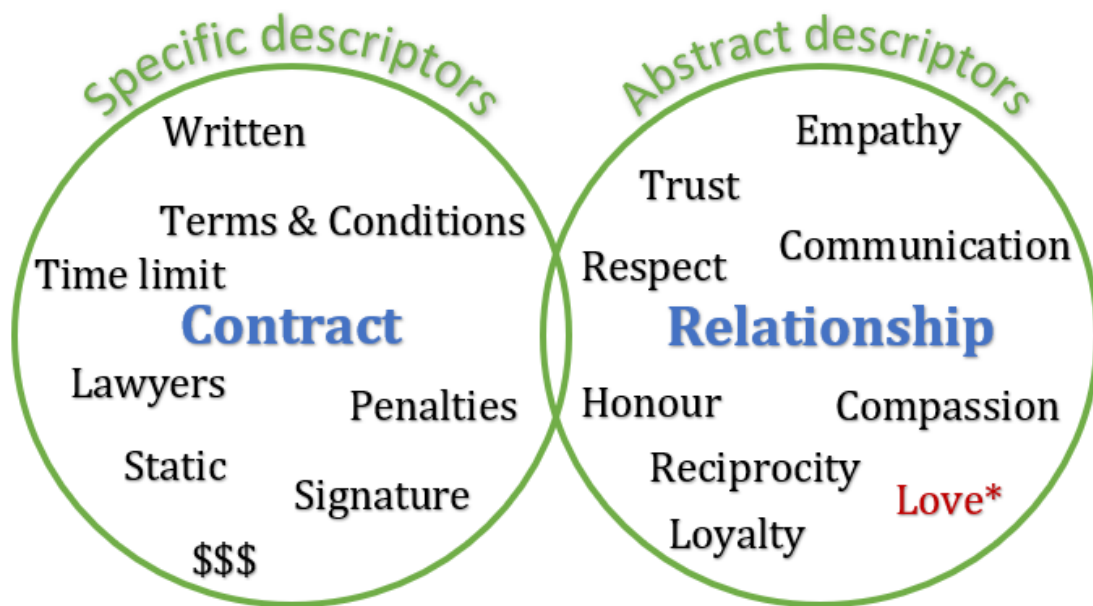


Treaty Primer #2: Treaty Relationships & The Covenant Chain

When European and Indigenous civilizations started interacting with each other they needed a framework to respect their independent social, political, economic and legal systems. Such frameworks already existed within Indigenous societies and were extended to European settlers: **Treaty Relationships**.



***Often described in English as familial love**

A meeting between two parties, highlighting the differences between understanding Treaty as a contract verses as establishing a relationship.

Some key understandings about Treaty:

- Rather than commercial contracts, Treaties should be understood as **relationships** between their members that flow through time and are constantly evolving. Premised upon an agreement that any disagreement will not destroy the relationship, a Treaty is perpetually a work in progress. Never static, relationships require constant communication, attention and respect.

Familial love is found at the centre of most Treaty relationships.

- Kayanesenh Paul Williams explained that Treaty relationships cannot be dissolved – they exist throughout time.¹
- When Treaties are seen only through the lens of a European language and law, they are reduced to simple contracts rather than the living familial relationships that accord with the Indigenous understandings at the Treaties.



Tehontatenentsonteronhtáhkwa (aka The Covenant Chain) is an overarching oral meta-treaty², as well as the oldest Indigenous-Settler relationship on the continent.

- **Treaty Relationships were not invented for non-Indigenous Peoples** – they have existed on this continent for ages and continue to this day. Describing Treaty relationships at the heart of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (formed centuries before Europeans arrived in North America), Teha’nakari:ne³ (Chief Curtis Nelson, Bear Clan, Mohawk Council of Chiefs) explained in 2023:

They are a tie, a place where we can tie each other together so that we are one family so that the Five Nations which later became the Six Nations were tied together under one family. And everybody that came along — and we had treaties with, we made sure that they were part of us and they still are today. And we still view them as such. And has there been difficulties with that? Of course. There is no such thing as perfection, especially not when it comes to the issues that surround all of our people, both in Canada and in the United States. But we continue to push in that direction and continue to move with that. And we’re still here so, I mean, something is working. ⁴

- During the 17th century, European nations began establishing settlements and colonies along the eastern coastline of North America.

¹ Kayanesenh Paul Williams, “Speaking from the Roots,” 29 February 2024.

² R. c. Montour, 2023 QCCS 4154 (CanLII), <<https://canlii.ca/t/k0wzd>>, retrieved on 2024-02-15.

³ Translates to “he drags horns” (referring to the deer antlers on kastoweh that identify royaner, aka “chiefs”).

⁴ Ibid.

The Dutch founded the colony of New Netherlands, with its capital at New Amsterdam (present-day New York City), during this period. The colony was located around the Hudson River, which connected it – through the Mohawk River and Fort Orange (present-day Albany, NY) – to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

- The Haudenosaunee Confederacy (known by the English as Six Nations, or the French as Iroquois ⁵) considers itself one of the world's oldest representative democracies.⁶ The founding nations of the confederacy are the Seneca⁷, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk. The Tuscarora Nation (originally from present-day North Carolina) joined in the 18th century, and since then other nations have also been admitted.



Map showing the location of the original five nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in relation to New Netherlands, New Amsterdam, Fort Orange and the Hudson River. The purple line is intended as a guide to, rather than a definitive drawing of, the territory of the Confederacy.

⁵ This identifier is no longer used.

⁶ Dr. Amber Meadow Adams explained “Haudenosaunee government is representative — youth, elders, men, women, ancestors, the yet unborn all have a voice. It’s something more inclusive than democracy, even as nation-states define it today.”

⁷ There were Seneca communities in Flamborough.

- A great resource to learn more about the Haudenosaunee Confederacy can be found here: <https://earthtotables.org/essays/haudeonsaunee-primer/>
- In order for the Dutch and Haudenosaunee Civilizations to interact with one another a Treaty relationship was established in the early 17th century (around 1613) called, in Kanien'kéha (Mohawk language), **Tehontatenentsonteronhtáhkwa**. In English, this Treaty relationship is often referred to as the **Covenant Chain**.⁸

Meaning behind Tehontatenentsonteronhtáhkwa:

te = two, dual, together

hontate = group of men to each other

nents = arm, forearm

onte = something attached to the end of it

ronhtahkwa = an action undertaken at some time in the past that's still being taken now⁹

- The Tehontatenentsonteronhtáhkwa, or Covenant Chain, was created with, and conducted through Treaty Councils using, Haudenosaunee protocols, rules and ceremonies,
 - Remember: Treaties are created using Indigenous rules, protocols, ceremonies and other diplomatic techniques including wampum, made with tubular shell beads that are woven into symbolic designs. Wampum are primary documents – their beads and symbols contain the teachings and agreements that are part of the Treaty relationship they represent.

Knowledge Keeper Rick Hill explains: *Wampum is just a visual device by which memory is kept alive. Our ancestors were very skilled in how to make these abstract symbols that have great meaning, great power. We also believe that wampum has its own power.*

⁸ A note on language. Kayanesenh Paul Williams explains that Euro-Canadian courts are fascinated in finding one, uniform definition for words while the Haudenosaunee tradition recognizes that there can be multiple definitions whose meanings can change. This teaching is important to consider when exploring Tehontatenentsonteronhtáhkwa (The Covenant Chain). Kayanesenh Paul Williams, "Speaking from the Roots," 29 February 2024.

Dehharagereneh (Chief Curtis Nelson, Bear Clan, Mohawk Council of Chiefs) defined the Covenant Chain as "The way us and the Crown work things out." Kayanesenh Paul Williams, "Speaking from the Roots," 29 February 2024.

⁹ Dr. Amber Adams, "Speaking from the Roots," 29 February 2024.

- Hear [Rick Hill explains The Covenant Chain](#) in this video produced by [Deyohaha:ge and Six Nations Polytechnic](#) (specifically from 6:47).



Wampum belts are often used to depict Treaties. Adam Freeman, Mohawk Nation, holds a replica of the "Friendship Wampum" which is a depiction of Tehontatenentsonteronhtáhkwa (The Covenant Chain). ca. 2013.



The Teioháte Kaswenta (Mohawk), Tekani Teyothata'tye Kaswénta (Cayuga), or Two Row Wampum, dates from the 17th century and is often used to illustrate the relationship established by the Tehontatenentsonteronhtáhkwa (Covenant Chain).

- Following the English victory in Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-1667) New Netherlands was transferred to the English Crown and renamed New York. The Covenant Chain was taken up by King Charles II, beginning a Treaty relationship with the Haudenosaunee and the English/British Crown¹⁰ that continues to this day. While the Dutch characterized the Covenant Chain as a rope or “iron chain,” the English described it as the “**Silver Covenant Chain.**”
- Following the Seven Years War and King George III’s **Royal Proclamation of 1763**, the British Crown moved to establish a presence in the Great Lakes Region. Following Pontiac’s War, Sir William Johnson (Superintendent General of Indian Affairs) held a Great Council at Fort Niagara with the Indigenous Nations of the Great Lakes Region during the summer of 1764.¹¹



A British military map of the environs of Fort Niagara drawn in 1760. The star identifies the approximate location of the gathering of Indigenous representatives. Fort Niagara is labeled as “A,” while “B” and “D” denotes “A bank of sand” and nearby “Trader’s Huts.” “C” marks the gardens of Fort Niagara.

¹⁰ The concept of a “British Crown” did not come into existence until the 1707 Acts of Union. A distinct Canadian Crown was created with the Statute of Westminster (1931), but it has yet to be recognized by the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

¹¹ Sir William Johnson’s partner was Mohawk Clan Mother Molly Brant. This has raised questions around who organized what, as well as who in their relationship was the driving force behind such moments as the Council at Niagara - Dr. Amber Meadow Adams.

- At this gathering a nation-to-nation relationship between the Crown and Indigenous Peoples north and west of Niagara was established as the principles animating the Royal Proclamation of 1763 were ratified using Indigenous protocols. This created a new relationship in the Great Lakes Region. The **Treaty of Niagara (1764)** extended what was articulated as the **Silver Covenant Chain of Friendship** into the Great Lakes Region.
- After a month of negotiations, Sir William Johnson crossed the Niagara River from Fort Niagara to present the 1764 Covenant Chain Wampum, as well as other belts and diplomatic presents, saying:

Brothers of the Western Nations, Sachems, Chiefs and Warriors;

You have now been here for several days, during which time we have frequently met to renew and Strengthen our Engagements and you have made so many Promises of your Friendship and Attachment to the English that there now remains for us only to exchange the great Belt of the Covenant Chain that we may not forget out mutual Engagements.

I now therefore present you the great Belt by which I bind all your Western Nations together with the English, and I desire that you will take fast hold of the same, and never let it slip, to which end I desire that after you have shewn this Belt to all Nations you will fix one end of it with the Chipeweighs at St. Marys [Michilimackinac] whilst the other end remains at my house, and moreover I desire that you will never listen to any news which comes to any other Quarter. If you do it, it may shake the Belt.¹²

- The Silver Covenant Chain of Friendship articulated by the Treaty of Niagara (1764) extended the Covenant Chain already established with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy into the Great Lakes Region, encompassing the Anishinaabek Nations. All subsequent Treaties in the Great Lakes Region were meant to align with the relationship established at Niagara.

¹² C. Flick, ed. *The Papers of William Johnson*, vol. 4 (Albany, NY: The University of the State of New York, 1925), 309-310.

This resource is based on my knowledge as of April 2024. It is continually being updated.

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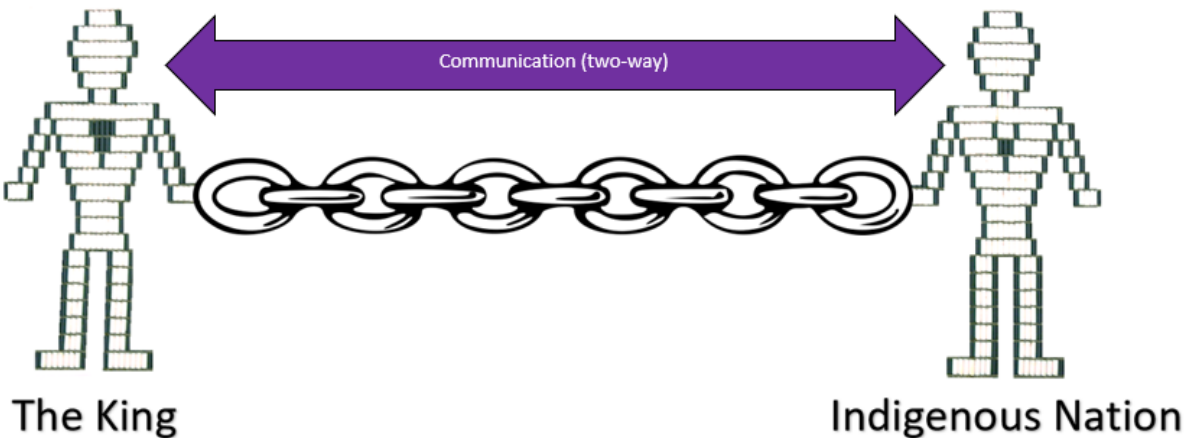
The 1764 Covenant Chain Wampum presented by Sir William Johnson to the assembled Indigenous dignitaries at Niagara on July 31st, 1764. Its creation was likely guided by Mohawk Clan Mother Molly Brant (Sir William was her partner). There are layers of stories and teachings embedded in this wampum that go far beyond the labels shown above.

- It is important to emphasize that **the 1764 Covenant Chain Wampum was commissioned by Sir William Johnson as the King's Representative**, an example of colonial officials employing Indigenous diplomacy and protocols including wampum.
- Learn more about the Treaty of Niagara (1764) by reading *The Queen at the Council Fire: The Treaty of Niagara, Reconciliation, and the Dignified Crown in Canada* (Dundurn, 2014).
- On November 1st, 2023, a landmark decision by The Honourable Sophie Bourque of the Supreme Court of Quebec ruled that:
 - Amidst the turbulence of that era, two civilizations encountered one another and, in response to the challenge that this represented, devised a distinctive mechanism to favour and govern a mutually beneficial relationship, the Covenant Chain.
 - Through their entry into and subsequent renewals of the Covenant Chain, the parties intended to establish a lasting relationship characterized by both a military and friendship alliance.
 - This alliance was to be guided by the principles of Haudenosaunee diplomatic protocol and included a conflict-resolution procedure.
 - **The Court concluded that the Covenant Chain was a treaty between the Haudenosaunee and the British, as recognized by Section 35(1) of the Canadian Constitution Act (1982).**¹³

¹³ R. c. Montour, 2023 QCCS 4154 (CanLII), <<https://canlii.ca/t/k0wzd>>, retrieved on 2024-02-15.



This image depicts how the Treaty of Niagara (1764) extended the Silver Covenant Chain originally established with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy into the Great Lakes Region.



A visualization of the relationship established by the Covenant Chain.

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