

The Iroquois Constitution

Before Revolutionary patriots put pen to paper to draft the U.S. Constitution in 1787, Colonial leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin studied other systems of government, including an example flourishing close to home: the Iroquois Confederacy. This political group had what Jefferson and Franklin were searching for—a constitution infused with the basic principles of democracy and federalism. The Iroquois Confederacy, also known as the League of Five Nations, was a union of the Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Oneidas, and Mohawks (the Tuscaroras joined later). Around 1500, so the legend goes, a Mohawk visionary named Dekanawida convinced the nations to unite in order to establish peace and to protect “life, property, and liberty.” Thanks to the constitution they created, the confederacy became a formidable power. By 1750, it numbered about fifteen thousand people, and Iroquois hunters and warriors ranged over one million square miles.

Because the constitution was originally not written but only shared orally, the exact date of its origination is unknown. Most scholars agree to a date of 1451. However, Seneca’s oral history mentions that the Iroquois Great Law of Peace was adopted shortly after a total eclipse of the sun. Scholarship indicates that such an eclipse occurred on August 13, 1142.

The oldest living constitution. The Iroquois Constitution, which still governs the Iroquois today, is regarded as the world’s oldest living constitution. It gives member peoples equal voice in the nations’ affairs, spells out a system of checks and balances, and guarantees political and religious freedom. Most amazing by European standards of that time, the Iroquois Constitution grants extensive political power to women, who hold the right to nominate and impeach chiefs.

The strength of five arrows. The Iroquois Constitution survives as a brilliant American political and literary work, filled with rich symbolism. Dekanawida had envisioned a huge evergreen “Tree of Peace” whose spreading roots represented the five nations of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois). After unification of the nations, a symbolic tree was planted. An eagle atop the Tree of Peace, clutching five arrows, symbolizes the Iroquois Confederacy—and it’s the image we see pictured on the back of the U.S. quarter. In 1988, to mark the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, Congress passed a joint resolution stating that “the confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy, as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself.” Like five arrows bound together, the Iroquois political and literary legacy is entwined forever with the ideals that continue to shape American life.

from The Iroquois Constitution Dekanawida

Tree of Great Peace

I am Dekanawida and with the Five Nations' Confederate Lords I plant the Tree of the Great Peace. I plant it in your territory, Adodarhoh, and the Onondaga Nation, in the territory of you who are Firekeepers.

I name the tree the Tree of the Great Long Leaves. Under the shade of this Tree of the Great Peace we spread the soft white feathery down of the globe thistle as seats for you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords.

We place you upon those seats, spread soft with the feathery down of the globe thistle, there beneath the shade of the spreading branches of the Tree of Peace. There shall you sit and watch the Council Fire of the Confederacy of the Five Nations, and all the affairs of the Five Nations shall be transacted at this place before you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords, by the Confederate Lords of the Five Nations.

Roots have spread out from the Tree of the Great Peace, one to the north, one to the east, one to the south, and one to the west. The name of these roots is The Great White Roots and their nature is Peace and Strength.

If any man or any nation outside the Five Nations shall obey the laws of the Great Peace and make known their disposition to the Lords of the Confederacy, they may trace the Roots to the Tree and if their minds are clean and they are obedient and promise to obey the wishes of the Confederate Council, they shall be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree of the Long Leaves.

We place at the top of the Tree of the Long Leaves an Eagle who is able to see afar. If he sees in the distance any evil approaching or any danger threatening he will at once warn the people of the Confederacy.

Leaders

The Lords of the Confederacy of the Five Nations shall be mentors of the people for all time. The thickness of their skin shall be seven spans—which is to say that they shall be proof against anger, offensive actions, and criticism. Their hearts shall be full of peace and goodwill and their minds filled with a yearning for the welfare of the people of the Confederacy. With endless patience they shall carry out their duty and their firmness shall be tempered with a tenderness for their people. Neither anger nor fury shall find lodgment in their minds and all their words and actions shall be marked by calm deliberation.

Clans

The lineal descent of the people of the Five Nations shall run in the female line. Women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the status of the mother.

Symbols

Five arrows shall be bound together very strong and each arrow shall represent one nation. As the five arrows are strongly bound this shall symbolize the complete union of the nations. Thus are the Five Nations united completely and enfolded together, united into one head, one body, and one mind. Therefore they shall labor, legislate, and council together for the interest of future generations.

War and Peace

I, Dekanawida, and the Union Lords, now uproot the tallest pine tree and into the cavity thereby made we cast all weapons of war. Into the depths of the earth, down into the deep underearth currents of water flowing to unknown regions we cast all the weapons of strife. We bury them from sight and we plant again the tree. Thus shall the Great Peace be established and hostilities shall no longer be known between the Five Nations but peace to the United People.