

# The iroquois confederacy to six nations

[Government](#), [Colonialism](#)



Northern Kentucky University The Iroquois Confederacy to Six Nations

Thesis: Examine how the Seneca, Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, and Cayuga, and the 1722 addition of the Tuscarora, resulted in the Iroquois Confederacy or Six Nations and their influence on the creation of the Constitution. Nicole Cushingberry Cultural Anthropology Michael Striker December 16, 2011

Nicole Cushingberry Instructor: Michael Striker Anthropology 100 The Iroquois: Confederacy to Six Nations

The Iroquois Confederacy, also known as Five Nations or Six Nations after the 1720 inclusion of the Tuscarora, was a collective of tribes that occupied the upper region of New York state around Lake Ontario, Pennsylvania, and Southern Ontario and Quebec. The term Iroquois is an English deviation from a French deviation of an offensive Algonkian (group of Native American Indian languages used from South Carolina to Labrador, Canada and west to the Great Plains) term for “ real snakes”.

Originally, the members of the confederacy described themselves as Kanonsionni (compound word - kanonsa meaning “ house” and “ ionni” meaning extended) or “ people of the longhouse” whereas today the term Haudenosaunee is used which translates to “ people building an extended house”. The literal meaning of these terms describes the housing arrangement of the Iroquois - a dwelling typically 60 feet long (as large as 300 feet long) constructed of young, bendable trees, covered with bark.

Historically and by native traditions, Dekanawidah, a Huron tribe member and shaman, is credited with creating the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy, also known as The Great Law of Peace, between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Great Law of the Iroquois was communicated

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orally, believed to be one of the earliest collections of governing principles equivalent to the constitution, and was utilized as a justice system to be applied to tribe members by their chiefs.

Chief Hiawatha, an Onondaga living amongst a Mohawk tribe and an equivalent to a modern day politician, was persuaded by Dekanawidah to teach The Great Law of the Iroquois in hopes of eliminating the ongoing conflicts between the tribes resulting in the raiding of villages to obtain captives, retaliation, and murder. Dekanawidah also hoped that by uniting the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca, they would be able to defend themselves against European invasion. Tribal Society

Several tribes of the Northeast region spoke the Iroquois language but not all of them were members of the confederacy (at left, map shows the tribes and regions in New York State; the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy is shown in red). The Five Nations, was formed when the Cayuga, Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, and Seneca agreed to abide by the principles of The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy; Six Nations was created when the Tuscarora, a tribe from North Carolina, Requested admittance into the confederacy to gain protection from European colonization oreover, enslavement. The Six Nations of the confederacy is comprised of clan groups of matrilineal descent, with members being part of the mother'sfamily(all members of each clan were related to other clans via the mothers) automatically at birth and will remain as such for their lifetime. Family kinship was determined by bifurcate merging, with unilineal descent. The Iroquois were matrilocal; when a man was selected as being worthy to join

their longhouse as a husband by the elder women, after marriage, the couple resided in the longhouse of woman's birth.

Though women were in the position of power commonly held by men, they did not dominate the society. The most senior woman lead her clan and was charged with the naming of children, working her advisors to elect a chief to represent the clan and remove him if he did not meet his obligations, foodproduction and distribution, making clothing, participating in medicinal groups, and as a pastime, took part in gambling. Men were responsible for hunting, managing military tasks, fighting in wars, and acting as a representative, if selected, of his longhouse.

The Iroquois mode of subsistence was agriculturally based society, which their staple crops being corn, squash, and beans. Their diet was enhanced by gathering fruit, roots, and nuts some of which was often dried for later use. During hunting season, the men trapped squirrels, rabbits, beaver and hunted bears and deer. They traded goods such as pipes, beaded clothing, furs, and food items. Religion consisted in devotion to " The Great Spirit", creator of the world. All things in the Iroquois existence were taken care of by the spirits of the trees, plants, wind, rain, and other aspects of nature.

They believed that a world of supernatural powers existed, with both good and evil entities and felt these spirits could alter the course of their lives. The religious specialists of the Iroquois were known as the " Keepers of the Faith" and were male or female and held the position part-time. The keepers were selected by the elders and were tasked with arranging and conducting religious ceremonies, such as funerals or fighting illness and disease.

Constitutional Influence The main authors of the Constitution of the United

States, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, were highly influenced and inspired by the principles of the Six Nations.

Iroquois chiefs were invited to the Continental Congress Hall where on June 11, 1776, the focus of discussion was on the topic of independence. The chiefs presented a speech that detailed an on-going friendship between the Iroquois and the new Americans, and this relationship would only continue if both groups acted "as one people, and have one heart". There are many similarities between the constitution and the principles of the Iroquois. Researchers Vine Deloria, Bruce Johnson, and Donald Grinde have found that the very foundation of both sets of principles mirror each other (Johansen 1998: 79): life, liberty, and happiness (Declaration of Independence); government by reason and consent rather than coercion (Albany Plan and Articles of Confederation); religious tolerance (and ultimately religious acceptance) instead of a state church; checks and balances; federalism (U. S. Constitution); and relative equality of property, equal rights before the law, and the thorny problem of creating a government that can rule equitably across a broad geographic expanse (Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution). Native America had a substantial role in shaping all of these ideas. Payne 1996: 607, quoting Grinde and Johansen, *Exemplars of Liberty*, xx) Further, Johansen found that Franklin was using quotes from the Onondaga and advising Americans in their ill feeling towards England: Our wise ancestors established union and amity between the five nations. This has made us formidable. This has given us great weight and authority without neighboring nations. We are a powerful Confederacy, and by your observing the same methods our wise ancestors have taken you will acquire

much strength and power; therefore, whatever befalls you, do not fall out with one another. Johansen 1998: 8) In closing, to think that the Constitution of the United States is based upon the life principles of a group of people once thought to be savages, is both a revelation and a disappointment. It is truly amazing that some many people with a common language can come together as one group for the benefits of all - socially, economically, and for the protection against a common enemy. The people of the Six Nations lived lives based on survival rather than greed by our current day definition.

However, what I find disappointing and disheartening, is the fact that we as Americans came to this country to escape oppression from the crown. Yet upon arrival in this new land, we turn and do the similar oppressive acts to the Native Americans. We called them savages and treated them as if they occupied a status lower than animals, yet we base the very document that makes use Americans on their life principles. A statement by issued during a discussion at Albany Franklin summarizes my point of view: " It would be a strange thing... f Six Nations of ignorant savages should be capable of forming such a union and be able to execute it in such a manner that it has subsisted ages and appears indissoluble, and yet that a like union should be impractical for ten or a dozen English colonies, to whom it is more necessary and must be more advantageous, and who cannot be supposed to want an equal understanding of their interest. " Works Cited Daly, Janet. " Iroquois constitution united states. " IPOAA Magazine. SocialScienceJournal, n. d. Web. 19 Nov. 2011. . Hale, Horatio. " Iroquois Book of Rites Index. Internet Sacred Text Archive Home. N. p. , n. d. Web. 16 Dec. 2011. . " Iroquois Confederacy (American Indian confederation) -- Britannica Online

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