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Definition: **Iroquois** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(1666) **1 pl** : an American Indian confederacy orig. of New York consisting of the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca and later including the Tuscarora **2** : a member of any of the Iroquois peoples

Summary Article: **Iroquois**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Member of a confederation of American Indian peoples of northeastern North America formed about 1570. Known originally as the Five Nations, it included the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca. It became the **Six Nations** after the Tuscarora joined in 1722. From its New York homelands, the confederacy aggressively enlarged its territorial control to include much of Ontario, Québec, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. Iroquois also refers to American Indians of the Iroquoian linguistic family, originally from the upper St Lawrence River, such as the Cherokee and Huron. Iroquois now live in Ontario, Québec, New York, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin, and number about 45,200 (2000).

The Iroquois language is still spoken in many homes although little of their traditional lifestyle remains. They are employed in a wide range of occupations with great variation in income. Most Iroquois are Christian, although a large number in New York belong to the Handsome Lake religion, a 19th-century development that incorporates much of the traditional religion.

The Iroquois League was formed and led by Hiawatha and Dekanawida as a defence against invasion and to prevent intertribal conflict. It was composed of a council of about 50 clan and village chiefs known as 'sachems', and each tribe had one vote. Decisions had to be unanimous. The Tuscarora were admitted without voting rights. An analysis of the organization of the Iroquois League by Benjamin Franklin contributed to the formulation of the US confederacy and constitution.

Traditionally, the Iroquois cultivated maize (corn), beans, and squash (pumpkin), supplementing their diet by hunting deer. Farming was organized by the women. Many families lived together in bark-covered longhouses in palisaded villages of several hundred people. Matrilineal kinship ties (passed through the mother's line) formed the basis of social and political life; women owned all property, and a man, upon marriage, would move into his wife's longhouse. Children took their mother's clan. Lineages were formed into three main clans, Turtle, Deer, and Wolf, each headed by a clan mother. Each village was led by a council of adult males who provided the village chief with guidance; leaders were chosen by the clan mothers. Warriors wore their hair in a scalp-lock, removing all other facial and body hair, and tattooing was common among men and women.

The Iroquois were very aggressive and tortured and enslaved their captives. They also practised ritual cannibalism. Honour was acquired by bravery and aggression in warfare.

History Originally located near the upper reaches of the St Lawrence River, the various Iroquois-speaking peoples moved southwest to occupy the greater part of south Ontario, the whole of New York State, and a large part of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. In the early 17th century, the Iroquois confederation traded beaver pelts with the Dutch and English, allowing them to dominate many other

peoples. As beaver became scarce they expanded their range, forcing other peoples westward and southward, and in 1648–50 destroyed the Huron confederacy. In the latter half of the 17th century, the Iroquois mounted successive raids against the French, who were allies of their bitter enemies, the Algonquin. Throughout most of the 18th century the Iroquois occupied most of New York State, controlling access to the Great Lakes by the French, English, and Dutch. In so doing they managed to maintain a degree of autonomy that eluded other tribes. With the exception of the Oneida and Tuscarora, the Iroquois, led by Mohawk chief Joseph Brant, also fought for the British in the American Revolution. In 1779 US general John Sullivan and 4,000 troops defeated them at Elmira, New York. The Iroquois confederacy was effectively dissolved by fighting for different causes during the war, and the Onondoga, Seneca, and Tuscarora settled on reservations in New York. The Cayuga and Mohawk migrated to Canada and the Oneida to Wisconsin.

In the 1950s the New York State Power Authority and the Army Corps of Engineers attempted to appropriate reservation land without permission for the Kinzua Dam. The ensuing controversy reinvigorated Iroquois identity and led to a cultural revival, including a return to traditional hairstyles and dress by Iroquois youth. It also led to demands for better education and a general growth in American Indian civil-rights activism.

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