First People of New York State

The

Haudenosaunee

“People of the Longhouse”

(Iroquois)
Who were the Haudenosaunee?

There is a huge geographic area in the northeastern part of the United States that is known as the Woodlands. The Woodlands include all five great lakes - Lake Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan, and Superior - as well as the Finger Lakes and the Saint Lawrence River.

No early people had it easy, but the Woodland Region certainly offered many opportunities to find food and shelter. There were wild fruit trees, loaded with cherries, mulberries, figs, apples, pears, and peaches. The lakes and rivers were packed with fish. You literally tripped over wild blueberries and strawberries and cranberries and all kinds of wild vegetables. There was plenty of wood available from birch, oak, elm, fir, and maple trees to use as firewood and to make homes and tools.

As early people wandered into the Woodland Region, many stayed. Thousands of years later, when European colonists began moving into the same area, they called these early people the Woodland Indians. By the time the European colonists arrived, there were many different groups of people who made their home in the Woodlands.

The most powerful group was the Haudenosaunee Nations - the Seneca, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Cayuga. Much later in their history, these five nations were joined by the Tuscarora Nation, bringing the League to a total of six. These were not tribes that joined together to form a nation. These were nations that joined together to form the League of Nations. Each group in the League was a Haudenosaunee Nation. The Haudenosaunee spoke the same language. They believed in the same gods. They had many similar customs. They were Haudenosaunee people.

Today, the Haudenosaunee people live like their non-Indian neighbors, but they still enjoy many of their old traditions.
Government

The League of Nations

The Haudenosaunee view of nature was based on sharing and cooperation. They took that same attitude into their daily life, history, and government. Because of their attitude, they were able to accomplish something spectacular, something that had never been done before. They were able to form the League of Nations.

The Legend of Hiawatha: Legend says ... Once upon a time, there was a Mohawk leader named Hiawatha. He was tired of the endless fighting between the five nations. He wanted things to change. One day, he met a great Haudenosaunee speaker named Dekanawida. Dekanawida convinced him that the way to bring peace was to form a new nation, a single Haudenosaunee Nation, where all five nations would have voice in government, so that things could be solved peacefully.

An old Haudenosaunee legend says this is what he told them:

"We bind ourselves together by taking hold of each other's hands so firmly and forming a circle so strong that if a tree should fall upon it, it could not shake nor break it, so that our people and grandchildren shall remain in the circle of security, peace, and happiness."

And so it was done. Each of the five great Haudenosaunee Nations banded together to form a new nation - the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Nation.
**Central Government:** The Haudenosaunee Nation had a unique form of representative central government. It was called the League of Nations.

**Written Constitution:** The League had a written constitution, a set of rights and agreements that all the people had to honor. The constitution was recorded on 114 wampums.

**Council:** The League had a Council. Each Haudenosaunee Nation had a set number of seats on the Council. The decisions of the Council were binding on every person in all Haudenosaunee Nations.

**Primary Purpose:** The League's primary purpose was the Great Law of Peace. This law said that the Haudenosaunee should not kill each other.

**Debates:** The League did not try to create rules for each tribe and village. That was the job of local government or regional government - the village council and the tribal councils. Only major issues were debated on the floor of the League of Nations.

Council speakers were eloquent and persuasive. Some members of the council were selected not because they were great warriors, but because they were great speakers.
Votes: There were groups inside the League that acted a great deal like today's political parties. The war-like Mohawk and Oneida often teamed up in the debates. The peaceful Seneca and Cayuga speakers would team up to oppose them. Fortunately, one of the League's constitutional rules was that the Chief of the League would always be selected from the Onondaga Nation. The peace loving Onondaga held 14 seats in the council. That was a lot of seats. The Onondaga were able to keep peace simply by reminding all representatives that their block of votes could swing either way.

Although each member's vote carried the same weight, there was a pecking order. The Mohawk, Onondaga, and Seneca were addressed as "elder brothers" and the Oneida, Cayuga, and Tuscarora were addressed as "younger brothers".

Unanimous Decisions: If there was a weakness to this system, it was that all decisions had to be unanimous. By the 1600's, the Haudenosaunee knew it was essential to present a united front to the colonists. Debates, although heated, nearly always led to a unanimous decision. The Nations stood together, and that made them strong.

During the American Revolution, the clan mothers could not decide whether to fight on the side of the colonists or on the side of the British. The Haudenosaunee Nations tried very hard to not take sides at all. When that did not work, they let each village decide for themselves. Some fought on the side of the colonists. Some fought on the side of the British.

Borrowing Ideas: When the early colonists began to design a system of government for what would become the United States of America, they borrowed many ideas from the League of Nations. It was an incredible system of government. It worked for them, it worked for us, and both governments - the Iroquois League of Nations and the Government of the United States are still in operation today.
Village Life

Villages: The Haudenosaunee lived in villages, and they believe in cooperation. They honored the needs of other people, just as they honored the land and animals. No one went hungry. Everyone in the village would share their food, even in the hardest times.

Clans: Haudenosaunee tribes are divided into groups called clans. Clans are family groups. It was forbidden to marry someone from your own clan. When a man married, he joined his wife's clan. When children were born, they became members of their mother's clan. The clan mother headed each clan. Most nations were divided into three clans. The Seneca had eight clans.

Sacred Trees: According to Haudenosaunee legend, the Great Spirit had told them that the animals and the things of the forest were their helpers. They knew they needed trees and plants and animals to live. But they were still sorry when they had to take a life. They were very careful to take only what they absolutely needed. To the Haudenosaunee and other Woodland Indians, it would have been an insult to kill something and then waste it.

A tree was living, and therefore sacred. If you were going to chop down a tree, every part of it had to be used. Young trees were made into poles for their longhouses. They carefully saved the leaves and twigs to start campfires. They used the bark to cover their homes to keep out the rain, and to line clay storage pots to keep dried food safe from mice. Twigs were also used to make baskets, hunting tools, and weapons. Twigs were used to make designs on clay pots. They used tree and plant fibers as weaving materials. They used everything over and over, even the smallest scraps, to avoid killing needlessly.

Their beliefs forced them to be inventive. They even invented games to use up left over pieces of wood. Some of these games became so popular that they turned into annual events, like the Snow Snake Games.
**Longhouses:** Because animal and plant life were plentiful, big groups could live together easily. Clans lived in longhouses. The distinctive clan longhouses were really long - they could be over 200 feet long, 25 feet wide, and 25 feet high. That's huge! To get an idea of how big they were, measure your own house.

Building a longhouse was hard work, and it took a long time. First, the people had to gather the materials - the wood and the hides. Since nothing could be wasted, it was not the gathering of materials that took a long time - it was using every part of every piece they gathered, as the materials they needed to build a longhouse began to pile up.

First, they made a frame out of long poles of wood. Then, they tied young trees to the frame, trees young enough to bend and shape. Once they had the shape of the longhouse in place, they covered the house with bark. They added a few smoke holes and two doors - one at each end. The Haudenosaunee rigged a flap on the smoke holes. When it snowed or rained, the holes could be opened and closed as needed. Later, the people might go back and add to the longhouse, making it even longer as needed. Longhouses, once built, lasted about twenty years.

Many longhouses had a huge pole fence built around them for additional protection. Stairs were built on the inside of the fence, so that archers could easily climb up and defend against attack. The poles ended in long sharp points to discourage anyone from climbing over.

Many families lived together in one longhouse. Each was assigned their own section. Fireplaces and fire pits ran down the middle of the longhouse for heat and for people to share as a place to cook food. Houses were not measured by feet. They were measured by camp fires. A house might be 10 fires long, or 12 fires long.

Longhouses were so important to the Haudenosaunee way of life that the Iroquois call themselves "the People of the Longhouse" (Haudenosaunee).
**Iroquois?** Iroquois is derived from an Algonquin word meaning "real snakes". Since the Algonquin and Haudenosaunee were traditional enemies, this was probably an insulting nickname that the Algonquin called the Haudenosaunee. It is likely that the British learned the name from their Algonquin allies and thought was the name of the nation.

**Marriage/Family Life:**

In the Haudenosaunee world, the husband had no real authority over his wife. Marriage was by mutual consent. Customs varied from tribe to tribe, but for the most part, a woman could leave her husband when she wished.

The women of each clan owned the longhouse. When a man married, he moved into his wife's longhouse. The men only brought a few things with them, perhaps a weapon or two and some clothing. When a baby was born, that child was a member of the wife's clan. When the boys grew up and married, they left their home and moved to their wife's longhouse. And so it went.

The men cleared the land for the garden crops. They hunted, fished, and participated as fierce warriors as needed.

Women controlled life in the longhouse. Out of all the women, the elder women were the ones who were in charge. The women tended the gardens and harvested the crops, as the men were too busy hunting to help much. Women raised the kids, made clothes, cooked food, and prepared food for storage. They were the gatherers, gathering wild fruits and vegetables. Women were usually the potters. They made the beautiful clay pots used for storage and cooking.

Children learned from their parents, uncles, and aunts. Girls helped their mothers. Boys helped their fathers. Both played games to strengthen their bodies and skills.
The Clan Mother: The clan mother had a great deal of power. She selected the Council members. Before the Council met to make decisions for the clan, the clan mother offered each member advice. Council members were usually chosen for life. But, if the clan mother felt she had made a mistake, she could fire a council member and choose someone new in his place. So, although the men ruled, they had to do so in a way that would please the clan mother.

Haudenosaunee Warriors: The men cleared the fields, and built and repaired the longhouses. Other than that, their time was spent in trading and hunting, and in war and preparing for war. The men made many types of weapons. They made bows and arrows out of hickory or ash wood. The tips of the arrows were made out of turtle, antler bone, and deer bone. They were very hard. They made blowguns and darts out of wood and hollow reeds, which were used to hunt birds. They made spears with sharp ends.

Haudenosaunee Battle Techniques: Haudenosaunee warriors taught the European settlers valuable lessons in how to use geography to win a battle. The early American colonists learned by watching the Haudenosaunee warriors blend into the landscape and fight like guerillas. They watched and learned how to attack quickly, and how to use a small number of men to sneak into enemy territory. The early colonists used the techniques they had learned from Haudenosaunee when fighting the British during the American Revolution.
Food

Farmers/Agriculture: Farming provided most of the Haudenosaunee diet. They made tools for farming. One tool was a wooden rake for leveling the soil. Another was a wooden spade used to dig the soil. They used seeds to plant corn, squash, green beans, lima beans, kidney beans, pumpkin, melon, and tobacco. The women owned the land and tended the fields. The women harvested the crops. The clan mother was the boss. The Haudenosaunee were very grateful for their harvests. They held six festivals each year to say prayers of thanks to their gods.

Three Sisters Succotash: Corn, beans, and squash were the most important crops. They were called The Three Sisters. The Three Sisters were mixed together to make a vegetable dish called succotash.

Boiled Corn Bread: They made a wonderful boiled corn bread. They made flour by pounding corn into flour. To make bread, they mixed water with corn flour. Sometimes cooked beans were added, or berries or nuts. The bread was kneaded and formed into small loaves. The loaves were dropped into boiling water and cooked until the bread floated. Boiled corn bread was served both hot and cold. They also used the same bread mix to bake bread by putting it on clay tablets in the fire. They used sunflower oil to fry bread.
**Wild Foods/Hunters and Gatherers**

**Wild Nuts, Fruits, Vegetables, and Eggs:** Women and children gathered wild nuts, fruits and vegetables, mushrooms, and eggs laid by birds and turtles. They gathered sunflowers to use to make sunflower oil, which they used to fry food. They also used sunflower oil to treat wounds and as a body lotion to protect their skin from hot or cold weather.

**Maple Syrup:** The Haudenosaunee learned to tap maple trees to harvest maple syrup. They had a quite a sweet tooth. They loved maple sugar in many foods. They made a special treat of heated nuts rolled in maple sugar.

**Wild Game:** The men usually left in the fall for the annual hunt. They used bow and arrows to kill black bear, elk, deer, rabbit, and wolves. They trapped wild turkey, ducks and other birds. They hunted turtles for their food and shells. No part of the animal was wasted. They did not eat raw food. They cooked everything they captured. Whatever the men brought back from the hunt was shared by the whole village.

**Fish:** Spring was fishing season. The men used huge nets to catch fish. When the brought the catch back, everyone in the village pitched in the help dry the fish over fires. Much of the catch would be dried and then stored. If the store of food was getting low, the men would go out at night with torches. The light attracted fish into their nets. Everyone in the village got busy drying and storing dried fish.
Storing Food: Dried fish was not the only food that was stored.

Rafter Storage Racks: They built storage racks inside that hung from the rafters. Corn was braided, along with squash, and hung from the ceiling. Other foods were stored on the storage rocks. The racks worked really well. Down the center of the longhouse were the family fires, one after another. Each family had a space inside the longhouse. And each family had a fire or shared a fire with the people across from them. There were smoke holes in the roof of the longhouse. So, the smoke and heat from the fires went up, and dried and smoked meat, fish, and other stored food, on the way out.

Buried Clay Pots: They also stored dried food in clay pots. The pots were lined with bark, which kept the mice out. Pots were filled with dried corn, meat, and vegetables. The pots were buried in bark lined storage pits inside or near the longhouse.
Clothing

They made clothes from soft deerskin. The women and men wore leggings, shirts, and moccasins. The women wore a skirt or a dress that covered most of their leggings. In the winter, the men added a smock that went down to their knees for warmth. They decorated their clothes with dyed porcupine quills.

The women wore their hair long. Warriors wore their hair in a "mohawk" - a wide stripe of hair left down the middle of their head. Men removed all body hair by scraping it off. Both men and women decorated their bodies with tattoos.

How did they travel?

Travel was by canoe on the water or by foot on land. They did not use wheeled vehicles or ride animals.
Wampum

Wampum was a system of recording important things.

Wampum was never used as money by the Haudenosaunee. It was used to write things down, and used as a symbol of position and title. The great circle wampum, for example, was a belt worn only by a chief as a symbol of his position. Wampum was also given to seal a promise.

The colonists used wampum as money. But then, they used everything as money, including coins from many different European nations, all at the same time. To the Haudenosaunee, wampum is a written record.

Wampum was made from dyed beads or shells, arranged in a certain way. To make wampum:

1. First, you needed to collect the right sized shells or make certain sized beads.
2. Then, you needed to dye your materials. Individual beads and shells were dyed various shades of solid purple, solid cream, or a mix of purples and cream. No other colors were used in making wampum.
3. Next, you had to string your beads on a thread in a certain order, depending upon what you wanted to say. The designs made out of certain combinations of colors had both symbolic and actual meaning. Long messages were made by sewing the strings of beads together to make a wampum belt.

Obviously, you had to know what you were doing, or who knows what message you might be sending. Wampum makers were skilled artists and trained in the messages of the wampum. They were the tribal historians. All the big events of the League of Nations were recorded in wampum.
Celebrations, Festivals, & Games

The Green Corn Festival

The Green Corn Festival was celebrated by many Indian tribes in one form or another. These early people were very grateful for their harvests. Tribes held several festivals each year to say prayers of thanks to their gods. One of the most important was the Green Corn Festival. This festival was held in late summer or early fall, when the corn they had planted had ripened on the stalk. The expression "green corn" refers to ripened sweet corn, corn you could eat.

These early people were great farmers. They depended on three staples - corn, beans, and squash. In the Woodland areas, these food items were so important that they had a name. They were called "The Three Sisters". The Three Sisters were mixed together to make a vegetable dish called succotash. But corn was always special.

Even after the Green Corn Festival, some corn was left on the stalk to additionally ripen, to help the drying process. Dried corn and dried corn meal were both very important staple items to help these early people eat well through the long winter ahead.

Lacrosse: The Haudenosaunee played many sports and games, but lacrosse was their favorite. They did not have much equipment. They had a ball made out of animal skin, clay, stone, or wood, a stick with a net at one end, a goal post at each end on the field and no other protective equipment. The purpose of the game was to pass the ball around and try to score goals. Whoever scored the most goals won. The game was played for fun, but that's not the only reason. They also played to improve their skills including aim, speed and strength. Lacrosse was played mainly by boys and men. The games sometimes went on for two or three days. One game even ended up in a war. Thanks to the Haudenosaunee, lacrosse is still played today by people of all ages.
Snow Snake Games

The Snow Snake Games were played in the winter, after the men returned from the annual hunt. These were huge games. Village played village. People shouted for their team. It was an exciting game of skill to the Haudenosaunee, and a team sport.

Before the games, each player carved their own "snake", which was a flattened piece of wood or a carved wood scrap, depending upon the age of the players and the competition level. One end was curved up a little, and the other end was notched to make it easy to throw.

When two teams met, they dragged a log through the snow to form a path or a trough. The object of the game was to throw your "snake" along the trough at a really fast speed. Teams alternated tosses. The distance that your snake traveled was added to your team score. Whichever side had the longest total distance or the best score was the winner.
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