

## Berkshire OLLI Land Acknowledgment

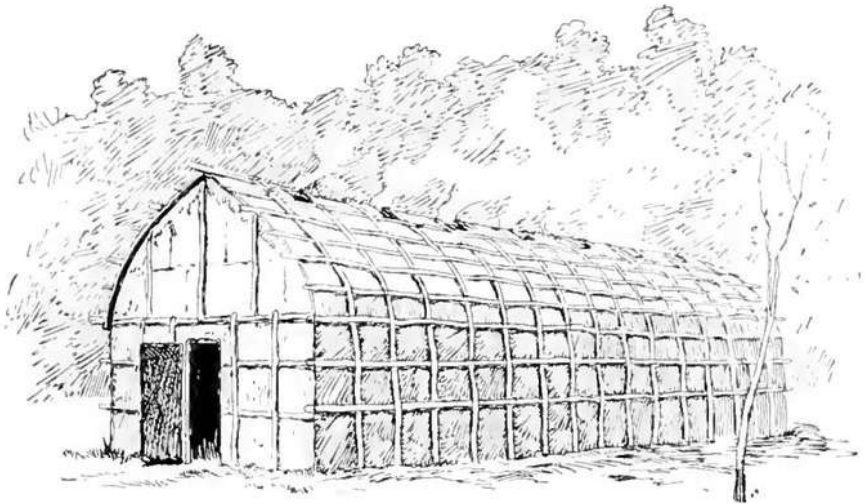
*As Alford's Town Moderator, in 2019 I started a tradition of making a land acknowledgment at our Town Meetings. This idea did not originate with me; such acknowledgments are becoming more widely used. I have here generalized my text so as to apply to the entire county, or to folks who have an interest in the Berkshires.*

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

Today, we call these people the Mohicans; and they are now headquartered 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, stretching from the upper reaches of Manhattan, north to the shores of Pitabagok (the double lakes of Lake Champlain and Lake George), west beyond Albany, and east to the Westfield River. 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 Esquatak (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 1700's, there may have been only 2 or 3 thousand remaining, since those early plagues are thought to have killed 90 to 95 percent of the indigenous population.

The Mohicans, like most original Americans, did not have a concept of private land ownership. 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 dwellings, there were once wigwams and longhouses. The biggest difference in land management is that the Indians also carefully maintained the woodlands. They burned the forest floor once or twice a year to provide themselves with 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. These border areas produced berries that attracted bears and birds, and, together with nearby wetlands, 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 animals 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 Mahican 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!"

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