America’s First Democracy

At one time, the Iroquois Indians lived along the lakes and rivers of upstate New York. The five tribes—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca—fought with each other for years.

A Plan for Peace

In the late 1500s, a wise Iroquois man named Dekanawida had a dream. In his dream, he saw the end to the Indian wars. An Onondaga chief named Hiawatha agreed to help Dekanawida bring peace to the region. Hiawatha traveled from tribe to tribe, trying to persuade the tribal leaders to unite in peace. The leaders listened. They realized that if they stopped fighting, they could become a powerful force in the Northeast region.

Forming an Alliance

The leaders of the five tribes set up a league, or a confederacy. This alliance brought all five tribes together. They set up a kind of democratic government. Each tribe had an equal voice. A Great Council was formed. Forty-nine chiefs, some from each tribe, were appointed to the Council. The Council worked together to solve problems for the league. The leaders talked until they all agreed on how to solve the problems.

A Powerful Force

In 1722, the Iroquois League increased from five to six Nations when the Tuscarora tribe joined them. The Iroquois League controlled the fur trade in the area. They played a key role in the war between the British and French. They controlled land from Canada to Kentucky. The Iroquois League prospered for over 200 years.

Taking Sides

Then during the American Revolutionary War, most of the Iroquois League sided with the British. After the Americans defeated the British, many Iroquois villages were destroyed. The Iroquois were forced to move and live on reservations. This caused the Iroquois League to become less powerful.

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History shows that the writers of the United States Constitution used some of the same ideas as the Iroquois Nation’s government. One section of the Iroquois Constitution is entitled “Rights of the People” and might be compared to the Bill of Rights. The Iroquois Nation’s constitution is often called America’s first democracy.