



1 IROQUOIS

ORIGIN STORY

680L

BIG HISTORY PROJECT



IROQUOIS

THE GREAT TURTLE

Compiled by Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

The Iroquois people of North America spoke this story. Settlers from Europe wrote it down.

This story comes from the Iroquois people in North America. In the 1400s they formed a federation of five tribes in what is now the state of New York. The Iroquois did not use writing. They passed this story by word of mouth for many years. Finally, settlers from Europe wrote it down.

The first people lived in a world past the sky. They lived there because there was no Earth beneath it. The chief of the people had a daughter. She became ill and no cure could be found for her sickness. A wise old man told them to dig up a tree and lay the girl beside the hole. People began to dig, but as they did the tree fell right through the hole, dragging the girl with it.

Below lay an endless sea of water where two swans floated. As the swans looked up, they saw the sky break and a strange tree fall down into the water. Then they saw the girl fall after it. They swam to her and supported her, because she was too beautiful to let drown. Then they swam to the Great Turtle, master of all the animals. He called a meeting right away.

All the animals gathered around. The Great Turtle told them that the woman falling from the sky was a sign of good fortune. The tree had Earth on its roots, so he asked them to find where it had sunk. He told them to bring up some of the Earth from the tree. By putting the Earth on his back, he could make an island for the woman to live on.

The swans led the animals to the place where the tree had fallen. First otter, then muskrat, and then beaver dived. As each one came up from the great depths, he rolled over exhausted and died. Many other animals tried, but they also died, like those before them.

At last the old lady toad volunteered. She was under so long that the others thought she had been lost. But at last she came to the surface. Before dying, she managed to spit out a mouthful of dirt on the back of the Great Turtle.

It was magical Earth and had the power of growth. As soon as it was as big as an island, the woman was set down on it. The two white swans circled it. All the while it continued to grow. At last, it became the world island as it is today, supported in the great waters on the back of the Great Turtle.



Sources

Cottie Burland, *North American Indian Mythology*,
Rev. ed. (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1985), 66.

Image credits

Illustration of the Iroquois Prayer of Thanksgiving
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Engraving of a tattooed Iroquois
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