

HIAWATHA BELT

The Hiawatha Belt is the national symbol of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The Belt is a historical record of the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and a visual representation of that alliance. Hiawatha, the namesake of the Belt, helped the Peacemaker spread the Creator's message of peace to the warring Five Nations. The tree at the center of the Hiawatha Belt represents the Great White Pine that the Peacemaker uprooted, under which the leaders of the Five Nations—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca—buried their weapons of war. The Peacemaker taught the Five Nations that they were to be united as one political family in a single longhouse, the traditional dwelling of the Haudenosaunee. The longhouse became the guiding metaphor of Haudenosaunee political structure and gave the people of the Five Nations their name: Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse.

The Hiawatha Belt illustrates the role that each Nation has in the metaphorical longhouse. The symbols of the Nations are placed in their traditional geographic order from east to west. Hence, the easternmost Nation, the Mohawk, and the westernmost Nation, the Seneca, are represented by squares at the right and left ends of the belt. The Mohawk and Seneca were tasked with being the Doorkeepers of the Haudenosaunee territory. Just as anyone who wished to enter a longhouse would have to enter through a door at either end, anyone who wished to enter Haudenosaunee territory would have to gain the permission of the necessary Doorkeeper Nation first—the Mohawk if they came from the east, the Seneca if they came from the west. The next two squares represent the Oneida and Cayuga Nations, who are respectively known as the Younger Brothers of the Mohawk and Seneca. The tree in the center, in addition to symbolizing the Tree of Peace, represents the Onondaga, whose traditional territories were at the geographic center of Haudenosaunee lands. The central element of a longhouse was the hearth; thus the Onondaga were given the role of Firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee and were responsible for keeping the council fire burning for Haudenosaunee meetings. The white line connecting the symbols of the Five Nations refers to the line that runs down the length of a longhouse from one door to the other, through each hearth, an additional reminder that the Five Nations are united under one longhouse. Additionally, in council meetings, this line divides the Younger Brothers from the Elder Brothers. The history and unity that the Hiawatha belt embodies lives on today through the Haudenosaunee flag, which bears its design, and through the continued alliance of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora (who joined the Six Nations in 1722).