

Canadian poet and author Emily Pauline Johnson (1861–1913) was the youngest of the four children of Mohawk Chief George Henry Martin Johnson and Emily Howells, an Englishwoman. She was also the granddaughter of Clan Mother Helen Martin and Pine Tree Chief and Council Speaker John “Smoke” Johnson.<sup>16</sup> Within a few years of Pauline Johnson’s father’s death in 1884, the Johnsons found themselves in difficult financial straits and the children were required to find employment. Pauline pursued a career as a recitalist, poet, and author. She was frequently billed as “the Mohawk Princess” and much of her poetry and stories included Native themes (see Appendix D). During her stage recitals, she alternated between fashionable Edwardian dress and an “Indian” stage costume accented with wampum belts, among other items (Francis 1992:115; Keller 1981:66; 1999:20–21; see Figures 1 and 8). Johnson met with considerable success but her life was also fraught with financial problems. During the lean times, she sold items such as the zigzag belt to support herself and her career (Keller 1981:99; 1999:55, 70–71, 81–82; Strong-Boag and Gerson 2000:41).

Pauline Johnson purchased the zigzag belt (NMAI 008386.000) between 1893 and 1905 from one of the Buck brothers.<sup>17</sup> A photograph of her holding the belt in her stage costume suggests that she used the belt during her performances (see Figure 8).

In 1905 Pauline Johnson began searching for a buyer for the zigzag belt; her correspondence suggests that her financial situation had deteriorated and that she sought a second London tour to advance her career (Johnson 1905a; 1905b, 1906a, 1906b; Keller 1981:99; 1999:55, 70–71, 81–82; see Appendix D). On August 2, 1905, she wrote to Ernest Thompson Seton (founder of the Boy Scouts of America) to enlist his help in finding an American buyer for a private sale of the belt (Johnson 1905b). This letter represents the only instance in which Pauline is known to have discussed her purchase of the zigzag belt. (The complete letter is transcribed in Appendix E.) In the letter, she confirms that her source for the belt was the son of the wampum keeper (presumably John Buck, Sr.) and that the belt had been photographed by Hale in 1871 (Johnson 1905b). She also identifies the belt first as a “Hiawatha League” belt and then later as a “National” belt. As the daughter of a Grand Council Chief and granddaughter of a Pine Tree Chief and former Speaker of the Council (both of whom tutored the Johnson children in their Mohawk heritage), Pauline Johnson would certainly have known of the belt’s status as Haudenosaunee communal property maintained by the Grand Council. As a community member she may have also been aware that the Grand Council was actively trying to retrieve the Confederacy belts that had once been in the care of John Buck, Sr.

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<sup>16</sup> Pine Tree Chief titles are non-heredity, merit-based positions that cannot be passed on to another upon the chief’s death (Tooker 1978a:429).

<sup>17</sup> Based on J.N.B. Hewitt’s experiences with the Buck family, the seller was probably Joshua Buck.