

Breaking the Great League of Peace and Power: The Six Iroquois Nations During and After the American Revolution

Author: Shannon C. McCutchen, Elementary Social Studies Curriculum Specialist, Baltimore City Public School System

Grade Level: Upper Elementary/Middle

Duration of lesson: 2-3 periods

Overview:

Over the course of centuries, the Six Nations of Iroquois speakers, in the region comprised today by the state of New York, formed a Great League of Peace and Power in order to preserve good relations among their communities. However, during the American Revolution, the league was unable to safeguard the alliance of Nations. In an attempt to maintain their sovereignty and independence the Iroquois were forced to divide their loyalties between the British and the Americans. In this lesson, students will discover how this organization of Native American tribes collapsed under the pressures of the American Revolution before coming back together to sign a treaty of friendship and reconciliation with the new United States government.

Related National History Standards:

Content Standards:

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754 – 1820's)

Standard 2: The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

C. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.

G. Draw upon data in historical maps.

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities

C. Interrogate historical data.

Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

A. Identify issues and problems in the past.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will examine primary sources concerning the members of the Iroquois nation in order to determine their reasons for signing a treaty with the new American government.

Topic Background:

The Great League of Peace and Power

The Native inhabitants of the St. Lawrence valley and the Great Lakes region belonged to two dominant linguistic groups: the Algonquian and the Iroquoian. The Great League of Peace and Power, also called the Five Nations or the Iroquois Confederacy, were part of the Iroquoian-speaking group. They inhabited the lands between the south-western shore of the Lake Ontario and the Hudson River. The Iroquois settlement extended from Canada to what is today northern New York state, namely the region of Finger Lakes near Syracuse. The Five Iroquois Nations consisted of the Onondaga, Oneida, Seneca, Cayuga, and Mohawk tribes.¹ In 1722, the Iroquoian-speaking Tuscarora from North Carolina moved to the north and joined the Iroquois Confederacy, which then became known as the Six Nations. It would fall to the league to direct Iroquois policy during the American Revolutionary War. Unfortunately for these Native Americans, the war's greatest impact would be to divide the Iroquois speakers and force many of them to lose their lands in the new United States.

Reconstructing the history and functions of the league is difficult, due to the scarcity of sources. Based on archaeological evidence, it seems likely that the league was established in the fifteenth century, a time of incessant warfare among the Iroquois.² There are several versions of the legend about the founding of the league. They tell a story about a man named Hiawatha, who lost all of his daughters, and a prophet Deganawidah, the Peacemaker, who soothed Hiawatha's grief, "offering strings of shell beads called wampum" and speaking "Words of Condolence."³ The prophet taught Hiawatha about peace and power and together they went to spread the message. They encountered resistance to their teaching, especially from an Onondaga shaman named Tadadaho, who had snakes in his hair and whose mind was full of rage. Eventually the Peacemaker and Hiawatha were able to comb Tadadaho's hair and calm his mind with Words of Condolence. Cured and reformed, Tadadaho joined Hiawatha, the Peacemaker and their followers, and established the Great League of Peace and Power.⁴

The purpose of the league was to preserve peace, not to wage wars. The league did not have state-like characteristics at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It operated on more of a religious level than a political one, because peace in the native understanding was a state of mind. The Six Nations thought of their alliance as a longhouse extending across their combined territory, whereby the Mohawk tribe protected the east near the Mohawk River and the Seneca tribe protected the west near Lake Erie. The Great Council of the league, through what was known as the Condolence rite, calmed down troubled minds and grief, and thus restored peace to peoples' minds and consequently to outsiders, on whom a "mourning war" might be

¹ R. Cole Harris, ed., *Historical Atlas of Canada: From the Beginning to 1800*, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), Plate 18.

² Daniel Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 31; and Dean Snow, *The Iroquois*, (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1996), 52.

³ Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 32.

⁴ Richter, 31-32, 39; Snow, *The Iroquois*, 58-59.

waged otherwise. However, the league did not function as a unified body toward its neighbors. The individual tribes of the confederacy pursued their own independent foreign policies. Treaty making was not essentially the league's mission.⁵ While the Great League of Peace and Power had a unifying and pacifying effect on the Iroquois Nations and their mutual relations, the Iroquois remained fierce enemies to the people outside the league.

The Iroquois and the American Revolution

The role of Native Americans in the American Revolution was a significant one. It was very important for both the British and the Americans to secure the Indians' neutrality at the beginning of the war. From a military point of view, the Iroquois Confederacy represented "probably the most formidable single body of fighting men in the colony of New York," commanding more than 10,000 warriors.⁶ Traditionally, the Iroquois were allied with the British, who could supply them with desired European goods, especially arms and ammunition. By the 1770s, the tribes of the Iroquois confederation depended on trade with the British for these goods. The Americans could not meet the Iroquois' trade demands and therefore could not expect the Indians to join them in the fight against the crown.⁷ Both sides knew the native tribes were likely to ally with the side that promised them a "better chance of cultural and economic survival and continued access to western goods."⁸ Thus the Continental policy was to secure at least the neutrality of the Six Nations and their dependents, when it became impossible to earn their support.⁹

Initially, both the Americans and the British encouraged the natives not to get involved in the war. They presented it to the tribes as a family affair, a dispute between "white brothers." The Indians themselves were not interested in the fighting with or against either side.¹⁰ The official terms of neutrality were formulated and agreed on at Albany in 1775. The neutrality was conditional: the eastern tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy agreed they would permit neither British nor American troops to pass through their country. In return, the Indians demanded assurance that their territory would not be invaded by either of the warring factions. This is an example of the classic play-off system, which the Indians had successfully used with the French and the British before and during the French and Indian War in 1756–1763.

The conditions of the Albany treaty were supposed to preserve the neutrality of the northern tribes, but instead they led to the eventual failure of the policy and the Indians' involvement in the Revolutionary War. Most historians agree that the main reason for Indians' involvement in the war was the issue of land and the threat of white encroachment. The Iroquois demanded an assurance from the fighting sides that their old land claims would be respected and land would not be taken by the settlers. While

⁵ Richter, 40 – 41.

⁶ Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972), 126.

⁷ Charles Patrick Neimeyer, *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 93; Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745 – 1815* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 73.

⁸ Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, 91.

⁹ Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

the British were willing to give their assurance, the American Congress would not.¹¹ Settlers' aggression toward the natives and contest for land in the frontier zone of settlement led to distrust and suspicion about the Americans' true goals.¹²

The Proclamation Line of 1763 and the Quebec Act of 1774 were supposed to secure the Indian lands and prevent land speculators from obtaining tracks of land in the Indian territory. The Proclamation set a line that represented the border between white and Indian settlement. Nobody was supposed to settle west of this line. However, this administrative step was ignored and illegal sales and claims to the land took place.¹³ The Quebec Act represented a bigger barrier for the land speculators. It nullified the territorial pretensions of the colonies with sea-to-sea charters, by extending the boundaries of the province of Quebec to the Ohio River on the south and to the Mississippi River on the west. Land speculating companies now faced several barriers to their business: the Crown, the superintendents, the Indians, and the almost inaccessible government in Quebec.¹⁴ However, these merely administrative provisions did not prevent land speculators and illegal squatters from obtaining land behind the lines.

Divisions among the Indians also helped to make the final decision to join the war. When the British officially asked the Six Nations to join them against the rebels at the Oswego council in the summer of 1777, the confederacy split into two opposing groups. One, led by the Seneca chief Cornplanter and his half-brother, the religious leader Handsome Lake, wanted to remain neutral, calling the prospective interference a mistake. They were challenged by Joseph Brant and his Mohawk warriors. Brant, a Mohawk leader and eventual British military officer in the war, argued that they [the Iroquois] were "obligated to defend their kind and indulgent father, [who's] disobedient children [the Americans] violated [his] laws and challenged [his] government."¹⁵ The majority of warriors voting for a war finally made the decision and the Six Nations officially ended its policy of neutrality. This decision would result in the consequent split of the Iroquois Confederacy in the war.

The Onondaga, Mohawk, Seneca, and Cayuga sided with the British, while the Oneida and Tuscarora sided with the Americans. The division and the decision to side with the Americans could be explained by the geographical positions of the tribes. The Tuscarora lived closest to the Americans; they were closest to possible military raids from the "rebels." Therefore their decision might have been a choice for survival. The Oneida on the other hand lived farthest to the north from the Americans, and thus their reasons for siding with them are not so clear. The remaining four tribes of the Iroquoian Confederacy might have decided to join the British, because they feared the American encroachment of their lands. Since the British Crown was willing to assure the Indians' land claims and the American Congress was not, it was more profitable to side with the British from the Indians' point of view.

¹¹ Ibid., 128; Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 71.

¹² Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 67, 71; Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, 93.

¹³ Frances Jennings, "The Indians' Revolution," in *The American Revolution: Exploration in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 339.

¹⁴ Ibid., 339 – 340.

¹⁵ Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, 133, 132.

Feeling that their lands, culture and identity were at stake, the Iroquois Confederacy decided to end their neutrality policy. The involvement brought the split of the Great League of Peace and Power. After the fighting ended, many Iroquois migrated to Canada, to live on the lands provided them by the Crown. Ironically, this group included tribes that had sided with the United States. In the words of one historian: “The Revolutionary war and its outcomes laid the foundation for the destruction of the Native American tribes east of the Mississippi.”¹⁶

After the American Revolution, the Six Nations and the United States signed the Canandaigua Treaty of 1794. Also known as the Pickering Treaty, or the George Washington Covenant, this treaty created a “lasting peace and friendship” between the Six Nations and the United States. It was signed November 11, 1794, and ratified January 21, 1795. *Peace and friendship* forever was the basis upon which the Six Nations leadership signed the Canandaigua Treaty. The United States government was equally desirous of establishing peace and exercising its authority as the sovereign government over the fifteen newly federalized states. The treaty acknowledged the sovereignty of the Six Nations *and* the United States. Moreover, Articles II, III and IV of the Canandaigua Treaty stated that the tribal lands held by the Six Nations were an allodium, that is, land that is the absolute property of its owner. Even with the treaty in place, some Iroquois, including Joseph Brant fled to Canada after the British defeat. With the signing of the Canandaigua Treaty a tumultuous time in Iroquois history was, for the moment, brought to a close.

Bibliography:

Dowd, Gregory Evans. *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745 – 1815*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Jennings, Francis. “The Indians’ Revolution.” In *The American Revolution: Exploration in the History of American Radicalism*. Ed. Young, Alfred F. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976, 320 – 348.

Neimeyer, Charles Patrick. *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

Richter, Daniel K. *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Snow, Dean R. *The Iroquois*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1996.

Wallace, Anthony F. C. *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1972.

Further Readings:

¹⁶ Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, 105.

Eccles, W. J. *The Canadian Frontier, 1534 – 1760*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983.

_____. *France in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

Ray, Arthur J. "The Northern Interior, 1600 to Modern Times," in *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*. 2 vols. Edited by Trigger, Bruce G. and Wilcomb Washburn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Richter, Daniel. "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," in *Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development*. Edited by Katz, Stanley N., John M. Murrin, and Douglass Greenberg. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993.

Salisbury, Neal. "Native People and European Settlers in Eastern North America, 1600 – 1783," in *The Cambridge History of the Native People of the Americas*. 2 vols. Edited by Trigger, Bruce G. and Wilcomb E. Washburn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Taylor, Alan. *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2001.

Trigger, Bruce G. *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's Heroic Age Reconsidered*. Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985.

White, Richard. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650 – 1815*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Vocabulary:

Boundary: physical feature that marks the agreed upon line separating political units

Claim: to take as the rightful owner

Nation: (in this lesson, be sure to make clear to students that there is more than one definition of a nation)
1. a large body of people, associated with a particular territory that is unified in its unity to seek or to possess a government peculiarly its own (in the context of this lesson, the nation of England and the new nation of the United States)
2. a member tribe of an American Indian confederation (in the context of this lesson, the Six Nations of the Iroquois)

Neutral: not taking part in or giving assistance in a war or controversy between others

- Sachem: the chief of a tribe
- Treaty: a formal written agreement between two or more political authorities in reference to peace, alliance, or commerce.
- Tribe: a group of people united by ties of descent from a common ancestor, community of customs and traditions, adherence to the same leaders, etc.

Teaching Procedures:

1. Write the term, "Iroquois" (pronounce this term for the students) on the board or on a sentence strip. Explain to the students that this is the name of a Native American Nation, and that they will be researching and discussing. Explain that we first need to understand where this nation was located.
2. Display a transparency of Resource Sheet #2, "The Iroquois Six Nations," keeping the label "New York" covered.

As a quick warm up, ask students if they can identify the area the Iroquois tribes used to inhabit. Point out that the Iroquois tribes were literally between the colonists and British-controlled Canada. Introduce the term "sandwiched" here when describing the position of the Iroquois. Do this while students have a visual. Make sure they understand the term because it is used in a later reading.

3. Write the remaining vocabulary and people terms (Six Nations, Great League of Peace and Power, Mohawk, Onondaga [on-uh n-**daw**-guh], Oneida, Cayuga [key-**yoo**-guh], Seneca, Tuscarora [tuhs-kuh-**rawr**-uh], and Canandaigua [kan-uh n-**dey**-gwuh] Treaty of 1794) on a sentence strip, pronouncing each term for the students. Students can repeat back the pronunciations.

Before going on to the reading make sure to introduce the term "neutral" if students are not familiar with the term. This can be accomplished through context clues. For example state, "It is important that the referee during the game be neutral" and have students come up with the meaning.

4. Distribute Resource Sheet #1, "The Iroquois and the American Revolution." Allow students 7 minutes with a partner to read the short excerpt.

Ask students the following question:

What position did the Iroquois take during the American Revolution? At first the Iroquois tribes tried to remain neutral, but eventually two tribes (the Oneida and Tuscarora) sided with the colonists, while the other four (the Onondaga, Mohawk, Seneca, and Cayuga) sided with the British. Take the six strips of the tribe names and separate them into two columns on the board to visually demonstrate the split.

Have students make predictions based on prior knowledge and on referring to the map as to why the tribes wanted to remain neutral and why they chose to enter the war on the sides they did.

Mention to students that there were Iroquois leaders that helped make the decisions for their respective tribes. Seneca Chief Cornplanter and his half-brother, the religious leader Handsome Lake, wanted to remain neutral. Joseph Brant, a Mohawk leader wanted to side with the British.

5. Explain that the focus of today's lesson is to develop an understanding of the relationship and the choices made by Native American Indian Nations and the United States Government during and after the American Revolution. Be sure to point out that Canada was still under the control of the British. The British had gained complete control of Canada during the French and Indian War and did not lose control during the American Revolution.

The Iroquois now found themselves in a difficult position, sandwiched between British-controlled Canada and the newly independent colonists, while amongst themselves there were still divided loyalties.

6. On the transparency of Resource Sheet # 2, color the four tribes that sided with the British and the two that sided with the colonists different colors.

Prompt students of prior knowledge of other split loyalties in previous conflicts, such as in the French and Indian War. The Algonquin and Huron Indians sided with the French, while the Iroquois sided with the British.

Questions for discussion can include:

Why would the Iroquois have been concerned with the outcome of the American Revolution? At first the Iroquois tried to remain neutral and stay out of the war. As time went on, the Six Nations became concerned about their land claims and white encroachment on their lands. The Iroquois liked having access to European goods and the outcome of the war would affect their access to these goods.

What European goods would the Iroquois have been most interested in?

Weapons (metal axes, guns, knives), ammunition (gunpowder), hoes, cooking pots, needles, scissors, and nails.

If they were a member of an Iroquois tribe, what side would they have taken in the American Revolution? Why?

Ask students to remember their earlier predictions about why the tribes would enter the war the way that they did.

Explain to students that it is a little unclear why each of the tribes picked the sides that they did. Point out that the Tuscarora were the smallest tribe and were a little closer geographically to the colonists. This may have influenced their decision. It is unclear why the Oneida tribe sided the way they did.

7. Tell students that the American Revolution has ended and the colonists are victorious. Since four tribes of the Iroquois sided with British and have been defeated, ask students the following question:

What should the Iroquois tribes do now? Have students come up with the options available to the tribes that sided with the British and those that sided with the Americans.

8. Divide students into six groups. Assign each group the name of an Iroquois tribe. Pass out to each student a copy of Resource Sheet #3 "Excerpts from the Canandaigua Treaty of 1794." Explain that each of the tribes of the Six Nations has been presented with this treaty by the Americans and they must decide what to do. In their groups have each group read the excerpt. Be sure to leave Resource Sheet #2 displayed on the overhead projector so students can be reminded how their tribe sided in the war and where they were located geographically, as that may influence their decision.
9. Have each group pick a recorder. Pass out to each group a copy of Resource Sheet #4 "Canandaigua Treaty of 1794: Questions for Student Discussion." Have the recorder write down the group's answers. Have students select a sachem (chief) for their group.
10. Bring the class back together and have each sachem share with the class his/her group's answers to the questions about the treaty.
11. Display a transparency of Resource Sheet #5 "Final Excerpt from Canandaigua Treaty." Read this short piece together as a class, sharing with students that this final excerpt explains that the treaty was accepted by the Six Nations and the representatives from the United States. Summarize by going back to the sentence strips from the beginning of the class. Have one or two students use them to outline the events covered in this lesson: from the Six Nations, through the split showing the two sides, and finally to the peace treaty.

As an aside, share with students that while all six tribes did sign the treaty some Iroquois did go to Canada with Joseph Brant.

You may also point out that in the treaty, the term “perpetual” does not imply an end date for the peace and friendship between the Six Nations and the Americans. End the lesson with students making predictions about what will happen to the relationships between the Iroquois and the Americans.

12. Possible extension activities could include having students write a report about one of the Six Nations to share with the class. In their groups, the students could also research their specific tribe and making a drawing depicting their tribe.

Students could research what happened to the tribe after the treaty was signed. Some students could also research what happened to Joseph Brant and the others who chose to go to Canada.

Primary Source Annotation:

The Canandaigua Treaty of 1794

Located at: <http://www.sni.org/treaty.html>

Content Confirmed by *Arizona State University*: <http://archnet.asu.edu/>

This treaty, signed on November 11, 1794 at Canandaigua, New York, established peace and friendship between the United States and the Six Nations of the Iroquois. It was signed by fifty-nine sachems and war chiefs from the Six Nations, along with Thomas Pickering. Pickering was the U.S. government’s official agent, sent by George Washington to negotiate with the Iroquois. The treaty is also sometimes called the Pickering Treaty. Students will analyze excerpts from this document to determine the reasons behind the Iroquois’ decision to sign the treaty.