Founding Schaghticoke and Odanak

Margaret Bruchac
University of Pennsylvania, mbruchac@sas.upenn.edu

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Founding Schaghticoke and Odanak

This artistic rendering of the Wôbanaki settlement on the Arsikantegouk (Saint Francis River) depicts wooden frame houses, bark wigwams, a small Catholic church, and the beginnings of a military stockade, circa 1690. Illustration copyright Frank Gregory.

Shifting Homelands in the Connecticut River Valley

For millennia, the Wôbanaki peoples along the Quinneticook (Connecticut) River and its tributaries lived in overlapping homelands while harvesting various natural resources through the seasons. They hunted as far north as southern Canada in the fall and fished together at the falls of the Quinneticook and Pocumtuck (Deerfield) rivers in spring. They traveled with their relatives and allies and gathered together for ceremonial and diplomatic occasions. (To learn more, see the explanation Native Land Use and Settlements in the Northeastern Woodlands.)

The tribal names they were known by came from the Algonkian locative terms for settlements centered on planting fields close to the river: Agawam, Nonotuck, Pocumtuck, Quaboag (near the Swift River), Sokoki, and Woronoco (near the Westfield River).

After 1630, long-standing traditional patterns of Native settlement and relationships in this valley were disrupted when Europeans arrived in the Connecticut River Valley. At first, English fur traders offered what seemed like a useful arrangement that would provide new goods and secure new English allies. (See the historic scene on this site: "Trade and Alliance" > "Trading at Springfield.")
Soon, the spread of disease and inter-tribal conflict, the increasing threat of European encroachment, and the need to concentrate supplies of food, furs, and ammunition for trade caused the Agawam, Nonotuck, Pocumtuck, and Sokoki people to construct at least five different fortified sites along the Connecticut River. During this same time period, William Pynchon and his son, John, negotiated a series of Indian deeds (1) to secure the most desirable farming and settlement lands for English colonists. (To learn more, see the map Settlement Patterns in the Connecticut River Valley.)

Indian forts were restrictive places to live, and offered little protection in the long run. (2) By 1675, political injustices and the loss of land inspired the valley’s Native peoples to abandon the forts, and join forces with the Wampanoag, Nipmuc and Narragansett during Metacom’s War (King Philip’s War). This rebellion proved as devastating to Native peoples as it was to the English. (See the historic scene on this site: "Assault on Peskeompskut."

After the war, some of the valley’s Native families continued to live in their old home sites, as others withdrew into less-populated places to resist further encroachment by the English. Between the 1670s and 1750s, the need for more secure settlements led many Native families to move north into Wôbanaki territory. Some joined the Missisquoi, Cowass, or Pennacook people in present-day Vermont and New Hampshire, or went to the Catholic Wôbanaki village of Norridgewock in western Maine. A few families joined the Kanienkahaka (Mohawk) at Kahnawake, or sought temporary refuge with the Mohican of the Hudson River Valley. Some families relocated several times during this time period. (To learn more, see the explanation Native Diaspora and New Communities: Algonkian and Wôbanaki.)

The survival of the Connecticut River Valley’s Native peoples was dependent, in large part, on two key places of refuge. One was Schaghticoke, located in New York state, about 60 miles west of Deerfield and 16 miles north of Albany, at the confluence of the Hoosic and Tomhannock Rivers, close by the Hudson River. The other was Odanak (Saint Francis), located about 200 miles north of the valley, above Montreal on the Arsikantegouk (Saint Francis River), just southeast of the St. Lawrence.

English settlers hoped that the Agawam, Nonotuck, Pocumtuck, Quaboag, Sokoki, and Woronoco had left the valley for good, but that was not the case. The records of their movements after 1676 are confusing only because colonial leaders assigned new names to these Native people based on wherever they happened to be living at the time. The French and English began calling them “Schaghticokes,” “North Indians,” “Loups,” “River Indians,” “Saint Francis Indians,” and other terms that obscured their original tribal identities. (3) Today, many of their direct descendants can be found among the Wôbanaki peoples of northern New England and southern Canada, still living near the places where their ancestors found refuge in the 1700s.

Seeking Refuge at Schaghticoke

Schaghticoke, New York, was situated in what had long been traditional Mohican Indian territory, but it had become part of the New York colony after the fall of New Netherland in 1664, and was now under the protection of the Kanienkehaha. The place name of “Schaghticoke” came from the Algonkian word “pishgoh-bi-goch,” which indicated a place “where two rivers come together.” (The Native residents of this refugee village should not be confused with the Schaghticoke Tribe, who live on the Housatonic River in Connecticut.) (4)
Among their close allies. Copyright Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Deerfield, MA. All Rights Reserved.

It was May of 1676, just after the attack at Peskeompskut, when New York's colonial Governor, Edmund Andros, first invited the Pocumtuck and other Connecticut River Valley Indians, to move to Schaghticoke. (5) Andros's offer was actually more strategic than humanitarian, since Schaghticoke was conveniently located near the Hudson River and close to Albany. Andros knew of the close ties among Wôbanaki people, and he assumed that the Schaghticoke Indians would provide a buffer to prevent the Saint Francis Abenaki from attacking the English settlements around Albany.

Oral traditions relate that Andros held a meeting called a "Witenagemot" (a peace council) with Albany's magistrates, ministers and Native leaders. Sachems from the Kanienkehaka, Mohican, and Connecticut River Valley jointly planted an oak tree to serve as a symbolic "tree of peace" to protect the Schaghticoke Indian settlement. (6)

During the fall of 1676, John Pynchon of Springfield, observed that more than 200 Native families from Agawam, Nonotuck, Pocumtuck, and Woronoco were leaving Massachusetts to go to Schaghticoke. (7) Soon, the Mohican people still living at Schaghticoke were completely outnumbered by Native people from the Connecticut River Valley. The newcomers built small family wigwams and larger bark lodges, and cleared and planted maize fields, just as they had in the Connecticut River Valley. They continued using their traditional homelands, traveling eastward to present-day Shelburne Falls on the Deerfield River for spring salmon fishing, and gathering medicinal plants and other local resources. They went northward in winter to hunt on the lower Winooski River on the east side of Lake Champlain, and to trade with the Missisquoi and other Wôbanakiak.

The Schaghticoke people lived under English protection, but the colonial documents make it clear that they governed themselves. When conflicts with Albany residents arose, the Mohican sachems would often intervene on their behalf. Soquans (Pocumtuck), Wamsachko (Sokoki), Shattoockquis (Pocumtuck and Quaboag), and Gray Lock (Woronoco) were some of the more prominent sachems at Schaghticoke. Although these men had left Massachusetts, the Schaghticoke sachems were still expected to intercede whenever troubles arose between the English and Native peoples in the Connecticut River Valley.

Schaghticoke was an important economic rendezvous for hunters and traders coming from the rich beaver hunting territory in the Adirondack Mountains to connect with the water routes on the Hudson River and the land trails into New England. For several decades, the peace and steady trade among the Schaghticoke, Kanienkehaka, Mohican, and the English allowed everyone living in the area to prosper.

The Native people living at Schaghticoke kept up steady communications with Connecticut River Valley families who had moved to other places, and New York's governors sent periodic gifts of wampum to encourage more Wôbanaki people to leave off their friendship with the French and join them. In 1685, the population increased dramatically after the Pocumtuck/Quaboag sachem Shattookquis (also known as Sadochques), who had earlier relocated to Odanak, was persuaded to bring about 50 families of Connecticut River Valley people to Schaghticoke. (8) What none of the Schaghticoke leaders knew, however, was that New York's colonial leaders were already maneuvering with Mohican and Kanienkehaka leaders to purchase Schaghticoke lands for English settlement. (9)

**Founding the Abenaki Nation at Odanak**

The village of Saint François, or Saint Francis, founded around 1670 by Sokoki people from central New England, was situated on the Arsikantegouk River just south of the St. Lawrence River, about 40 miles above Montreal. The name Arsikantegouk (meaning "empty cabin river" or "place of shells") came from two events: a 1691 attack by the Kanienkehaka on French settlers, and a plague that hit the Abenaki village around 1700. The Wôbanakiak more commonly call the place "Odanak," which means "at the dwelling-place."

In 1638, the French settlers of New France named the river for François de
This 18th century illustration demonstrates the mixture of French and Native dress that was typical of Wôbanaki people, who combined trade goods like linen chemises and wool blankets with indigenous deerskin leggings and decorative markings. Copyright Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Deerfield, MA. All Rights Reserved.

Lauzon who was given seigniorial rights by the French crown. The surrounding territory was called Saint-François-du-Lac, since it bordered on Lac Saint-Pierre, and the first Catholic parish there was named Saint-François-Xavier. After the French Jesuit mission on the Chaudière River, Saint-François-de-Sales, moved to Odanak in 1700, the town and region came to be simply called “Saint Francis.” The Abenaki village had come under the protection of the French after Marguerite Hertel ceded some land granted her by the crown to provide a larger refuge for the Wôbanaki who were among New France’s key allies.

The first group of Connecticut River Valley Indians to head north after Metacom’s War were a group of Sokoki families who moved to Wolinak (near the French villages of Trois Rivières and Bécancoeur), about 40 miles north of Odanak. Sokoki people also went to Odanak and to Ville-Marie (Montreal). Wôbanaki families frequently went back and forth among these locations. The Wôbanaki village of Missisquoi, situated along the eastern shore of Lake Champlain, was another key place of refuge. For some, it was a stopping point on the way to Odanak; for others, it became a new home. (10)

Life at Odanak was a mixture of lifeways, including traditional seasonal travels for hunting and fishing, concentrated planting fields near the river, and extensive trading with the French for goods and supplies. During the winter, families would break into smaller bands for hunting and trapping at a distance. Native people at Odanak lived in both bark wigwams and French frame houses, and used Native leather, bark, clay and fur materials, alongside woolen cloth, metal tools, and various other goods and ornaments provided through the fur trade.

There was a Catholic church at Odanak, staffed by a Jesuit priest who incorporated the Abenaki language into the text and hymns, in an attempt to both accommodate the spiritual needs of Wôbanaki people and encourage conversions. (11) While some accepted Catholicism, others maintained traditional Native practices and beliefs that have persisted to the present day.

Over time, many considerations drew Native families to Odanak, not the least of which were pre-existing kinship ties, and broad diplomatic alliances among the Canadian Algonkian and Iroquoian Nations. These alliances included the Wôbanaki Confederacy (among Eastern and Western Abenaki peoples), the Seven Nations Alliance (among Iroquoian and Algonkian villages, around the St. Lawrence, and the 1701 Great Peace of Montreal (including 30 nations of Iroquoian and Algonkian peoples across Canada and the French). (See the historic scene on this site: "Great Peace of 1701").

The similarities among Catholic Indians in New France, their ties to the French, and their common grievances against the English helped to make these alliances very strong. The alliance with the French provided military support as well as trade and protection. By 1704, a French military-style stockade was constructed at Odanak, and French families and soldiers were at times in residence alongside Wôbanaki families.

By 1704, at least 300 of the Native people known collectively as "Saint Francis" Indians were those who had originally come from Wôbanaki homelands in central and northern New England. It should be no surprise that so many of them were willing to join in the attack on Deerfield.

Pressure to Leave Schaghticoke

The English expected the Schaghticoke Indians to monitor the movements of all Native people through New York and New England, which was an impossible
In 1704, the French assisted the Wobanaki in constructing a military-style fortification with corner bastions around the village of Odanak, which had expanded to include 14 large bark lodges, built to house multiple families, in addition to the church.

Courtesy National Archives of Canada.

more than 1,000 Native people living at Schaghticoke, and the sachem Soquans declared that the tree of peace was symbolically so strong and "grown so thick of leaves & Bows that the sun can scarce shine throw it, yea the fire itself cannot consume it, meaning that they are now so strong, that they do not much fear the enemy." (14)

Despite their strength, it was becoming all too clear that the Connecticut River Valley Indians living at Schaghticoke were about to be forced off their lands in New York, just as they had been forced out of their original homelands in Massachusetts. The lush maize fields at Schaghticoke were proving to be too great a temptation to resist, and English colonists began demanding use of the Native lands at Schaghticoke.

In 1699, the town of Albany purchased a six mile square tract of Schaghticoke Indian land from a Dutch broker, Hendrick van Rensselaer, who had secured a crown patent years earlier. When Albany's leaders negotiated a deed for an additional two mile by six mile tract, they paid the Schaghticoke with 2 blankets, 12 coats, 20 shirts, 2 guns, ammunition and an assortment of alcohol. Drunkenness soon became a serious problem at Schaghticoke. More deeds would soon follow.

Over the course of the eight decades that the refugee village of Schaghticoke was under New York colony's protection, more than 2,000 Native people from the Connecticut River Valley sought refuge there. Equal, if not greater numbers came and went from Odanak, Missisquoi, Cowass, Pennacook, and other northern Wobanaki communities.

By 1704, some Native families began leaving Schaghticoke to move north, where the colonial documents then identify them as generic "Saint Francis Abenaki Indians." In this same time period, other Native people, such as Wattanummon, grew disenchanted with French Catholicism, and moved back to Schaghticoke. Although the name "Schaghticoke Indians" does not appear on the list of those responsible for the 1704 attack on Deerfield, it is clear that many
Connecticut River Valley Indians, by way of Schaghticoke, were in residence at Odanak while the attack was being planned. (For further discussion, see Schaghticoke and Points North: Wôbanaki Resistance and Persistence.)