

Seneca Survival: Handsome Lake, the Longhouse Religion, and Haudenosaunee Revitalization in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

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Abstract

In 1799, Seneca member Handsome Lake found himself on the brink of death, facing the consequences of alcohol abuse and land loss. This affected Handsome Lake's mental state more than ever before, leading to his abuse of alcohol and eventually a severe bout of wasting disease, which caused him to be bedridden. Being bedridden allowed him to reflect on his life and meditate. He came dangerously close to death when four messengers came bearing the Gaiwiio, the product of the Great Spirit. Handsome Lake made a near instant recovery and preached what the messengers provided to him. The teachings contributed to the revitalization of cultural identity, repairing the damaged Haudenosaunee society. Following his visions from the Great Spirit, Handsome Lake established the Longhouse Religion, also known as the Gaiwiio. Handsome Lake used the Gaiwiio to bring together the people of the Haudenosaunee by promoting temperance from alcohol, preservation of land, spiritual renewal, and family and communal values. These ideas contributed to the cultural identity of the league and helped those affected by alcoholism and abuse within Haudenosaunee society. Handsome Lake focused on the community, which allowed for the Haudenosaunee to come together and reestablish their collective identity, which he wanted to preserve. He renounced the rites and rituals of Haudenosaunee culture that focused on the individual rather than the community, including the War Dance, in which warriors boasted of their own abilities in combat. Though certain aspects of his teachings, namely family values, aligned with those of the Quaker missionaries in his vicinity at the time, he did not seek conversion to Christianity. Handsome Lake ultimately wanted to preserve Haudenosaunee culture and identity by revitalizing it following decades of internal and external problems. Through the Longhouse Religion, Handsome Lake revitalized Haudenosaunee spiritual, familial, and communal values, preserving their Indigenous culture and identity against the pressures of U.S. expansion and internal social and spiritual disarray.