

The Americas to 1620: North America on the eve of the European invasion

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TOP: Illustration of the ancient Cahokia mounds. MIDDLE: Map of Iroquois Five Nations, Wikimedia. BOTTOM: English explorer John Smith's Map of the Powhatan Confederacy. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

Around the year 1450, a young man was living alone in the dense forest southeast of Lake Ontario because there was not enough food in his home village. Many like him were doing the same, and some, perhaps even this young man, were killing other men for food. As the story goes, he was butchering a fresh kill when he was confronted by a stranger. The young man's name was Hienwatha — sometimes spelled Ayenwatha or Hiawatha — and the stranger was called Dekanahwideh.

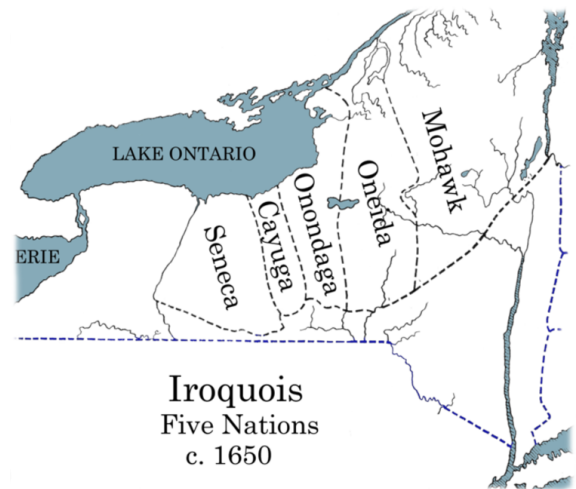
Hienwatha had lived among the Mohawk Nation of Iroquois Native Americans, and Dekanahwideh was from the Wendat, sometimes called the Huron Nation. The Wendat were also Iroquois but fierce rivals of the Mohawks. Dekanahwideh claimed he was on a mission given to him by a spirit called "Peacemaker" to unite all Iroquois into a great and peaceful nation.

Weather changes led to conflict and desperation

Like most of the Indians living between the Rocky Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean, the Iroquois had for generations been living peacefully in their villages on the corn that women grew and the game that men hunted. War was infrequent, and famine all but unknown. But in the years just before Hienwatha's birth, all that had begun to unravel as a long-lasting natural change in the weather hurt the corn harvest. To survive, the people were forced to hunt and gather more wild foods. As hunters roamed more deeply into the forests, they encountered others who were also desperate. Conflicts became common. "Everywhere there was peril and everywhere mourning," says one version of the story. "Feuds with outer nations and feuds with brother nations, feuds of sister towns and feuds of families and clans made every warrior a stealthy man who liked to kill."

Following Dekanahwideh's advice, Hienwatha moved back among the Mohawks, married and began telling the people about Peacemaker's message.

Some opposed him, but Hienwatha, undaunted, tried to think of some way to convince his enemies to accept the idea of cooperation. He wove a belt of wampum-shell strings that showed the great chain connecting the five northern Iroquois nations — Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca. Carrying his belt, Hienwatha traveled among the five nations, telling them that they could survive only if they ceased fighting among themselves. It is said that he finally won over the Onondaga chief by asking him to break an arrow, which the chief easily did, and then asking him to break a bundle of five arrows, which the chief could not. The other leaders of the Five Nations created a confederation government that Europeans later would call the League of the Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee.



Widespread alliances formed in North America

Hienwatha's story is remarkable but far from unique. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that widespread alliances were forming throughout North America at this time.

In the central Mississippi Valley, for example, large, thriving cities had been around since 900. Near the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, across from what is now St. Louis, the city of Cahokia had a population of about 40,000 and controlled territory housing many, many more. Cahokia experienced a long string of natural and human-caused disasters. Around 1200, the city was struck by a ferocious earthquake that did terrific damage. The city went on to experience massive flooding, mudslides and crop destruction because of the change in the weather. After 1400, the people in the region began to scatter.

Climate change began to affect other groups, including the Algonquin people living along the coast of Virginia. Around 1550, a child was born in one of the villages, who was later known as "Wahunsunacock" or "The Powhatan."

Europeans brought weapons and disease

Throughout Wahunsunacock's life, conditions grew continuously worse. In addition to the bad weather, conflicts between confederations became common. More troubling were the odd-looking strangers who began arriving in ever-greater numbers. Most times these strangers seemed just to be exploring the coastline and various river inlets, while other times they seemed interested in trading goods. Sometimes they came wrapped in metal and carrying loud, deadly sticks that could kill a man at a long distance; frequently they took away women and children who were never seen again. And what was worse, shortly after the appearances of these strangers, people in the villages became sick and a great many died.

Wahunsunacock became an Algonquin chief and decided that the nation must either expand or die. By 1607, when the mysterious strangers began to settle permanently in the region, he built a little six-village alliance into nearly 30 villages over about 8,000 square miles.

The observations recorded by the Europeans led to a long-standing impression that Native Americans were continuously at war. But what these European settlers saw was the product of a particular moment in time, one of adjustment



and adaptation to new conditions, not unlike what was going on in Europe. However, Europe would not experience foreigners bringing new technologies, animals and diseases to the native populations, turning crisis into disaster.

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Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence below from the section "Europeans brought weapons and disease."

The observations recorded by the Europeans led to a long-standing impression that Native Americans were continuously at war.

Which of these sentences from the article MOST strongly counters, or goes against, this impression?

- (A) Hienwatha had lived among the Mohawk Nation of Iroquois Native Americans, and Dekanahwideh was from the Wendat, sometimes called the Huron Nation.
- (B) Like most of the Indians living between the Rocky Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean, the Iroquois had for generations been living peacefully in their villages on the corn that women grew and the game that men hunted.
- (C) Following Dekanahwideh's advice, Hienwatha moved back among the Mohawks, married and began telling the people about Peacemaker's message.
- (D) Wahunsunacock became an Algonquin chief and decided that the nation must either expand or die.

- 2 Read the paragraph below from the section "Weather changes led to conflict and desperation."

Some opposed him, but Hienwatha, undaunted, tried to think of some way to convince his enemies to accept the idea of cooperation. He wove a belt of wampum-shell strings that showed the great chain connecting the five northern Iroquois nations — Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca. Carrying his belt, Hienwatha traveled among the five nations, telling them that they could survive only if they ceased fighting among themselves. It is said that he finally won over the Onondaga chief by asking him to break an arrow, which the chief easily did, and then asking him to break a bundle of five arrows, which the chief could not. The other leaders of the Five Nations created a confederation government that Europeans later would call the League of the Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee.

Which conclusion is BEST supported by the paragraph?

- (A) Hienwatha was committed to seeing the Peacemaker's message realized by the Five Nations.
- (B) Most Mohawks ignored the efforts of Hienwatha to create a confederation because they thought he was seeking political power for himself.
- (C) Most members of the Onondaga tribe lost faith in their chief when they saw he was unable to break the bundle of five arrows.
- (D) Hienwatha used arrows in his demonstration to the Onondaga chief because he had lost his belt representing the five Iroquois nations.

- 3 Which option BEST describes the connection between Hienwatha and Wahunsunacock?

- (A) Both men became chiefs of their tribes during periods of conflict with Europeans.
- (B) Both men believed that forming alliances was an effective means of dealing with difficult conditions.
- (C) Hienwatha was instrumental in helping Wahunsunacock form alliances with nearly 30 villages over 8,000 square miles.
- (D) Hienwatha told Wahunsunacock about the Peacekeeper's message in order to improve the lives of both of their nations.

- 4 How does the author introduce the idea that Native Americans responded to change in much the same way as Europeans did?
- (A) by describing the ways that Europeans and Native Americans responded to changing weather conditions
 - (B) by describing alliances that the Native Americans and Europeans formed in order to engage in conflict with each other
 - (C) by indicating that some Native Americans and Europeans were resistant to forming alliances to deal with changing conditions
 - (D) by stating that the Native Americans' need to adjust to new conditions was similar to Europeans' need to adjust to new conditions in their homeland