

# Office cleanup unearths tribal documents

State's OK needed to return them to Stockbridge-Munsee

BY CLARENCE FANTO

*Eagle correspondent*

**STOCKBRIDGE** — A set of historic 18th-century documents and records retrieved from the former Town Hall building on the Village Green is expected to be repatriated to the town's first settlers, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians.

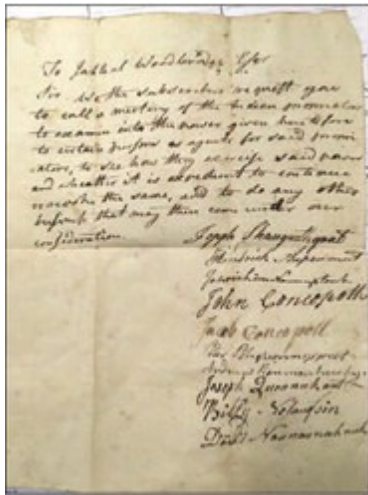
The Select Board recently approved an article to the annual town meeting warrant seeking voter approval. The transfer of the two documents, along with Indian proprietor records, needs approval by the Legislature. State Rep. William "Smitty" Pignatelli has said he will push that proposal.

The documents were found during a cleanup of the old Town Hall, adjacent to the First Congregational Church, one of them bearing the name of Chief Popewannehah "John" Konkapot, said Selectman Patrick White.

Stockbridge Town Facilities Manager Chris Marsden recovered the documents; some of his ancestors, who worked for Pilling Contractors, had built the old Town Hall in 1902, which has been vacant since local government offices moved into the former Stockbridge Plain School in 2007.

In addition, a book of Native American records pertaining to the tribe was found by Town Clerk Terri Iemolini, White said.

According to state law, town documents from before 1870 cannot be transferred without local voter approval, followed by an act of the Legislature.



“I talked to Smitty; he’s excited to support the transfer,” White said after town meeting voters approve it. The Select Board approved White’s motion to place the matter on the warrant, with Chairman Ernest “Chuck” Cardillo voicing “a very strong yes.”

The article drafted by Town Counsel Donna Brewer allows Stockbridge to ask the Legislature to greenlight the shipment of the documents.

“The Stockbridge-Munsee Community has such a rich history in the town of Stockbridge and we are excited about the possibility of bringing more of that history home to Wisconsin,” said Heather Bruegl, director of cultural affairs for the tribe.

“I’m very grateful to hear this,” said Bonney Hartley, tribal historic preservation officer. “To our tribe, having actual tangible documents such as this in hand is very meaningful and restorative to our cultural heritage.”

The federally recognized tribe of blended Mohican and Munsee natives, who both are Algonquian peoples, now includes about 1,500 members. About 750 are direct descendants of the Stockbridge Mohicans.

They are governed by a seven-member Tribal Council elected by the community based on a 25,000-acre reservation in the towns of Red Springs and Bartelme in Shawano County in Wisconsin.

The tribal nation operates several businesses, including the Stockbridge-Munsee Health and Wellness Center, North Star Mohican Casino and Pine Hills Golf Course.

Stockbridge, originally named Indiantown, was settled as a missionary community for the Mohicans and English settlers to coexist and co-govern.

“As a community that has been uprooted and displaced many times over, so many important archives and heirlooms have been separated from us as we were focused on survival,” Hartley said. “Receiving the Stockbridge documents back honors our ancestors and all they went through, and is meaningful and uplifting to us today.”

In a message to town leaders, Hartley pointed out that “both documents are historically and culturally central to the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican people. They possess a sense of pride and connection to our ancestors.”

She noted that the 10 sachems — chiefs — who signed one of the documents are direct ancestors of living members in the tribal nation.

The names include Konkapot, Aupaumut and Naunaneecannuck, Hartley’s ancestor.

The second document from a proprietor meeting “gives a sense of the daily transactions our people were going through as they sought to remain in Stockbridge,” Hartley commented.

Pignatelli termed the retrieval of the documents “very exciting,” adding that he would be happy to file a bill supporting the town’s efforts.

Local historian Rick Wilcox, who specializes in the history of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community, commented that “the willingness to place the three documents on the town meeting warrant is especially important. There are so many documents and artifacts all over New England and New York that organizations and institutions hold and are not willing to repatriate.”

The former police chief thanked White for his efforts to repatriate the documents that represent much of the tribe’s history in Stockbridge.

“It is an extremely wonderful gesture and I for one am very, very grateful for your efforts,” Wilcox wrote in an email.

“Do the right thing,” White said, summing up the town’s efforts on behalf of the tribe’s heritage. “I wish the right thing were always so obvious.

Members plan further exploration of their tribal nation’s 18th-century local history with two federal- and town-funded archaeological digs, at a time to be determined.

The Stockbridge-Munsee Nation’s project is designed to document and preserve the 1739 Meetinghouse site on Main Street and the site of a 1783 Ox Roast feast along the Housatonic River.

Two months after the Ox Roast feast, the Mohican tribe's chiefs were forced to relocate the community to Oneida tribal lands in western New York, later settling at the reservation in Wisconsin, where they joined the recently established Munsee Nation by treaty in 1856.

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