



THE LAND BENEATH US ◆

What Is a Treaty?

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 1

aiwrangler.ca — an illustrated companion

Every date, term, and quotation in this series is drawn from the historical record. This companion is the full episode narration, illustrated.



From the episode

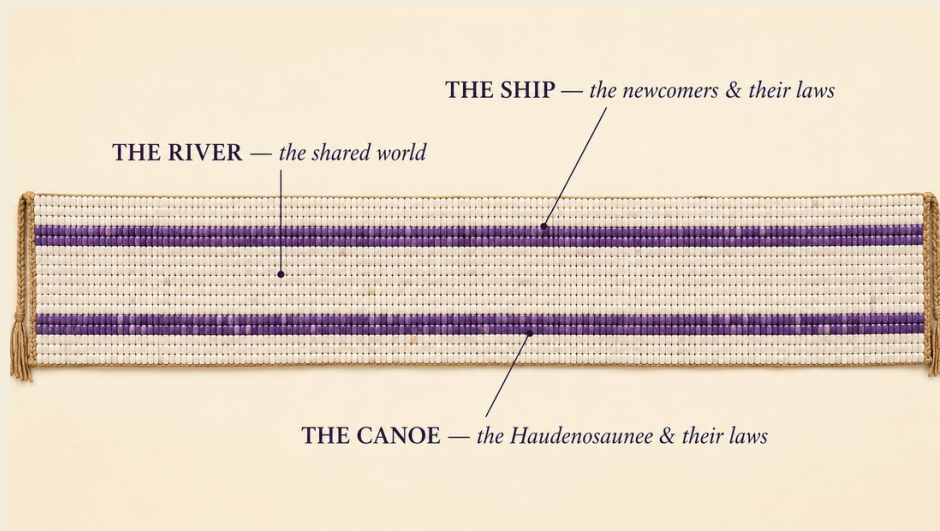
WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Stand on the bank of the Grand River in southern Ontario and you are standing on the territory of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy — one of the oldest living political unions on this continent — and somewhere nearby, in a council house or a community archive, there is a wampum belt that is older than Canada itself. My name is Willow Born With a Tooth, and on this show we ask one question about every piece of land we stand on: what deal put this here? But before we can answer that for any specific place, we need to understand what a deal even was — what a treaty actually meant, in the understanding of the people who first made them.



SAM CARDINAL

In the Indigenous understanding that stretches across this land, a treaty is a living relationship between nations, meant to hold as long as the sun shines and the rivers flow — not a transaction, not a sale, but an agreement about how two peoples would share a world. That is the starting place for everything we explore this season. And the clearest, oldest window into that understanding — the one that shows you what the word "treaty" meant before any of this was called Canada — is a belt of wampum, made in the year sixteen thirteen, that the Haudenosaunee presented to Dutch traders on the river the Lenape people called the Mahicantuck.



SAM CARDINAL

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy — the People of the Longhouse, whose territory stretched from the St. Lawrence to the Ohio Valley — were already one of the most sophisticated political confederacies in the world at that point. Five nations bound together by their own constitution, the Gayanashagowa, the Great Law of Peace. They were not newcomers to diplomacy. When Dutch traders arrived in the river valley seeking furs and commerce, the Haudenosaunee knew exactly what kind of relationship they wanted with these newcomers, and they had a way of recording it that the Dutch did not fully understand.



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Because when most of us think of a treaty today, we picture a piece of paper with signatures on it — a document you fold up and put in an archive. That is not what this was.



SAM CARDINAL

Not at all. Wampum — small cylindrical beads worked from the white whelk shell and the purple quahog clam — were woven into belts whose patterns were a precise record. But calling them a record misses something essential: the belt was read aloud, in council, by speakers who had memorized its full meaning. The belt was not a shorthand for the agreement — it was the agreement, held in the beads and in the mouths of the people who kept it alive. It was a living document in a way that ink on parchment simply is not, because it required human voices, generation after generation, to remain real.



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So the Haudenosaunee present this belt to the Dutch, and it becomes known as the Kaswentha — the Two Row Wampum. What does it look like?

THREE RECORDS OF ONE AGREEMENT

THE BELT

what the people understood:
two sovereign nations
sharing one river.



THE DUTCH PAPER

a brief commercial peace;
the word they wrote was
'friendship.'



THE ORAL RECORD

carried in council for
more than four hundred
years.



SAM CARDINAL

Picture a wide white field of wampum beads with two parallel rows of purple running its full length, side by side, never touching. The white field is the river — the great river of life, the shared world that both peoples move through. One purple row is a canoe: the Haudenosaunee, their laws, their traditions, their way of living. The other purple row is a ship: the Dutch newcomers, their laws, their customs, their way of living. Two vessels on the same river, travelling in the same direction, neither one steering the other. That image is the treaty.



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Two vessels. Same river. Neither one reaching over to grab the other's wheel — or paddle.



SAM CARDINAL

And the Haudenosaunee speakers who presented this belt were explicit about what those rows meant. You will not make laws for my people, and I will not make laws for yours. You will not take our children and raise them in your ways, and we will not do the same to you. We will not impose our beliefs on each other. But we will share this river — we will look after each other in the ways we have agreed to, and we will travel together for as long as the agreement holds. Two sovereignties, each recognized by the other, committed to a shared path without merger. That is what a treaty meant, in this understanding.



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Now, four hundred and some years later, we have more than one account of what happened in sixteen thirteen. This is where the detective trail gets interesting. What does the Dutch written record actually say?



SAM CARDINAL

The Dutch written record from that period is sparse. The Dutch East India Company's men were merchants, and they recorded what merchants care about: access, trade, and peace enough to do business. What they committed to paper does not come close to capturing what the Haudenosaunee understood to have been agreed. There is nothing in the Dutch account resembling the Two Row's specific terms — the mutual non-interference, the recognition of separate sovereignty. What the Dutch wrote down was, in essence, a commercial peace.



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And what did the Dutch negotiators and officials report back about what had been arranged?



SAM CARDINAL

The word that appears most often in European accounts of early agreements with Indigenous nations is "friendship." It is a warm word, a comfortable word — and a very thin one. "Friendship" does not tell you who has the right to make laws on whose territory. It does not tell you whether one nation has agreed to live under the other's authority. It is a translation that turns something structurally precise into something pleasantly vague, and that vagueness had consequences that stretched across centuries.



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And the third record — what the Haudenosaunee themselves have carried forward, in the belt and in the spoken tradition?



SAM CARDINAL

That record is rich, and it has not been set aside. Haudenosaunee leaders and diplomats have referenced the Kaswentha in formal councils for more than four hundred years — in meetings with colonial governments, in petitions to Ottawa, in international forums well into the twentieth century. Representatives have carried wampum belts into meeting rooms to assert that the relationship the belt describes is still in force. In their understanding, you do not let a living agreement expire by ignoring it — you renew it, face to face, in council. The belt did not come with an expiry date.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The word "renew." I keep coming back to it. To renew something means it is still alive. To file something away means you believe it is finished.



SAM CARDINAL

That difference — between a relationship you tend and a document you archive — is one of the most important things I can say about everything we will look at this season. A wampum belt requires living voices to remain real: speakers who carry the meaning, councils where the belt is brought out and spoken aloud. When those councils stopped happening, when the belt was placed in a museum case rather than carried into a meeting room, the agreement did not cease to exist in the eyes of the people who had made it. But it had been broken in practice. And the distance between what the belt says and what the land beneath your feet looks like today — that distance is, in many ways, the story of this country.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So before there was a Canada, before there was a government that issued proclamations or drew boundary lines — there was already this: a nation with a centuries-old understanding of what it meant to share territory with newcomers, encoded in purple and white shell beads. Two rows that run side by side, never crossing. Two peoples, each sovereign.



SAM CARDINAL

And I want you to sit with how precise, and how generous, that image actually is. The Haudenosaunee were not saying "go away." They were saying "come — here is the shape of how we can both be here." That shape assumed two sovereignties, neither swallowed by the other. It assumed the river was wide enough for two vessels. What happened in the centuries that followed is the story of what happens when one vessel begins to believe the river belongs to it alone — and what the people in the canoe have carried, and spoken, and brought to councils and to courts, to insist that the original terms still stand. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The Grand River still flows through Six Nations of the Grand River territory in Ontario — home today to tens of thousands of people from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the largest First Nations reserve in Canada. The Kaswentha has not been put away. It is still read, in councils, by people who carry the words. Two purple rows on a white field. Two vessels on the same river. That's where this story begins.

Sources & Notes

The Land Beneath Us is built on the historical and documentary record. Where that record is contested, we say so.

A note on the record

On the date “1613.” The precise 1613 dating of the Two Row Wampum comes from a written “Tawagonshi” treaty document that scholars — notably Paul Otto and Jaap Jacobs — have concluded is a twentieth-century forgery. The Two Row Wampum (Kaswentha) tradition itself is authentic and old: Haudenosaunee oral history, and a 1701 council recitation describing the original Dutch agreement as made “above eighty years” earlier, place its origin in the early 1600s. Historian Jon Parmenter defends the antiquity of the tradition even though the 1613 paper is discredited; Otto suggests c. 1630 for the adoption of the purple (quahog) beads. This episode uses 1613 as the date carried in Haudenosaunee tradition, with this caveat noted.

References & further reading

Onondaga Nation. “Two Row Wampum — Gä•sweñta’.” onondaganation.org — the official Haudenosaunee account of the belt’s meaning and terms (two vessels on one river; mutual non-interference; separate sovereignty).

Parmenter, Jon. “The Meaning of Kaswentha and the Two Row Wampum Belt in Historical Context.” *Journal of Early American History* 3, no. 1 (2013): 82-109.

Otto, Paul, and Jaap Jacobs, eds. Special issue on the Two Row Wampum and the Tawagonshi document, *Journal of Early American History* 3, no. 1 (2013) — establishing the 1613 written document as a twentieth-century forgery.

“Two Row Wampum Treaty.” Wikipedia — overview of the tradition and the historiographical debate.

“The Great Binding Law, Gayanashagowa (Constitution of the Iroquois Nations).” Harvard University, cscie12.dce.harvard.edu — the Great Law of Peace, the oral constitution binding the Five (later Six) Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

“Six Nations of the Grand River.” The Canadian Encyclopedia; and Wikipedia — the largest First Nations reserve in Canada (2024 registered population over 29,000; c. 46,500 acres), established by the Haldimand Proclamation of 1784.

Wampum materials: the white beads worked from the whelk shell, the purple from the quahog clam — per the Onondaga Nation and standard ethnographic accounts.