

DID YOU KNOW?

THE IROQUOIAN LONGHOUSE

Longhouses, sometimes called bark houses, were the basic house type of pre-contact northern Iroquoian-speaking peoples, such as the Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, Petun, and Neutral. Longhouses were longer than they were wide with door openings at both ends. During the winter, these openings were often covered with hide or bark. These long cylindrical structures were built to accommodate large extended families, often measuring up to 200 feet long and 18 feet wide.



Built using saplings set calf-deep into the ground at three foot intervals, the frames extended 18 feet tall and curved at the top. Cord made from wood fibers bound thick sheaths of bark stripped from trees to be used as shingles for the walls and roof.



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Whole extended clan families (related through the maternal line) dwelled in these structures with 20 or more families typically living under one roof. Members of a clan are all descendants of the same person and can trace their heritage through their female ancestors. Longhouses were separated into compartments by wood screens, creating walls with a common doorway which opened to a corridor stretching the length of the long house.



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Individual compartments consisted of a low platform raised a foot off the ground and covered with reed or cornhusk mats and hides. This platform served as a bed for the entire family at night and sitting area during the day. Longhouses were also used as places of storage. Families could store supplies such as dried meats and corn, as well as personal belongings on additional platforms built at a level of seven feet on the walls of the longhouse. Special treasures were said to be tucked into dug outs underneath the sleeping platform.

Longhouses were also windowless except for smoke holes set in the roof at 20 foot intervals with bark or hide hatches which could be used to seal them during poor weather. Families shared common fire pits with the family living in the compartment across from them.



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To the Iroquois people, the longhouse meant much more than the building where they lived. Aside from their practical uses, longhouses served as sites of political gatherings and ceremonies.

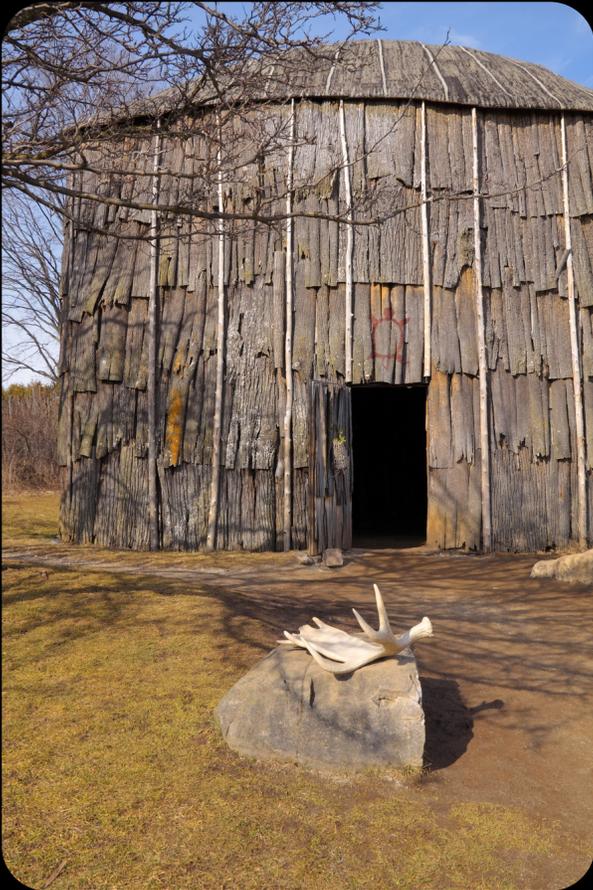


The term longhouse also carried philosophical and cultural meaning. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy (originally made up of the Mohawk, Oneida, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga) characterized their association as a longhouse of five fires. In this way, these nations themselves represented the longhouse, which demonstrates the centrality of the longhouse to Iroquoian culture.



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It's a common myth that all Indigenous Peoples use or used teepees as their shelters. These types of dwellings were used mostly by the Plains First Nations who often migrated following the buffalo herds.

Longhouses were built for families who intended to stay in one place. Once a decade, a nation might decide to relocate once the farming land and resources in that particular area had been exhausted.



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In the 1700s, European-style single-family houses gradually replaced longhouses as primary residences. However, to modern Iroquois people, the longhouse remains a powerful symbol of Iroquoian traditions and the ancient union between the original five nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Longhouses still function as important facilities in which some Indigenous groups conduct ceremonies, political meetings, and various community gatherings.



Reconstructions of these historic structures can be found in a variety of museums and cultural centres, such as the [Museum of Ontario Archaeology](#) and [Sainte Marie Among the Hurons](#) (also in Ontario).

