

Group 1: Where they lived

There is a huge geographic area in the northeastern part of the United States that is known as the Woodlands. The Woodlands include all five great lakes - Lake Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan, and Superior - as well as the Finger Lakes and the Saint Lawrence River.

No early people had it easy, but the Woodland Region certainly offered many opportunities to find food and shelter. There were wild fruit trees, loaded with cherries, mulberries, figs, apples, pears, and peaches. The lakes and rivers were packed with fish. You literally tripped over wild blueberries and strawberries and cranberries and all kinds of wild vegetables. There was plenty of wood available from birch, oak, elm, fir, and maple trees to use as firewood and to make homes and tools.

As early people wandered into the Woodland Region, many stayed. Thousands of years later, when European colonists began moving into the same area, they called these early people the Woodland Indians. By the time the European colonists arrived, there were many different groups of people who made their home in the Woodlands.

Group 2: Political organization

The most powerful group of Native Americans were the Iroquois - the Seneca, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Cayuga. These were not tribes that joined together to form a nation. These were nations that joined together to form the League of Nations. Each group in the League was an Iroquois Nation. The Iroquois spoke the same language. They believed in the same gods. They had many similar customs. They were Iroquois people.

Central Government: The Iroquois Nation had a unique form of representative central government. It was called the League of Nations.

Written Constitution: The League had a written constitution, a set of rights and agreements that all the people had to honor. The constitution was recorded on 114 wampums.

Council: The League had a Council. Each Iroquois Nation had a set number of seats on the Council. The decisions of the Council were binding on every person in all Iroquois Nations.

Primary Purpose: The League's primary purpose was the Great Law of Peace. This law said that the Iroquois should not kill each other.

Group 3: Food of the Iroquois (part one)

Farming provided most of the Iroquois diet. The Iroquois made tools for farming. One tool was a wooden rake for leveling the soil. Another was a wooden spade used to dig the soil. They used seeds to plant corn, squash, green beans, lima beans, kidney beans, pumpkin, melon, and tobacco.

The women owned the land and tended the fields. The women harvested the crops. The clan mother was the boss. The Iroquois were very grateful for their harvests. They held six festivals each year to say prayers of thanks to their gods.

Three Sisters Succotash: Corn, beans, and squash were the most important crops. They were called The Three Sisters. The Three Sisters were mixed together to make a vegetable dish called succotash.

Boiled Corn Bread: They made a delicious boiled corn bread. They made flour by pounding corn into flour. To make bread, they mixed water with corn flour. Sometimes cooked beans were added, or berries or nuts. The bread was kneaded and formed into small loaves. The loaves were dropped into boiling water and cooked until the bread floated. Boiled corn bread was served both hot and cold.

They also used the same bread mix to bake bread by putting it on clay tablets in the fire. They used sunflower oil to fry bread.

Group 4: Food of the Iroquois (part two)

Wild Nuts, Fruits, Vegetables, and Eggs: Women and children gathered wild nuts, fruits and vegetables, mushrooms, and eggs laid by birds and turtles. They gathered sunflowers to use to make sunflower oil, which they used to fry food. They also used sunflower oil to treat wounds and as a body lotion to protect their skin from hot or cold weather.

Maple Syrup: The Iroquois learned to tap maple trees to harvest maple syrup. The Iroquois had a quite a sweet tooth. They loved maple sugar in many foods. They made a special treat of heated nuts rolled in maple sugar.

Wild Game: The men usually left in the fall for the annual hunt. They used bow and arrows to kill black bear, elk, deer, rabbit, and wolves. They trapped wild turkey, ducks and other birds. They hunted turtles for their food and shells. No part of the animal was wasted. They did not eat raw food. They cooked everything they captured. Whatever the men brought back from the hunt was shared by the whole village.

Fish: Spring was fishing season. The men used huge nets to catch fish. When they brought the catch back, everyone in the village pitched in to help dry the fish over fires. Much of the catch would be dried and then stored. If the store of food was getting low, the men would go out at night with torches. The light attracted fish into their nets. Everyone in the village got busy drying and storing dried fish.

Group 5: Food storage

Rafter Storage Racks: They built storage racks inside that hung from the rafters. Corn was braided, along with squash, and hung from the ceiling. Other foods were stored on the storage racks. The racks worked really well. Down the center of the longhouse were the family fires, one after another.

Each family had a space inside the longhouse. And each family had a fire or shared a fire with the people across from them. There were smoke holes in the roof of the longhouse. So, the smoke and heat from the fires went up, and dried and smoked meat, fish, and other stored food, on the way out.

Buried Clay Pots: They also stored dried food in clay pots. The pots were lined with bark, which kept the mice out. Pots were filled with dried corn, meat, and vegetables. The pots were buried in bark lined storage pits inside or near the longhouse.

Group 6: Clothing and travel

They made clothes from soft deerskin. The women and men wore leggings, shirts, and moccasins. The women wore a skirt or a dress that covered most of their leggings. In the winter, the men added a smock that went down to their knees for warmth. They decorated their clothes with dyed porcupine quills.

The women wore their hair long. Warriors wore their hair in a "mohawk" - a wide stripe of hair left down the middle of their head. Men removed all body hair by scraping it off.

Both men and women decorated their bodies with tattoos.

Travel was by canoe on the water or by foot on land. They did not use wheeled vehicles or ride animals.

Group 7 : How did they live?

Villages: The Iroquois lived in villages.

Clans: Iroquois tribes divided their tribe into groups called clans. Clans were family groups. It was forbidden to marry someone from your own clan. When a man married, he joined his wife's clan. When children were born, they became members of their mother's clan. The clan mother headed each clan. Most nations were divided into three clans. The Seneca had eight clans.

The Clan Mother: The clan mother had a great deal of power. She selected the Council members. Before the Council met to make decisions for the clan, the clan mother offered each member advice.

Council members were usually chosen for life. But, if the clan mother felt she had made a mistake, she could fire a council member and choose someone new in his place. So, although the men ruled, they had to do so in a way that would please the clan mother.

Group 8: Sacred life

According to Iroquois legend, the Great Spirit had told them that the animals and the things of the forest were their helpers. They knew they needed trees and plants and animals to live. But they were still sorry when they had to take a life. They were very careful to take only what they absolutely needed. To the Iroquois and other Woodland Indians, it would have been an insult to kill something and then waste it.

A tree was living, and therefore sacred. If you were going to chop down a tree, every part of it had to be helpful. They used young trees to make poles for their longhouses. They carefully saved the leaves and twigs to start campfires. They used the bark to cover their homes to keep out the rain, and to line clay storage pots to keep dried food safe from mice. Twigs were also used to make baskets, hunting tools, and weapons. Twigs were used to make designs on clay pots. They used tree and plant fibers as weaving materials.

They used everything over and over, even the smallest scraps, to avoid killing needlessly.

Their beliefs forced them to be inventive. They even invented games to use up left over pieces of wood. Some of these games became so popular that they turned into annual events, like the Snow Snake Games.

Group 9: Longhouses

Because animal and plant life were plentiful, big groups could live easily together. Clans lived in longhouses. The distinctive clan longhouses were really long - they could be over 200 feet long, 25 feet wide, and 25 feet high. That's huge! To get an idea of how big they were, measure the distance from floor to ceiling in your own house.

Building a longhouse was hard work, and it took a long time. First, the people had to gather the materials - the wood and the hides. Since nothing could be wasted, it was not the gathering of materials that took a long time - it was using every part of every piece they gathered, as the materials they needed to build a longhouse began to pile up.

First, they made a frame out of long poles of wood. Then, they tied young trees to the frame, trees young enough to bend and shape. Once they had the shape of the longhouse in place, they covered the house with bark. They added a few smoke holes and two doors - one at each end. The Iroquois rigged a flap on the smoke holes. When it snowed or rained, the holes could be opened and closed as needed. Later, the people might go back and add to the longhouse, making it even longer as needed. Longhouses, once built, lasted about twenty years.

Many longhouses had a huge pole fence built around them for additional protection. Stairs were built on the inside of the fence, so that archers could easily climb up and defend against attack. The poles ended in long sharp points to discourage anyone from climbing over.

Many families lived together in one longhouse. Each was assigned their own section. Fireplaces and fire pits ran down the middle of the longhouse for heat and for people to share as a place to cook food. Houses were not measured by feet. They were measured by camp fires. A house might be 10 fires long, or 12 fires long.

Longhouses were so important to the Iroquois way of life that the Iroquois call themselves "the People of the Longhouse".

Group 10: Marriage and family

In the Iroquois world, the husband had no real authority over his wife – men and women were equal. Marriage was by mutual consent. Customs varied from tribe to tribe, but for the most part, a woman could leave her husband when she wished.

When a man married, he moved into his wife's longhouse. It was forbidden to marry anyone from your own clan, so when any woman married, a new man arrived in the longhouse. The men only brought a few things with them, perhaps a weapon or two and some clothing. When a baby was born, that child was a member of the wife's clan. When the boys grew up and married, they left their home and moved to their wife's longhouse. And so it went.

The men cleared the land for the garden crops. They hunted and fished and participated as fierce warriors as needed.

Women controlled life in the longhouse. Out of all the women, the elder women were the ones who were in charge. The women tended the gardens and harvested the crops, as the men were too busy hunting to help much.

Women raised the kids, made clothes, cooked food, and prepared food for storage. They were the gatherers, gathering wild fruits and vegetables. Women were usually the potters. They made the beautiful clay pots used for storage and cooking.

Children learned from their parents, uncles, and aunts. Girls helped their mothers. Boys helped their fathers. Both played games to strengthen their bodies and skills.

Group 11: Warfare

Iroquois Warriors: The men cleared the fields, and built and repaired the longhouses. Other than that, their time was spent in trading and hunting, and in war and preparing for war.

The men made many types of weapons. They made bows and arrows out of hickory or ash wood. The tips of the arrows were made out of turtle, antler bone, and deer bone. They were very hard. They made blowguns and darts out of wood and hollow reeds, which were used to hunt birds. They made spears with sharp ends.

Iroquois Battle Techniques: Iroquois warriors taught the European settlers valuable lessons in how to use geography to win a battle. The early American colonists learned by watching the Iroquois warriors how to blend into the landscape and fight like guerillas. They watched and learned how to attack quickly, and how to use a small number of men to sneak into enemy territory.

The early colonists used the techniques they had learned from Iroquois when fighting the British during the American Revolution.

Group 12: Government (part one)

The League of Nations

The Iroquois view of nature was based on sharing and cooperation. They took that same attitude into their daily life, history, and government. Because of their attitude, they were able to accomplish something spectacular, something that had never been done before. They were able to form the League of Nations.

The Legend of Hiawatha: Legend says that once upon a time, there was a Mohawk leader named Hiawatha. He was tired of the endless fighting between the five nations. He wanted things to change. One day, he met a great Iroquois speaker named Dekanawida. Dekanawida convinced him that the way to bring peace was to form a new nation, a single Iroquois Nation, where all five nations would have voice in government, so that things could be solved peacefully.

An old Iroquois legend says this is what he told them:

"We bind ourselves together by taking hold of each other's hands so firmly and forming a circle so strong that if a tree should fall upon it, it could not shake nor break it, so that our people and grandchildren shall remain in the circle of security, peace, and happiness."

And so it was done. Each of the five great Iroquois Nations banded together to form a new nation - the Iroquois Nation.

Group 13: Government (part two)

Debates: The League did not try to create rules for each tribe and village. That was the job of local government or regional government - the village council and the tribal councils. Only major issues were debated on the floor of the League of Nations.

Council speakers were eloquent and persuasive. Some members of the council were selected not because they were great warriors, but because they were great speakers.

During the American Revolution, the clan mothers could not decide whether to fight on the side of the colonists or on the side of the British. The Iroquois Nations tried very hard to not take sides at all. When that did not work, they let each village decide for themselves. Some fought on the side of the colonists. Some fought on the side of the British.

Borrowing Ideas: When the early colonists began to design a system of government for what would become the United States of America, they borrowed many ideas from the League of Nations. It was an incredible system of government. It worked for them, it worked for us, and both governments - the Iroquois League of Nations and the Government of the United States are still in operation today.