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Iroquois - The Six Nations

By Mary Lynn Bushong

When you think of the Native Americans of the East, what comes to mind? Do you think of longhouses and wigwams, hunters with bows and arrows, or blood-curdling war cries? If you lived among the Iroquois, you would know that politics was one of the most important parts of their culture. Surprised? Many people are.

For their daily lives, Iroquois were like other natives. They hunted their meat and grew several kinds of corn for food. Hides were saved from their kills to make clothing, while bones became tools.

The Iroquois lived in longhouses rather than wigwams. The name Iroquois was given to them, and it stuck. The name they called themselves was Haudenosaunee. It meant "people building a longhouse."

You should remember that when the New World was being settled by Europeans, the Iroquois were major players and power brokers. They were not a simple people as some would like to portray natives. The men had a reputation for being great warriors, and even more important was their reputation for being even greater diplomats.

Many of those coming to the Americas wanted to set up feudal systems just like the system they were used to back home. The Iroquois, by contrast, were already using a democratic system of government. It is thought that many elements of their constitution were used in the development of the U.S. Constitution.

The Iroquois were not a single nation but a confederation of six nations: Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora. By banding together they could ensure peace in their region. The peace allowed their people to not only grow in population but to enjoy the stability of a strong government.

The Iroquois Confederation was ruled by a Grand Council who used the "Great Law" which was their founding constitution. Contrary to European society, women held an important role in the Grand Council. Each clan had a "Clan Mother." This Clan Mother led the clan and selected the male chief. The Clan Mothers could also remove any chief from office who did not act responsibly.

The reasoning for using Clan Mothers was simple. Men might hunger for conflict from time to time, but mothers knew the value of life and would encourage the men to seek peaceful solutions to problems. Peace was possible because those nations around them knew their strength as warriors.

This reputation also attracted the English and French to seek them out as allies. They were not concerned so much with what the Europeans were trying to accomplish. They were most concerned with keeping their own lands and way of life. The Iroquois were a strong people that did what they had to do to defend their land and culture.

The Iroquois today are still a sovereign nation. They were never a conquered people. They are able to make treaties with other governments and maintain their independence, although their territory is now split between Canada and the United States.



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Questions

_____ 1. The Iroquois name "Haudenosaunee" meant:

- A. People who work together
- B. People who hunt together
- C. People who build longhouses
- D. People who make war

2. What type of government did the Iroquois use?

3. How was it different from the one the colonists had?

_____ 4. What did the colonists learn from the Iroquois?

- A. Diplomacy
- B. How to fight
- C. Peaceful negotiation
- D. Democracy

5. What skills of the Iroquois did the Europeans seek to use?

6. List three of the six nations in the Iroquois Confederacy.

7. How did women influence the Iroquois government?
