

2021 Alford Land Acknowledgment

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

Such acknowledgments are becoming more widely used. I felt it would be an appropriate tribute to the indigenous people who cared for the 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 Europeans arrived.

Today, we call these people the Mohicans; their Council Fire is now in Wisconsin. Their own name for themselves is Muh-he-CON-ne-ok, which means "The People of the Waters that are Never Still" – 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 Pi-TAW-ba-gok, the double lakes of Lake Champlain and Lake George. This homeland includes all of what is now Berkshire County.

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

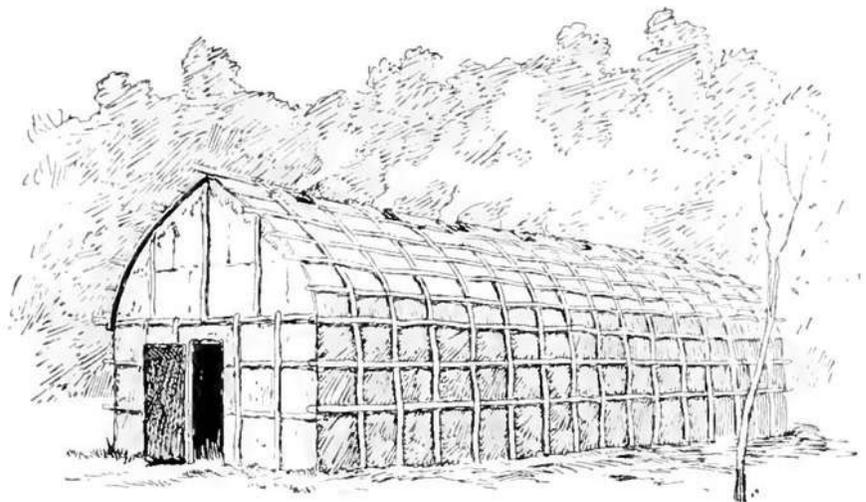
Place names in the Algonkian dialects are descriptive, and there are many places in the Northeast that were called Podunk, which means something like "the place where you sink in" – in

other words, a marshy area. If you're familiar with the center of our valley, you will know why it was called that. Through 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 *segôgw*¹, a word that also gives us the English word *skunk* (which is one of the many Algonkian words that have entered the English language; others being *moz* and *mokezen*).

Prior to 1492 and the arrival of deadly European diseases, I estimate that there

¹ the *ô* in *segôgw* is pronounced as a nasalized vowel similar to the "on" sound in honk



could very well have been 600 to 700 people living in Podunk, more than the current population of about 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 ownership of private land. Families were given exclusive rights to farm the land that they cleared and maintained, so they had first rights to the product of the land, but did not own 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 and outright theft, they 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 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 mountainsides used for hunting. The biggest difference is that the Indians also carefully maintained the woodlands; 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. In other words, they created deer parks.

Then, as now, bushes grew along the borders between the forest and the agricultural lands. Berries attracted bears and birds. Wetlands, many of which were created by beavers, in addition to 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 food, as well as for their soft fur, which was 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-ay-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 "it's all good"].

These are Algonkian dialects; I'm told they can 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 Canada and Maritime Canada). To all of them, and to the other Native peoples of the Northeast, I say "Thank You!"