

THE (REALLY) GREAT LAW OF PEACE

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Many centuries ago, a Huron woman dreamed that her son would become a great man. According to legend, her dream came true. The woman's son, Dekanawideh, founded the Great Law of Peace — the oldest constitution in North America. Over 800 years later, the Iroquois peoples of Canada and the United States still follow its rules!

NATIONS AT WAR

Dekanawideh grew up on the north side of Lake Ontario. He learned about the Iroquois nations that lived across the lake, including the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca peoples. These five nations shared many traditions, including their style of home, called a longhouse. But they were bitter rivals, and they fought each other over many issues.

MIRACLE MAKER

Dekanawideh believed he could put a stop to the fighting. He crossed Lake Ontario in a canoe made of stone, then set about bringing peace to the warring nations.

Early in his journey, Dekanawideh visited the Mohawk peoples. He preached his message of peace to them, but they were very suspicious. To win their trust, Dekanawideh climbed to the top of a tall tree overlooking the Mohawk River. He told the people to chop down the tree so that it would crash into the rushing rapids. If Dekanawideh survived, it would be proof that his message was true.

When the tree crashed, Dekanawideh vanished into the water. But early the next morning, he was found sitting calmly in the forest, enjoying his breakfast by a fire. This so impressed the Mohawk chief that his nation was the first to agree to peace.

Five feathers are a symbol of unity for the people of the Iroquois Confederacy.

Wampum belts, made of shell beads, were often created to mark important historical events. This belt represents the Great Law of Peace, and it is a symbol of unity among the Five Nations.

The Iroquois Grand Council of Chiefs at the Six Nations Reservation in Ontario, 1871.



PEOPLE OF THE LONGHOUSE

While on his travels, Dekanawideh met a man called Hiawatha, a brilliant speaker who also wanted to help bring peace. Hiawatha joined Dekanawideh on his visits to the other nations. Together, they told the people of their peace plan.

Dekanawideh used arrows to explain his message: a single arrow can break easily, he explained. But five arrows, tied together, are strong and cannot break. The arrows symbolized the strength of the five nations together.

After long talks, the leaders of all five nations agreed to peace. They called themselves the Haudenosaunee, meaning "people of the longhouse." Their new government became known as the Iroquois Confederacy.

THE GREAT LAW OF PEACE

Dekanawideh created a set of rules (or constitution) for the Confederacy, called the Great Law of Peace. The laws focused on respect and equality among nations. In celebration, Dekanawideh planted a white pine. He buried arrows beneath it to represent the end of war.

This Tree of Peace became the symbol of the Confederacy, and Dekanawideh became known as the Great Peacemaker.

PEACE FOR ALL TIME

In 1702, the Tuscarora nation joined the Iroquois Confederacy, and the group became known as the League of Six Nations. Today, the Haudenosaunee continue to follow the Great Law of Peace and to honour the Peacemaker who made it all possible.

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