

Colonial Relationships

We continue with the relationship between the Native Americans and the Colonists:

The northwestern section of Connecticut was spared the horrors of contact with hostile Indians primarily because of two factors: the buffer zone to the north provided by a string of fortifications erected by Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York, and the goodwill of the friendly Stockbridge Indians. While residents of the Connecticut River Valley and other areas to our north and west had a great deal to fear, and almost on a daily basis, what was to become Litchfield County remained relatively tranquil. What special set of circumstances allowed for this situation? We will first look at the protecting towns to our north, then undertake to explain our local Native American connection.

The Massachusetts communities that formed a buffer between the French and Indians to the north were Becket, Lanesborough, Lenox, Charlemont, Deerfield, Gill, Northfield, Rowe, Williamstown and Bernardston.

Had it not been for them, and the sacrifices that were made by their inhabitants, our history would be far bloodier and shorter than it is. The original highways through our area, built at the request of the colonial legislature, were laid out to facilitate troop movements from the populated Connecticut River Valley to the Hudson River Valley. Note that settlers having military titles populated many of Colebrook's and surrounding towns. Many of these were earned during the so-called northern campaigns. Locally, we do not have any military graves decorated with emblems from these early wars, but many are to be seen in eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island. These use a fleur-de-lis design to hold the flag, as opposed to the Revolutionary War veterans, who have a five-pointed star enclosed within a ring of laurel leaves.

With respect to our relationship with the local Indians, part of the answer lay with the actions of the Massachusetts legislature.

The town of Stockbridge was originally laid out by the general government of the state in 1735, for the accommodation of the Indians. In the year previous a mission was commenced among the Housatonic Indians by Mr. John Sergeant, then a candidate for the ministry, assisted by Mr. Timothy Woodbridge as schoolmaster, under the patronage of the board of commissioners for Indian affairs in Boston, of which his excellency Jonathan Belcher, then British governor of Massachusetts, was an active and influential member. At that time about half of these Indians lived in the great meadow on the Housatonic in this town, called by them *Wnahktukook*. Here Konkapot the chieftain resided, whom Gov. Belcher had just before honored with a captain's commission. His cabin stood on a knoll a few rods north of the Konkapot Brook, on the east side of the county road. The other Indians lived on their reservation in Sheffield, called by them Skatehook. For the better improvement of their moral condition it was soon found desirable to have these united and settled in one place, with such other Indians in the vicinity as might be disposed to join with them. Being made acquainted with their situation, the legislature, on the 17th of March, 1735, granted them a township 6 miles square, to be laid out on the Housatonic River, immediately north of Monument Mountain, provided the proprietors and settlers of the Upper Housatonic could be induced to give up their right to that portion of their lands on which the new township would partly fall. It was wished to include the fine alluvial ground at Wnahktukook,

where the chieftain resided, and which to some extent, was under cultivation. The committee met with but little difficulty in performing the duties assigned them, and in April 1736, they laid out the town in a square, which included the present townships of Stockbridge and West Stockbridge.

Early in May of that year the Indians began to move into their plantation, and by the last of June there were more than 90 persons in the settlement. In January 1737, the subject being laid before the legislature by the governor, they ordered that a meetinghouse 40 feet by 30, together with a schoolhouse should be built for the Indians at the charge of the province. On the 7th of May in this year the grant of the town was confirmed to the Indians, their heirs and assigns; and in 1739, the town was incorporated by the name of Stockbridge, after the town of that name in England.

Some of the Indians' houses were on the plain, some on the meadows near the river and a few about Barnum's Brook. These Indians at first were called by the English River Indians, afterwards more generally Housatonic Indians, until the incorporation of the town; since which they have more generally been called Stockbridge Indians. They have also sometimes, as well as the tribe at Norwich, Conn., been called Mohegans, which is a corruption of their proper name Mahhekaneew or Muhhekaneok, signifying "the people of the great waters, continually in motion."

One very important effect that this mission produced was that the friendship of these Indians was effectually secured to the English. They performed numerous kind offices for the early settlers of the county; in time of war were spies for the English, and often fought and sometimes shed their blood for them in the army.

Though Fort Massachusetts was repeatedly attacked in the time of the first French war, and terror was spread through all this region, yet, in consequence of the well known friendship of the Muhhekaneews, no hostile Indians ventured down into the vicinity of this place, and the southern section of the county was saved from such calamities as befell some of the settlements on the Connecticut River, and others to the west, in the state of New York. Though in the second French war a few families in different parts of the county were disturbed, yet the mischief was small compared with what probably would have been done had it not been for the friendship of the Stockbridge tribe.

In this war many of the Indians were received as soldiers in the service of Massachusetts, and showed their fidelity by fighting for the whites. In the Revolutionary War a part of the company of minutemen under the command of Captain Goodrich of this town, was composed of these Indians. A company went to White Plains under Capt. Daniel Nimham, where some were slain and others died with sickness. Numbers served at other places. At the close of the war Gen. Washington directed the contractors for supplying a division of the army at West Point with provisions, to give the Indians a feast in consideration of their good conduct in the service. An ox weighing 1,100 lbs. was roasted whole; the entire tribe partook of it; the men first, and then the women, according to custom. The feast was held near the residence of chieftain King Solomon, and after this was over the Indians buried the hatchet in token that the war was past, and performed some other ceremonies in their own style for the gratification of the company.

The school begun for these Indians in 1734 remained in service until the Indians emigrated to the region of the Oneidas in 1788.