

from "IROQUOIS GREAT LAW OF PEACE"

Pre-history

Translated by Arthur C. Parker

The Iroquois Great Law of Peace was a constitution that established a democracy between five Iroquois-speaking tribes—the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, and Mohawk. This group of five nations, called the Iroquois Confederacy, was established around 1450. The Great Law of Peace was thought to have been produced shortly after the Iroquois Confederacy was formed and was recorded on wampum belts [belts made with ornamental shells]. The original purpose of this constitution was to end years of bloody battle between these five nations. Below are excerpts from an English translation of the Great Law of Peace.

READING FOCUS:

What does the Great Law of Peace have in common with the ideals of more modern government?

2. 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 their disposition [swear their allegiance] 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.

5. The council of the Mohawk shall be divided into three parties as follows: Tekarihoken, Ayonhwhathah, and Skadekariwade are the first party; Sharenhowaneh, Deyoenhegwehn, and Oghrenghregowah the second party, and Kehennakrineh, Aghstawenserrenthah, and Shoskoharowaneh are the third party. The third party is to listen only to the discussion of the first and second parties and if an error is made or the proceeding is irregular they are to call attention to it, and when the case is right and properly decided by the two parties they shall confirm the decision of the two parties and refer the case to the Seneca Lords for their decision. When the Seneca Lords have decided in accord [agreement] with the

from "IROQUOIS GREAT LAW OF PEACE"

Mohawk Lords, the case or question shall be referred to the Cayuga and Oneida Lords on the opposite side of the house.

16. If the conditions which arise at any future time call for an addition to or change of this law, the case shall be carefully considered and if a new beam [law] seems necessary or beneficial, the proposed change shall be voted upon and if adopted it shall be called, "Added to the Rafter."

24. The chiefs of the League of Five Nations shall be mentors of the people for all time. The thickness of their skins shall be seven spans, which is to say that they shall be proof against anger, offensive action and criticism. Their hearts shall be full of peace and good will and their minds filled with a yearning for the welfare of the people of the league. With endless patience, they shall carry out their duty. Their firmness shall be tempered with a tenderness for their people.

92. If a nation, part of a nation, or more than one nation within the Five Nations should in any way endeavor [try] to destroy the Great Peace by neglect or violating its laws and resolve to dissolve the Confederacy such a nation or such nations shall be deemed guilty of treason and called enemies of the Confederacy and the Great Peace.

93. Whenever a specially important matter or a great emergency is presented before the Confederate Council and the nature of the matter affects the entire body of Five Nations threatening their utter [complete] ruin, then the Lords of the Confederacy must submit the matter to the decision of their people and the decision of the people shall affect the decision of the Confederate Council. This decision shall be a confirmation of the voice of the people.

94. The men of every clan of the Five Nations shall have a Council Fire ever burning in readiness for a council of the clan. When it seems necessary for a council to be held to discuss the welfare of the clans, then the men may gather the fire. This council shall have the same rights as the council of the women.

95. The women of every clan of the Five Nations shall have a Council Fire ever burning in readiness for a council of the clan. When in their opinion it seems necessary for the interest of the people they shall hold a council and their decision and recommendation shall be introduced before the Council of Lords by the War Chief for its consideration.

From "The Constitution of the Five Nations" from the *New York State Museum Bulletin*, Albany, NY, April 1, 1916.