

Background Information on the Akwesasne Mohawk

The Mohawk nation is one of the original five nations of the Haudenosaunee (hoe-dee-no-SHOW-nee) Confederacy. The Haudenosaunee are also known as the Iroquois or Six Nations. The Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, and Onondaga nations were the first members of the confederacy, which probably was founded in the late 1500s; the sixth nation to join was the Tuscarora, in 1722. Together they formed a peaceful alliance under what is called the Gayanere:gowa (gaya-NESH-a-gowa), or the Great Law of Peace, creating one of the world's oldest known democracies. Within the confederacy, the Mohawk people are known as the Keepers of the Eastern Door; as the easternmost tribe, it was their responsibility to guard the confederacy from an intrusion from the east.

Because they were the first tribe to accept the Great Law of Peace, the Mohawks are also known as Elder Brothers within the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. This is an important role when all 50 traditional chiefs gather to make decisions that affect everyone within the confederacy. The traditional chiefs are selected by the clan mothers, elders within the tribe who also have the authority to remove chiefs from their position if their actions do not reflect traditional Mohawk values. Today there are also Mohawk council chiefs who are elected by the people and interact directly with the U.S. and Canadian federal governments.

Original Mohawk homelands stretched from the northeastern region of what is now New York State into parts of what are now Vermont and Canada, although the Mohawks asserted influence across a much greater area through trade. The location of the Mohawks' traditional territories has put them in the middle of many historic conflicts, during which they allied with different North American and European nations. Today, there are numerous Mohawk communities in the U.S. and Canada, each with its own traditional leadership and elected representatives, although there is only one Mohawk community officially recognized by the U.S. government—St. Regis, located on the Akwesasne (awk-we-SAHZ-nee) reservation in northern New York. Within all Mohawk communities, there are strong efforts to continue practicing their traditional language, culture, and governance. Examples include language-immersion schools, such as the Akwesasne Freedom School; participation in the traditional sport of lacrosse, including competition on the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse team; and political engagement in international forums, such as the United Nations.

Mohawk identity has in many ways remained the same for centuries. Like all Haudenosaunee peoples, they are matrilineal, meaning that membership in the three original clans—Turtle, Bear, and Wolf—is passed down through the mothers. Mohawk people traditionally lived in large, multi-family dwellings known as longhouses, and today’s longhouse ceremonies are still central to perpetuating their language, songs, and dances. Mohawks were expert fishers, hunters, and trappers, and they became skilled agriculturalists who knew how to grow enough food to sustain their people throughout the long winters. Their expertise in cultivating crops enabled them to shift from a hunting-and-gathering lifestyle to settling permanent villages where they cleared large areas of forest to develop farmlands. Their main crops of corn, beans, and squash—known as the Three Sisters—became the basis of their economy. These plants not only served as food, but were important to many medicines, dyes, and teas. Many of the traditional plants grown and harvested historically are still used in the present day.

For more information about Haudenosaunee history, related resources, and classroom activities, check out our *Haudenosaunee Guide for Educators* at <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/resources/Haudenosaunee-Guide-for-Educators.cshtml>