

THE HAUDENOSAUNEE

Haudenosaunee, pronounced “hoe-dee-no-SHOW-nee” means “people who build a house.” The name refers to an alliance among six Native American nations who are more commonly known as the Iroquois.

THE CONFEDERACY

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is a very old participatory democracy, one of the oldest (if not the oldest) in the world. Its constitution is believed to be a model for the Constitution of the United States. Haudenosaunee means “People of the Long House.” The confederacy is a union of six northeastern Native American nations formed many centuries ago to end the debilitating violence and wars among the member nations and to create a way for them to live in harmony. The five original nations included the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas. The Tuscaroras joined the confederacy in 1722. The union is also called the Iroquois Confederacy or the League of Six Nations. These six separate nations of people agreed to live under the traditional law of governance called the Great Law of Peace. Although many cultural similarities and family connections unite the six nations, each one is also unique and has its own distinct language. Each nation maintains its own council with Chiefs chosen by the Clan Mother; each deals with its own internal affairs. The Grand Council deals with issues affecting the nations within the confederacy.

The Gayanesshagowa (gaya-ness-HA-gowa), meaning Great Law of Peace, is the oral constitution that binds together the six member nations. One of the earliest examples of a formal democratic governance structure, it was conceived by Deganwidah, known as The Great Peacemaker, and an Onondagan leader named Hayo’wetha, better known as Hiawatha. The laws were transmitted orally, and recorded by means of wampum symbols that conveyed meaning. Eventually the Great Law of Peace was translated into English. It emphasizes the power of Reason, not force, to assure the three principles of the Great Law: Righteousness, Justice, and Health. The Great Law of Peace provides the Haudenosaunee people with instructions on how to treat others, directs them on how to maintain a democratic society, and expresses how Reason must prevail in order to preserve peace.

The Peacemaker traveled among the Iroquois for many years, spreading his message of peace, unity and the power of the good mind. According to oral history, it may have taken him forty years to speak with the different tribes, who often reacted skeptically to his proposals of peace. Undaunted, he continued and was able to persuade fifty leaders to gather together to listen while he recited the passages of the Great Law of Peace. He assigned duties to each of the leaders and selected women as the Clan Mothers, who were to lead the family clans and select the male chiefs.

To unite the member nations and form of social order, he established extended family groups called clans. A Clan Mother heads each clan. In the past, a clan mother was usually the oldest woman of the clan. Today, clan mothers are chosen for their cultural wisdom and dedication to the Haudenosaunee people. Haudenosaunee clans are matrilineal: they follow the line of descent of the mother. Children belong to their mother's clan. The clans are named after animals and birds. Before European contact, the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents of a clan lived together in one house called a longhouse. This arrangement created a strong cooperative family unit with the clan mother as the head. When a couple got married, the husband moved into his wife's family's longhouse. Though men moved into their wives' homes, they did not change their clans. Each man retained responsibilities to his mother's family and helped raise his sisters' children. People belonging to the same clan are related, regardless of their community location. When people traveled to other Haudenosaunee communities, they were welcomed by relatives of their same clan. The clan mother has an important role. Some of her responsibilities are to make all the major decisions that affect the clan, assign names to people in her clan, nominate the male leader of the clan (called the hoyaneh), help ensure that all members of her clan are fed.

The hardest part of the Great Law is to understand the meaning of the concept of peace. Peace is not simply the absence of war. Peace is a state of mind. Each individual has a base spiritual power. As you go through life as Haudenosaunee, your own spirit grows as well: you experience different things, learn more, comprehend more and tap into other forms of spiritual power. The old timers called it *orenda*. Everyone is thought to have it to some degree. It effects how we do things. Good minds have strong *orenda*. The ultimate power of the Great Law rests in how well the individual person develops their sense of self in regard to the well-being of the others in the clan, in the village, in the nation and in the Confederacy of the Six Nations.

Wampum and Wampum Belts

The word wampum means "white shell beads" in the languages of the Narragansett of Rhode Island and Wampanoag of Massachusetts. Wampum are purple and white beads made from quahog (KWA-hog) clam and whelk shells. Native nations that lived along the Atlantic coast collected the shells from their shorelines and produced beads from them. Long before Europeans came to America, the Haudenosaunee traded with their Algonquian speaking neighbors, who lived along the Atlantic coast, to obtain the highly valued shell beads. In exchange for wampum beads, the Haudenosaunee provided furs, corn, beans and squash. The mostly white quahog shells contain a small amount of purple. The rareness of the purple beads makes them much more valuable than white beads. The process of making the beads is very difficult and time consuming. Today, they are made using power tools but formerly they were created using a bow drill.

A very important use for the wampum was to make belts, consisting of rows of interlaced wampum woven on a bow loom. The placement of the purple and white beads in the belt formed symbolic designs and codes. The designs in the belts recorded the laws of the Confederacy, oral tradition used for ceremonies, and important political interactions between Native nations, and later between the Confederacy and Europeans. Wampum belts were presented at Grand Council meetings or other official gatherings. Wampum belts were never worn as clothing. Though they are all different sizes, the name alludes to the belt-like shape featuring long and narrow bands. Wampum continues to play an important role in Haudenosaunee society.

The Haudenosaunee never used wampum as money. However, due to the scarcity of metal coins in New England, Europeans and Americans recognized the value of wampum and began producing wampum in factories to use for trade among themselves and with Native people. The Narragansetts and Pequots played a critical role in the manufacture and exchange of wampum in the New England area in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The two tribes collected the shells and produced the beads, which they traded to Europeans in exchange for newly introduced goods. By the 1700s, Dutch settlers established wampum factories, including the Campbell Wampum Factory, founded in Bergen, New Jersey in the 1780s. The Campbell Wampum Factory continued to operate until the 1880s.



Left: Haudenosaunee flag created in the 1980s, based on the Hiawatha Wampum Belt created centuries earlier from purple and white wampum beads to symbolize the union of the original five nations, formerly enemies, who buried their weapons under the Great Tree of Peace.

HAUDENOSAUNEE CULTURE

Longhouses and Village Life

Extended families belonging to the same clan lived together in houses called longhouses, each usually housing sixty people. As the clan grew, the houses were expanded to accommodate the families. On average, longhouses measured approximately eighty to one hundred feet in length and twenty feet wide. Roofs were either rounded or triangular. Men were responsible for building longhouses and the entire community participated in their construction. The longhouse frame was made from cedar or hickory poles and possibly elm as well. Bark lashing was used to hold the poles together where they intersected.

Tree bark was used to cover the frame to make the walls and roof of the house. Bark lashing was also used to tie the bark onto the frame. Smoke holes were located at intervals in the roof, above the fireplaces. The holes could be easily closed during bad weather. Doors were located at either end of the house. Inside the longhouses, families had separate sleeping areas that were separated by wood screens. The several cooking areas were shared.

Two platforms ran the length of both sides of the longhouses. A low platform served as a sleeping and sitting area. Another platform, located approximately seven feet high, served as a storage area.

In the 1600s, a typical Haudenosaunee village consisted of between two hundred and three thousand people. Villages were located in clearings near forested areas and near waterways where fresh water could be obtained easily. The forests provided food and shelter for the Haudenosaunee. Villages were often surrounded by tall wooden fences, or palisades.

Haudenosaunee people spent most of their time outdoors, except in the cold winter months when the longhouse became the center of community life. In the winter, people repaired clothing and tools and got ready for the busy spring ahead. Winter was also a time when people visited with one another, renewed friendships, and told stories. Through the use of stories, Native communities have passed along their oral traditions including life lessons, histories, and languages. Haudenosaunee communities moved every twenty to thirty years as firewood became exhausted and bark became scarce for repairing the longhouse roofs. Moving also allowed the soil to replenish from many years of planting crops.

VALUES AND ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

The Haudenosaunee culture is a way of thinking and feeling, but also an intuitive way of problem solving and a unique way to express oneself in the world. It is guided by specific principles that have endured for centuries.

Values

Thinking collectively, considering the future generations.

Consensus in decision making, considering all points of view.

Sharing of the labor and benefits of that labor.

Duty to family, clan, nation, Confederacy and Creation.

Strong sense of self-worth without being egotistic.

People must learn to be very observant of the surroundings.

Everyone is equal and is a full partner in the society, no matter what their age.

The ability to listen is as important as the ability to speak.

Everyone has a special gift or talent that can be used to benefit the larger community.

Ethics

- To be generous
- To be thankful
- To honor others
- To be cooperative
- To be honest
- To feed others
- To show respect
- To be kind
- To live in peace
- To ignore evil or idle talk
- To share
- To be hospitable
- To love your family
- To live in harmony with nature

Philosophy

The philosophy of the Haudenosaunee is the search for understanding of the basic truths of the native universe. It is how the Haudenosaunee have come to understand their role in the world and the important lessons that understanding teaches:

There is a Creator who produced the things that give bounty to this life.

The universe is full of living beings - sun, moon, stars, earth, winds, and rain.

There is a living spirit in all things - animals, plants, minerals, water, and winds.

People have power, called *orenda*, that accumulates through life experiences.

People should live in peace with each other.

People should live in harmony with nature.

People should be thankful everyday.

People should be kind, sharing what they have.

Life is a journey, as people are born from the earth, exist on the earth and are returned to the earth to continue that journey after death.