

## Change and Crisis: North America on the Eve of the European Invasion

by Christopher L. Miller



*Detail of the Great Lakes region in 1718, from Carte de la Louisiane et du cours du Mississippi, by Guillaume de l'Isle. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)*

It was around the year 1450. A young man was living alone in the dense forest somewhere southeast of Lake Ontario because there was not enough food in his home village. Many like him were doing the same and some, perhaps even this young man, were not above killing other men for food. As the story goes, he was butchering a fresh kill—whether man or beast is not immediately relevant—when he was confronted by a stranger. The stranger shamed him for his sad and dishonorable condition and suggested that they engage in trying to correct the problem that had created it. The young man's name was Hienwatha—sometimes spelled Ayenwatha or Hiawatha—and the stranger was called Dekanahwideh.

Before striking out on his own, Hienwatha lived among the Mohawk Nation of Iroquois Indians. Dekanahwideh was from the Wendat (sometimes called the Huron) Nation, also Iroquois but fierce rivals of the Mohawks. Dekanahwideh claimed that he did not speak for the Wendats, but was on a mission given to him by a spirit being called "Peacemaker." Peacemaker had charged Dekanahwideh with unifying all Iroquois into a great and peaceful nation.

The occasion of this meeting and the conditions that led to it were part of a far-reaching change that was taking place throughout North America. Like most of the Indians living between the Rocky Mountains and the Atlantic, the Iroquois had for generations been living peacefully in their largely self-sufficient villages on the corn that women grew and the game that men hunted. Warfare was infrequent, and famine all but unknown. But in the years just prior to Hienwatha's birth, all that had begun to unravel as a long-lasting change in the weather made corn production less dependable. To survive, the people were forced to hunt and gather more wild foods to supplement their diets. As hunters roamed more deeply into the forests looking for food, they encountered others who, like themselves, were desperate to harvest the diminishing resources. Conflicts became common. "Everywhere there was peril and everywhere mourning," says one version of the story. "Feuds with outer nations and feuds with brother nations, feuds of sister towns and feuds of families and clans made every warrior a stealthy man who liked to kill."

Following Dekanahwideh's advice, Hienwatha moved back among the Mohawks, married, and began telling the people about Peacemaker's message. Although many found his words inspiring,

some, including the Onondaga leader Tadadaho, opposed him. Tadadaho and his supporters finally attacked Hienwatha, killing his family and forcing him to flee once again into the woods.

Undaunted, Hienwatha tried to think of some way to convince his enemies to accept the idea of cooperation. His solution was to weave a belt of wampum-shell strings that showed a great chain connecting the five northern Iroquois nations—Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. Carrying his belt, Hienwatha traveled among the five nations, telling them that they could survive only if they ceased fighting among themselves. It is said that he finally won over Tadadaho with a simple demonstration: he asked the Onondaga chief to break an arrow, which he did easily; then Hienwatha tied a bundle of five arrows together which Tadadaho could not break. Thereafter, Hienwatha, Dekanahwideh, Tadadaho, and the other leaders of the Five Nations created a confederation government that Europeans later would call the League of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee).

Hienwatha's remarkable story is still celebrated by the Haudenosaunee. Yet it is far from unique. For example, Dekanahwideh's Wendat people did not join the Haudenosaunee, but formed a similar alliance to contend with the unified Haudenosaunee and the neighboring Attiwandaronk, or Neutral Confederacy. Nor were the unsettling effects brought about by climate change and other natural forces limited to the northeastern woodlands. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that widespread reorganization among all populations was going on throughout North America at this time.

In the central Mississippi Valley, for example, large, thriving urban centers had arisen since 900. The jewel in this crown was Cahokia. Situated near the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers across from what is now St. Louis, Cahokia at its height had an estimated residential population of 40,000 and controlled territory housing many, many more. At around the same time that the Haudenosaunee began to reorganize, Cahokia experienced a long string of natural and human-caused disasters. First, at the beginning of the thirteenth century the city was struck by a ferocious earthquake that did terrific damage. Then the weather change combined with the Indians' intensive farming and logging led to massive flooding, mudslides, and crop destruction. After 1400, the people in the region began to scatter, creating a "vacant quarter" stretching from the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to Cahokia then southward almost to the Arkansas and upstream for a considerable distance along the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers.

A similar fate befell the urban agricultural Anasazi and their neighbors the Mogollon in the desert Southwest; they too began to decline after 1300 and by 1425, archaeologist Bruce D. Smith concludes, "the cultural map of the Southwest resembled what was observed by the first European visitors"—a largely unoccupied desert of ruins. North and east of these monumental civilizations, climate change was affecting people of the Great Plains by reducing crop yields. But there was one positive outcome of the colder weather: bison, the last survivor of the great Ice Age megabeasts, began to expand their numbers and their range. As farming declined, hunting improved, and Algonquian- and Siouan-speakers began pushing out from the ever-colder subarctic and Great Lakes region. Here, as with Hienwatha's people, competitors began to meet, confederations grew, and fighting became a way of life.

Similar conditions affected village folk living along the coast of what would become Virginia. Here, too, the climate began to change, putting pressure on food supplies. Probably because they were

farther south than the Haudenosaunee, the situation for these people does not seem to have become critical quite so quickly. Yet by 1550, six village-based Algonkian groups formed an alliance and placed a hereditary chieftain (weroance) in charge of coordinating their mutual affairs, signifying a change in conditions. At about the same time a child was born in one of the villages, a latter-day Hienwatha. We do not know what his childhood name was, but as an adult he was called “Wahunsunacock” or sometimes “The Powhatan.”

Throughout Wahunsunacock’s life, conditions grew continuously worse. In addition to the bad weather, neighboring groups had begun to consolidate into local confederacies and brushfire conflicts were common. More troubling was the increasingly frequent appearance of odd-looking strangers who arrived in ever greater numbers along their shores. Most times these strangers seemed just to be looking around, exploring the coastline and various river inlets. Other times they seemed interested in trading often wonderful things for items that the Indians traditionally traded among themselves. Sometimes they came wrapped in metal and carrying loud, deadly sticks that could kill a man at a long distance; frequently they took away women and children never to be seen again. And what was worse, shortly after the appearances of these strangers, people in the villages became sick and a great many died.

When Wahunsunacock reached adulthood, he became the weroance of the six-village confederacy into which he had been born. He decided that, in light of worsening conditions, his political state must either expand or die. Calling upon the five to six hundred fighting men who lived in the six villages, Wahunsunacock used a combination of diplomacy, intermarriage, and brute force to pull other confederacies and isolated villages into a larger confederation. By 1607, when the mysterious strangers actually began to settle permanently in the region, the little six-village alliance had grown to nearly thirty villages and occupied some 8,000 square miles. They could field between 1,500 and 2,000 armed soldiers. As the strange newcomers quickly learned, this was a violent world in which warriors largely ruled.

The observations recorded by these newcomers have led to a long-standing impression of what traditional Indian life was like. As noted twentieth-century anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber wrote in 1934, “traditional Indian life” consisted of “warfare that was insane, unending, continuously attritional.” But what these European settlers saw was far from “traditional”; it was the product of a particular moment in time, a particular history. It was, as journalist Charles C. Mann put it, like coming upon “refugees from a Nazi concentration camp, and conclud[ing] that they belonged to a culture that had always been barefoot and starving.” The period of time for Native Americans was one of adjustment and adaptation to new conditions, not unlike what was going on simultaneously in Europe and for similar reasons. However, Europe would not experience the land-hungry mob bearing novel technologies, animals, and diseases to the native populations, turning crisis into disaster and making Kroeber’s conclusion seem reasonable even as it was totally wrong.

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