

Iroquois Native American Cultural Influences in Promoting Women's Rights Ideologies Leading Up to the First Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls on the 19th and 20th of July, 1848

Willow Michele Hagan

To what extent did Iroquois Native American culture and policies influence the establishment of the first ever women's rights convention at Seneca Falls on the 19th and 20th of July, 1848?

Abstract

In Iroquois culture women have always shared equal treatment with men. They regard women with respect and authority; women can participate in equal labor and can own their own property. With these ideals so close in proximity to Seneca Falls, to what extent did Iroquois Native American culture and policies influence the establishment of the Seneca Falls Convention and the arguments for women's rights it proposed?

To answer this question, Iroquois relationships between women's rights activists and other leaders in American society will be examined; including the spread of matrilineal thought into the minds of those who had ties to the Iroquois, predominantly with the leaders of the Seneca Falls Convention. The proposals put forth by the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* will also be addressed to look at the parallels between the thoughts promoted for women's rights and those ideologies of Iroquois culture. Newspaper articles, as well as other primary and secondary sources, will be consulted in order to interpret this relationship.

Through the exploration of the association between Iroquois culture and the Seneca Falls Convention, it can be determined that the culture of the Iroquois did have influence over the Seneca Falls Convention. With the specific relationships and commentary between those in charge of the convention and the Iroquois Nation, it can be found that ties existed between both parties. Parallels between the ideals promoted at the Seneca Falls Convention in comparison to the culture of the Iroquois are also considered, especially due to how drastic the thoughts promoted were. Considering the parallels in

thought between the Iroquois and women’s rights leaders, including their specific relations, it ultimately demonstrates the extent to which the Iroquois acted as a catalyst to the ideas provoked throughout the feminist movement in the Seneca Falls Convention and the years beyond.

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Introduction

The idea of equality, especially between that of the sexes, has always been a controversial topic, no matter the culture. While in some cultures women have been revered, in other cultures women have always suffered inequality to their male counterparts, especially between the 18th and 19th century in the United States. Yet, over this time, the idea of women's rights would expand throughout the United States as various women would pursue the promotion of equality. While no such date can be pinpointed as the beginning of the women's rights movement in the United States, it can be established that the first major stand for equal rights to men occurred in the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. This Convention brought forth a congregation of radical ideals promoting equal opportunities for men and women. Despite the fact that this convention only held about 300 people and that the ideas brought forth did not manifest themselves for many years to come, the convention did, however, act as an important catalyst to the feminist movement in the United States.

But, then if these demands had never been brought before an assembly before, where could the ideals put forth at the Seneca Falls Convention come from? How had those in charge, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, been able to envision such radical proposals of equal rights when for their entire lives they had lived so far from them? While these ideas may have seemed new and utopian to women living in the United States during the 18th century, they were not radical to the many Native American tribes

who had lived in America prior to European settlement. Among these tribes included that of the Iroquois, a confederacy of six nations established in the New York area, close in proximity to Seneca Falls. In Iroquois society, equal treatment of women had never been uncommon. In fact, women were treated as equals, and in some cases, even regarded above men. Unlike many English American women, Iroquois women were given the ability to work in the fields, hold their own property and have custody of their own children. These aspects of Iroquois culture much resemble the proposals that Elizabeth Cady Stanton demonstrated at the Seneca Falls Convention. With these ideological political policies presented by the Iroquois in such close proximity to Seneca Falls, to what extent did Iroquois Native American culture and policies influence leading women's rights activists Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in establishing the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls in July, 1848?

In answer to this question, this essay will assess the parallels between Iroquois culture and policies in regards to what the Seneca Falls Convention promoted. It will assess the immediate influence that individual Iroquois people had in guiding the thought behind putting forth such seemingly radical proposals for that time at the convention.

Iroquois Culture, Politics and Influence leading up to the 1800's

After years of tribal warfare and dispute, the Iroquois nation developed as a form of a confederacy among six Native American tribes. Together this included the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, and last to join, the Tuscaroras in 1723 (Grinde and Johanson 22). Through this confederacy a complex form of checks and balances was created to outline their government, which would allow for balance between nations, families and people, including balance between the sexes. Balance held a crucial role in not only the spiritual but also in the political life of the Iroquois. They believed that unity, peace and brotherhood should be maintained with the natural rights of all people (Grinde and Johanson 31). This went with the belief that men and women both had responsibilities that needed to be carried out in order to keep life in balance. Following these goals, it was required that everyone in the nation had a voice, so that all people, men and women, had a role in decision-making through consensus in public

councils (Wagner 85). The idea of balance creates a simplistic reality to the culture of the Iroquois where all have equal opportunities; an idea much different and utopian for American women at this time who did not receive equal treatment. This brings forth a congregate of ideas of Iroquois culture where life, in general, held no social prejudices or boundaries. Since all people had the same opportunity in every aspect of life in Iroquois culture, none could suffer exclusion of or prejudice. In this world, women could thrive as equals to their male counterparts.

Balance of the sexes held crucial importance above all else in Iroquois culture, especially considering their honorable equal treatment of women. In Iroquois society women had predominance in daily life. According to Barbara Graymont, author of *The Iroquois*, women had equal opportunities in the education of dreams, story telling, and the supernatural world. Women had the respect of governing in councils, they could hold their own property and, most importantly, they were given a pivotal role in the labor force (41). In Iroquois culture, the role of tilling the fields and planting the crops existed as the role of the women. This held a position of key importance in women's roles, giving them a powerful place in society, due to the fact that the Iroquois Nation centered itself on agriculture (45). Rather than the use of authority and accumulation to govern a society, as can be seen in American culture, the Iroquois focused on common rituals, togetherness and the rearing of children (Grinde and Johansen 27). Young people were trained to enter into a society that exemplified egalitarian views, where power could be evenly distributed between male and female youth (Grinde and Johansen 28). With such views of equal rights instilled in Iroquois people since youth, it made it possible for an egalitarian culture to continue to thrive through generations. Much like the idea of balance, these common rituals allowed for explicit togetherness to occur between the people, ultimately conveying the idea of equality and opportunity.

Even through the spread of patriarchal views in America, the Iroquois Nation still maintained their egalitarian identity. They held strong to their method of society, still emphasizing the use of a democratic Confederacy to maintain equal balance among the citizens (Allen 48). This form of government in a democratic Confederacy also held great influence among the first European colonists to settle in the Iroquois area. In history, the Iroquois spent a lot of time with colonial settlers. Through this, many of their ideas of

political structure were able to originally influence the minds of these colonists. Much of this was due to their pivotal position in diplomacy seen through the Confederacy, wherein colonial ideals for democracy and freedom could begin to derive and expand (Grinde and Johansen 20). With such an impactful history in influencing the minds of America, this put the Iroquois already in a position of influence. They would continue to take part in the surrounding cultures for many years to come; essentially providing a basis to which others, such as the Seneca Falls advocates, could maintain and build from.

This idea can be seen throughout historical contexts. In the *Exemplar of Liberty* by Grinde and Johansen, the Iroquois would teach, and in some cases even adopt, American people in the surrounding areas into their society sharing their ways and beliefs. Most predominantly was the idea of dual citizenship, where people throughout time, including even influential figures in the English colonies, were adopted as second members of Iroquois society (Grinde and Johansen 23). This practice did not solely extend to the first arrivals of the English colonists, but also was initiated into the next century. Not only were the American people living around New York in the early 1800's geographically close, but many were very close to direct familiarity with the Iroquois people. The Iroquois continued their practice of dual citizenship well into the 17th century; many individuals of other nations, and many English residents of New York held adoptions, some even carrying adoptive Iroquois names (Wagner 32). This creates a great connection between both cultures and values in that area. Many Americans had close views to those of the Iroquois through their upbringings and adoptions. Their distinctive culture would have been recognized through the people in the surrounding area due to the connection and familiarities that the surrounding people had. Considering this culture and the Iroquois' unique perception of women's rights and their egalitarian views, it is not surprising that among those who had personal connection to the Iroquois Nation were Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda Gage and Lucretia Mott.

Iroquois Specific Relationships and Connections to Women Activists

Even in a world where English American men had begun to dominate, the Iroquois nation still managed to maintain an egalitarian system throughout the 1800's. Through the spread of reservations and of colonial ideals, the idea of balance, respect and motherhood still held prominence among the Iroquois people (Graymont 111). Not only did their views on society remain strong and bold within their own nation, but they also remained prominent enough for the ideals to begin spreading into the surrounding English American areas, such as that of Seneca Falls. As mentioned above, specific relationships and interactions can be seen between the Iroquois Natives and the non-Natives. This includes, importantly, relationships between many women who were involved in promoting women's rights (Wagner 36). Many women's rights promoters have had specific relationships with Iroquois people. These women include Lucretia Mott, Matilda Joslyn Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, all of whom played a leading force in the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.

Through analysis of primary sources, specific relationships can be found detailing each activist's personal experience with the Iroquois. According to Mary Beauchamp, a journalist for the *Skaneateles Democrat*, Lucretia Mott had encounters with the Iroquois in 1848, prior to the Convention. Lucretia Mott, in her interview, is described to have witnessed women exercising equal authority in decision-making as the Iroquois made changes to their governmental structure. This encounter is quoted as "Providing for a first-hand experience into women's political, spiritual, social, and economic authority" (Beauchamp 1). Even more specifically, Matilda Joslyn Gage not only visited the Iroquois but also gained dual citizenship with the Wolf Clan of the Mohawk Nation, part of the Iroquois Confederacy. In describing her experience in her book *Women, Church and State*, she writes "I received the name of Ka-ron-ien-ha-wi, or 'Sky Carrier,' or *She who holds the sky*. It is a clan name of the wolves" (Gage 1). The last of the main activists of the Seneca Falls Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, also had specific ties to the Iroquois. In the *Seneca Falls Historical Society Papers* it can be found that Stanton grew up in Seneca county, very close in proximity to the Iroquois nation. Both her cousin, Peter Skenandoah Smith, and her nearest Seneca Falls neighbor, Oren Tyler, were adopted into Iroquois clans (1). As she told the *Marcellus Observer* in an interview, she would, throughout her childhood, have other encounters with the Iroquois people (1).

Due to this fact, Iroquois culture was always near to her and the ideals always presented before her. Throughout her work for women's rights, Stanton continually references in books and interviews Iroquois culture and their prominent views of women, including that of motherhood, marriage and punishment of rape (Wagner 42). Thus, the connection established between these activists to the nearby culture of the Iroquois, allows for a parallel to be seen through both prominent views.

Despite the prominence of Iroquois culture on all three of these activists' lives, Matilda Gage seemed to display an effervescent passion for the Iroquois, devoting much of her time to writing about their culture, relations and advocating for Native rights. Her interest in the Iroquois paralleled that of the fire she held for the rights of women. She drew comparisons between the oppression of women and that of the Native Americans (Wagner 93). Through her studies she saw the cultural hearth with which the Iroquois were centered, regarding their ideals of balance and looking fondly over their respect of women (Wagner 28). Gage wrote extensively about the Iroquois. In 1875, as president of the National Woman Suffrage Association, she wrote a series of newspaper articles on them. Over the course of twenty years, Gage was able to introduce readers to Iroquois culture through her articles in the newspaper that she edited called *The National Citizen and Ballot Box* in 1878-1881 and through her magnum opus *Women, Church and State* in 1893. She took great interest in explaining their form of government, terming it that of a "matriarchate" or as a system of "mother-rule" (Wagner 31). In *Women, Church and State* she describes "The famous Iroquois Indians, or Six Nations, which at the discovery of America held sway from the Great Lakes to the Tombigbe river, from the Hudson to the Ohio... showed alike in form of government, and in social life, reminiscences of the Matriarchate" (Gage 41). With such an immense passion to the lives of the Iroquois, it shows the extent to which she learned from them. Significantly, she found parallels between her own struggles of being a woman to that of Native struggles, pushing her passion for both forms of human rights and her goals.

Beside the writings of Matilda Gage, many other women writers expanded from the culture and customs of the Iroquois. The culture of the Iroquois was able to develop not only in the minds of these major activists, but, was able to flourish throughout the community. Numerous women studied and wrote about them, usually with a depth of

understanding which would have been recognized into this century had they been men (Wagner 34). It was with this that these women also recognized the differences in culture in regards to the treatment of women. Beauchamp, a reporter already quoted, wrote “I believe I have mentioned the fact that women are treated with great respect among the Onondagas [an Iroquois nation], and in fact are usually supposed to rule. When I came to teaching my little folks to read catechism, I found that in my Fifth Commandment, they invariably put the mother before the father, even after repeated readings and corrections” (Beauchamp 1). Here she even comments on religion, and how in Christianizing the Natives they would still put the woman before the man. This exemplifies how even in the assimilation and spread of English American ideals, the Iroquois still continued to strongly hold onto their beliefs of equality, regardless of English American influence. Not only is this significant to Iroquois culture, but it shows the impact and strength of their culture, allowing for its importance to permeate into the minds of those they influenced.

With the respect and study from so many women, the Iroquois did not go unrecognized by the women population. Their culture tied with specific relationships to activists held great prominence in influencing the minds of major activists, especially in regards to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the overall leader of the Seneca Falls Convention. As the author of the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* (a document presented at the Seneca Falls Convention as to the rights that women should have) Elizabeth Cady Stanton put forth many radical proposals. Much of what she argued for can be seen exactly in the customs already in practice for the Iroquois for centuries. Stanton looked at other cultures to support her theory that men and women are born equal and thus should be treated equal (Banner 73). Of other importance Stanton commented on their connections to child custody. She quoted to Gage, contrasting how in American society “A mother has no legal right or authority over her children; she is only entitled to respect and honor” while in Iroquois society “If for any cause the Iroquois husband and wife separated, the wife took with her all the property she had brought into the wigwam; the children also accompanied the mother, whose right to them was recognized as supreme” (Gage, “The Mother of His Children” 13). Yet, there were more customs that Stanton drew from. She realized the differences between the cultures and saw the differences in how they treated divorce and marital abuse (Wagner 67). Keeping all of this in mind, it

seems logical that much of what she learned in the culture of the Iroquois would be found parallel in many of her proposals she argued for at the Seneca Falls Convention.

Seneca Falls Convention, 1848 and Iroquois Cultural Ties

The Seneca Falls Convention, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton with Matilda Gage and Lucretia Mott, took place in 1848 in the small Wesleyan Chapel in July. Among the proposals demonstrated at the Convention were the right to property, fair divorce and most radically the right to vote. Other emphasized ideas promoted were changes in thinking, including for women to go to college, keep their own wages, pursue challenging careers, exercise free speech, and have equality before the law (Banner 40). Many of these ideas had already been displayed in the culture of the Iroquois, to which all three women held social ties. In the Iroquois nation, close in proximity to Seneca Falls in New York, these demonstrations acted as the equivalent to their already existent culture. As previously mentioned, these women all put considerable thought into the culture of the Iroquois, like Gage in her writing *The Mother of His Children* where she references these same thoughts put forth at the Convention to the Iroquois (3). These ideas, while radical for the watchers of the Seneca Falls Convention, can likely be considered impacted by the culture seen of the Iroquois. The idea of equal labor in the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* is much like the idea of Iroquois women holding authority in agricultural labor. Iroquois women also had the right to divorce and, in coherence with the idea of balance, all members, male and female, of Iroquois society had the right to free speech. When compared to the proposals mandated in *The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments*, there are many parallels between the ideals of Iroquois culture to the proposals this document states.

This document was meant to catalyze change in the movement for women rights. *The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* had great significance to the watchers of the Seneca Falls Convention. While drastic and influential in its proposals, *The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* served as the first document presented by a woman, and therefore had an important impact. Still, a lot of what was presented in *The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* compares to what can be learned through Iroquois culture. For

example, the document states “That all laws which prevent woman from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate, or which place her in a position inferior to that of man, are contrary to the great precept of nature, and therefore of no force or authority.” This statement is much similar to Iroquois culture where women are able to hold authority in society and are considered of equal respect in council to men (Wagner 28). Other details presented in *The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* propose that “men and women are equal,” that woman should be able to “be taught, learn, speak and be free” and that women ought to “exercise free labor as considered equal to men” (1). These proposals also show great similarity to Iroquois culture and, thus, show significance in regards to Iroquois influence. Other proposals such as this were made throughout the convention that relate to Iroquois culture.

Altogether, the Seneca Falls Convention was a major stand for women rights. There were 300 people in all, 40 of which male, who attended the Convention. During the Convention, it broadened and redirected women’s political action, it used familiar language to articulate new political goals and it gave notice that women status would not remain the same (Banner 42). Altogether, 100 people signed the Seneca Falls Declaration, allowing for the first ever signified step toward women’s rights. While much criticism followed the Seneca Falls Convention, it still had a huge success in promoting what it had set out to do. Following the event, more conventions began to spring up around the country, as others, such as Susan B. Anthony, were inspired to act for women’s rights (Banner 45). Women and men began to realize the main argument at Seneca Falls, that all men and women are created equal, a reality displayed decades prior to the convention through the culture of the Iroquois. In this way, the Iroquois had the ability to provide significant guidance to the women’s rights movement. Through the Seneca Falls Convention, parts of the Iroquois culture could be demonstrated and they were able to act as a catalyst toward a changing dynamic in the feminist movement.

Conclusion

The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 served its purpose as the first ever convention to put forth a declaration that women should be treated equally to men. From

that point onward, the women's rights movement quickened as women began to take lead in standing up for their natural rights. Yet, in Iroquois culture women had always been treated fairly and had a prominent role in daily life, even without the changing dynamic in the American women's rights movement. Not only did they already express a utopian society for those women who sought equality, but the Iroquois also shared these women's views. They spent a lot of time with American women and men in the surrounding area, teaching their culture and accepting them into their lives. With such a shared connection between the Iroquois Nation and the people in Seneca Falls County and surrounding New York areas, it seems highly explainable that their cultural ideals of balance, egalitarian life and women prominence would spread and even influence the thoughts and minds of those seeking gender equality.

The Iroquois Nation, even in the 1800's, did not establish any boundaries in its idyllic model of dual-citizenship. This custom is of primary importance because of how welcoming the Iroquois were in allowing others to expand and learn from their cultural views, especially in regards to their acceptance of all three women's rights activists, Lucretia Mott, Matilda Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Through each individual woman's specific connection to the Iroquois, it allowed for direct exposure to a society where balance and equality could work. They were able to examine the flow of a society in which both men and women could work together to make up a whole. These women could view how, despite their own oppression in society, women could live in high social standards and could thrive in a life where they served a primary role. It was because of this proximity to the first women's rights convention and the makers of the convention that the Iroquois had so much influence, even when their role cannot be directly pinpointed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote *The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* with a clear intention that all she put into it could be achieved, that women could have equality in a functioning society. With such parallels between the Iroquois' culture and her goals in the Declaration of Sentiments, it shows how what she expressed was correct. She knew for a fact that what she stated could be achieved, because she had already seen it in the lives of Iroquois women. Through their influence on the minds of these women, it shows that the Iroquois had an impactful position in working as a catalyst to further the women's rights movement in America.

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