

LONGHOUSE

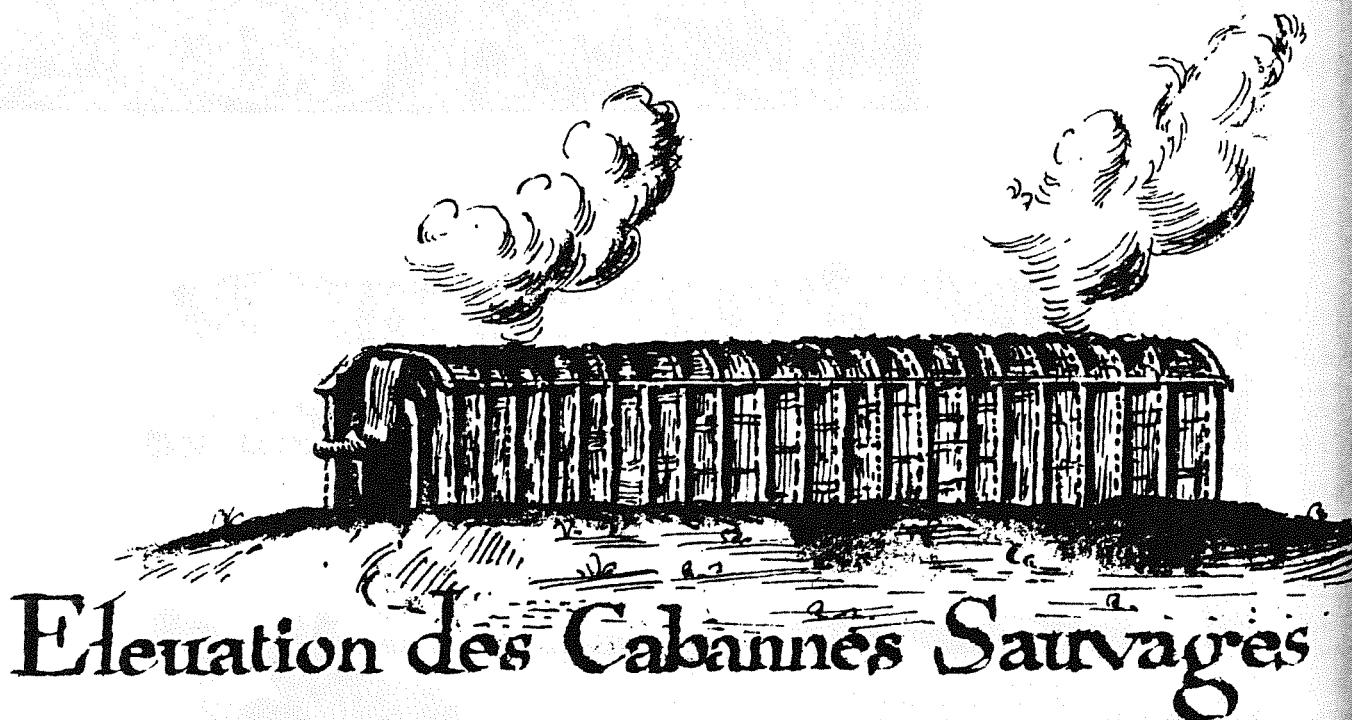
The longhouse has always been the dominant symbol of social solidarity for the Iroquois of upper New York state. The central role this building has played in their culture originates with the Iroquois genesis myth. Before mankind there existed only a sky world, illuminated by blossoms from an all-nurturing Great Tree. This domain was populated by "elder brothers," prototypes of the people and animals yet to appear on Earth. They occupied long, bark-covered houses aligned on an east-west axis. In each dwelling these mythological residents were related as clan kinfolk through the female line of descent. Single families occupied sleeping compartments along both sides of the central aisle, and cooking fires were shared by families opposite one another.

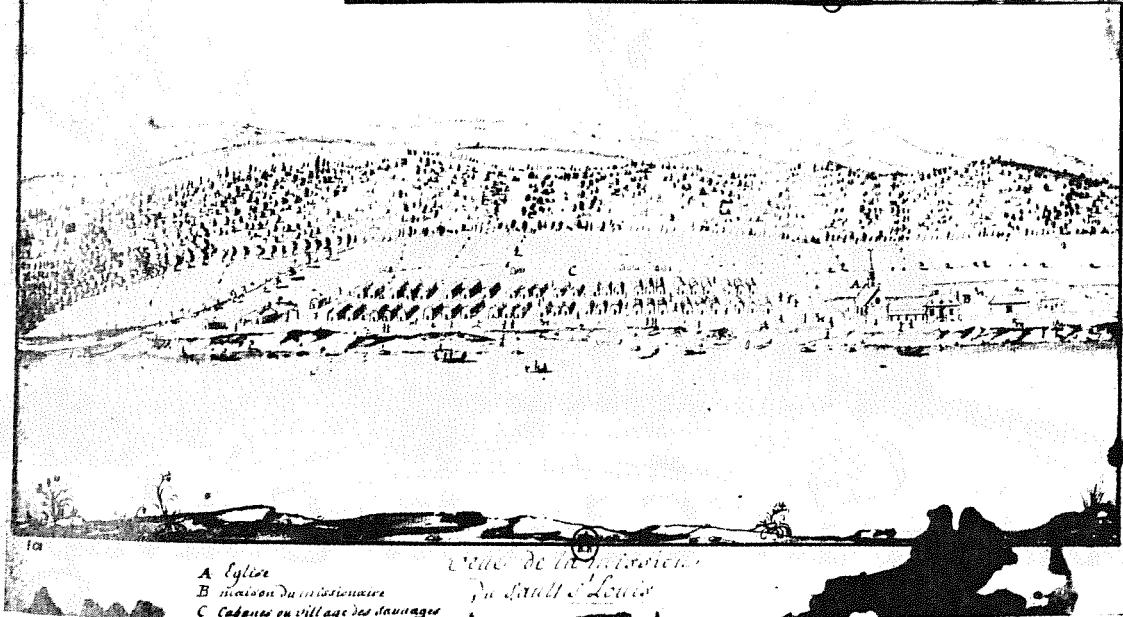
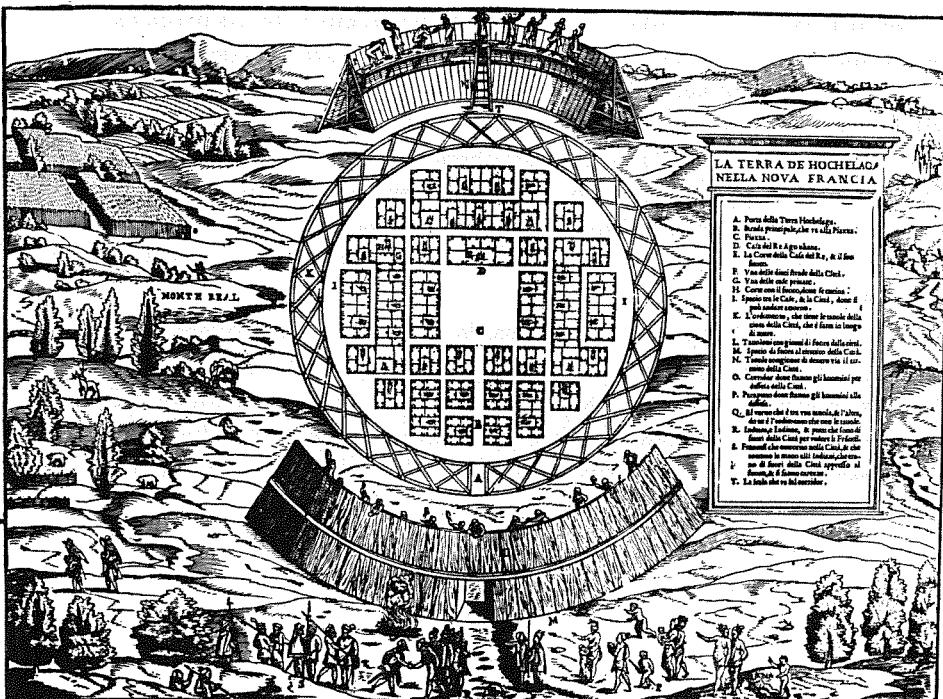
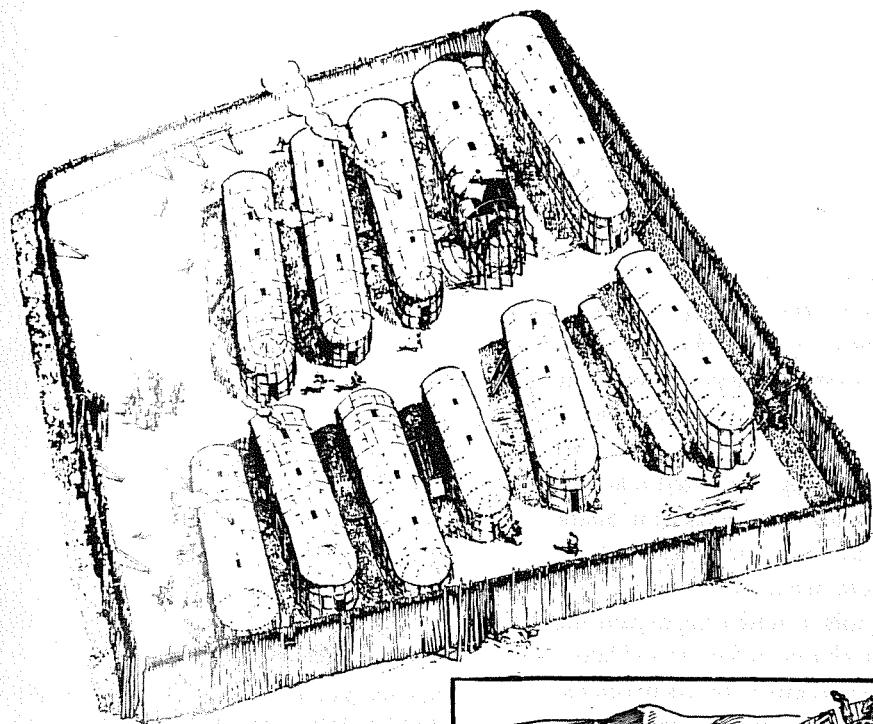
This mythic system gave the prehistoric Iroquois a model for organizing their living spaces and surroundings. Men were in charge of forests and lakes, and women were responsible for villages and gardens. The men offered prayers and choice tobacco to the forest spirits, who in turn let them clear the woods for houses and fields. The best town sites were level hilltops with clear views for spotting enemy war parties. They also had to have access to fresh water and timber for their dwellings and firewood. Trees were marked and girdled in the spring so they could be toppled by late August. Once the gardens were cleared with controlled burning, the women took over, praying to the spirits of the "three sisters"—corn, beans, and squash—before planting in the family plots.

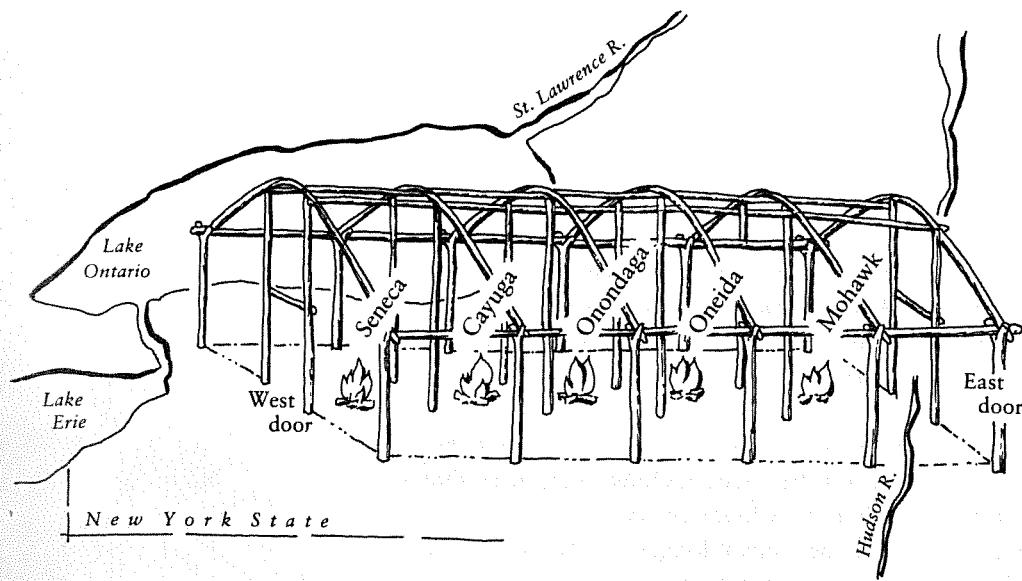
Iroquois towns remained in one place as long as tillable soil, roofing bark, firewood, and stands of saplings for longhouse additions and stockades held out. After a decade or two, however, these resources often were exhausted, and heaps of refuse and invasions of fleas made the town unlivable. New longhouses were customarily built just downhill from the old site, where the bark structures were left to decay.

Iroquoian architecture

The centerpiece of Iroquois and Huron Indian life was the longhouse. This example (below) is a detail from an early French map of Fort Frontenac, ca. 1720. Longhouses were grouped together in large communities, the Mohawk town of Caughnawaga (bottom right), located on the banks of the St. Lawrence River, ca. 1750. An idealized drawing of the fortified town of Hochelaga (middle right), near present-day Montreal, was made shortly after Cartier's visit in October 1535. The longhouses shown in this drawing of an Iroquois village of the late seventeenth century (top right), are far more accurate. They are aligned in two rows and are surrounded by a rectangular palisade.







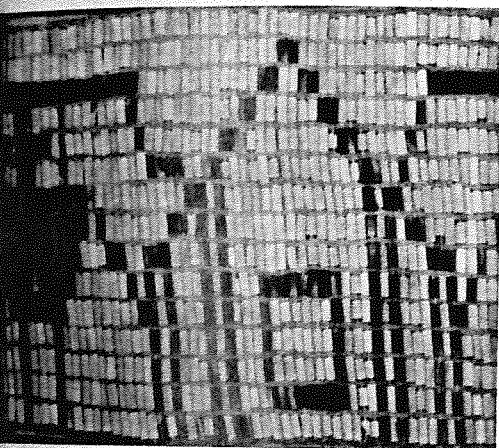
THE LEAGUE OF FIVE NATIONS

Between 1400 and 1600, the longhouse—which sheltered the basic social unit, the matrilineal clan—became the unifying political symbol for a new federation of five Iroquois tribes. Sometime during that period two legendary heroes, Deganawidah and Hiawatha, formed a union of the Seneca, Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Oneida tribes which came to dominate the fertile valleys and forested hills from the St. Lawrence River to Lake Champlain. They called themselves the “people of the longhouse”; to outsiders they were the League of Five Nations, or the Iroquois Confederacy.

At the famous council that is said to have formed their new league, the tribal delegates concluded in unison, “Have built longhouse.” Ever afterwards, the Iroquois spoke metaphorically of their domain as a gigantic longhouse, which stretched 240 miles from near Albany to the shores of Lake Erie at Buffalo. Its symbolic central aisle was the Iroquois Trail, which hastened communication and provided mutual defense for the league. “To an Iroquois,” the scholar Lewis H. Morgan wrote, “the League was not like a Longhouse. It *was* a Longhouse, extending from the Hudson to the Genesee, in which around five fires the five tribes gathered.”

The eastern end of this stronghold was guarded by the Mohawks, who from then on were known as “keepers of the eastern door.” The Seneca were “keepers of the western door.” Such architectural figures of speech became part of Iroquois oratory and were used both in councils among themselves and in warnings to dangerous outsiders. “Secure the doors” meant for the Mohawks and the Senecas to keep a close watch on their territories. The west end of the house was said to be protected by slick sheets of green bark, which enemy invaders would slip on. Just inside the southern and northern “walls,” respectively, lived the Cayugas and the Oneidas. In the center was the territory of the Onondagas, the “keepers of the fire.” The Onondaga council house was said to stand directly beneath the longhouse’s central smoke hole, and it was there that the entire league met for grand councils. The French were once warned to beware of threatening the Onondaga lest they fall through this smoke hole and burn themselves. Iroquois clan leaders, or *sachems*, were said to be the “braces” of the longhouse, while its “posts” were the tribal chiefs.

The Iroquois League represented the greatest military and economic alliance of Indians in seventeenth-century North America, but it began to lose power as the European struggle to retain the American colonies came to a climax. Following the Revolutionary War, American soldiers swept through upper New York state to take revenge upon the League for supporting the



Longhouse of the League

Connected by the Iroquois Trail in upper New York State, the five nations of the League of the Iroquois symbolized their political and military unity by a longhouse of five fires. (top)

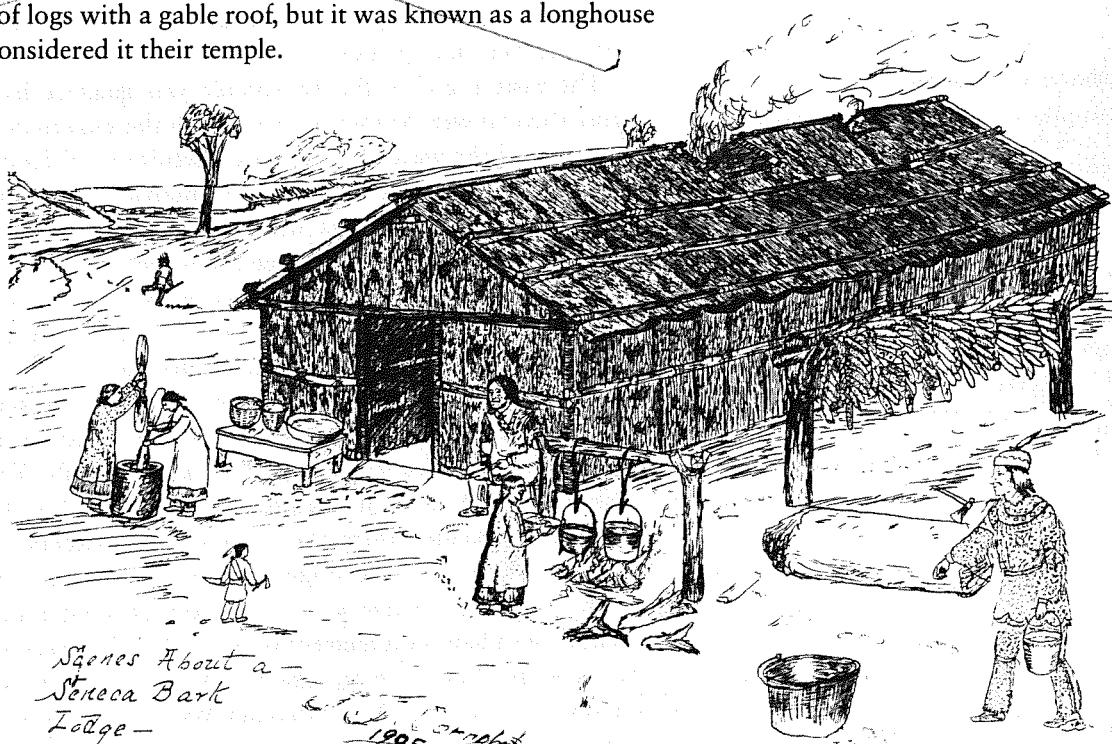
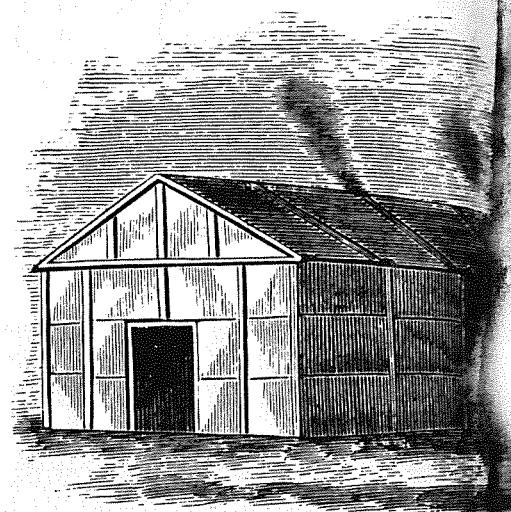
A ceremonial belt (above) depicting a longhouse. Strung of white and purple clamshell beads, wampum belts commemorated historical and religious events. Shown here is the central portion of the “Washington belt,” which honors a peacemaking council between the Iroquois League—represented by the longhouse—and the “thirteen fires,” or the American colonies.

British. Forty longhouse towns were burned and an estimated sixty thousand bushels of corn were destroyed. At about the same time smaller houses of log walls and bark roofs were beginning to replace the traditional longhouses, and furnishings of European influence—chairs, tables, trunks, and rugs—were proliferating.

The last enclave of Seneca traditionalists was a community known as Burnt House near Allegheny, New York. In 1798, visiting Quakers reported that in this settlement of four hundred Indians they found thirty bark-roofed houses, a building set aside for guests, and one council longhouse. Elsewhere, most Iroquois families lived in white-pine log cabins. By the mid-nineteenth century, when Morgan conducted his fieldwork among the Seneca, the traditional longhouse was but a memory. In his classic study of Iroquois society, *League of the Iroquois* (1851), Morgan included an engraving of an idealized longhouse with five fires and a trim gable roof. He noted, however, that “very little is now remembered by the Indians themselves of their form and mechanism, or of the plan of life within them . . . A complete understanding of the mode of life in these longhouses will not, probably, ever be recovered.”

The Handsome Lake Revival

The potency of the Iroquois longhouse as a collective symbol was revived around the close of the eighteenth century. In the Burnt House settlement lived a reformed alcoholic and charismatic mystic named Handsome Lake. His new religious doctrine, which attempted to revitalize Iroquois society through a blend of traditional seasonal rituals and Quaker moral teachings, was profamily and antiliqour. His followers met in a grange-type, rectangular meeting hall built of logs with a gable roof, but it was known as a longhouse and its members considered it their temple.



The year 1979 marked the fiftieth annual Winnebago powwow at Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin. Here, two boys in full ceremonial regalia await their turn to dance.



THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY

Best known of all Iroquois nations were the Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee, whose confederacy took its name from the longhouses in which they lived. These five nations came to think of themselves as embodying an enormous longhouse that stretched 250 miles (402km) across what is now New York State. The Onondaga, who lived in the center of the region, near the Haudenosaunee Trail—their principal communication route—were said to represent the central corridor of the Great Longhouse and were the Firekeepers for all five nations. The westernmost group, the Seneca, were the Keepers of the Western Door, and the Mohawks were the Keepers of the Eastern door. Together with the Oneida and the Cayuga, these five groups formed the Iroquois Confederacy, later expanding to include the Tuscarora. The actual date when the confederacy was founded is unknown, but historians agree that it existed before Columbus' arrival.

The tribes created the confederation as a means for the peaceful resolution of conflict among the member nations. Before the existence of the League of the Iroquois, when a man murdered someone of another nation, the victim's people sought revenge through raids, which often erupted into war between the nations.

Deganawidah, a Huron spiritual leader, had a vision of a great spruce tree that reached through the sky to communicate with the Great Spirit. His vision also showed him how to put these ideals into practical application through the Great Law, a set of rules and procedures for settling hostilities. Yet few people accepted his message, perhaps because of Deganawidah's speech impediment. In his travels, he met the compelling Mohawk orator, Hiawatha. Together, Hiawatha and Deganawidah were able to communicate effectively the Great Spirit's message of peace, unity, and clear thinking to the Five Nations. When they finally convinced the nations to relinquish warfare among

themselves, they planted the Great Tree of Peace on Onondaga land near present-day Syracuse, New York.

The Iroquois put these ideals into practice by forming a confederacy of forty-nine chiefs. These representatives settled their disputes peacefully through agreements and ceremonies at annual gatherings, with each decision requiring unanimous consensus among all member nations.

The women of each matrilineal clan chose their most respected woman to be Clan Mother who, in turn, chose a clan chief, called a sachem, to represent the lineage on the basis of his integrity, wisdom, vision, and oratorical ability. The Clan Mother also had the power to depose the chief if he did not conform to the will of his lineage.

Iroquoian values of unity, democracy, and liberty and the effective ways in which the nations of the confederacy put these ideals into action quickly attracted the attention of American leaders. Even before the American Revolution, these leaders sought the help of the Iroquois in their attempt to replace the British monarchy with a democratic alternative; in 1755, they formulated the Albany Plan of Union based on Iroquoian ideals.

In Philadelphia, in May and June 1776, American leaders asked Iroquois chiefs to attend the weeks of debate on the Declaration of Independence. Impressed with the sincere efforts of the Americans, an Onondaga sachem gave John Hancock, who presided over the debates, the name Karanduawn, which means "The Great Tree." In 1790, Thomas Jefferson led others in a toast to the United States Constitution as an "[Iroquois] tree of peace" that sheltered the Americans "with its branches of the union."

In 1777, the Iroquois Confederacy allowed each nation of the League to follow its own path in the war between the British and the Americans. This division of allegiance ended the League's military power.

