

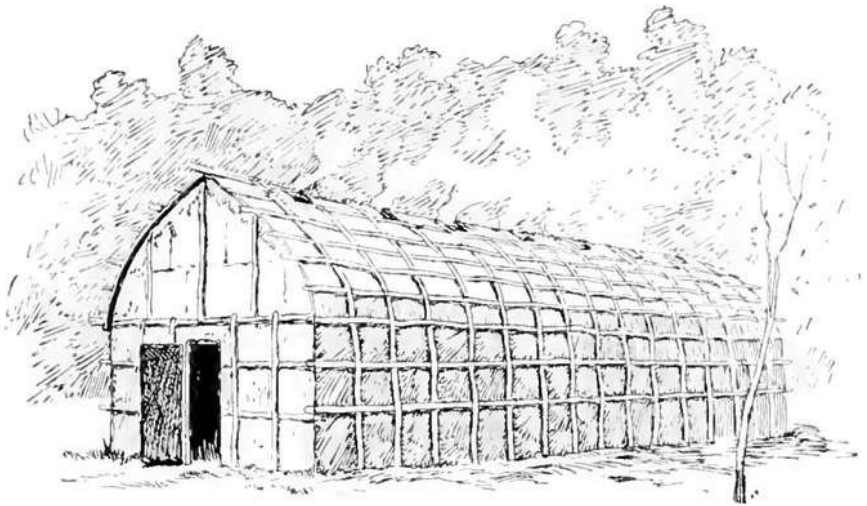
A Berkshire Land Acknowledgment

As Alford's Town Moderator, I recently started a tradition of making a land acknowledgment at our Town Meetings. This idea did not originate with me; such acknowledgments are becoming more widely used. I have here generalized my Alford-specific text so as to apply to anywhere in the Berkshires.

I invite you to join with me in acknowledging our gratitude, and in giving our thanks, to the people who tended the Berkshire lands, on which we now meet, for thousands of years before Europeans arrived.

Today, we call these people the Mohicans; and they now live in Wisconsin. Their own name for themselves is Muh-he-con-neok, which means "The People of the Waters that are Never Still" – and is a reference to the river they call the Muhheconnituck, which is also known as the Hudson River. Their homeland includes land on both sides of that river, from the upper reaches of Manhattan, north to the shores of Pitabagok (the double lakes of Lake Champlain and Lake George). That vast homeland includes all of what is now Berkshire County.

Place names in the Algonkian languages are descriptive. The area in the center of our County was given the name Housatonic by the Muhheconneok. This means "beyond the mountain" in the Mahican language, and reflects the perspective from their Council Fire on Schodack Island. The area between Housatonic and the Muhheconnituck was called Taconic, which mean "the place of the forest."



Prior to 1492 and the arrival of deadly European diseases, I estimate that there could very well have been 50 to 60 thousand people living in what is now Berkshire County, about half the current population. By the time the first English colonists arrived, in the early 1700s, there may have been only 2 or 3 thousand remaining.

The Mohicans, like most original Americans, did not have a concept of private property. Families were given exclusive rights to farm the land that they cleared and maintained, so they were the owners of the product of the land, but not of the land itself. As the English population grew, they were able to impose their own

legal system on the Indians, and through various forms of trickery were able to take away nearly all of the land, leaving the Indians homeless in their own homelands. In 1783, the Mohicans and their allies, a group collectively known as the Stockbridge Indians, began a long journey of many trails that would eventually take them to their present location in Wisconsin.

Our area now probably looks much like it did in those pre-colonial Indian days, in many respects, with the center of the valleys being used for agriculture, and the wooded mountains used for hunting. Where there are now European-style buildings, there were once wigwams and longhouses. The biggest difference in land management is that the Indians also carefully maintained the woodlands, and they burned the forest floor once or twice a year to provide clear and silent passage during hunting season, as well as to promote fresh growth of fodder for the deer and moose that they hunted.

Then, as now, bushes grew along the borders between the forest and the agricultural lands. Berries attracted bears and birds. Wetlands, along with those border areas, provided habitats for small critters and the animals that hunted them. Muskrat, skunk, otter, mink, mice, fox, possum, fisher, beaver, and many others. Some of these were harvested for their soft fur for clothing and blankets, as well as for food.

Please join with me in acknowledging and thanking the Muhheconneok, who retain an active interest in and a fondness for their ancestral homeland. On our behalf, I say to them "anushiik" [ah-noo-sheek] which is a Munsee word for thank-you, and "oneewe" [on-ay-wah], the Mohican word. In Abenaki, the expression is "wliwni" [oo-lee-oo-nee, meaning "it's all good"].

These are Algonkian dialects; I'm told they could all understand each other, despite the regional differences. The Munsee homelands are to our south (New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland), and the Abenaki homelands are to our north (Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine; as well as French and Maritime Canada). To all of them and to the other Native peoples of the Northeast, I say "Thank You!"

Michael Forbes Wilcox mfw@mfw.us April 2020