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THE FIRST NATIONS IN CANADA: POLITICAL AND TRADE RELATIONS AMONGST THE IROQUOIS, HURON AND ALGONQUIN IN THE 17TH CENTURY

The part of eastern Canada, south of the forest region, forms a part of the Eastern Woodlands cultural area. Lakes and rivers are scattered throughout the region, and Indian territory has often been defined by the boundaries of river system. The St Lawrence River, linking the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean, was an important feature in both the social and physical landscapes.

The environment provided numerous resources useful to its inhabitants. The forests were home to a number of animals, desired primarily for their meat and skins, but also for other purposes. These included deer, bear, moose, rabbit, beaver, otter, muskrat, fox, wolf, raccoon, skunk, bobcat, and numerous fowl. They were hunted with bows and arrows or spears, or caught in traps. The people inhabiting the Canadian Woodlands during the historic period were primarily Algonquian and Iroquoian speakers.

Iroquois

Iroquois is an easily recognised name, but like the names of many tribes, it was awarded to them by their enemies. The Algonquin called them the Iroqu (Irinakhoiw) “rattlesnakes”. After the French added the suffix *-ois* to this insult, the name became *Iroquois*. The Iroquois called themselves Haudenosaunee meaning “people of the long house”.

The Iroquois achieved a dominant cultural position among all tribes living in the Woodlands area (Gaśowski 1996:147). It was expressed first of all by building permanent settlements with long, rectangular houses, which were situated close to lakes and springs so there was an easy access to the water needed for agriculture.

For the most part, the Iroquoian-speaking people during the historic period were more intensive farmers than the Algonquian-speakers, who relied more heavily on fishing, hunting, and gathering. Friendly relations between Algonquian and Iroquian peoples, when they occurred, often centred around trade, with corn and other agricultural products going to the Algonquians in return for meat, fish, and furs.

Within Iroquois villages, the main organising units were matrilineally grouped women, who directed communal activities such as planting and gathering, and choosing councils of peace and war chiefs. Sex and gender were important determinants of economic activity. At least during the later historic period, the division of labour resulted in a mental association of men with forests and women with clearings. Women, aided by children, did most of the agricultural work and the gathering of fruits, other vegetable foods, and firewood. Women also made wooden utensils, pottery vessels, and clothing. All clothing was made of tanned animal (usually bear or deer) skin.

Iroquoian men were hunters, fishermen, councillors, and warriors who in spring, summer and winter went on hunting expeditions. They made hunting, fishing and war tools, built homes and canoes, cleared new fields, traded, negotiated, and warred with other nations. They had much greater contact with the world outside their villages than did the women.

The political unity of the Iroquois was the source of their power. With considerable effort, the warring tribes were persuaded to join together in a league known as the Iroquois League or the Five Nations Confederacy which originates as early as approximately 1450 A.D.¹ The founder of the Five Nations Confederacy is generally acknowledged to be Dekanawida, who befriended with a Mohawk named Hiawatha who became his spokesman. Together they travelled the lands on the south shores of the Lakes Erie and Ontario, as well as the banks of the St Lawrence River. These were the homelands of the tribes with a common heritage, but who had been warring with one another for many years. Dekanawida united them into a League of Nations, called the Iroquois League which was one of the most famous Native American governments on the continent.

Dekanawida also introduced the message the *Haudenosaunee* referred to as the Great Law of Peace. Under the Great Law, the nations became of one blood – addressing one another as family members, and not killing one another. Chiefs of the nations became members of the Confederacy’s deliberative assembly.

Sometimes the Iroquois Confederacy is referred to as the “Six” Nations. In 1722, the Tuscarora Nation moved up from North Carolina to avoid warfare with

¹ For more information concerning the origin of the Five Nations Confederacy refer to *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*, J. Lehman (ed.) (1999:751).

the invading white settlers, and were adopted into the Confederacy. At this point in time, the Iroquois controlled many parts of eastern states from their homelands in what is now New York state. The tribes belonging to the “Six” Nations were the following:²

Mohawk:	People Possessing Flint
Onondaga:	Hill People
Seneca :	Great Hill People
Oneida:	Granite People
Cayuga:	Swamp People
Tuscarora:	Shirt Wearing People became the Sixth Nation

The original League included fifty permanent offices that were occupied by representatives of each of the five member tribes. The Onondaga contributed fourteen; the Cayuga, ten; the Mohawk and Oneida, nine each; and the Seneca, eight. These delegates were called sachems. Among the Iroquois a sachem was called the Counsellor of the People. The sachems collectively formed the Council of the League, which had legislative, executive, and judicial authority over the combined tribes. Decisions in the name of the League were made by consensus. The fifty great chiefs met together in a grand council at the principal Onondaga town, in the centre of the alliance territory. The meetings of the League were called to deal with internal and external affairs or to carry out religious duties.³

The new political structure was erected to maintain peace among the Iroquois and gradually to draw the surrounding tribes into the League. In the eyes of the Iroquois, the fact that the Huron refused to come under the ‘tree of peace’ proved that they were evil, hostile people. The effect of the League was also to secure a large tract of fertile land to allow more extensive farming capable of supporting large expeditionary forces. In the Longhouse of the League, the five allied nations exercised, in the seventeenth and eighteen centuries, a power unprecedented in the Northeast.

The Iroquois Confederacy was dissolved in 1777, when the five tribes could not agree on which side to support in the American Revolution.⁴

² For more information concerning the tribes belonging to the Five Nations Confederacy look at *Native America in the Twentieth Century* by W.H. Oswald and S. Neely (1994:279).

³ Gąssowski (1996:149) gives information concerning the formation of the Council of the League.

⁴ Circumstances in which the Iroquois League was extinguished are analysed in *Native America in the Twentieth Century*, M.B. Davis (ed.) (1994:279).

Algonquins

The Algonquin (Algonkin) are a group of communities of Algonquian-speaking people living on both sides of the Ottawa River along the Quebec and Ontario border. They lived in wigwams – round huts whose frame was made of stout branches and covered with leather and birch bark. Some tribes, especially the inhabitants of the eastern seaboard, used tipi – conical tents, however the Algonquins from the south-east built long wooden huts.⁵

They called themselves *Anissinapek* (*Anishinabeg*) or by the name of their local community. Their language has been classified as a dialect of *Ojibwa*, one of the languages of the Algonquian family. As the dialects of *Ojibwa* merge one into another, it is not possible to establish a definite linguistic boundary between other *Ojibwa* dialects and Algonquin.⁶ However, the Algonquin are politically distinct from the *Ojibwa*. Neighbours of the Algonquin include Cree, Ottawa, Huron and Iroquois.

They represented the northernmost penetration of a marginally agricultural economy in eastern North America, but were largely a hunting people who quickly adapted to the activities of the fur trade, which lasted until recent times. The Algonquin were hunters and fishermen who lived in bands comprising related families. Since the local communities were largely independent of one another, relations between an individual Algonquin band and other groups depended largely on local conditions. Marriages took place between Algonquin and other groups and generally relations between neighbouring bands were tempered by kinship ties regardless of language or tribal designations.

A division of labour existed among the Algonquins.⁷ Men were primarily responsible for hunting, fishing, warfare, councils, building, manufacturing implements for hunting and fishing, and, among those involved in agriculture, clearing the fields. Women were responsible for gathering, planting, cultivating, and harvesting. They also participated in fishing, prepared fish and game, cooked, cared for children, and made clothing and household utensils.

Their history is one firm friendship with the French. In 1613 Champlain visited an Algonquin village on Morrison's Island and established trade relations with them. The Algonquin were allies of the French and the Huron against the Iroquois. This conflict, which had its origin in the competition over the European fur trade, lasted throughout much of the historic period.

⁵ Geography and lifestyle of the Algonquins are analyzed in *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes*, M. Johnson (ed.) (1999:49).

⁶ The languages of the Algonquian family are described in *The Canadian Encyclopedia Plus* (1995).

⁷ Division of labour among the Algonquian men and women is described in *Native Peoples. The Canadian Experience*, R.B. Morrison and C.R. Wilson (eds) (1986:320).

Huron

The Huron were Iroquoian people but they did not join the Five Nation Confederacy. Instead they formed their own confederacy of 5 Iroquoian-speaking tribes who occupied the territory north and west of Lake Simcoe, between Nottawassaga and Matchedash bays.⁸ The nickname *Huron* was given to them by the French and means “ruffian” or “boar’s head” from the hairstyle of Huron men. They were agriculturists and gathered fruits, but were only occasional hunters and fishers.

The Huron formed close monogamous families; however the fundamental socio-economic group was the matrilineal extended family, made up of a number of families whose female members traced a common descent to a mother or grandmother, who was in charge of daily affairs. Huron individuals belonged to one of 8 matrilineal clans. Clan members considered themselves cousins and were not permitted to marry each other. Village affairs were run by 2 councils, one in charge of civil affairs, the other of war. All men over 30 were members. In theory, matters were decided by consensus, but in reality the experienced men and elected chiefs of large families decided things because of their community standing and powers of oratory.

The name of their own confederacy was Ouendat (Wendat), commonly thought to mean “people of the island.” The Huron were divided into five confederated tribal groupings – Attignawan, Attigeeonongnahac, Ahrendarouon, Tahontaenrant, and Ataranchronon⁹ – and met at least once a year to renew their alliance.

Attignawantan:	Bear People
Attigeeonongnahac:	Rope Makers
Arendaronon:	Rock People
Tahontaenrat:	Deer People
Ataranchronon:	Swamp People

As a rule the Huron did not trade with groups with whom they were at war or with strangers with whom they had no formal peace treaties. The conclusion of a “treaty” involved not only trade between groups but also mutual aid in times of war. It is for this latter reason that the Huron sought a military alliance with Champlain¹⁰ and a demonstration of French goodwill through their participation

⁸ Geographical descriptions of the area inhabited by the Huron are provided by *The Canadian Encyclopedia Plus* (1995).

⁹ For further descriptions of the confederated tribal groupings refer to *Native Peoples. The Canadian Experience*, R.B. Morrison and C.R. Wilson (eds) (1986:324).

¹⁰ Samuel de Champlain was a French mapmaker who established the first permanent French settlement in the New World. In 1609 the Huron contacted the French under Samuel de Champlain and concluded a military and trading alliance which drew the French into the Huron-Iroquois conflict.

in raids on the Iroquois before they would trade any furs. Such alliances were initiated and renewed through gift giving, feasts, and a limited exchange of people. Although these were expressions of mutual goodwill, the people who were exchanged acted in effect as hostages and spies.

The Catholic missionaries were sent to the Huron in 1615 but together with religion, they brought a number of dangerous diseases to which the Hurons had no immunity. Prior to 1600, the Huron numbered approximately 20,000–25,000, but between 1634 and 1640 they were reduced to about 9000 by a series of diseases, particularly the smallpox epidemic of 1639.

They seem to have been in a continuous war with the Seneca, which in 1648–49 began an invasion by the Five Nations in pursuit of expansion and control of the fur trade. The Huronia region was abandoned; a large number of Huron were adopted by the Iroquois or fled west, although a few found refuge at Lorette near Quebec City.

The fur trade and the Iroquois wars

During all three periods of Canadian history – French colonial, British colonial and post-Confederation Dominion Status – there was little warfare between the Indian and the white population, as compared to events south of Canada in the region now known as the United States.¹¹ The French were more interested in furs than land and white traders depended on Indian co-operation.

The Fur Trade in Canada began as an adjunct to the fishing industry. Early in the 16th century fishermen from the north-western Europe were taking catches of cod on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland and in the Gulf of St Lawrence. Drying their fish onshore took several weeks, during which good relations had to be maintained with the Indians who were eager to obtain metal and cloth goods from the Europeans such as: iron knives and axes, awls, copper kettles, blankets and trinkets. All they had to offer in exchange were furs and fresh meat. The fishermen found a ready market in Europe for the furs and made high profits. When the wide-brimmed felt hat came into fashion later in the 16th century, the demand for beaver pelts increased significantly. The best material for the felt hat was the soft fur of the beaver.

Early in the 17th century French traders established permanent shore bases in the Acadia Region, Tadoussac and Quebec in order to exploit the trade more effectively.¹² During these years the number of traders coming to the St Lawrence region intensified the rivalry between the commercial empires of the

¹¹ Contrastive analyses are provided in *Atlas of the North American Indian*, C. Waldman (ed.) (1985:159).

¹² For further information concerning fur trade see *The Canadian Encyclopedia Plus* (1995).

French and the Dutch. As the French noticed, the Indians were aware of their economic advantage in fur trade. While the Europeans were competing for dominance, the Indians developed their own trading network and aimed at monopolising the fur trade. The problems faced by the tribes from the Five Nations were limited resources of furs and lack of direct access to European trades, except in the lower part of the St Lawrence River.

At the time of French-Indian contact early in the seventeenth century, the Huron were embroiled in a long-standing war with the five Iroquois tribes and in particular with the Seneca. Peaceful relations did however exist between the Huron and the Algonquian groups of Ontario. Participation in a war party, if successful, raised a man's standing in his clan and village. With the arrival of the Europeans, economic motives joined those of prestige and the blood feud as causes of Indian warfare. Both the Iroquois and the Huron needed a steady supply of furs in order to buy European trade goods. While it was easy to start a war, usually through murder and refusal to pay restitution, it was exceedingly difficult to conclude a treaty of peace. On several occasions when attempts were made to negotiate a peace settlement between members of the Huron confederacy and one or all the Iroquois tribes, either some groups on one side refused to join in the negotiations or peace collapsed because of continuing murders. Theoretically any man could plan and organise a war party if he got enough support, but in most cases the responsibility was assumed by the experienced war chiefs.

The struggle between the Iroquois and the Huron was of immense importance to New France. By the 1620s the Huron had become a principal economic partner of the French, exchanging corn and European goods with the neighbouring Algonquians for furs. The Algonquians, in turn, traded as far north as James Bay and along the shores of Lakes Michigan and Superior. As elsewhere on the continent, the fur trade and the goods that it brought stimulated the development of a richer culture among the Hurons.

The French brought with them more than European trade goods and a Christian missionary message. Unknowingly they brought to Huronia diseases of European origin that devastated the Huron and their neighbours. Especially disastrous was the smallpox epidemics of 1639, resulting in the loss of most of the village elders who were the traditional leaders. Political disunity arose as young men increasingly tried to assume roles previously held by elders and their councils. By the late 1640s the Iroquois began to raid Huronia in large, well-organised groups, intent on destroying entire villages.¹³ To the original aims of warfare, which had been revenge and blood feuds, was added the dispersion of the Huron confederacy. The driving motive became the acquisition of the fur-bearing areas of the Canadian Shield.

¹³ The Iroquois Wars are described by R.D. Francis, R. Jones and D.B. Smith in *Origins. Canadian History to Confederation* (1992:64).

The Huron recognised three major sources of illness: natural causes, unfulfilled desires of a person's soul, and witchcraft. It was not surprising that the Huron blamed the new diseases on their visitors, whom the most serious epidemic had not touched. To them, the Jesuits' celibacy suggested that the "white shamans" were developing a great supernatural power for the purposes of witchcraft. Since trading relations with the French had to be maintained, the Huron had no alternative but to tolerate the missionaries.

At the very time when disease was weakening the Huron, they faced their greatest military threat from the Iroquois. The 1640s was a time when the Iroquois needed an increased supply of beaver pelts to trade for European goods, but were facing a shortage of beavers in their territory. They had begun to obtain firearms from English traders and so equipped, they could raid the tribes living to the north much more frequently than they did before. The successful Iroquois attacks of the early 1640s contributed to the growth of a faction of Huron traditionalists who were prepared to end the trading alliance with the French and believed in peace with their enemies – the Iroquois. In the end, however, the majority of the traditionalists mistrusted the Iroquois more than they did the French.

By the early 1640s the Mohawk and Oneida were attacking New France and raiding the colony's Algonquian allies throughout the St Lawrence Valley. By 1642 the French had begun to halt these raids by building a chain of fortified settlements as far upriver as Montréal. The French tried to counter the Mohawk acquisition of muskets by giving muskets to their Huron and Algonquian allies, but the Jesuits persuaded officials to restrict their sale to reliable Christian converts. As a result, the Iroquois had a numerical and psychological advantage.

In winter 1648–49 the Seneca began an invasion which led to Huronia being abandoned. A large number of Huron were adopted by the Iroquois, some joined the Algonquians or found refuge at Lorette near Quebec City. The fall of Huronia greatly disrupted the fur trade on which New France's economy depended. Because the Huron could no longer supply food to the northern Algonquians, the latter became a new market for the colony's farmers. By 1653, the French went inland to live with the Algonquians of the upper Great Lakes, or the "Ottawa," as the French called them, and to take their furs to New France.

In the late 1650s and 1660s New France was forced to develop effective measures against the Iroquois attacks. A small detachment of soldiers patrolled the most exposed settlement. The French organised militia units and also came to realise that the Iroquois could best be fought using Indian tactics.

The French took their first initiative against the Iroquois when a military force consisting of Adam Dollard Des Ormeaux with sixteen Frenchmen, and Annaotaha, an experienced Huron and his warriors, decided to attack a small Iroquois war party on the Ottawa River. However, instead of a small band of Iroquois hunters, the French and their allies faced three hundred warriors with a

further four hundred awaiting them at the Richelieu River. Some of the adopted Huron in the Iroquois camp persuaded a number of the Huron who were with Dollard to join them. After the attack only three Frenchmen managed to escape.

Security finally came for the inhabitants when, in 1663, King Louis XVI elevated the status of the colony to a royal province of France and sent troops to New France. The colonies existence was in question after the dispersal of the Huron and after the Iroquois raids on the French settlements in the St Lawrence Valley. Yet, in the long term, the destruction of Huronia actually contributed to New France's growth since the French began to trade directly with the Algonquians for their furs. Together, the French and their Algonquian allies defeated the Five Nations in the late 1680s and 1690s and overcame the Iroquois resistance to French expansion.

In 1697 when the English made peace with the French, the Iroquois had to reconsider their own conflict with the French. The Iroquois made peace with the French and thirteen western tribes in August 1701. To ensure that the Iroquois continued to serve as a buffer between the English colonies and New France, the French allowed them to continue to trade some northern furs with the English. In turn, the Iroquois promised their neutrality in any future colonial war between France and England.

Today there are seven Iroquois settlements in Canada: Kahnawake/Caughnawaga, Oka/Kanesatake/Lake of Two Mountains, Gibson, St Regis/Akwesasne, Six Nations/Grand River, Tyendinega, and Oneida on the Thames.¹⁴ Some of the settlements were formed in Canada as a result of the American Revolution. Many Iroquois, viewed American settlers as a threat to their land and security and supported the British during the war. Despite promises from British officials, Indian interests were not protected during the peace negotiations. The Peace Treaty of Paris in 1783¹⁵ between the United States and Great Britain made no provisions for the Indians: it divided all land, including Native land between the two nations.

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¹⁴ For more information concerning the Iroquois settlements in Canada see *Native Peoples. The Canadian Experience*, R.B. Morrison and C.R. Wilson (eds) (1986:334).

¹⁵ Historic details of the Treaty of Paris are provided by Mary B. Norton in *A People and a Nation. A History of the United States* (1984:53).

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