ABENAKI HERITAGE

Presentation to Vermont State House - Leave Behind

CONTEXT

The W8banakiak (Abenaki) have a rich and radiant identity, culture and tradition, of which they can be proud. They carry this heritage in their blood and in their soul. They are the legitimate guardians of this heritage and have the duty to protect it and pass it to future generations.

The Abenaki Council of Odanak, the Abenaki Council of W8linak, and W8banaki (Abenaki Tribal Council) are concerned about the increasing number of individuals and groups who proclaim themselves to be Abenaki, as well as those who fraudulently claim to be spiritual guides, chiefs, and guardians of the culture and its traditions. Genealogical affiliation is the sole basis for an individual's legitimate right to bear the Abenaki identity and to claim its rights and privileges. In the case of the four so-called 'Abenaki' tribes in Vermont, 98% of their members have no Indigenous ancestry whatsoever, as demonstrated in Professor Leroux's article, *State Recognition and the Dangers of Race Shifting.*

In 2011 and 2012, the Vermont government was misled by the so-called 'Abenaki' tribes and recognized four Vermont-based groups as Abenaki - a decision made through a political process from which the Abenaki Nation and its legitimate representatives were largely excluded. The outcome and legitimacy of this decision have since been challenged by the W8banaki Nation, certain journalists, as well as several historians and academics.

Moreover, the group of 'Abenakis' of Missisquoi (formerly known as the St. Francis/Sokoki Band of Abenakis of Vermont) attempted to obtain federal recognition, which was denied in 2007, because "the available evidence does not demonstrate that the petitioner or its claimed ancestors descended from the St. Francis Indians of Quebec, a Missisquoi Abenaki entity in Vermont, any other Western Abenaki group, or an Indian entity from New England or Canada. Instead, the Proposed finding concluded that the petitioner is a collection of individuals of claimed but undemonstrated Indian ancestry "with little or no social or historical connection with each other before the early 1970's" (1).

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(1) Summary under the Criteria and Evidence for Final Determination against Federal Acknowledgment of the St. Francis/Sokoki Band of Abenakis of Vermont

The theft of identity, cultural and spiritual heritage by self-proclaimed groups or groups recognized by states such as Vermont is a major component of the loss of political influence of the W8banakiak on the ancestral territory, the Ndakina. This loss of influence over the territory has a direct impact on its occupation and use for traditional activities, such as fishing and hunting, as well as the practice of crafts and the trade that goes with it. They speak on behalf of the Nation without any legitimate right to do so.

In this sense, self-proclamation and recognition without regard to the genealogical affiliation the individuals or groups in question, like it is the case for the above-mentioned groups in Vermont, must be unequivocally denounced.

Identity theft, whether in Quebec or Vermont, has had profound consequences for the Abenaki Nation. Individuals have claimed Indigenous identity based on distant ancestors, while ignoring or downplaying the historical and cultural realities of Indigenous peoples. The impacts include misappropriation of Abenaki heritage, institutional fraud and distortion of history.

The event "*What if we got it wrong?*" serves as a starting point for an honest and rigorous reflection on the recognition of Indigenous groups. Correcting this mistake is essential to restoring the cultural and historical integrity of the Abenakis and paving the way for a future based on truth and respect.





ABOUT DARRYL LEROUX

Associate Professor at the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa. For the past decade, he has been studying the social, political, and legal dynamics that have led white people in the U.S. and Canada to claim Indigenous identities. His book, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity*, was published in 2019 and translated into French in 2022 (*Ascendance détournée*).

ABOUT DAVID MASSELL

David Massell has been a member of the University of Vermont Department of History since 1997. He specializes in Canadian-American, environmental and Indigenous history. He directs the Canadian Studies Program and is a member of the Environmental Program.

ABOUT RICHARD WITTING

Richard Witting is a Vermonter and historian, his research has focused on both modern Abenaki history in Vermont, and on the related subjects of Eugenics, disability, and institutionalization in Vermont in the 20th century. His published work looks at the victims of those who were sexually sterilized under Vermont's 1931 law titled an *Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization*.

TO LEARN MORE:

- www.AbenakiHeritage.org
- unsettlingvermont
- State Recognition and the Dangers of Race Shifting by Darryl Leroux
- The awkward truth about Vermont Abenaki | David Massell | Vtdigger
- What are Pretendians? |NDN POV | TVO Today
- Why are Abenaki Nation Challenging the legitimacy of Vermont's state recognized tribes? | Brave Little State Podcast | Vermont Public

ABOUT THE ABENAKI COUNCIL OF ODANAK

The Abenaki Council of Odanak is the governmental and administrative body of the Abenaki community of Odanak, in Quebec. Responsible for managing social services, health, education and economic development, the Council plays an essential role in the daily life of the community. The Council is also actively involved in the preservation and promotion of Abenaki culture and traditions, ensuring that this rich heritage is passed on to future generations.

Learn more:

ABOUT ABENAKI HERITAGE

Abenaki Heritage is an organization founded by the Abenaki Councils of Odanak and W8linak, as well as by W8banaki, the Nation's Tribal Council. The latter, founded in 1979, features three main elements in its mission: representation, development and administration. Through Abenaki Heritage, the political representatives of Odanak and W8linak, supported by W8banaki, are responsible for the ongoing mobilization campaign targeting its members residing in the United States.

Learn more:

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First and foremost, thank you all for attending in this important meeting, and taking time to listen to us.

K'wlipai8 w8banakik Ndakina (Welcome to our territory). Wliwni to Representative Troy Headrick for giving us an opportunity to be heard. I appreciate you taking the lead within the State House.

As you may know, pitawbagw, Lake Champlain, is a historical landmark for us, it is the place of our birth. The origins of the Abenaki Nation permeate these surroundings. Since time immemorial, what is now called the State of Vermont, has been part of the Ndakina, our unceded territory. We continue to trace and honor these lands as the place where our ancestors formed our legacy as we continue to restore our history told by the traces of their stories.

As Chief of the Abenaki First Nation in Odanak, protecting the legacy of our ancestors is a duty driven by the necessity to make right the wrongs in telling our history. We have to keep in mind that we have a responsibility towards the next 7 generations to protect and restore our rightful heritage. They need to heal the shame imposed by a history that discounted the value of our people's history and world view. They need to know about the courage and resilience of their ancestors, and that that is the blood that flows in through their hearts.

I would like to apologize for not being able to attend today's meeting. With the major changes in our world right now, I'm in western Canada dealing with critical issues affecting us in current times. However, my absence does not mean that this meeting is less important. I am sure that our Councilors Jaques Watso, Florence Benedict, our director Daniel Nolett, his assistant Suzie O'Bomsawin and our invested future leaders Sigwanis Lachapelle and Isaak Lachapelle-Gill will represent us efficiently. They will lead this discussion with their heart in a respectful way. Respect being one of our core values as Abenaki people. I invite you to meet in a likeminded way.

I would like to thank Darryl Leroux, Richard Witting and David Massell for participating in today's discussion. I am sure that they will provide valuable information to consider in the recognition process of four groups in Vermont. As Chief, having been involved in politics for much of my life, but in office for the last 15 years, I am understanding the challenges of ancestry and recognition. Sometimes in politics we can be misled, having to make decisions without always knowing all the facts and consequences of these decisions. Politics requires us to have the courage and humility to rethink and repair the faulty system in which we can create damaging experiences for the people we serve. In the words of Maya Angelou; "when we know better, we can do better.".

Finally, I urge you all to open your minds and hearts, listen to our voices and ask yourself: What if we got it all wrong?

In peace and friendship

Chief Rick O'Bomsawin

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MAP OF NDAKINA

