory in southern Ontario between the two groups long before European influences were present.

The Haudenosaunee

The combined leadership of the Nations is known as the Haudenosaunee. It should be noted that "Haudenosaunee" is the term that the people use to refer to themselves. Haudenosaunee means "People of the Long House." The term is said to have been introduced by The Great Peacemaker at the time of the formation of the Confederacy. It implies that the Nations of the confederacy should live together as families in the same longhouse. Symbolically, the Seneca were the guardians of the western door of the "tribal long house," and the Mohawk were the guardians of the eastern door.

The Iroquois nations' political union and democratic government has been credited by some as one of the influences on the United States Constitution. However, that theory has fallen into disfavor among many historians and is regarded by others as mythology. Historian Jack Rakove writes: "The voluminous records we have for the constitutional debates of the late 1780s contain no significant references to the Iroquois." Researcher Brian Cook writes: "The Iroquois probably held some sway over the thinking of the Framers and the development of the U.S. Constitution and the development of American democracy, albeit perhaps indirectly or even subconsciously... However, the opposition is probably also correct. The Iroquois influence is not as great as [some historians] would like it to be, the framers simply did not revere or even understand much of Iroquois culture, and their influences were European or classical - not wholly New World."

Iroquois Constitution

1. The Structure Of The Great Law Of Peace In Wampum

The above illustration shows some of the symbols that the Peacemaker gave to the *Haudenosaunee* and to Hiawatha who was his spokesperson. Through oral tradition and wampum, the *Haudenosaunee* date the origins of the Great Law of Peace to be between 1000 and 1400 AD. However, Anglo-American scholars set the date to be, based on written accounts, at about 1450 AD. It is unfortunate that many Anglo-scholars, do not accept wampum belts as a legitimate form of writing, for these symbols when read by the elders, speak volumes.

The Peacemaker envisioned the *Haudenosaunee* as one united extended Longhouse in which each nation had its own hearth. This concept is written symbolically into the Hiawatha belt. To the novice, the belt looks like interlocking squares on each side of a tree, but to the *Haudenosaunee*, the entire story of how the Great Law of Peace developed is encapsulated within these symbols.

The Hiawatha belt represents the unity of the original Five Nations and is read from the right to the left. The first square, on the right, represents the Mohawk Nation. The second square represents the Oneida Nation. The heart or the tree in the middle of the Hiawatha belt represents the Onondaga Nation. The square to the left of the tree represents the Cayuga Nation, and the farthest square to the left represents the Seneca Nation. The small white lines that lead away from the Seneca and Mohawk Nations represent paths that welcome others to join the Confederacy. These nations have agreed to follow the Peacemaker's message of the Great Law of Peace.

2. Great Law Of Peace Government Structure

The Peacemaker provided through the Great Law of Peace, a complex structure allowing for the separation of powers, checks and balances, ratification, public opinion, and equality of all peoples. As the Onondaga Clan Mother, Audrey Shenandoah, states:

Within our society we maintain a balance between the responsibilities of the women, the responsibilities of the men, of the chiefs, of the faithkeepers. All the people in between have a special job to do to help to keep this balance so that at no time do we come to a place within our society where anyone has more power than any of the rest, for our leadership all have equal power. They must be able to listen to one another.

Each Nation has its own autonomy to deal with its internal affairs, and there is a Grand Council that deals with problems that may affect all of the nations within the Confederacy.

a. The Autonomy Of The Council Of The Mohawk

In the written accounts of the Great Law of Peace, which merely scratch the surface of what the Great Law of Peace truly contains, the "11th Wampum" of the Great Law of Peace describes the duties and the responsibilities of the Council of the Mohawk. The Mohawk Nation is comprised of 9 chiefs, which are divided into 3 Wolf Clan Chiefs, 3 Bear Clan Chiefs, and 3 Turtle Clan Chiefs.

The Turtle Clan Chiefs get the issue first, and if it is of importance, the matter is discussed and deliberated. When they come to a conclusion, they then pass the issue over to the Wolf Clan for their consideration. If the Wolf Clan agrees upon the solution given by the Turtle Clan, the issue then goes back to the Turtle Clan. The Turtle Clan then takes the solution and gives it to the Bear Clan who have heard the Turtle and Wolf Clan's discussion, and they further discuss the issue. If the Bear Clan Chiefs agree to the conclusion, they then will sanction the agreed upon solution. Therefore, when all of the Mohawks are of one mind, they are in accordance with the Great Law of Peace and the solution is reached through consensus.

This is an example of the self-autonomy that each nation of the Confederacy possesses to govern the internal affairs of their own nation, and it is similar to the relationship between the United States and each individual state. If one refers back to the Peacemaker's symbols (at the top of the page), one can easily ascertain that what he meant through his message of the one extended Longhouse was that all nations shall be united but each have a separate hearth fire.

b. The Grand Council

The Grand Council is composed of the original Five Nations and the Tuscarora, who joined the Confederacy in approximately 1714. The Grand Council of the League's "decision-making process somewhat resemble[s] that of a two-house congress in one body, with the 'older brothers' and 'younger brothers' each comprising a side of the house." The Onondaga occupy "an executive role, with a veto that could be overridden by the older and younger brothers in concert."

The Elder Brothers consist of the Seneca and the Mohawk and the Younger Brothers are the Cayuga and the Oneida. Today the Tuscarora also sit with the Younger Brothers during Grand Council meetings. The combined bodies of the chiefs work out all of the matters concerning the Haudenosaunee. Generally the matter first goes to the Mohawk and Seneca for deliberation, and then the matter goes to the Cayuga and Oneida for their deliberation. The matter then is given to the Onondaga, the Keepers of the Fire who have many responsibilities one of which is to keep records of the meetings, for their final confirmation and final ratification.

The "22nd Wampum" illustrates that after all of the Chiefs have debated, there is one Onondaga Chief, *Hononwiretonh*, whose duty it is to sit and listen to all of the debate, the matter is then turned over to him for final approval, if all are in consensus. If he refuses to sanction the solution, then no other chief has the authority to pass the legislation.

Hononwiretonh is not allowed to refuse sanctioning the matter unless there is a strong basis for his refusal. As can be seen, the Great Law provides for numerous checks and balances of power and depends on consensus of all fifty chiefs for its decision making.

C. The Importance Of Women Within The Great Law OF Peace

The Great law was structured to keep all things in balance. Women have an important role in *Haudenosaunee* society, which unfortunately is not adequately illustrated in the written versions of the Great Law of Peace (also known as the Great Law of Peace). While only men could become chiefs, it was the duty and responsibility of the Clan Mothers to select the chiefs.

The chiefs were elected for life, but if they went astray, did not have the best interests of the people and Natural World in mind, after three warnings, the Clan Mothers could "dehorn" them. Dehorning means that the deer antlers that chiefs wear on their *kastowehs* (feathered hats) to show that they are chiefs, would be removed from the chief's headdresses; thus, stripping him of his authority as chief. The Clan Mothers when picking the chiefs, look for a man who is of the Good Mind and is married and has children so he will love his people and his country like he does his own children.

In the preceding paragraphs, is just a snippet of the Great Law of Peace and how the *Haudenosaunee* used wampum has been examined in an attempt to give the reader a general understanding of how the *Haudenosaunee* themselves understand some of the important aspects of the Great Law of Peace. One important aspect of the Great Law of Peace that often goes untold and is hard to explain, is the idea that the government is not separated from the *Haudenosaunee* religion, culture, or way of life, for these things are all rolled up into one.

Iroquois Influence on the Founding Fathers¹

Thomas Jefferson:

As they decried contemporary Europe, architects of the new nation such as Franklin, Jefferson and Paine described American Indian societies in ways strikingly similar to their visions of the state they hoped to erect, modified to suit a people of Old World ancestry. In many ways, these Revolutionary Americans were taking up the argument of American freedom where Roger Williams left off. All were pragmatic enough to understand that a utopian vision of a society based on natural rights could not be instantly grafted onto thirteen recent British colonies. Writing Madison January 30, 1787 from Paris, Jefferson examined three forms of societies:

1. Without government, as among our Indians.
2. Under governments wherein the will of every one has a just influence, as is the case in England in a slight degree, and in our states in great one.
3. Under governments of force, as is the case in all other monarchies and in most of the other republics.

It is a problem, not clear in my mind, that the [first] condition [the Indian way] is not the best. But I believe it to be inconsistent with any great degree of population.²

Jefferson wrote: "The only condition on earth to be compared with ours, in my opinion, is that of the Indian, where they have still less law than we." When Paine wrote that "government, like dress is the badge of lost innocence," and Jefferson that the best government governs least, they were recapitulating their observations of native American societies, either directly, or through the eyes of European philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau.

Entering Monticello [Jefferson's home], visitors in Jefferson's time were greeted in the Great Hall (or entry way) by walls laden with native American artifacts. Jefferson was especially interested in native languages. For more than twenty years after he first discussed Indians' languages in *Notes on the State of Virginia* [1782], Jefferson collected Indian vocabularies. By 1800, Jefferson was preparing to publish what would have been the most extensive vocabulary of Indian languages in his time. It also was the year Jefferson became president, so his work was delayed until he left office in 1808. Jefferson packed his research papers at the presidential residence, and ordered them sent to Monticello. Contained in the cargo were Jefferson's own fifty vocabularies, as well as several compiled by Lewis and Clark. Boatmen piloting Jefferson's belongings across the Potomac River ripped them open and, disappointed that they could find nothing salable, dumped the priceless papers into the river.

¹ Excerpted from http://www.ratical.org/many_worlds/6Nations/EoL/chp8.html

² Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, January 30, 1787, in Boyd, ed., *Jefferson Papers*, Vol. 11, pp. 92-93.

Believing in the universal morality of humankind, Jefferson had no objection to intermarriage between races. He, like Patrick Henry, occasionally promoted intermarriage with native peoples to create a "continental family." In January, 1802, Jefferson told an Indian delegation: "Your blood will mix with ours, and will spread, with ours, over this great island." The reference to "this great island" could have been an Iroquois term: the *Haudonesaunee* origin story calls America "Turtle Island."

When Jefferson designed a curriculum for the University of Virginia, he included traditional European subjects, and added courses in American Indian cultures and languages.

Jefferson called up the same images in his *Notes on Virginia* in a section that was inserted into the 1787 edition while the Constitutional Convention met. The native Americans, wrote Jefferson, had never

[s]ubmitted themselves to any laws, any coercive power and shadow of government. Their only controls are their manners, and the moral sense of right and wrong. . . . An offence against these is punished by contempt, by exclusion from society, or, where the cause is serious, as that of murder, by the individuals whom it concerns. Imperfect as this species of control may seem, crimes are very rare among them.

The lesson here seemed clear to Jefferson:

Insomuch that it were made a question, whether no law, as among the savage Americans, or too much law, as among the civilized Europeans, submits man to the greater evil, one who has seen both conditions of existence would pronounce it to be the last.

Writing to Edward Carrington in 1787, Jefferson linked freedom of expression with public opinion as well as happiness, citing American Indian societies as an example:

The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, our very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter. . . . I am convinced that those societies [as the Indians] which live without government enjoy in their general mass an infinitely greater degree of happiness than those who live under European governments.

Thomas Paine:

"Among the Indians," wrote Paine, "There are not any of those spectacles of misery that poverty and want present to our eyes in the towns and streets of Europe." To Paine, poverty was a creation "of what is called civilized life. It exists not in the natural state. . . . The life of an Indian is a continual holiday compared to the poor of Europe." As one who sought to mold the future in the image of the natural state, Paine admired the

Indians' relatively equal distribution of property, but he realized it impossible "to go from the civilized to the natural state."

Patrick Henry:

Patrick Henry even advocated state subsidies for Indian-white marriages. In the fall of 1784, he introduced such a measure into the Virginia House of Delegates. The bill directed the state to pay an unspecified sum for the marriage, and an additional sum on the birth of each child. In addition, Henry proposed that Indian-white couples live tax-free. Henry pushed the bill with his usual enthusiasm and oratorical flourish as it survived two readings. By the time it reached third reading, Henry had been elected governor of Virginia. Without him in the House of Delegates, the intermarriage bill died.

Benjamin Franklin:

Franklin used his image of Indians and their societies to critique Europe for him:

The Care and Labour of providing for Artificial and fashionable Wants, the sight of so many Rich wallowing in superfluous plenty, while so many are kept poor and distress'd for want; the Insolence of Office . . . [and] restraints of Custom, all contrive to disgust them [Indians] with what we call civil Society.

Franklin turned for help to all "the Indians Indians of North America not under the dominion of the Spaniards," who

are in that natural state, being restrained by no Laws, having no Courts, or Ministers of Justice, no Suits, no prisons, no governors vested with any Legal Authority. The persuasion of Men distinguished by Reputation of Wisdom is the only Means by which others are govern'd, or rather led -- and the State of the Indians was probably the first State of all Nations.

The Articles of Confederation

The *Articles of Confederation* also contained a similarity to the Iroquois and other confederations because it had difficulties in levying taxes with any degree of authority. With the aid of historical hindsight, one may argue that the founders, in establishing the first confederation of states, erred in their judgement of just how much "natural law" a gaggle of thirteen former English colonies could absorb. Like many native confederacies, their first attempt at government had a very weak executive -- not a problem if a legislative body strives for genuine consensus, but potentially paralyzing in a system more attuned to reconciling competing special interests, as the United States' evolved. The *Articles* contained another native mechanism intriguing to European eyes: a clause allowing for amendment, just as the Iroquois Great Law of Peace provides that new measures may be "added to the rafters" of the symbolic national longhouse. Like the Iroquois Great Law, Franklin's *Articles* provided means by which new people and

territory could be brought into the confederacy. Franklin even mentioned Ireland as a possibility in that regard, showing his anti-British sentiments.

The most dramatic example of the influence of Iroquois political theories on Americans occurred in the summer of 1775 at a conference in New York. This conference was so important that a delegate from the Continental Congress, Philip Schuyler, attended. At German Flats, New York on August 15, 1775, treaty commissioners from the Continental Congress met with the sachems and warriors of the Six Nations to acquaint the Iroquois with the "United Colonies dwelling upon this Island."

After some preliminaries, the sachems and treaty commissioners began their deliberations in earnest on August 24, 1775 at Cartwright's Tavern in Albany, New York. According to protocol, the commissioners asked the sachems to appoint a speaker, but the sachems deferred to the commissioners so the Americans picked Abraham, a Mohawk, adopted brother and successor to Hendrick. On the next day, the Treaty Commissioners (who had specific instructions from John Hancock and the Second Continental Congress) told the sachems that they were heeding the advice Iroquois forefathers had given to the colonial Americans at Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1744. At this point, the commissioners quoted Canassatego's words:

Brethren, We the Six Nations heartily recommend Union and a good agreement between you our Brethren, never disagree but preserve a strict Friendship for one another and thereby you as well as we will become stronger. Our Wise Forefathers established Union and Amity between the Five Nations . . . we are a powerful Confederacy, and if you observe the same methods . . . you will acquire fresh strength and power.

The Americans then said that their forefathers had rejoiced to hear Canassatego's words which sank

deep into their Hearts, the Advice was good, it was Kind. They said to one another, the Six Nations are a wise people, let us hearken to their Council and teach our children to follow it. Our old Men have done so. They have frequently taken a single Arrow and said, Children, see how easy it is broken, then they have tied twelve together with strong Cords -- And our strongest Men could not break them -- See said they -- this is what the Six Nations mean. Divided a single Man may destroy you -- United, you are a match for the whole World.