

**Classroom Connection:**

# Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Lands and the American Revolution

## About This Resource

During the summer of 1779, George Washington ordered his generals Clinton and Sullivan to attack and burn Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) towns. The American armies destroyed 40 Haudenosaunee towns and burned their harvests while residents fled. This online resource shows the pressures the American Revolution placed on the Haudenosaunee and their efforts to maintain their nations, the confederacy of which they are a part, and the principles and values that keep them strong.

## Cultural Terminology

- **Haudenosaunee** is a Native word meaning “people building the longhouse.” The name refers to a confederation of six Native American nations based in present-day New York State and Canada. The alliance is also known as the Iroquois Confederacy.
- **Iroquois** was a word used by French settlers in the 1600s, meaning “real snakes.” This was a misunderstanding of an Algonquian-language name for the Haudenosaunee.
- **Six Nations** replaced **Five Nations** in 1722, when the Tuscarora joined the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca as a member of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.
  - Seneca (Onöndowahgah): People of the Great Hill
  - Cayuga (Guyohkohnyoh): People of the Great Swamp
  - Onondaga (Onoñda’gega’): People of the Hills - As the Keepers of the Central Fire, the Onondaga Nation serves as the capital of the confederacy.
  - Oneida (Onayotekaono): People of the Standing Stone
  - Mohawk (Kanien’kehá:ka): People of the Flint
  - Tuscarora (Sharuhreh): Shirt-Wearing People
- **Clan Mothers** – Women play an essential leadership role in maintaining Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) society. The role of clan mother originated with Jigöhsahsë’, a woman who helped convince the five warring Haudenosaunee nations to unite in peace. A clan mother advises and guides each clan and selects its chiefs. She teaches young tribal citizens about Haudenosaunee history and culture.

## Historical Overview

Long before there was a New York State, its lands encompassed thousands of Native towns, cornfields, fishing grounds, and hunting territories. European traders and other colonists migrated to these lands, intending to stay. This forced some Native New Yorkers to seek safety elsewhere. Other Native people managed to remain, and their descendants live there today. Still other Native communities moved into New York, seeking alliances and new homes. This online resource looks closely at the Haudenosaunee experience before, during, and after the American Revolution.

Long before Europeans arrived, five nations—Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca—formed an alliance on the shores of Onondaga Lake called the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Later, the Tuscarora joined them. The confederacy is a democratic government based on consensus. Today these nations remain on parts of their once vast homelands.

During the American Revolution, the Haudenosaunee nations tried to remain neutral. Eventually, though, some chose to honor their long alliance with the British. Others, particularly the Oneida and Tuscarora, sided with the American patriots. At the height of the conflict, the Onondaga suspended the Confederacy Council because of his lack of unity.

In the summer of 1779, George Washington, as commander of the colonist army, ordered his generals James Clinton and John Sullivan to attack and burn Haudenosaunee towns. Learning of the army's approach, Cayuga clan mothers asked Oneida leaders allied with Americans to plead with the army to spare their towns. Four Oneida leaders met with General Sullivan, but he would not listen.

During the Sullivan-Clinton Campaign, American Soldiers destroyed 40 Haudenosaunee towns, burning fields, orchards, and harvests while residents fled. Cayuga women, children, and elders hid near a secluded creek known today as the Great Gully. There, the women's knowledge of food plants and medicines kept the group alive. After the attack, many Haudenosaunee suffered through a starving winter. They called George Washington *Hanadahguyus*, or *town destroyer*. Later, the refugees traveled west to the British stronghold at Fort Niagara (present-day Buffalo), where they joined others who had also lost their homes.

After the Revolutionary War, many Haudenosaunee moved to Canada to establish a community there now known as the Six Nations Reserve. Between 1785 and 1792, the Haudenosaunee who remained in New York faced overwhelming pressure to give up their lands. By 1807 all of the Cayuga territory had been taken. Unfair and illegal sales of Haudenosaunee lands continued until 1842, resulting in smaller reservations dispersed throughout the state. Today, the nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy are scattered among seven communities in Canada and twelve in the United States. Ten remain in New York State.

Although the Cayuga have bought back small parcels of their land, they still have no reservation. In 2005, however, under the leadership of clan mother Bernadette (Birdie) Hill, the Cayuga Nation purchased 70 acres. There the community began to replant orchards that George Washington's armies had burned more than 200 years earlier.

The Haudenosaunee still call George Washington and all U.S. presidents *Hanadahguyus*.

**Key Message:** During the Revolutionary War, General George Washington ordered the destruction of Haudenosaunee towns allied with the British. His troops burned cornfields, orchards, and homes, including the Cayuga town known as Chonodote, or Peach Town. The war drove many Haudenosaunee people farther west in New York, where they rebuilt their nations and the bonds of the confederacy.

## Where Could This Fit in My Curriculum?

- **United States History:** This resource aligns with any unit on the American Revolution or New York State history. Consider using it to diversify the traditional Euro-centric narrative about the American Revolution.
- **Native Studies:** This resource aligns with any study of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

## Ideas for Implementation: Suggested Activities and Discussion Questions

### Lesson Hook or Introduction:

Use this resource at the beginning of a lesson as a “hook” to introduce the Native experience during the American Revolution. Ask students to consider who the American Revolution affected other than American colonists and the British.

### K-W-L Chart:

Have students complete a K-W-L chart (What do you know? What do you want to know? What did you learn?) about the Haudenosaunee experience during the American Revolution.

### Jigsaw Activity:

Jigsaw the four different sections of this resource:

- Section 1: Before the Revolution (1713–1775)
- Section 2: The American Revolution (1775–1783)
- Section 3: Treaties (1783–1794)
- Section 4: Land Taken (1797–Today)
- Conclude with a class discussion addressing the central question, “How did the American Revolution cost the Haudenosaunee Confederacy most of its land?”

### Discussion Questions:

Watch the interactive And then have a class discussion. Consider the following questions:

1. When studying the American Revolution, we often talk only about the American colonists and the British. Who else did the revolution affect? How?
  - Upper level: Why do you think Native American experience is often left out of the traditional narrative of the American Revolution? What do you think is the effect of this omission on Native people in the United States today?
2. What does the word “revolutionary” mean? For whom exactly was the war revolutionary? Why?
3. How did the American Revolution cost the Haudenosaunee Confederacy most of its land?
4. How does the American Revolution continue to affect the Haudenosaunee Confederacy?
5. What role did George Washington play in the changing shape of Haudenosaunee territory?
6. Does anything surprise you about the Americans’ role in reducing Haudenosaunee land and American treatment of the Haudenosaunee?
  - Upper level: Think about why the American colonists declared independence. How does American treatment of the Haudenosaunee conflict with the original goals of the revolution?