



Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *from* **The Iroquois Constitution**

In the 15th century, five separate nations of Iroquois—Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, and Onondaga—united to form the League of Five Nations. The purpose of the Iroquois League was to end internal warfare and to form a strong alliance against outside enemies. To further their goals, the league created a constitution, called the Great Binding Law, that consisted of 117 individual laws and customs governing all aspects of life—from self-government and war to family relationships, religion, symbolism, and burial rites. In the following excerpt, the speaker Dekanawidah is the great Mohawk leader credited with establishing the Great Peace among the nations. He speaks to Adodarhoh, leader of the Onondaga. In this English translation, the term Lord means “chief.”

1 I am Dekanawidah 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.

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 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. . . .

6 I, Dekanawidah, appoint the Mohawk Lords the heads and the leaders of the Five Nations

Confederacy. The Mohawk Lords are the foundation of the Great Peace and it shall, therefore, be against the Great Binding Law to pass measures in the Confederate Council after the Mohawk Lords have protested against them.

No council of the Confederate Lords shall be legal unless all the Mohawk Lords are present. . . .

9 All the business of the Five Nations Confederate Council shall be conducted by the two combined bodies of Confederate Lords. First the question shall be passed upon by the Mohawk and Seneca Lords, then it shall be discussed and passed by the Oneida and Cayuga Lords. Their decisions shall then be referred to the Onondaga Lords (Firekeepers) for final judgment.

The same process shall obtain when a question is brought before the council by an individual or a War Chief.

from Arthur C. Parker, The Constitution of the Five Nations or the Iroquois Book of the Great Law (New York State Museum Bulletin). Reprinted in William N. Fenton, ed., Parker on the Iroquois (Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 30–60.

Discussion Questions

1. The Tree of the Great Peace has both literal and figurative meanings. Discuss some of the things it might symbolize to the Iroquois.
2. What advantages do you think the Iroquois gained by establishing the constitution? What disadvantages, if any, might there have been?
3. Some historians claim that the Iroquois constitution had an influence on the U.S. Constitution. Look briefly at the beginning of the U.S. Constitution on pages 84–85 in your textbook and discuss some similarities and differences between the two constitutions.