

# from **The** **Iroquois Constitution**

Dekanawida

## The Tree of the 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, Adodarho,<sup>1</sup> and the Onondaga Nation, in the territory of you who are Firekeepers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> as seats for you, Adodarho, 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.

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.

## The Care of the Fire

The Smoke of the Confederate Council Fire shall ever ascend and pierce the sky so that other nations who may be allies may see the Council Fire of the Great Peace.

You, Adodarho, and your thirteen cousin Lords shall faithfully keep the space about the Council Fire clean and you shall allow neither dust nor dirt to accumulate. I lay a Long Wing before you as a broom. As a weapon against a crawling creature I lay a staff with you so that you may thrust it away from the Council Fire.

## The Laws of the Council

Whenever the Confederate Lords shall assemble for the purpose of holding a council, the Onondaga Lords shall open it by expressing their gratitude to their cousin Lords and greeting them, and they shall make an address and offer thanks to the earth where men dwell, to the streams of

1. *Adodarho* was an Onondaga chief who enjoyed a position of honor in the Confederate Council. His name became an honorific, or traditional title, for Iroquois leaders.
2. *Firekeepers* were important chiefs who oversaw the Council Fire, which symbolized the confederacy.
3. *Globe thistle* is a plant that has prickly leaves and blue flowers. Like a dandelion, the flower becomes a mass of white, silky fuzz, or down, when it goes to seed.

**Author's Purpose** Based on this statement, what do you think is Dekanawida's purpose in writing this piece?

### Vocabulary

**disposition** (dis' pə zish' ən) n. one's general way of thinking or feeling

**Draw Conclusions About Culture** What can you conclude about the Iroquois attitude toward strangers or outsiders?

**The Sacred Earth and the Power of Storytelling** How does the opening of a council meeting reflect the importance of storytelling in Native American culture?



water, the pools, the springs and the lakes, to the maize<sup>4</sup> and the fruits, to the medicinal herbs and trees, to the forest trees for their usefulness, to the animals that serve as food and give their pelts for clothing, to the great winds and the lesser winds, to the Thunderers, to the Sun, the mighty warrior, to the moon, to the messengers of the Creator who reveal his wishes and to the Great Creator who dwells in the heavens above, who gives all the things useful to men, and who is the source and the ruler of health and life.

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.

When the Council of the Five Nation Lords shall convene, they shall appoint a speaker for the day. He shall be a Lord of either the Mohawk, Onondaga, or Seneca Nation.

No individual or foreign nation interested in a case, question, or proposition shall have any voice in the Confederate Council except to answer a question put to him or them by the speaker for the Lords.

If the conditions which shall 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 seems necessary or beneficial, the proposed change shall be voted upon and, if adopted, it shall be called, "Added to the Rafters."<sup>5</sup>

4. Maize is corn.

5. The Iroquois leaders thought of their confederacy of five nations as a longhouse, a communal Iroquois dwelling with an east door, a west door, and a central fire. The terms *beam* and *Added to the Rafters* continue this comparison.

#### Vocabulary

**convene** (kən vĕn') v. to come together; assemble

## The Clans

Among the Five Nations and their posterity there shall be the following original clans: Great Name Bearer, Ancient Name Bearer, Great Bear, Ancient Bear, Turtle, Painted Turtle, Standing Rock, Large Plover, Little Plover, Deer, Pigeon Hawk, Eel, Ball, Opposite-Side-of-the-Hand, and Wild Potatoes. These clans, distributed through their respective Nations, shall be the sole owners and holders of the soil of the country, and in them is it vested as a birthright.

People of the Five Nations [who are] members of a certain clan shall recognize every other member of that clan, irrespective of the Nation, as relatives.

The lineal descent of the people of the Five Nations shall run in the female line. Women shall be considered the progenitors<sup>6</sup> of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the status of the mother.

## The Leaders

The Lords of the Confederacy of the Five Nations shall be mentors<sup>7</sup> 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 good will 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,

6. Progenitors are direct ancestors or originators of an ancestral line.

7. Mentors are wise and trusted advisers.

**Draw Conclusions About Culture** What shift in traditional attitudes toward the land is shown here and what conclusion might you draw from it?

#### Vocabulary

**posterity** (pɒs tər' ə tē) n. generations of the future; all of one's descendants



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**.

## The Festivals

The rites and festivals of each Nation shall remain undisturbed and shall continue as before because they were given by the people of old times as useful and necessary for the good of men.

The recognized festivals of Thanksgiving shall be the Midwinter Thanksgiving, the Maple or Sugar Making Thanksgiving, the Raspberry Thanksgiving, the Strawberry Thanksgiving, the

**Author's Purpose** *How does Dekanawida's lengthy description of the traits of the Lords of the Confederacy reinforce his purpose for writing the constitution?*

### Vocabulary

**temper** (tem' pər) *v.* to modify or moderate; soften  
**deliberation** (di lib' ə rā' shən) *n.* careful consideration

Corn Planting Thanksgiving, the Corn Hoeing Thanksgiving, the Little Festival of Green Corn, the Great Festival of Ripe Corn, and the complete Thanksgiving for the Harvest.

## The Symbols

A large bunch of shell strings, in the making of which the Five Nations' Confederate Lords have equally contributed, shall symbolize the completeness of the union and certify the pledge of the Nations represented by the Confederate Lords of the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca, that all are united and formed into one body or union called the Union of the Great Law, which they have established.

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. 🍁





# After You Read

## Respond and Think Critically

### Respond and Interpret

1. What is your opinion of Dekanawida's abilities as a peacemaker? Explain.
2. What does Dekanawida say is the nature of the roots of the Tree of the Great Peace?
3. (a) Describe the rules Dekanawida includes about making changes to the law. (b) Given these rules, how would you characterize Dekanawida's skills as a planner?
4. Explain the symbols of the confederacy described on page 51. In what way, do you think, does the design of the symbols reflect Dekanawida's vision for the confederacy?

### Analyze and Evaluate

5. (a) How does the constitution divide authority among the five nations? (b) How did structuring decision making this way benefit the Iroquois?
6. What do you think were important leadership qualities in the confederacy? Explain.

### Connect

7. **Big Idea** **The Sacred Earth and the Power of Storytelling** How is reverence for nature reflected in the Iroquois Constitution? Explain.
8. **Connect to the Author** Dekanawida gives women a great deal of power. Why might he have assigned women these roles?

### Literary Element Author's Purpose

After forming your initial idea of the author's purpose, double-check your notion against the information in the piece.

1. What is Dekanawida's basic purpose in creating the Iroquois Constitution?
2. What different comparisons does he introduce to convey his ideas of peace and unity?

### Reading Strategy Draw Conclusions About Culture

To draw conclusions about the Iroquois, think about how the details tell you something about Iroquois society. Review your chart on page 48 and the passage about women's roles on page 50. What conclusions do you draw about the importance of women in Iroquois society?

### Vocabulary Practice

**Practice with Synonyms** Match each vocabulary word below with its synonym on the right. You will not use all the answer choices. Check your answers in a thesaurus or dictionary.

- |                 |                  |
|-----------------|------------------|
| 1. disposition  | a. moderate      |
| 2. convene      | b. congregate    |
| 3. posterity    | c. contemplation |
| 4. temper       | d. journey       |
| 5. deliberation | e. temperament   |
|                 | f. imprisonment  |
|                 | g. descendants   |