

The Native American Tale of Wahconah

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The tale of Wahconah the Indian maiden tells of two young braves, Yonnongah and Nessacus, and their rivalry to determine whose squaw she would be.

Yonnongah, a Mohawk warrior from a neighboring village, stopped to pay his respects to the sachem Decanawida. The visitor was quickly enchanted by the beauty of a young maiden, Wahconah, only 16 summers old. He asked her father's permission to marry her. The old chief viewed Yonnongah as a brave and stalwart man, and a fitting choice for his daughter. He told the brave to come back in the spring and he would have Wahconah as his squaw.

One day as Wahconah was collecting firewood, she was attacked by a bear. As she struggled to escape its claws, a young warrior appeared. He was an Algonquin named Nessacus, who was fleeing from the mighty Mohawks. With but a light fish spear, Nessacus killed the bear, though the beast's talons tore his flesh.

The young man was ill from his wounds for many days, and Wahconah nursed him tenderly with her own hands. Her beauty and friendliness captured his heart and he asked Decanawida for her hand.

But the sachem told Nessacus that although he was a brave man and had saved his daughter's life, he must keep his promise to Yonnongah.

The old chief went to the lodge of the medicine man, Mohessah, and the two men smoked many pipes as they discussed the problem of the two warriors who were in love with Wahconah.

The shaman agreed that both warriors were brave men and had just claims. One of these men claimed Wahconah on a promise, the other because he had saved her life. Thus only fate should judge the right warrior, and a contest should be held.

Wahconah, it was decided, should be placed in a canoe without paddles at the base of the falls. The canoe would then be set adrift. In the shallow water of the falls there was a small island. If the vessel bearing Wahconah passed the island to the north side, she should belong to Yonnongah. If it passed to the south side, Nessacus could claim her.

In that night's darkness, Yonnongah slipped away to the small island in the middle of the stream. He set to work dropping stones into the channel on the south side of the island, reasoning that the water would flow more swiftly to the north, and thus Wahconah would be his.

In the village, shortly after Yonnongah returned from his work, a shadowy figure hurried to the row of canoes lying on the bank of the creek. At the end of the row was an old birch canoe used by the squaws to fetch firewood. The ghostly figure dropped a bundle of furs into this canoe.

At day's arrival, Yonnongah walked to the north bank of the stream, opposite the island. Nessacus waded to the south shore.

When Wahconah arrived, she begged to be permitted to use the old squaw's canoe, saying she was not worthy to ride in a war canoe.

At a nod from Mohassah, two warriors picked up the squaw canoe and placed it at the base of the falls. Wahconah stepped in and settled herself on the bundle of furs. Mohassah gave the canoe a shove into the rushing waters. The craft turned and rocked as it sped toward the island. In the grip of the current, it headed toward the north bank and Yonnongah.

Then suddenly and inexplicably the canoe turned, hesitated, then shot to the center of the stream. It rapidly approached the shallows close to the island. It grounded briefly then twisted free and moved toward the south bank. Nessacus ran into the water and dragged the canoe ashore, and gave his future wife a hug.

Later that afternoon, Decanawida and Mohassah saw a canoe filled with water, lying several feet from the bank. Mohassah waded out and pulled the canoe to shore. It was the one used by Wahconah. In the bottom was a bundle of soggy furs. The medicine man picked up the skins and saw a ragged hole in the bottom of the craft. From a fold in the furs a sharp, sturdy stick fell to the ground.

"A sharp stick pushed through the bottom could guide a canoe in shallow water," he observed. Decanawida nodded in agreement, with laughter in his voice, "The Great Manitou decided the contest --- assisted by Wahconah."