

Six Nations Cultural and Historical Context

Background

The Haudenosaunee (Six Nations or Iroquois) were pulled in two different directions because of conflicting treaty obligations. There were two Covenant Chains, one with the British Crown and one with the American Congress. The Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora people were not only scattered physically across their former territory, they could not come to one mind on what to do. There was no single Haudenosaunee response to the war. Even within each nation there existed divided loyalties.

The Peace Chiefs wanted to remain neutral, but lingering animosities from the American Revolution set various communities at odds with one another. The Chiefs at Buffalo Creek in western New York did not see eye-to-eye with the Chiefs at Six Nations of the Grand River in Ontario. Pleas for neutrality fell on the deaf ears of the warriors. After the British invaded Grand Island in 1812 the Senecas felt compelled to declare war on England, and did so in August 1813. The following autumn, the Grand River fighters attacked and destroyed the Tuscarora community. What remained of the legendary Great Peace that once bound the Six Nations together seemed to disappear.

However, the horrors of war stopped even the toughest Native fighters in their tracks. The blood shed at Chippewa, Queenston Heights, and Beaver Dams forced them to question their motives. What were they really fighting for? Most agreed to withdraw from the fighting and return to protect their families.

After the war, calls for reconciliation led to a historic peace council in which the former combatants, and their British and American allies, consoled each other for their losses, buried the weapons of war and agreed to become one people again. Despite the divided loyalties during the war, the Haudenosaunee merged as one people once again and since the War of 1812 have been at peace with each other.

Leading up to Queenston Heights

In June 1812, before the outbreak of the War, Seneca warriors and leaders, along with representatives of the Onondaga and Cayuga nations, traveled to meet with the Six Nations chiefs at Grand River. They argued for neutrality but could not come to one mind on the matter. Too many chiefs and warriors at Grand River, perhaps still stinging from their losses during the American Revolution, still remained allied with the Crown.

The Grand River Chiefs made a statement to Indian Department officials that the friendship between the Haudenosaunee had ended. Seneca delegate Hure-hau-stock (Capt. Strong) tried to deliver a wampum belt, but the Grand River delegates would not receive it.