



## **Treaty Week Primer #2:**

### **Treaty & The Covenant Chain**

When European and Indigenous civilizations started interacting with each other they needed a framework with which to do so that respected their independent social, political, economic and legal systems. Such a framework already existed within Indigenous societies and were extended to European settlers: Treaty.

Some key understandings about Treaty:

- Rather than contracts, Treaties should be understood as **relationships** between their members that are constantly evolving. Filled with agreement and disagreement, a relationship is always a work in progress. Never static, relationships require constant communication, attention and respect. Familial love is found at the centre of most Treaties.
- I once heard from an Indigenous negotiator that Canada deals with modern Treaty negotiations as if they were divorce proceedings; lawyers are involved as details are hammered out in some sort of agreement that will settle things once and for all, so that both sides can move on separately with their lives.
- When Treaties are seen only through the lens of a European language, they are reduced to simple contracts rather than the living familial relationships they were intended to be. As Bruce Morito explains in *An Ethic of Mutual Respect: The Covenant Chain and Aboriginal-Crown Relations*:

*Understanding the lifeworld or mindset of one's allies could only be accomplished to a certain degree, partly because of psychological limitations in the human capacity to make foreign cultures intelligible without knowing the other's language. Both parties would have lacked the ability ... to detect and automatically interpret nuances in the behaviour and speech of others.*



*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.*

## The Covenant Chain:

- Among the European nations establishing settlements and colonies along the eastern coastline of North America, the Dutch founded the colony of New Netherlands, with its capital at New Amsterdam, in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The colony was located around the Hudson River, which connected it – through the Mohawk River and Fort Orange – to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.
- The Haudenosaunee Confederacy (a.k.a. The Six Nations or Iroquois Confederacy<sup>1</sup>) considers itself the world's oldest functioning democracy. The founding nations of the confederacy are the Seneca<sup>2</sup>, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk.

<sup>1</sup> This identifier is no longer used.

<sup>2</sup> There were Seneca communities in Flamborough.

The Tuscarora Nation joined in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and other nations have also been admitted.

- 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 17<sup>th</sup> century (around 1613) called **The Covenant Chain**.
  - Treaties are created using Indigenous diplomatic techniques including oral discussions, ceremony and wampum. Wampum are primary documents – their beads and symbols contain the teachings and agreements that are part of the Treaty 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.*

- Hear [Rick Hill explain 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. This Haudenosaunee man holds a replica of the "Friendship Wampum" which is a depiction of the Covenant Chain. ca. 2013.

- Following the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-1667) New Netherlands was transferred to the English Crown, becoming New York. The Covenant Chain was taken up by King Charles II, beginning a relationship with the English/British Crown<sup>3</sup> that continues to this day. While the Dutch characterized the Covenant Chain as an “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 of Indian Affairs) and Mohawk Clan Mother Molly Brant held a Great Council at Fort Niagara with the Indigenous Nations of the Great Lakes Region during the summer of 1764.
  - At this gathering a nation-to-nation relationship between settler and Indigenous Peoples north and west of Niagara was established as the Royal Proclamation of 1763 was ratified using Indigenous protocols, establishing a new relationship in what would become territory claimed by Canada. The **Treaty of Niagara (1764)**, extended what is now called the **Silver Covenant Chain of Friendship** into the Great Lakes Region.
    - The Silver Covenant Chain of Friendship extended by the Treaty of Niagara (1764) is meant to be the foundational Indigenous-Settler relationship in these lands. All subsequent Treaties were meant to align with the relationship established at Niagara.



*The 1764 Covenant Chain Wampum presented by Sir William Johnson to the assembled Indigenous dignitaries at Niagara on July 31st, 1764. It’s creation was likely guided by Molly Brant.*

- Learn more about the Treaty of Niagara (1764) by reading Dr. John Borrows’ article [\*Wampum at Niagara: The Royal Proclamation, Canadian Legal History, and Self-Government.\*](#)

<sup>3</sup> 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.