

The Two-Row Wampum Treaty

The best way to understand what people were thinking and feeling long ago is to examine the evidence. Historians begin with the obvious. For example, forensic evidence that a wampum belt is 400 years old will confirm that the belt was made 400 years ago. Historians also make inferences from the evidence. For example, if we know that a wampum belt survived 400 years, we can infer that people must have valued it enormously. The long-standing regard for the belt isn't a fact we can know for sure, but it is a well-founded conclusion based on the evidence.

The Kaswhenta wampum belt, sometimes called the Two Row wampum belt, was made to record a treaty with the Dutch, who were the first Europeans to make treaties with First Nations in North America. As **ONONDAGA CHIEF IRVING POWLESS, JR.**, tells it, in 1613 Tadaho sent out messages to the five Haudenosaunee nations to send representatives to negotiate a relationship between the Dutch and First Nations.

After they made their agreement, the Dutch said to our leaders, "We think that in the future when we meet, it would be our idea that you would refer to us as father and we will refer to you as son." Now we had a lot of men sitting there. How many men have been reprimanded by their fathers? Yeah. The father has authority, as you know. So we looked at what a family was like, and we realized that a father and son relationship would not be to our advantage. It would be better, because of our concepts, that we be equal. Brothers are equal in a family relationship.

Our leaders informed the Dutch people, "From this day forward, we will refer to each other as brothers." ... The Dutch agreed.

The Dutch recorded this historic treaty on paper. The Haudenosaunee recorded it in the Two-Row Treaty belt. **TAIAIAKE ALFRED**, member of the Kanienkahaka

First Nation and director of the Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Victoria, describes the relationship it records.

The metaphor for this relationship — two vessels, each possessing its own integrity, travelling the river of time together — was conveyed visually on a wampum belt of two parallel purple lines (representing power) on a background of white beads (representing peace). In this respectful (co-equal) friendship and alliance, any interference with the other partner's autonomy, freedom, or powers was expressly forbidden. So long as these principles were respected, the relationship would be peaceful, harmonious, and just.

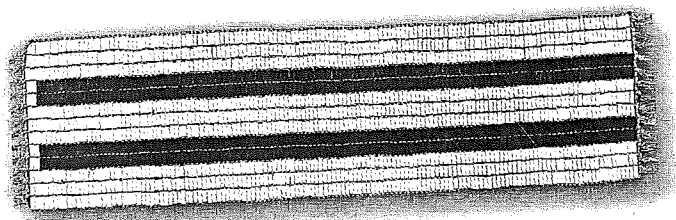


Figure 3-12 The Two Row Wampum Treaty was recorded in the symbols in this belt made from the white shells of the Atlantic whelk and the purple shells of the Quahog clam. The belt is displayed and explained regularly so that the Haudenosaunee remember.

Explorations

1. What can you infer about the Dutch or the Haudenosaunee based on the Powless quotation?
2. What can you infer from the belt, or Alfred's description of it, about the thinking of the Haudenosaunee who made the treaty and the belt?
3. Compare the benefits and drawbacks of recording a treaty on paper versus recording it on a wampum belt.
4. What can you infer about the authors of the Constitution Act, 1982, based on your knowledge that they included Aboriginal and treaty rights?