

Conversations lead to deeper connections between descendants



Retired Stockbridge Police Chief Rick Wilcox walks around the Indian Burying Ground after clearing away sticks and brush. Wilcox has a generations-long relationship with the Mohican Nation Stockbridge-Munsee Band, and he keeps an eye on their burial ground in Stockbridge.

ELODIE REED - EAGLE CORRESPONDENT

By Elodie Reed, Eagle Correspondent

When Bonney Hartley, tribal historic preservation officer for the Stockbridge-Munsee Band, watches archeologists scrape back aged earth, something special - and emotional - happens: The centuries, the interstate distance and the other outcomes of colonial conquest that separate her from her ancestors all just disappear.

"When they get to the soil floor from that time, it's not really about the individual materials or the stone or the chemical makeup," Hartley said. "It's more when that living floor is opened up, to me it just opens up that whole moment in time. That connection is just more potent to me."

Her reservation is in Wisconsin, but Hartley works out of Troy, N.Y., where she moved four and a half years ago. She's only an hour drive away from Stockbridge, the last place Mohicans lived in their own homelands before European colonizers pushed them out in the late 1700s.

Hartley's direct ancestor, David Naunaunecannuck, owned the eastern portion of the property the Stockbridge Town Cemetery now sits on. She remembers the first time visiting the site as "dizzying and overwhelming."

"It's not hard to imagine the 1700s," Hartley said. "You feel their presence kind of reaching out over time. You know your ancestors are always around you all the time, but for me personally, it's comforting in a way. It's like, 'There you are, I see you.' You're that much more in conversation with them."

While Hartley has had powerful interactions with her ancestral homelands, she has had negative experiences, too. Most days, her job requires her to travel to state and federal construction sites to preserve Mohican cultural resources. These protections are in place under the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act [NAGPRA].

"It's really discouraging when you're in a consultation meeting and our sites are basically described as an inconvenience," Hartley said. "Standing in the way of a dollar store or gas station - that's the developer's point of view, just that, they want to get the project done and we're an obstacle."

Benefits of collaboration

From the point of view of Eric Johnson, the most recent director of UMASS Archaeological Services until its contract ended in 2018, laws like NAGPRA, which gives Native descendants protective rights, and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which set up the consultation process between tribes and governments, have benefits for both Native people and for the field of archeology.

For example, during one UMASS Archaeological Services excavation, a Native monitor noticed digging in an unstudied part of the site. The monitor pointed this out, and the disturbance stopped - rightly so, Johnson said.

"One thing that I think is changing, has been changing, [has] been the idea of research being collaborative with the descendants of what we're studying," he said. "That needs to continue to become the accepted model of archaeological research."

From Hartley's perspective, the best kind of collaboration ends in respectful acknowledgment of the original inhabitants in present-day eastern New York and western Massachusetts.

"You feel some sense of satisfaction when we're able to protect an ancestor from being disturbed and know they can continue on their journey," she said.

That kind of satisfactory acknowledgment is harder to come by outside of NAGPRA, however. This is due to a combination of factors: her tribe's geographic distance from its homelands; the persistent, romanticized narrative about Mohicans voluntarily leaving their territory; and the Stockbridge-Munsee Band's lack of resources for public education demand.

"It's often an issue, that there's a disconnect," Hartley said. "There's so much interest from our community in continuing to reengage in our homelands and more and more from residents here, but to try and make that connection is often really hard."

This challenge is pronounced in places like the Mohawk Trail, where there is not a lot of documentation and almost no representation of Mohicans, and in Stockbridge, where Hartley said there is abundant evidence of Native heritage, but limited visibility.

"I think that's something that, within the next generation, I want to see that change," she said. "A lot has been lost, but we're still an integral part of the story in the Berkshires - we're here, and we've lived to tell the tale. I'd like for people to approach us with that understanding and try to work together."

Partnership models

While there is "still a long way to go" when it comes to Mohican presence here, Hartley said there are already examples of her tribe and Berkshires residents working together.

In the Northern Berkshires, the Berkshire Natural Resources Council is working with the Stockbridge-Munsee Band's Language and Culture Committee to draft an interpretive kiosk sign for the portion of the Mahican-Mohawk Trail that runs through BNRC's Hoosac Range property.

"They reached out to get input on the content," Hartley said.

In the Southern Berkshires, partnerships range from the Bidwell House Museum posting photos of current Stockbridge-Munsee Band members on its

interpretive trail signs in Monterey to the Trustees of Reservations offering for the tribe's use the carriage house at The Mission House, which once belonged to the Rev. John Sergeant, the first Christian missionary to live with Mohicans.

Hartley has also been collaborating with the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area to build a Native American Heritage Trail.

"We have been focusing on just Stockbridge, because we've developed a walking tour of Main Street," she said. "We've developed the content of 11 different stops. We want to make it a website and have tribal members come out and do some narrations of videos in front of each stop."

The Stockbridge-Munsee Band could create the walking tour in large part thanks to the raw data provided by retired Stockbridge Police Chief Rick Wilcox. He transcribed about 240 Berkshire County deeds involving members of the tribe, plus another 100 or so related ones.

"He's done a lot of research for the tribe," Hartley said of Wilcox. "He connects people all the time."

In 2018, for instance, Wilcox helped local homeowners contact the Stockbridge-Munsee Band when they found a hickory bow dating back to the mid-18th century behind their fireplace. The bow was repatriated to the tribe last spring, when members came out to Stockbridge for a day-long festival called "Revisiting Indiantown."

"Returning the bow was really significant," Hartley said. "That's what it comes down to - having trust, having those kinds of relationships."

Close connections

There are a select few people with whom the Stockbridge-Munsee Band has maintained long-term relationships.

These include Stockbridge historian Lion Miles, a former American Airlines pilot who has studied Mohican history for three decades and who has visited most if not all archives across the country to gather historic documentation. He has given talks, written books and used some of these sources - the ones written by Native people - to compile a dictionary of Mohican words, which the tribe shares on its website today.

Miles also befriended the tribe over the years. He welcomed them to stay at his house, visited Wisconsin for powwows, became an honorary member of the Mohican veterans group, and traveled with them to Washington, D.C., for the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian in 2004.

On the National Mall, surrounded by 20,000 Native people, Miles recalled his friends' joy at the national recognition of their presence, as well as his own happiness to be a part of it.

"People came up to me asking about the tribe - like I was one of them," he said.

As for Wilcox, his ties go back not only to his grandmother, Grace Wilcox, who curated the Stockbridge Library's historical materials and kept in contact with the tribe, but also all the way back to the years of Mohican removal from Berkshire County.

Wilcox is an indirect descendant of Sergeant and a direct descendant of Oliver Partridge, the second-ever doctor to move to Stockbridge. Partridge was also the man to whom Hendrick Aupaumut, tribal attorney and diplomat, deeded Mohican burying grounds in 1809.

Today, Wilcox keeps an eye on the burying ground, which sits between the Stockbridge Congregational Church and the golf course. A stone monument, gifted by Laurel Hill Association founder Mary Hopkins Goodrich in 1877, rises up from a grassy plot lined with hickory trees.

Whether its researching deeds or picking up brush from the burying ground, Wilcox said he maintains his family's longtime connection with the Stockbridge-Munsee Band as a way to improve upon the Colonial past.

"I don't feel responsible for what happened with my ancestors," he said. "But what I can be responsible for is what I do now, which is uncover history and have relationships with the tribe."

That's what Hartley wants, too. She is a descendant of the Mohicans who signed the deed with Partridge, and she said it gives her "chills" to think about working together with Wilcox, generations after their ancestors did the same.

"It just seems like there's always been a conversation, there's always been a relationship there," Hartley said. "It's really important that we continue to guide it in the right direction."