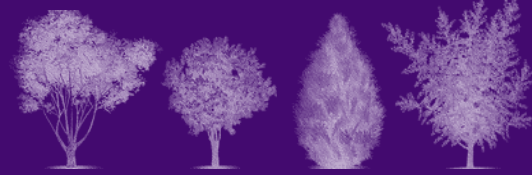


A More Perfect Union



The Great Law of Peace and the People of the Longhouse

Who should hold the power in a community and how much authority should a leader have? These are questions that people throughout the world have been trying to answer for thousands of years. In the United States, people live in what is called a representative democracy, where individuals are elected to represent the wishes of the people who selected them. Did you know that a Native American community provided one of the primary models for this form of government? Indeed, that Native American community still exists and remains the oldest living participatory democracy in the world.

In this article, you will learn about the Iroquois Confederacy, who called themselves the “Haudenosaunee,” meaning “the People of the Longhouse.”

How the Iroquois Confederacy Came to Be

The Iroquois Confederacy formed sometime in the 12th century. This representative government created hundreds of years of peace and stability between the five warring tribal nations of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca. In coming together to create this confederacy, they created a safe and prosperous environment in which the peoples of these nations lived. The Haudenosaunee called their government the Great Law of Peace. So inspiring was this form of government that Benjamin Franklin used some of its principles in the United States’ Constitution, such as the separation of powers, the ability to impeach, or remove, a leader who is not fulfilling their duties, and the inalienable rights of individuals.

Important Symbols of the Haudenosaunee

Just like an eagle, stars and stripes, or the colors red, white, and blue are often used to represent the United States, the Haudenosaunee used images to represent themselves.



The Tree of Peace

The Tree of Peace

Like many Native American communities before the arrival of Europeans, the Haudenosaunee used images and an oral tradition, rather than the written word, to pass down knowledge from one generation to the next. The Great Law of Peace is symbolized by a tree - specifically a white pine, under whose branches the people of the Confederacy would find protection. When the sachems from the five tribal nations first met and agreed to follow the Great Law of Peace, the tree was dug up, and all of the people threw their weapons of war in the hole, and then the tree was replanted. This is where we get the expression “to bury the hatchet.” The roots of the tree extended in the four directions. If other peoples wanted to learn about the Great Law of Peace, they could follow the white roots of the tree and come under the protection of its branches. The needles of the white pine connect in five bunches, symbolizing the five tribal nations. An eagle sits at the top, vigilantly watching for threats to the Confederacy.

Hiawatha Wampum Belt

The Great Law of Peace was also symbolized in the design of a wampum belt, referred to now as the Hiawatha belt. Wampum is a term used to refer to beads made from quahog, or clam shells. Because of its historical and cultural significance, wampum continues to be a powerful symbol of identity for Native American communities throughout the Northeast, including the Haudenosaunee. In fact, the Hiawatha Belt’s design is still used as the national belt of the Haudenosaunee. With its white design on a purple background, the four squares represent the unified tribal nations with the Onondaga represented by the Tree of Peace in the center. According to the Onondaga Nation’s website, “The shell is thought of as a living record of the Haudenosaunee. The speaker puts the words of the agreement into the wampum as the strings or belts are woven together. Each speaker thereafter uses the wampum to remember the initial agreement and the history that has happened to date. To us, the belts are our living history.”

As you can see, the Haudenosaunee and their Great Law of Peace left a powerful impact on some of the individuals who helped to form the United States’ government, even if those contributions are sometimes forgotten. Just as significantly, in answering their own questions about how to govern themselves, maintain peace, and select their leaders, they created a government that has stood the test of time despite numerous changes and challenges over thousands of years. Perhaps their enduring symbols - the Tree of Peace and the Hiawatha Belt - should be as familiar to people living today as is the U.S. Constitution.



Hiawatha Wampum Belt