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The Geology and Cultural History of the Beaver Hill Story

By Marge Bruchac.

The Pocumtuck story of the "Amiskwôlowôkoiak" -- the people of the beaver-tail hill -- is an example of a "deep-time story" with an "earthshaper" motif. Native stories in this genre describe, in metaphorical terms, using human, super-human, and non-human characters, how ancient geological events reshaped the landscape, forming mountains, rivers, lakes, islands and rocky outcroppings. Many of these stories also describe species evolution and climate change. Native oral narratives about the landscape formed part of a larger body of knowledge that enabled Native people to efficiently hunt, fish, gather and plant, make climate predictions, practice ethnobotany, and situate homesites in the best locations. In this story, there is a remarkable resonance between the familiar results of a beaver building a dam, the ancient history of glacial flooding, the presence of giant beavers in the region during the Pleistocene era, and a mountain that happens to be shaped like a beaver today (Bruchac 2005).

The present-day town of Deerfield is laid out on a broad flat floodplain that was once filled, about 10-12,000 years in the past, with the waters of what is now called "Glacial Lake Hitchcock." This glacial lake extended up the Connecticut River Valley into present-day Vermont. The water was contained on the east by Pemawatchuwatunck, the "long, twisting mountains" now called the "Pocumtuck Range." The rocky outcrop at the southernmost end of the Pocumtuck Range was known as "Wequamps," meaning a place where a hill drops off. (1) On the west are the Sunsick Hills, now called "West Mountain." On the south was the glacial dam called "Rocky Hill Dam," near present-day Rocky Hill, Connecticut. A series of earth movements broke open the dam and allowed Lake Hitchcock to drain. When the Pocumtuck Range is seen from the top of nearby Mt. Tom or from the ground in South Deerfield, it resembles the shape of a beaver swimming in the water with its legs submerged.

Although Lake Hitchcock was too large to have been literally shaped by a beaver, there are other lakes across the continent that were formed by giant beavers. The extinct species *Castoroides ohioensis* averaged nine feet long (not including the tail) and seven hundred pounds, compared to the modern beaver, *Castor canadensis*, who averages only two feet, with the tail, and sixty pounds. When beavers first construct dams, their ponds fill with fresh water, but after silt forms, the waters stagnate and the beavers move on. Old beaver ponds eventually drain and fill in to form "beaver meadows." A few beaver ponds remain as lakes, such as "Beaver Lake," in Yellowstone, created by a Pleistocene-era beaver dam that once measured seven hundred feet long (Ruedemann and Schoonmaker 1938:523).

There are many stories of giant beavers among Algonkian peoples in New England and Canada, and they seem to occur with the greatest frequency where glacial lakes were found. Topographical modifications are often attributed to transformer characters such as Gluskabe (Wôbanaki), Maushop (Wampanoag) and Nanbhozo (Anishinabe). Parts of the landscape that resemble particular animals or objects serve as mnemonic devices and tangible places that represent the proof of past actions. In one Malecite story, the transformer Gluskap chases a beaver across Canada, "to the St. Lawrence River where it built a great dam which created the Great Lakes" (Beck 1972:110). In a story from Nova Scotia, a shapeshifting shaman turns into a beaver (DeBlois 1990:87). Another story describes how Gluskap formed Nova Scotia while he was chasing a giant beaver. He left behind a broken canoe, a cooking pot, a moose, a dog, and beaver's entrails, all of which are visible as rocks and islands today (Fauset 1925:305).

In Native communities, certain stories were often considered to be the property of families or tribes, in part because those people knew best when and where to tell them. Some stories belonged to medicine societies, and were only told in certain seasons of the year, out of the belief that sickness or imbalance could be caused by the misuse of a story (Bruchac 1996). Among Algonkian peoples, creation stories were often recounted only during the wintertime. Lesson stories might be told whenever a child made a mistake. Stories attached to certain parts of the landscape often served as tribal origin stories, reminding people of the places they came from.

In the late 1740s, a Sulpician missionary named Father Jean-Claude Mathevet compiled a manuscript of Algonkian words from a group of Native people he identified as "Loups." Loup, meaning "wolf," was one of the common terms used by the French to identify the Native residents of Schaghticoke, NY, who were largely Pocumtuck, Nonotuck, Agawam, Woronoco, and Sokoki refugees from the Connecticut River Valley. Mathevet indicated that one group called themselves "8miskan8ag8iak" and said, "They call themselves this because they have their village on the edge of a very high ground" (Mathevet translated by Gordon Day 1975:52) The closest equivalent to this word in modern Abenaki, which is similar to the language of the Pocumtuck, is the word

"amiskwôlowôkoiak," which literally translates to mean "the people living at the tail of the beaver hill." (2) The Pocumtuck fort, constructed in 1648, is said, in local tradition, to have been built near the tail end of the Pocumtuck Range.

The English settlers at Pocumtuck, now Deerfield, who first heard these traditions during the 17th century planted their farms on land that had already been cleared and cultivated by the Pocumtuck, even though they described the region as "wilderness." They never recorded the name amiskwôlowôkoiak, although they did know about the Pocumtuck fort. They were, ironically, unaware of the deep-time history of glaciers and giant beavers.

In Native families, these stories were meaningful traditions that preserved useful knowledge. But New Englanders who were prejudiced against Indians spread the idea that all Native oral traditions were simply fanciful tales meant for children, with no sophisticated substance or meaning. The Eurocentric ignorance of the depth of knowledge behind such stories prevented their being recorded in more detail. For example, Henry David Thoreau, while on a trip to Maine in 1846, refused to listen to the deep-time history of Mount Kineo:

...the Indian repeated the tradition respecting this mountain's having been anciently a cow moose, - how a mighty Indian hunter, whose name I forget, succeeded in killing this queen of the moose tribe with great difficulty, while her calf was killed somewhere among the islands in Penobscot Bay; and to his eyes this mountain still had the form of the moose in a reclining posture, its precipitous side presenting the outline of her head. He told this at some length, though it did not amount to much....(Thoreau 1996:236).

Luckily, in a few places, some fragments of the indigenous oral traditions were preserved. In 1870, Phineas Field published the following version of the Pocumtuck beaver hill story:

I herewith furnish you with a record of such traditions as are distinct in my recollection, relating to the Indians...The Great Beaver, whose pond flowed over the whole basin of Mt. Tom, made havoc among the fish and when these failed he would come ashore and devour Indians. A pow-wow was held and Hobomock raised, who came to their relief. With a great stake in hand, he waded the river until he found the beaver, and so hotly chased him that he sought to escape by digging into the ground. Hobomock saw his plan and his whereabouts, and with his great stake jammed the beaver's head off. The earth over the beaver's head we call Sugarloaf, his body lies just to the north of it (Field 1890:63).

The correspondence between glacial events and the Pocumtuck story was apparently first noticed by local historians who were exposed to the work of 19th century geologists like Louis Agassiz and Edward Hitchcock (for whom the glacial lake was named). A version of the beaver story published in 1907 reads as follows:

The old squaw Mashilisk, mother of Wattewwaluncksin, marked Deerfield's south bound "To ye Lower Point of ye hill called Wequamps and by ye English Sugar Loafe Hill;" Mashilisk's Wequamps (the picturesque southern knob of Pocumtuck Range, an especial glory of Hatfield towering sheer above pretty Sunderland Ferry) is of high prehistoric dignity; [the prominent geologist] Agassiz says that the Connecticut River once occupied Deerfield Plain and swept forcefully around Sugar Loaf, evidence of its seething tracks being a huge "pot-hole" on the craggy slope. The Valley legend of the Great Beaver (East Mountain) as related by a Pocumtuck Indian tallies with the conclusion of Agassiz (Abbot 1907:163-64).

It's important to recognize the possibility that Pocumtuck people may also have shared this story with European colonists for a reason. Native oral traditions, when told over time in Native communities, reinforce peoples' knowledge of past events and demonstrate their sense of connection to place. Many stories also serve as lessons that illustrate how anti-social behaviors may be punished by supernatural forces - in this case, an unwanted intruder was killed by Obbamakwa. Native people today see a resonance between the actions of mythical creatures in the past who changed the landscape, and modern buildings and dams that have similarly altered or destroyed indigenous ecosystems. Power plants and dams are the modern-day equivalent of the giant beaver.

Most residents of Deerfield today know little about geoscience, megafauna, earthshaper traditions, Pocumtuck history or Algonkian language. But many people living within sight of the Pocumtuck Range are aware of the local tradition that the hill is shaped like a beaver.

In recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in Native oral traditions as entertainment. In Native communities, stories are a crucial part of the process of cultural preservation. Increasingly, scholars, scientists, and historians are showing more interest in these traditions, and learning how to recognize and respect Native forms of knowledge. Oral traditions like these offer a glimpse into the complex of Native social, biological, and spiritual relationships to other living beings, ecosystems and the landscape that are embedded within what seem like children's tales.

Footnotes:

1. The August 26, 1672 deed for lands around Deerfield notes that the hill is called "Wequamps & by ye English Sugarloafe hill." The Oct. 19, 1672 Hatfield deed names the brook that abuts the hill as "Weckwannuck or Sugar loafe Brook." (Wright 1905) Some writers have mistakenly interpreted the name "wequamps" as the proper name of the beaver, but in New

England Algonkian languages, beavers are usually "tamakwa" or "amiskwa." The root syllable "wehqu-" or "weckw-" in the words "wequomps" and "weckwannuck" indicates "at the point or extremity of," and appears in place names referencing some stopping point, i.e.: a road that ends at a river, the end of a trail, or the bluff end of a hill (Huden 1962).

2. Mathevet's transcription of the Abenaki language followed French conventions, writing the number "8" to indicate the nasalized "ohn" sound, which is also written, in Abenaki, as ô. In Western Abenaki (the closest dialect to Pocumtuck) the ending "agi" or "aki," combined with "ak" forms the animate plural to indicate people who live in a particular place, as in "Wabanakiak." The extra "-ô-" (ag8i or akôî) may have been added, in Mathevet's transcription, to indicate an absentative form, meaning, "used to live in a place."

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