



THE LAND BENEATH US ♦

The Covenant Chain

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 2

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

If you drive west of Hamilton, Ontario, you reach Six Nations of the Grand River — home to roughly thirty thousand Haudenosaunee people, the largest First Nations reserve in Canada. And if you stand there and look at a map of the seventeenth century, you start to see something the map doesn't say out loud: the people who live here once held the entire northeastern continent in a kind of diplomatic grip. Not through war alone — through a chain.

SAM CARDINAL

Long before there was a Canada, or a British Empire that stretched this far, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy — five nations joined in one great league — sat at the centre of the northeastern world. They held the trade routes, the river paths, the overland connections between the English colonies along the coast and the vast interior. Both the French to the north and the English to the south understood something that most schoolbooks leave out: if you wanted access to this continent, you needed a relationship with the Haudenosaunee.



SAM CARDINAL

So the English came to Albany — which the Dutch had called Fort Orange before the English took it in sixteen sixty-four — and in sixteen seventy-seven, after years of smaller agreements, something new was given a name. They called it a chain. A chain linking English hands to Haudenosaunee hands, binding them in alliance and mutual obligation. And in those early councils, they called it an iron chain.

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Iron. But it didn't stay iron.



SAM CARDINAL

It didn't. Iron rusts. Iron breaks under enough strain. And within a generation, the language at the Albany councils shifted: the chain became silver. Silver lasts longer — but silver tarnishes, and that tarnishing held a meaning that shaped everything about how this relationship worked. Because silver does not keep its shine on its own. It must be polished. And that single word — polishing — became the living heartbeat of the whole alliance.

SAM CARDINAL

Polishing the chain meant coming back to Albany, sometimes every year or two, sometimes more often, and formally renewing the relationship. You named the grievances that had let it grow dim. You acknowledged the places where the alliance had been neglected or strained. You cleared those spots away — and then you reaffirmed the bond. The chain was not a document you signed and filed. It was a relationship you maintained by showing up and tending to it.



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So Albany wasn't just a trading post. It was the meeting ground — the place you came back to, again and again.

SAM CARDINAL

Albany was the council chamber of the northeastern world for the better part of seventy years. Colonial governors, or their representatives, sat across from Haudenosaunee leaders and spoke in a diplomatic language that both sides had worked, over decades, to develop together. There were formal speeches. There were interpreters who had to carry not just words but meanings across two very different ways of understanding what an alliance was. Through all of it, both sides were building something they believed would last.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And here is where I want to stop — because I think this is the whole question: what did each side believe they were building?

SAM CARDINAL

That is exactly the question, and to answer it honestly we need to lay three records side by side. The first is the written record: the minutes of the Albany councils, the official documents sent back to London. Those documents describe the Haudenosaunee, at various points, as peoples who have submitted to the Crown, or who are under the protection of the British king, or who acknowledge British sovereignty over the territory. That is what went into the archive, and what was reported home.



SAM CARDINAL

The second record is what the Crown's own negotiators said in the room — which was sometimes softer than the written summary, because they knew the Haudenosaunee leaders sitting across from them would not have stayed at the table for a moment if they had been called subjects to their face. And the third record is what the Haudenosaunee orators actually said, in their own language and on their own terms: they called the English their brothers. Sometimes their younger brothers. They described the chain as a bond between equals — two distinct peoples, each strong, choosing alliance, not submission.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Brothers. Not subjects.



SAM CARDINAL

And neither side was lying — that is the important thing to hold onto. The English word 'subject' mapped a real concept in English law onto a relationship that had no such category in Haudenosaunee diplomacy. The Haudenosaunee word for 'brother' carried obligations of mutuality and respect that the English word 'ally' did not fully convey. They were speaking their truths across a translation gap that no interpreter could completely close. The gap between those two records — 'subject' on one page, 'brother' in the spoken memory — would widen over the following century into something much harder to bridge.

SAM CARDINAL

But for much of the alliance's active life, the ritual of polishing held that gap in check. When Haudenosaunee leaders arrived at Albany and said the chain had grown rusty, or had spots upon it, that was a formal diplomatic signal with real weight: something has gone wrong between us — a trader cheated our people, a boundary was crossed, a promise was not kept — and we are here to name it before it corrodes into something worse. Polishing was the built-in mechanism for managing conflict without severing the relationship. It presumed friction, and it gave both sides a shared language for addressing friction before it became rupture.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

There's something genuinely sophisticated about that — building the repair into the relationship from the start.

SAM CARDINAL

And the Haudenosaunee were sophisticated in another way that the chain made possible: they kept their options open. The French were also on this continent, also wanting allies, and the Haudenosaunee maintained communication with them even while the Covenant Chain with the English held. That was not treachery — it was statecraft. As long as two European powers competed for Haudenosaunee alliance, the Haudenosaunee retained real leverage. The chain was not a surrender of independence; it was a diplomatic tool for preserving it. When the chain was bright, the English slept easier at the frontier. When it dimmed, they felt the anxiety immediately — and came to Albany to polish it.



SAM CARDINAL

The chain also grew. Other nations could be brought into the alliance network — added as links, with the Haudenosaunee often serving as intermediaries or sponsors. Albany became not just a bilateral meeting ground but the centre of a whole web of diplomatic relationships, with the Haudenosaunee holding the most consequential connections. For decades — from the sixteen seventies well into the seventeen forties — this web held. Not without wars, not without grievances slow to be polished out. But the chain held, and both sides kept coming back.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So what happened? Because the Haudenosaunee who live at Six Nations today are not in the position their ancestors held at Albany.



SAM CARDINAL

What happened is the world shifted under the chain's feet. After the French were defeated and driven from the continent in seventeen sixty, the English no longer needed the Haudenosaunee as a military counterweight. The strategic calculation that had sent governors to Albany year after year — that had made the polishing of the chain a matter of necessity — evaporated almost overnight. You do not polish a chain when you feel you no longer need what it secures. And something else shifted alongside the strategy: the British began to speak of Indigenous nations less as sovereign allies maintaining a relationship and more as peoples to be managed within an expanding empire.

SAM CARDINAL

The word 'subject' — which had always been in the written record, sitting quietly beside the spoken 'brother' — began to be used without apology, without softening. The councils at Albany grew infrequent, then stopped. No one formally ended the Covenant Chain. There was no ceremony of dissolution, no final meeting where both sides acknowledged what was ending. It was simply set aside. Allowed to tarnish past the point where a council could restore it.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The chain didn't break. It just stopped being polished.

SAM CARDINAL

That is perhaps the most honest way to put it — and it is worth sitting with, because what was lost was not only a military alliance. The Covenant Chain, at its best, was proof that relationship-diplomacy on this scale could work, and had worked, for generations. The Haudenosaunee had not surrendered anything to enter it. They had brought their full strength to the table — their knowledge of the land, their trade connections, their political reach — and for the better part of a century, that strength was genuinely acknowledged by the other side. The English came to Albany because the Haudenosaunee made it necessary. What the tarnishing of the chain set in motion was a slow shift in that balance: from a world where both nations needed each other, to a world where only one nation wrote the terms. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Six Nations of the Grand River is still here — the Haudenosaunee Confederacy still meets, still governs by its own laws, and still carries the memory of what those Albany councils meant. The chain is not the instrument it once was. But the people who built it, and kept showing up to polish it, are still on this land, and that's worth knowing.

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

The “iron chain → silver chain → polishing” language is drawn from the Haudenosaunee diplomatic tradition and from the records of the Albany councils; it is metaphor with legal force, not a physical object. The central tension of this episode — the written record calling the Haudenosaunee “subjects” of the Crown while the spoken councils called the English “brothers” — is documented in the council minutes themselves, and is the subject of a long scholarly literature on whether the Covenant Chain was a relationship of alliance between equals or of subordination.

References & further reading

“Covenant Chain.” The Canadian Encyclopedia — overview of the Haudenosaunee-British alliance, its renewal at Albany, and the iron/silver metaphor.

Francis Jennings. *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire: The Covenant Chain Confederation of Indian Tribes with English Colonies* (New York: Norton, 1984) — the standard scholarly study of the Chain.

Daniel K. Richter. *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

The English capture of New Netherland — Fort Orange renamed Albany — in 1664; the Covenant Chain given its formal name under Governor Edmund Andros of New York in 1677.

The fall of New France (Montreal surrendered, 1760) removed the French counterweight that had given the Haudenosaunee diplomatic leverage — the strategic shift this episode describes.

“Six Nations of the Grand River.” The Canadian Encyclopedia — the largest First Nations reserve in Canada (registered population over 29,000).