

Laws Braided into Belts

Understanding wampum belts

The Two-Row Wampum - Teyohate Kahswentha



Jock Hill and Norma Jacobs hold a clay replica of the Two-Row Wampum, which represents early agreements between the Haudenosaunee and European settlers.

Below is an excerpt from an interview with Gayogóhó:nq' (Cayuga) Sub-Chief and Faithkeeper Leroy (Jock) Hill from Six Nations of the Grand River.

Note: Aionwatha was an Onondaga man, and one of the figures from the historical moment when the Haudenosaunee Nations first became one. His name was later anglicized as Hiawatha.

The Haudenosaunee “must work to extend that branch of peace to all [we] encounter,” says Jock, according to the instructions given by the Peacemaker. As designated “Keepers of the Eastern Door,” it was the Mohawk who discovered the Europeans imposing westward along the St. Lawrence River.

The Mohawk brought this information to the Haudenosaunee council fire and “our people saw that we’ve got to sit down, and we’ve got to work out how we’re going to coexist,” says Jock. All kinds of European nations would arrive at the Eastern Door in the coming decades.

The Haudenosaunee helped early settlers by sharing medicines and teaching them how to survive in this environment which was new to them. We were simply “practicing these laws that the Creator sent to us about assisting others,” says Jock.

Eventually, “they shook hands, and they made friendship,” says Jock, gesturing to the two rows beaded into the Wampum, side-by-side. The Haudenosaunee and the Europeans co-created the Two-Row Wampum to acknowledge the sovereign rights of the other. While this Wampum was first made with Dutch settlers, it was later transferred to the British in 1664 when they took over the New Netherlands settlements.

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The two purple rows signify the path of the Dutch in a ship and the Haudenosaunee in a canoe, respectively. Each vessel contains language, culture, laws, and ways of being. Jock explains the original intention, “you keep in the ship and we’ll keep in a canoe and we’ll travel through the river of life together.”

They agreed that the two vessels would continue in parallel without ever crossing paths. “That means we won’t interfere with one another’s laws and traditions. So that’s been broken,” he points out, “but it’s still a law we’re adhering to on our side.”

The three white rows on the wampum symbolize the “principles of a good mind, of peace and friendship and mutual aid,” Jock says. “So, we have some really beautiful laws that are meaningful to this day, that we’re still doing our best to adhere to and promote, and to reconnect our people with. That’s the race that we’re in as humans, as Haudenosaunee.”

The original Two-Row Wampum was “meant to last as long as the rivers flow, as long as the grass grows green, and as long as the sun is in motion.” In this new era of decolonialization and Indigenous resurgence, it’s becoming possible for both sides to return to the boats of their respective ancestors.