

# The Haudenosaunee

## Sharing the Law of Peace

In addition to being the housing style of Haudenosaunee people, the longhouse (and how it sheltered and connected people with common beliefs) was the metaphor the Peacemaker used when uniting nations in the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

Photo courtesy of Ganondagan State Historic Site

USA Mission Experience participants had the opportunity to visit Ganondagan State Historic Site, a Seneca cultural center where to learn about the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy, an alliance of six Native American nations—Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk and Tuscarora—that occupied what is now New York State prior to European colonization.

**H**audenosaunee means “People of the Longhouse.” The longhouse was central to clan life, and a common symbol for all the member nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Ganondagan State Historic Site, near Victor, New York, includes a reproduction of a longhouse with items from daily life in the 1600s. “Spanning 569 acres, Ganondagan is the original site of a 17th-century Seneca town that existed there peacefully more than 350 years ago. The culture, art, agriculture and government of the Seneca people influenced our modern understanding of equality, democratic government, women’s rights, ecology and natural foods.”<sup>1</sup>

### The Peacemaker

In the late 1500s, the Haudenosaunee nations were at war with each other, but the Peacemaker convinced them they would be stronger united. The Confederacy describes their origin this way:

The Peacemaker was sent by the Creator to spread the *Kariwii* or “good mind.” With the help of Aiionwatha, commonly known as Hiawatha, the Peacemaker taught the laws of peace to the Haudenosaunee. Travelling from community to community they both succeeded in persuading the Chiefs of each nation to join in the Great League of Peace . . . Asking the Clan Mothers of each tribe to present their Chiefs, he placed deer antlers on each of their heads to symbolize their authority to the five nations. . . . The Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, Seneca and Onondaga accepted the long house as a symbol of their unity.<sup>2</sup>

In 1722, the Confederacy accepted a sixth nation, the Tuscarora. The Canandaigua Treaty, signed in Canandaigua, New York, in 1794, established peace and friendship between the young United States of America and the Six Nations; though there have been violations of the treaty, it has never been broken and is still recognized by the Six Nations and the United States government.<sup>3</sup>

The Peacemaker and the “good mind” that he taught are central to Haudenosaunee culture. The Friends of Ganondagan say:

The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) have been practicing the teachings of the Good Mind ever since the Peacemaker helped us bury our arrows under the Tree of Peace. The concept of the Good Mind teaches us to be aware of our thoughts and their intent, resulting in more kind and loving thoughts. The Haudenosaunee believe peace is a state of mind obtained through a strong connection to spirit. Our Elders teach us that practicing the Good Mind will cause our spirit to grow, known as Orenda. Good Minds have strong Orenda which leads to Peace.<sup>4</sup>

### “Good Mind”

“Good mind” isn’t just about individual behavior, it’s also essential to Haudenosaunee constitution and political structure. “Often described as the oldest, participatory democracy on Earth, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy’s constitution is believed to be a model

for the American Constitution. What makes it stand out as unique to other systems around the world is its blending of law and values.”<sup>5</sup>

The Haudenosaunee influence went beyond shaping the U.S. constitution; it also informed what women’s rights advocates in the Finger Lakes region hoped to achieve with their movement. Author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz notes, “Men were the representatives [for their clans in governing councils], but the women who chose them had the right to speak in the council, and when the chosen representative was too young or inexperienced to be effective, one of the women might participate in the council on his behalf. Haudenosaunee clan mothers held the power to recall unsatisfactory representatives. Charles C. Mann, author of *1491: New Revelation of the Americas before Columbus*, calls it ‘a feminist dream.’”<sup>6</sup> (See page 18.)

The values of equality, unity and good mind have remained integral to Haudenosaunee life, in part because of storytelling. The Confederacy says, “Story telling is an essential part of Haudenosaunee culture. It isn’t just about telling stories, it’s a positive way to teach the beliefs and values the Haudenosaunee hold.”<sup>7</sup> The Haudenosaunee Confederacy nations still

thrive today, living out commitments to peace and unity. 🍅

### Notes

1. “Welcome to Ganondagan,” ganondagan.org; accessed October 31, 2019.
2. “Confederacy’s Creation,” in “About Us” on the Haudenosaunee Confederacy website; www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com; accessed October 31, 2019.
3. Friends of Ganondagan, “Canandaigua Treaty of 1794,” Ganondagan.org; https://ganondagan.org/Learning/Canandaigua-Treaty; accessed October 31, 2019.
4. Friends of Ganondagan, “Good Minds,” Ganondagan.org; https://ganondagan.org/learn/good-mind; accessed October 31, 2019.
5. “About the Haudenosaunee Confederacy,” in “About Us,” Haudenosaunee Confederacy website; www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/who-we-are; accessed October 31, 2019.
6. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2014), 27.
7. “Story Telling,” in “Culture & History” on the Haudenosaunee Confederacy website; www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com; accessed October 31, 2019.

## Three Sisters\*

BY CARISSA HEROLD



*Iroquois Three Sisters,*  
Barry Lee

The Native American tale of the “Three Sisters” (corn, beans and squash)\* tells of the abundance available to humankind thanks to a generous Creator: “You crown the year with your bounty.” From ancient days, corn, beans and squash were welcomed and understood as precious gifts of the Great Spirit, for they truly are foods of life.

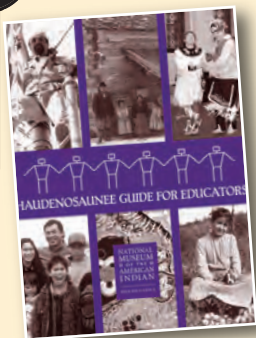
Nutritionally, the sisters provide protein, carbohydrates and essential vitamins.

But this tale is a cautionary one as well: the sisters thrive together but grieve when they are apart. They are interdependent, and it is at their peril that they forget God’s intent: corn grows tall and gives beans structure to grow upward; beans, in turn, provide nitrogen that nourishes sister corn, and provide a steady base for windier days. Squash vines keep weeds at bay (especially the prickly variety of squash!). Our sweet family of sisters also provides nourishment for the soil, for the following year’s planting.

Let us remember that our interdependence is of God. We are blessed to serve one another and creation. We are blessed to see with our own eyes the glory of God’s good world and the miracle that all good things are freely provided. Let us “shout and sing together for joy.”

\*A Mohawk telling of the story is available at <https://ganondagan.org/learn/legend-of-the-three-sisters>.

### Recommended Resources



**Haudenosaunee Guide for Educators**  
[https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/Haudenosaunee\\_Guide.pdf](https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/Haudenosaunee_Guide.pdf)

This resource provides an understanding of Haudenosaunee life, past and present. With discussion questions, activities and resource recommendations, it is excellent for use with all ages.



**Iroquois Creation Story DVD**  
[ganondagan.org/shop](https://ganondagan.org/shop)

The ancient Iroquois Creation Story, passed down through generations of oral tradition, is beautifully captured in video with this blend of live action and animation.