



Figure 7. Map of the Haudenosaunee Reservations and Reserves with the Six Nations Reserve highlighted (Tooker 1978b:450; highlight added).

IV. CULTURAL CONTEXT

The Role of Wampum among the Haudenosaunee

Literature pertaining to wampum within Haudenosaunee (also referred to as Iroquois) culture and history is vast and wampum’s role is well attested. Haudenosaunee oral tradition traces the origin of wampum to the Confederacy’s founder, the Mohawk Chief Hiawatha.³ Even the name Hiawatha, which ethnologist Horatio Hale (1897b:483) once translated as “the wampum-belt maker,” indicates that the origins of wampum and the Great Law of Peace are deeply intertwined.

Historically, wampum has been linked to a variety of ceremonial and political activities. For example, wampum strings play a central role in the Haudenosaunee “Condolence Ceremony” to mourn a passed chief and install his successor (Hale 1963[1883]:48–58; Morgan 1975[1851]:114–22; Snyderman 1954:478–80). Wampum strings also function as official messages between nations and as symbols of tribal

³ Haudenosaunee oral history “tells how Hayehwatha came upon the lakes and saw many different kinds of ducks floating on the water. As he approached the lake, the ducks flew up and in doing so they lifted the water. The lake bottom was covered in white shells that he picked up and realized that they could be use to make beads like the cut bird quills he had been using. Hayehwatha determined that these shell beads could be used to remind people of the Great Law. He returned to Onondaga and told Todadaho that the wampum beads will be used to mark the various tasks and to kindle the council fire” (HSCBRR 2001:4).