

# Handsome Lake [Ganiodaio; Skanyadariyoh]

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(b Canawaugus [now Avon, Livingston Co], ca 1735; d Onondaga Indian Reservation [loc in Onondaga Co], 10 Aug 1815). Seneca prophet, chief, and warrior. Relatively little is known of his early life, and his birth name is not known. A half-brother of the Seneca war chief Cornplanter, at some point he gained the hereditary title Handsome Lake, by which he is commonly known. He supported the alliance with the British during the Revolutionary War but was not particularly active in Seneca political affairs, although he signed the 1797 Treaty of Big Tree, and had a reputation as a drunkard.

The Seneca after the Revolutionary War faced a daunting series of problems. The entire Iroquois culture experienced major destructive changes, including ongoing loss of land, a new reservation system, instability in the traditional family unit, alcohol abuse, and accusations of witchcraft. Cultural, religious, and political factionalism grew increasingly prevalent. Compounding these changes, ancient rituals used to treat diseases continued ineffective against illnesses introduced by Europeans.

Living a dissolute life on Cornplanter Grant in Pennsylvania on the Allegheny River, Handsome Lake emerged from a trance on 15 June 1799 and began preaching a new message of salvation to his people. He reported that he had died and been transported to heaven by three celestial beings. This was the first of a series of trances in which he saw the destructive effects of white culture. The traditional importance of dreams and their interpretation among the Iroquois partially explains his visions being so easily accepted among his people. Recovering in health, Handsome Lake began to advocate a series of prohibitions aimed at moral salvation for the Iroquois.

The new message, often called the Code of Handsome Lake, or Gaiwiiio (Good News or Good Word), prohibited alcohol, sexual promiscuity, abortion, witchcraft, and gambling. It is the basis in the 20th and 21st centuries of some Iroquois opposition to casinos on reservations. Handsome Lake believed that much of the Seneca problem came from the evil workings of witches, who were urged to confess and repent, and predicted that evil would eventually result in the fiery destruction of the world. He advocated for family stability and the care of children and the elderly. The influence of various missionary efforts among the Seneca was evident in his code, and Handsome Lake incorporated elements from both traditional and Christian systems into a new Iroquois religion. He especially advocated keeping four Seneca traditions performed at the annual midwinter ceremonies: the Drum Dance, the Great Feather Dance, the Personal Chant, and the Great Bowl Game.

Handsome Lake would spend the remainder of his life proselytizing his vision. He moved to Cold Spring on the Allegany Indian Reservation in 1803. Although his message was initially accepted among the Seneca, his overzealous focus on witchcraft led to both his and his dogma's rejection. Several Seneca accounts during this period tell of witches being executed. Eventually, Handsome Lake moderated his views, especially following his accusation of a member of a prominent Lenape family resident among the Seneca. In 1809 he moved to the Tonawanda Indian Reservation. He died during a missionary trip to the Onondaga, who had invited him. Handsome Lake had a foreboding of his death and reported a visitation of the corn spirit but chose to continue to travel regardless. Following his death several adherents, including Gov Blacksnake, took up his message and contributed to its spread, which continued into the 21st century.

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