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## POLISHING THE SILVER COVENANT CHAIN: A Brief History of Some of the Symbols and Metaphors in Haudenosaunee Treaty Negotiations

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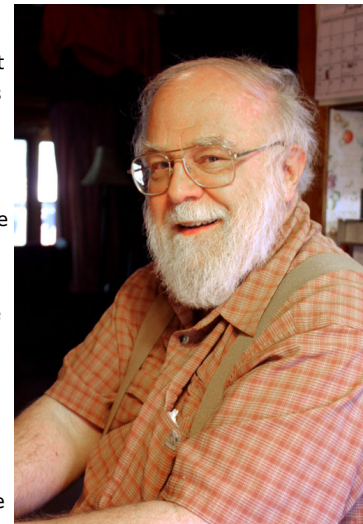
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### INTRODUCTION. PART 1

**"Chain"** is the key word in the phrase "Silver Covenant Chain" or "Covenant Chain." "Chain" is an English translation of root words in Iroquoian languages for "arms linked together," such as the Onondaga "dehudadnetsháus" meaning "they link arms" and Cayuga "teHonane:to:sho:t" meaning "they have joined hands/arms." The New York English colonial official Cadwallader Colden noted in 1747 that "The Indians always express a League by a Chain by which two or more things are kept fast together." Thus even when the term "chain" does not appear in the records, it is implied, at least from the Haudenosaunee point of view, in the English term "treaty." In some ways, the Haudenosaunee concept of "chain" is similar to the European concept of an interdependent world defined as "the Great Chain of Being." "The Great Chain of Being," however, is not a perfect analogy to Haudenosaunee concepts because the European "chain" stressed both the interdependence of links within the world *and* a hierarchy -- and the concept of hierarchy being in direct contrast to the dominant Haudenosaunee principle of "balance."



**"Covenant"** is an English legal term and means "a formal agreement, convention, or promise of legal validity" used in the English language from 1066 A.D. onwards.

**"Silver."** The term "silver" denoted a qualitative enhancement of the bonds of friendship and alliance from its beginnings as a fiber rope -- or possibly a rope of wampum, as suggested by the 1613 treaty -- to one of iron, and finally to one of silver. The rope may refer symbolically to an alliance with the Dutch as early as 1613. The iron chain refers symbolically to an alliance between the Dutch and the Mohawks in 1643. The English renewed the "iron chain" -- and perhaps even a silver chain -- in 1665, the year after the English took over the colony of New Netherlands in 1664 and renamed the colony "New York." This exact date was affirmed in 1775 by the Albany Committee of Safety during a council with the Haudenosaunee:

Brothers: This covenant, afterwards improved upon, was confirmed between you and us in the year 1665, one year after this Country went over [from the Dutch] to the Crown of England. Since this you have, from time to time, admitted into your chain the Tuscaroras, and most, if not all, the Twelve United Colonies.

The first surviving record of the Silver Covenant Chain occurs in 1677. Interestingly, the imagery associated with the iron chain survived in describing efforts to keep the chain viable: not only was the Covenant Chain frequently "polished," a reference to improving the links of the silver chain, the chain could also be described as rusted -- not tarnished as silver would be. Polishing the chain and removing its rust were interchangeable images until the 1820s.

The Silver Covenant Chain was often referred to simply as the Covenant Chain or the Chain of Friendship." One

purpose of the Covenant Chain, noted in 1763, was to enable all negotiators to be "of one Mind, linked together in the Chain of Friendship." But in order to maintain peace, the Haudenosaunee and the Europeans also understood that the chain was also based on mutual economic benefits and mutual support in times of crisis.

**Wampum Belts and the Covenant Chain.** Not all records of the Covenant Chain exist in documents. An example is **The Tadadaho Wampum Belt**. An image of the Covenant Chain is woven down the middle of the Tadadaho Wampum Belt, one of the wampum belts held by the Onondaga Nation on behalf of the Haudenosaunee. The exact age of the wampum beads that make up the Tadadaho Belt, like the age of the wampum tubular beads woven into the belts, is not known. But the symbolism on the belt undoubtedly dates back to the founding of the Confederacy, perhaps as early as 1142 -- and in any case long before European contact. If the Tadadaho Belt is draped across an arm, the links of the Covenant Chain run vertically up triangular patterns of wampum beads, triangular patterns that take on the appearance of pine boughs. If the Tadadaho Belt is held horizontally, however, the links of the Covenant Chain run across two sets of triangular patterns, one on each half of the entire belt, that "point" towards the converge at the center of the two sets of triangular patterns. It is very probable that the symbols on the Tadadaho Belt were originally created to represent the convergence of the five original member nations of the Confederacy at Onondaga, the center of the Confederacy, at the time the league was formed. The Covenant Chain that unites them depends upon economic cooperation (including the "one bowl" of The Woods); mutual military support; and the continual maintenance of peace. The five different Haudenosaunee nations and their various clans, may be represented by the triangular patterns, perhaps representing the protection of the Great Law, symbolized by pine boughs stretching along the geographic east-west axis of the Haudenosaunee, all of which converge in the center to form the Confederacy at Onondaga. Later, when other Indian nations were invited to ally themselves with the Confederacy, or were actually adopted by the Confederacy, the same symbolism would have been appropriate: the pine boughs of diverse Indian peoples, linked by the chain of friendship, converge at the Confederacy's center, Onondaga. After contact with the Europeans, these same symbols would then have been extended to represent mutual agreements with colonists including the trade relationships negotiated between the Haudenosaunee and the English. Overall, the belt represents the Haudenosaunee concept that different, separate societies -- converging pine boughs -- can work together through the links of a "Covenant Chain" while still maintaining their identities. When the Covenant Chain is applied to the English, one interpretation could be that the two sets of triangular patterns, each of which "points" towards the middle of the belt, symbolize the convergence of two "trees" -- the two separate societies of the Haudenosaunee and the English -- for the purpose of trade and military alliance. These goals, mutually agreed to, did indeed link the two separate societies through the "Covenant Chain." As the spokesmen for both peoples so often stated in their negotiations, both the Haudenosaunee and the British tried to keep this Covenant Chain "polished." Such adaptive utilization of traditional Haudenosaunee metaphors -- the boughs, the tree, and the chain of friendship -- would not be inconsistent with earlier uses of these traditional Haudenosaunee metaphors.

**Another example is The George Washington Covenant Belt** commemorating the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua. The design of the belt, with human figures linking arms, clearly reflects the root word for "chain" -- "arms linked together," such as the Onondaga "dehudadnetsháus" meaning "they link arms."

**"Covenant" wampum belts did not necessarily have to include the symbol of a "chain."** The **Guswenta or Two Row**, for example, places the emphasis on two separate societies cooperating and sharing their resources to sustain peace and trade -- the Covenant Chain. The Guswenta (Two Row) is regarded by both the Haudenosaunee and the whites as a legal covenant, a binding agreement. The Guswenta is also a dramatic illustration of how the Haudenosaunee and the non-Indian people can negotiate to share the same time and space but will never interfere with one another

**The Problem of Omission.** The Dutch and the English were so used to hearing and observing the diplomatic protocol of the Haudenosaunee that they frequently omitted any mention of these when they submitted their official records. Although the protocol of councils such as The Edge of the Woods, the Opening Address, general greetings, and analogies to peaceful co-existence such as the Covenant Chain were undoubtedly a part of these councils, the records make no mention of them. Thus, for example, there are three lengthy reports by Dutch and English negotiators who went to Onondaga in March and April, 1699, after King William's War (1689-1697). But all three reports omit mention of any of protocol, except for the presentations of wampum belts. All three reports focus on issues such as disagreements over possible prisoner exchanges with French Canada, relations with the French, land grants, and future meetings. Yet the response of the Haudenosaunee to this council, expressed in a message to the Earl of Bellomont, the governor of New York, clearly notes that the Covenant Chain was mentioned by the white negotiators at the council (this answer appears below, at "1699, May 9").

The Problem of Translation into English. There may have actually been more references to the Covenant Chain

by Haudenosaunee speakers because no Haudenosaunee language records of treaty councils survive, and English language records of treaty councils are translations from one of Haudenosaunee languages into English. Also, given the fact that the Haudenosaunee referred to the Covenant Chain by using words whose root, as noted above, translates "arms linked together" and *not* "chain," it cannot be known how many times Haudenosaunee speakers actually referred to a Haudenosaunee form of the concept of a cooperative, mutual pact. For example, when an English translation reads "alliance," it is possible that the original Haudenosaunee phrase was "arms linked together," a reference to the Covenant Chain, but an interpreter chose not to use the specific phrase "Covenant Chain." An example of just such a possibility is discussed below, at the date April 19, 1710, when four Haudenosaunee diplomats visited London and addressed Queen Anne.

**This paper discusses prime examples that specifically use the term "the Covenant Chain," "the Silver Covenant Chain," and "the Chain of Friendship" as they were used during negotiations carried out between the Haudenosaunee on the one hand and, on the other hand, the Dutch, the French, the English, and the United States.**

**Between 1613 and 1842, more than four hundred negotiations** were carried out by the Haudenosaunee with the Dutch, the French, the English, and the United States. Because the concept of a chain was -- and in the present-day remains -- one of the central symbols or metaphors of a treaty, these negotiations involved, at least from a Haudenosaunee point of view, the concept of the chain: "dehudadnetsháus" -- "they link arms." Because there are thousands of pages of correspondence and treaty texts related to these negotiations in scholarly libraries on both sides of the Atlantic, it would take years to identify each and every specific mention of the term Covenant Chain. A selective collection of correspondence related to these negotiations and the texts of the actual negotiations fill forty-nine reels of microfilm. The catalogue listing these fills 409 pages. And this collection is hardly a complete record.

In addition, 163 wampum belts associated with these negotiations have been identified and photographed.

Negotiations between the Haudenosaunee and other First Nations often took place with no white present, and thus no written records were kept. This is a major gap in the historical record, and this gap will remain until oral histories have been added to this vast array of material (for example, in addition to oral histories kept by Indian nations, oral histories recorded during the Great Depression in both Canada and the United States will require extensive study).

The Haudenosaunee concept of the covenant chain evolved from Haudenosaunee concepts long before European contacts with the Dutch, the French, and the English.

Unfortunately, no record of a covenant chain speech survives in any Haudenosaunee language. Because the Haudenosaunee relied on oral tradition, their wampum belts are their "written records" until some Haudenosaunee began to learn a European language.

#### **EXAMPLES OF THE USE OF THE TERM "COVENANT CHAIN"**

**1613, April 21. The "Rope" bonding the Dutch to the Haudenosaunee.** The Treaty of Tawagonshi [exact location unknown] between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch. This may be the event later referred in speeches as the first step towards the Silver Covenant Chain -- using a "rope" to attach the Dutch to the Haudenosaunee (see, for example, the speech of May 5, 1694, by Sadakanahtie (Onondaga), below).

Two English translations includes: "we exchange a silver chain for a fathom of beadwork" and "we exchange with each other a silver chain in return for a special piece of rope from a sea vessel [sea shell; wampum]."

In any case, this is the "Rope" bonding the Dutch to the Haudenosaunee at Tawagonshi.

**1643-1645. The Iron Chain is established.** Treaty between the Dutch and the Haudenosaunee that establishes the "iron chain" -- the second step, after the rope, in the three-step evolution of the Silver Covenant Chain.

**1665. The Covenant Chain made with the Dutch is reaffirmed by the English.** The English renewed the "iron chain" -- and perhaps even a silver chain -- in 1665, the year after the English took over the colony of New Netherlands in 1664 and renamed the colony "New York." This exact date was affirmed in 1775 by the Albany Committee of Safety during a council with the Haudenosaunee:

Brothers: This covenant, afterwards improved upon, was confirmed between you and us in the year 1665, one year after this Country went over [from the Dutch] to the Crown of England. Since this you have, from time to time, admitted into your chain the Tuscaroras, and most, if not all, the Twelve United Colonies.

1677, July 21: First mention of the Silver Covenant Chain. Speech of Carachkondie (Onondaga) to Colonel Henry Courcy, Governor of Maryland, meeting at Albany, New York

[Text below is in modernized spelling; the original text follows]

We shall not Injure or do any damage to the people of Maryland or Virginia, and do thank the Gentelman that yet they do exhort us to the peace for we are so minded ....We desire now that all which is past may be buried into oblivion and do make now an absolute Covenant of peace which we shall bind with a chain for the Sealing of the same do give one band of thirteen deep [a wampum belt thirteen rows wide].

Wee shall not Injur or doe any damage to ye peopell of MaryLand or Virginia, and doe Thank ye Gentleman thar yt they doe exhort us to ye peace for we are so mynded.... wee desire now yt all wch is past may be burried in oblivon and doe make now ane absolut Covenant of peace wch we shall bind wth a chayn for the Sealing of ye Same doe give ane band of Thirteen deep.

**1689, September: Example of a renewal of the Covenant Chain. Tahajadoris (Mohawk) to the representatives of Massachusetts Bay, New Plymouth, and Connecticut, at Albany.**

We thank you for renewing the Covenant-chain. It is now no longer of Iron and subject to Ruse, as formerly, but of pure Silver, and includes in it all the King's Subjects, from the Senekas Country eastward, as far as any of the great King's Subjects live, and southward, from New-England to Virginia....

The Covenant-chain between us is ancient (as you tell us) and of long standing, and it has been kept inviolably by us....

We make fast the Roots of the Tree of Peace and Tranquility, which is planted at this place.

1690, February 25. Example of the Covenant Chain as a component of a condolence ceremony. A Mohawk delegation speaking to with the mayor of Albany and other officials, at Albany, after the French had destroyed the Dutch/English settlement of Schenectady.

Brethren, be not discouraged, we are strong enough. This is the Beginning of your War, and the whole House [Haudenosaunee longhouse] have their Eyes fixed upon you at this Time, to observe your Behavior. They wait your Motion, and are ready to join in any resolute Measures.

Our Chain is a strong chain, it is a Silver Chain, it can neither rust nor be broken. We, as to our Parts, are resolute to continue the War.

1691, June 2. Recollection of the first Dutch ship and probably the 1613 Treaty of Tawagonshi [exact location unknown] commemorated by Two Row Wampum.

Answer of the Oneydas, Onnondagas, Cayouga & Sennekas by their Sachems to His Excellr Col. [and governor] Henry Slaughters Speech....

We have been informed by our Forefathers, that in former times a Ship arrived here in this Country, wch was [a] matter of Great Admiration to us, especially our desire was to know what should be within her Belly. In that Ship were Christians & amongst the rest One Jaques [probably Jacob Eelckens who signed the 1613 Treaty of Tawagonshi along with his colleague Hendrick Christiaenssen] with whom we made a Covenant of Friendship, which Covenant hath since been tyed together with a Chain, & always been kept inviolable both by the Bretheren & us, in which Covenant it was agreed, that whosoever should hurt or prejudice the One, should be guilty of injuring the Other, all of us being comprehended in One Common League.

(in testimony here of they gave a Bever Skin)

You have made a Covenant with us wherein they of Boston & Virginia are included.

Peter Wraxall, *An Abridgment of the Indian Affairs Contained in Four Folio Volumes, Transacted in the Colony of New York, from the year 1678 to the Year 1751*, Charles Howard McIlwain, ed. (1754; reprint of the 1915 edition; New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1968), 16)

1694, May 5. First known detailed description of the symbols of the Covenant Chain. Curiously, this only includes an "iron chain" and does not include a "silver chain." Speech by Sadakanahtie (Onondaga) to New York Governor Benjamin Fletcher, at Albany.

This speech is also important because the speaker, Sadakanahtie, reviewed the relationships of the Covenant Chain to other Haudenosaunee symbols, summarized as follows:

1. a rope of bark fibers, representing an initial, relatively weak alliance for trade and mutual support, which the

Haudenosaunee chose to replace because it was too weak

2. an iron chain, a synthesis of Indian and European elements that captured the idea of interdependent trade and evoked the imagery of linked arms often used by the Haudenosaunee as well as iron and other goods brought by the Europeans.

3. the pine tree of peace, symbolic of the Haudenosaunee concept of legal order as established by the Confederacy's founders

4. wampum, shell beads in strings or woven in great belts and used to convey the seriousness of business at hand or to commemorate a solemn pledge.

The English translation of Sadakanahtie's 1694 speech:

When the Christians first arrived in this Country, we received them kindly. When they were but a small People, we entered into a League with them, to guard them from all Enemies whatsoever. We were so fond of their Society, that we tied the great Canoe which brought them, not with a Rope made of Bark to a Tree, but with a strong iron Chain fastened to a great Mountain. Now before the Christians arrived, the General Council of the Five Nations was held at Onondaga, where there has, from the Beginning, a continual Fire been kept burning; it is made of two great Logs, whose Fire never extinguishes. As soon as the Hatchet-makers (their general Name for Christians) arrived, this General Council at Onondaga planted this [pine] Tree [of peace] at Albany, whose Roots and Branches have since spread as far as New-England, Connecticut, Pensilvania [sic], Maryland and Virginia; and under the Shade of this Tree all these English Colonies have frequently been sheltered.

Then (giving seven Fathom of Wampum) he renewed the Chain, and promised, as they likewise expected, mutual Assistance, in Case of any Attack from any Enemy.

**1699, May 9.** "The answer of the five nations of Indians to Captn John [Johannes] Schuyler and Captn John [Johannes] Bleeker, Messengers sent by His Excellcy the Earle of Bellomont in Onondaga the ninth of may 1699." This clearly demonstrates how one governor believed the Covenant Chain meant that he could dictate policies to the Haudenosaunee, while the Haudenosaunee thought otherwise. Although the war between England and France known as King William's War, 1689 to 1697, had come to an end in Europe, raids on the frontier by both sides continued. The governor forbade a prisoner exchange until peace was assured, while the Haudenosaunee were indignant that a prisoner exchange would be delayed. The Haudenosaunee message included the following:

We desire that Corlaer [the Haudenosaunee term for any governor of New York] may overset that kettle of war, for we sustain great damage daily by the farr Indians, which is all done by the instigation of the French, nay the French threaten sorely that they will not putt up the sword, till we come to Canada and bring the French prisoners with us, and fetch our own from thence, and if we goe, then you

[Continue to Part 2](#)

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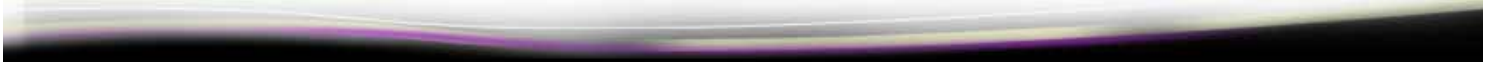
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