

Great Tree of Peace: The White Pine

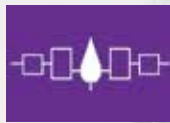
By Neil Patterson Jr., Skarure (Tuscarora)

The white pine is a national symbol to the Haudenosaunee, or “People of the Longhouse.” The tree plays a major role in the story of how five separate, warring nations, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca, became united under one law. A “Great White Pine” is mentioned several times in most versions of the story still recited in Haudenosaunee communities today:

“Thousands of years ago, the people were at war with each other. A man named the Peacemaker saw a vision of a Great White Pine reaching into the sky. Beneath the pine, the weapons of war were buried and four white roots extended in all four directions to the corners of the Earth. Those who followed the roots at the base of the Great White Pine found shelter beneath its branches. At the top, an eagle alerts the people of approaching danger.”

The eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*) is generally considered to be the “Great White Pine” in this formative story. Eastern white pine is the largest native conifer in Haudenosaunee territory, whose aboriginal range nearly mirrors that of the tree, reaching from the southern Appalachian Mountains into the upper Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Valley. White pine is also the only five-needled tree in New York State, and has been used by generations of Haudenosaunee storytellers to depict the “bundling” of five nations together under one law.

The Hiawatha Belt, which records the formation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, is a purple and white belt made from deer sinew and beads cut from the shells of quahog clams. The belt features four rectangles representing (from left to right) the Seneca, the Cayuga, the Oneida and the Mohawk, united by a line with an elongated triangle in the center representing the Great White Pine. The tree symbol also represents the Onondaga Nation, in whose territory the Confederacy was formed and where the central fire of the Confederacy government is kept.



In 1722, after being driven from North Carolina, the Tuscarora Nation followed the roots of this metaphorical tree back to the Confederacy. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is often referred to as the “Six Nations,” or “Iroquois Confederacy.”

The Great White Pine is found throughout historical and contemporary Haudenosaunee culture, and is often depicted growing on the back of a giant snapping turtle (see image at right) to portray the Creation Story of the Haudenosaunee. (See *Conservationist*, January 1976, page 3.)

I’ve often wondered what the Great White Pine tree must have looked like along the shores of Onondaga Lake more than a thousand years ago. Today, some of the largest old-growth white pines are found in portions of the Five Ponds Wilderness in the Adirondack Park. During a recent visit to this area, I was reminded of the majesty of the Great White Pine and the ancient story of peace.

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“The Iroquois Tree of Peace” by Oren Lyons, Onondaga