

## A Berkshire Land Acknowledgment

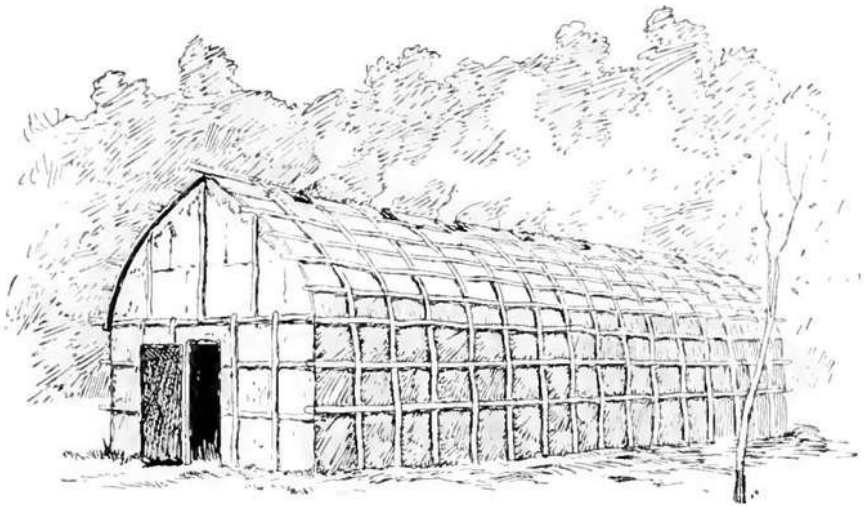
*Several years ago, as Alford's Town Moderator, I began a tradition of making a land acknowledgment at our Town Meetings. Such acknowledgments are becoming more widely used. By learning more about the original people of our area, you can become a better ally.*

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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; their Council Fire is now in Wisconsin. Their own name for themselves is Muhheconneok. In English, they call themselves "The People of the Waters that are Never Still" which 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). This 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. In the Mahican language, this means "the place beyond the mountain" to reflect the perspective from the main Council Fire on Schodack Island. Their hunting grounds in the



area between the agricultural lands of Housatonic and the Muhheconnituck valley was called Taconic, which means "the place of the forest."

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

The Mohicans, like most original Americans, did not have a system of private land ownership. Women were given exclusive rights to farm certain tracts of land, which they planted and maintained. They retained what food their family needed, and any excess went to their village as a whole. Every few years, they would move

to a new plot and let the old one lie fallow.

As the English population grew, they became able to impose their own legal system on the Indians. Through various forms of trickery and outright theft, they were able to take away nearly all of the land, leaving the Natives homeless in their own homelands. In 1783, the Mohicans and some of 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.

In many respects, our area now probably looks very much like it did in pre-colonial days, with the center of the valleys being used for agriculture, and the wooded mountains used for hunting and for sugaring. Where there are now European-style buildings, there were once wigwams and longhouses.

One big difference in land management was that the Natives did not plow the ground, contrary to the English practice, a system which degraded the soil and caused erosion. The Native agricultural plots, containing the Three Sisters and other crops, produced more food value per acre than did the English system. It seems a shame that the English chose not to learn from the Natives.

Another difference is that the Natives carefully maintained the woodlands; the men 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 birds, bears and other creatures. In addition to those border areas, there were wetlands (often created by beavers) that provided habitats for small critters and the animals that hunted them. Besides the beavers, there were muskrat, skunk, otter, mink, mice, fox, possum, fisher, and many others. Some of these were harvested for food, as well as for their soft fur, used to make clothing and blankets.

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 "oneewe" [on-nee-wah], the Mohican word for thank-you, and "anushiik" [ah-noo-sheek] which is the Munsee word. In Abenaki, the expression is "wliwni" [oo-lee-oo-nee, meaning "good circles back"].

These are Algonkian dialects; I'm told they could all understand each other, despite the regional differences. The Munsee homelands are to our south (in New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland), and the Abenaki homelands are to our north (in 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!"