



## How the White Race Came to America and Why the Gaiwiiio Became a Necessity

As told by Edward Cornplanter

(An oral tradition with origins c. 1800)

*The Gaiwiiio, or “Good Message,” is the teaching of the Seneca prophet Ganiodayo, known in English as Handsome Lake, who preached in upstate New York between the 1800 and the 1810s. The Seneca people were part of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy, which had been a formidable political power in the colonial era. However, by 1799, when Handsome Lake experienced the visions that made him a prophet, the Haudenosaunee had become internally divided, had suffered a crippling military defeat by the United States, and had ceded most of their territorial claims. According to oral tradition, the 65-year-old Handsome Lake was chronically ill, struggling with alcoholism and despair, when he entered a death-like trance, during which four messengers from the Creator taught him the Gaiwiiio. The Gaiwiiio told the Haudenosaunee to peacefully coexist with whites while practicing a reformed version of their traditional religion and an ethical code intended to strengthen their family and community bonds.*

*Many Haudenosaunee people came to embrace the Gaiwiiio, which was passed down orally through successive generations. A retelling of the Gaiwiiio was committed to writing between 1900 and the 1910s, a full century after Handsome Lake’s prophetic career, by a Seneca leader named Edward Cornplanter (a.k.a. Sosondowa), who was descended from a brother of Handsome Lake. As a preface to the Gawaiio, Cornplanter recounted also this story.*

Now, this happened a long time ago and across the great salt sea, odji’ke’dāgi’ga, that stretches east. There is, so it seems, a world there and soil like ours. There, in the great queen’s country, where swarmed many people—so many that they crowded upon one another and had no place for hunting—there lived a great queen. Among her servants was a young preacher of the queen’s religion, so it is said.

Now, this happened: The great queen requested the preacher to clean some old volumes which she had concealed in a hidden chest. So he obeyed; and when he had cleaned the last book, which was at the bottom of the chest, he opened it and looked about and listened, for truly he had no right to read the book and wanted no one to detect him. He read. It was a great book and told him many things which he never knew before. Therefore he was greatly worried. He read of a great man who had been a prophet and the son of the Great Ruler. He had been born on the earth, and the white men to whom he preached killed him. Now moreover, the prophet had promised to return and become the King. In three days he was to come, and then in forty to start his kingdom. This did not happen as his followers had expected, and so they despaired. Then said one chief follower, “Surely he will come again sometime; we must watch for him.”

Then the young preacher became worried, for he had discovered that his god was not on earth to see. He was angry, moreover, because his teachers had deceived him. So then he went to the chief of preachers and asked him how it was that he had deceived him. Then the chief preacher said, “Seek him out and you will find him, for indeed we think he does live on earth.” Even so, his heart was angry, but he resolved to seek.

On the morning of the next day, he looked out from the opening of his room and saw out in the river a beautiful island, and he marveled that he had never seen it before. He continued to gaze, and as he did, he saw among the trees a castle of gold, and he marveled that he had not seen the castle of gold before. Then he said, "So beautiful a castle, on so beautiful an isle, must indeed be the abode of him whom I seek." Immediately he put on his clothes and went to the men who had taught him, and they wondered and said, "Indeed it must be as you say." So then together they went to the river, and when they came to the shore, they saw that it was spanned by a bridge of shining gold. Then one of the great preachers fell down and read from his book a long prayer; and arising, he turned his back upon the island and fled, for he was afraid to meet the lord. Then, with the young man, the other crossed the bridge, and he knelt on the grass, and he cried loud and groaned his prayer; but when he arose to his feet, he too fled and would not look again at the house—the castle of gold.

Then was the young man disgusted, and boldly he strode toward the house to attend to the business which he had in mind. He did not cry or pray, and neither did he fall to his knees, for he was not afraid. He knocked at the door, and a handsome, smiling man welcomed him in and said, "Do not be afraid of me." Then the smiling man in the castle of gold said, "I have wanted a young man such as you for some time. You are wise and afraid of nobody. Those older men were fools and would not have listened to me (directly) though they might listen to someone whom I had instructed. Listen to me, and most truly you shall be rich. Across the ocean that lies toward the sunset is another world, and a great country, and a people whom you have never seen. Those people are virtuous; they have no unnatural evil habits, and they are honest. A great reward is yours if you will help me. Here are five things that men and women enjoy; take them to these people and make them as white men are. Then shall you be rich and powerful, and you may become the chief of all great preachers here."

So then, the young man took the bundle containing the *five things* and made the bargain. He left the island and, looking back, saw that the bridge had disappeared; and before he had turned his head, the castle had gone; and then as he looked, the island itself vanished.

Now then, the young man wondered if indeed he had seen his lord, for his mind had been so full of business that he had forgotten to ask. So he opened his bundle of five things and found a flask of rum, a pack of playing cards, a handful of coins, a violin, and a decayed leg bone. Then he thought the things very strange, and he wondered if indeed his lord would send such gifts to the people across the water of the salt lake; but he remembered his promise.

The young man looked about for a suitable man in whom to confide his secret; and after some searching, he found a man named Columbus, and to him he confided the story. Then did Columbus secure some big canoes and raise up wings, and he sailed away. He sailed many days, and his warriors became angry and cried that the chief who led them was a deceiver. They planned to behead him, but he heard of the plan and promised that on the next day he would discover the new country. The next morning came, and then did Columbus discover America. Then the boats turned back and reported their find to the whole world. Then did great ships come, a good many. Then did they bring many bundles of the five things and spread the gifts to all the men of the great earth island.

Then did the invisible man of the river island laugh, and then did he say, "These cards will make them gamble away their wealth and idle [away] their time; this money will make them dishonest and covetous, and they will forget their old laws; this fiddle will make them dance with their arms about their wives and bring about a time of tattling and idle gossip; this rum will turn their minds to foolishness, and they will barter their country for baubles; then will this secret poison eat the life from their blood and crumble their bones." So said the invisible man, and he was Hanisse'ono, the evil one.

Now, all this was done; and when afterward he saw the havoc and the misery his work had done, he said, "I think I have made an enormous mistake, for I did not dream that these people would suffer so." Then did even the devil himself lament that his evil had been so great.

So, after the swarms of white men came, and misery was thrust upon the Ongwe-oweh,<sup>a</sup> the Creator was sorry for his own people, whom he had molded from the soil of the earth of this great island; and he spoke to his four messengers, and many times they tried to tell right men the revelations of the Creator, but none would listen. Then they found our head man, sick. Then they heard him speak to the sun and to the moon, and they saw his sickness. Then they knew that he suffered because of the cunning evils that Hanisse'ono had given the Ongwe-oweh. So then they knew that he was the one—he was the one who should hear and tell Gai'wiiio'. But when Ganio'dai'io' spoke, the evil being ceased his lament and sought to obstruct Gai'wiiio', for he claimed to be master.

The Gai'wiiio' came from Hodiänok'doo<sup>n</sup> Hěd'iohe', the Great Ruler, to the Hadiöyă'geono<sup>n</sup>, the four messengers. From them, it was transmitted to Ganio'dai'io' (Handsome Lake), who taught it to Skandyo<sup>n</sup>'gwadī (Owen Blacksnake) and to his own grandson, Sos'heowă (James Johnson). Blacksnake taught it to Ganishando (Henry Stevens), who taught it to Soson'dowa (Edward Cornplanter). "So I know that I have the true words, and I preach them," adds Cornplanter.

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<sup>a</sup> Ongwe-oweh = "real men," meaning indigenous people

**Source:** Arthur C. Parker [ed.], *The Code of Handsome Lake, the Seneca Prophet*, New York State Museum Bulletin 163 (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1913), 16-19, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t9r212g7n>. Public domain.

Excerpt edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Two grammatical infelicities corrected (*direct* → *directly*, *some one* → *someone*). Punctuation emended for readability. Pairings of individuals’ Seneca names and English aliases, inconsistently formatted in the source publication, are consistently presented here with the Seneca name first and the English alias in parentheses. The use of italics for the expression *five things* replicates the source, as does the capitalizing or not of titles (*Great Ruler, King, queen, god, lord, evil one, devil, four messengers*). The expression *great island*, capitalized in the source, has been converted here to lowercase for consistency with the source publication’s earlier lowercasing of *great earth island*.

This edited excerpt from *The Code of Handsome Lake* is intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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