

A Land Acknowledgment

As Alford's Town Moderator, I took the occasion of our 2019 Annual Town Meeting to introduce a new tradition of land acknowledgment.

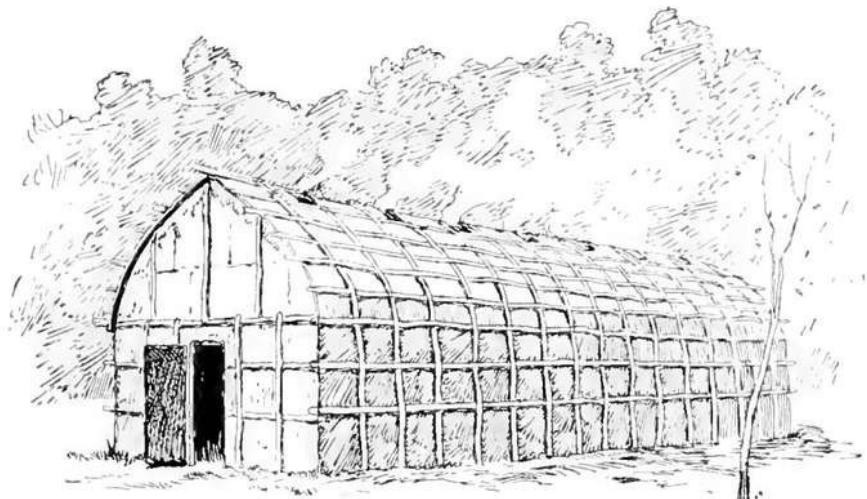
The idea did not originate with me; such acknowledgments are becoming more widely used. I felt it would be an appropriate tribute to the indigenous people who cared for our land long before our Town took on its current configuration.

I invite you to join with me in acknowledging our gratitude, and in giving our thanks, to the people who tended this land, that is now our Town, for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived.

Today, we call these people the Mohicans; 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 Lake Champlain, including all of what is now Berkshire County.

The place we now call Alford, an English name, was originally known as Podunk.

Place names in the Algonkian languages are descriptive, and there are many places in the Northeast that were called Podunk, which means something like “the place where you sink in” – in other words, a marshy area. If you’re familiar with the center of our valley, you can see why it was called that. In that valley runs a stream now called the Alford Brook. It was, once upon a time, known as the Seekonk River, and it supported many dams; first, those of beavers; later, of the English colonists, to provide power for their mills.



The name Seekonk derives from the Algonkian word *seg8gw*¹, a word that also gives us the English word *skunk* (one of the many Algonkian words that have entered the English language; another being *moz*).

¹ the 8 in *seg8gw* is pronounced as a nasalized vowel similar to the “un” sound in junk

Prior to 1492 and the arrival of deadly European diseases, I estimate that there could very well have been 600 to 700 people living in Podunk, more than the current population of 500. By the time the first English colonists arrived, in 1750, there may have been only a few native families here, or they may have already moved to nearby Indiantown, which by then was known as Stockbridge.

A few years later, in 1756, the land that now comprises Alford was conveyed from the Mohicans to the English colonists in two tracts; the Shawenon Purchase, and the Greenland Grant.

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 began a long journey of many trails that would eventually take them to their present location in Wisconsin.

Our town now probably looks much like it did in those pre-colonial Indian days, with the center of the valley being used for agriculture, and the wooded mountains used for hunting. The biggest difference 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, I say "Thank You!"