



PRESS RELEASE

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THE REAL ETHNOCIDE IS SELF-INDIGENIZATION: THE ABENAKIS OF ODANAK AND W8LINAK RESPOND TO THE SELF-PROCLAIMED 'ABENAKI' GROUPS OF VERMONT

Ndakina, May 8, 2023 - The truth, although hard to swallow at times, is always preferable to good intentions. The Councils of the Abenaki of Odanak and W8linak, representatives of the Abenaki People, wish to rectify mistruths put forward in a recent op-ed by Rich Holschuh, Don Stevens, and Vera Sheehan, titled: ["Abenaki Alliance: Is Vermont Being Lobbied for Nuremberg Laws?"](#), which accuses the First Nations of Odanak and W8linak of using Vermont's media and public education system to lobby for Nuremberg Laws — directly comparing our Indigenous Sovereign Nations to the Nazis during World War II. This accusation is both ironic and deeply disturbing to us.

For many years we have asked these “tribal” leaders in Vermont, who claim to be “Abenaki”: *who are your ancestors?* As we are the descendents of the original First People of “Vermont,” if they are our kin, we wish to know how we are related to them and reconnect. This is a simple question among all Indigenous people when you meet kin. We, representing the [Abenaki of Odanak and W8linak](#), do not deny that descendants of Abenaki People live in Vermont, or for that matter, in New Hampshire, Maine, New York State, or elsewhere. For the most part, we know who they are as we have always kept in touch with our relations. If we do not, we are eager to learn and verify their descendancy and connection to us. [For many years we supported the Vermont groups](#), believing these facts would be forthcoming. Nearly fifty years since the groups began to form, we have not received an answer.

Seeking answers elsewhere, the Council of Odanak and W8linak have researched the genealogies of Mr. Holschuh and “Chief” Don Stevens, among other leaders of the so-called “Vermont Abenaki.” These have been corroborated by multiple independent specialists on behalf of CBC News, forthcoming scholarly articles, and the Abenaki Nations of Odanak and W8linak. All clearly demonstrate no Abenaki ancestry. Despite these individuals’ repeated claims of being Indigenous, Mr. Holschuh, who chairs the Vermont Commission of Native American Affairs (VCNAA), has exclusively Euro-American ancestry; he has no Mi’kmaq or Wendat ancestors as he has claimed. “Chief” Don Stevens, for his part, has mixed European ancestry and a fifth generation Black Canadian ancestor with the surname Phillips, which he claims to be related to Chief Philip of New Hampshire. Chief Philip’s descendants are not related to Stevens. The same lack of ancestry applies to the Indigenous identity claims of Vera “Longtoe” (Lanctot) Sheehan and those of the other leaders of Vermont’s state-recognized “Abenaki tribes.”

These authors equate us, the Abenaki people descended from the [Original Peoples of Northwest New England and Southern Québec](#), with Nazis, and accuse us of committing “lateral violence” and “ethnocide” by telling our story. This comes ironically from a group who has spent decades

trying to replace us through historical revisionism and literally lobbying the Vermont government for their recognition as Native American Tribes (2010-2012) – [a process from which we were excluded](#). These accusations are a strategic distraction which undermine the sovereign rights of Indigenous Nations to define our belonging and citizenship. As Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate (Dakota) scholar Kim TallBear stated in last month's [UVM conference](#) on “Indigenous Sovereignty, [Race-Shifting](#), and University Responsibility,” white settlers redefining Indigeneity is the last of “[eight stages of white settler-colonial denial](#)” and a final form of colonization, wherein the very core of what makes us Indigenous is stolen.

Mirroring the finding of the [VT Attorney General in 2003](#), as well as [The Bureau of Indian Affairs’ final determination against Federal recognition in 2007](#), French-Canadian sociologist and genealogical researcher Darryl Leroux has revealed that the founding families of these “tribes” – St. Laurent, St. Francis, Hoague, Colomb, and Hakey – descend from French-Canadians who immigrated to rural Northwest Vermont in the 19th century from agricultural regions north of Lake Champlain.

Like many French-Canadians, some of the Vermont group members share a distant Indigenous ancestor from the early 1600s – a non-Abenaki woman named Marie Sylvestre. **This does not equate to kinship within our or any Indigenous community**, and does not entitle one to speak on behalf of Indigenous people. Heavily “identifying” with a single distant Indigenous ancestor from among thousands who were white settlers is not the same as adoptees or disenrolled relatives “reconnecting,” it is race-shifting. The State of Vermont has supported white supremacy and the theft of Indigenous identity by recognizing such people as “Abenaki.”

The criteria for Vermont State-recognition used [vague language about having a “connection” to Native people and included “other methods” as sufficient substitutes for genealogy](#). Applicants’ “other methods” were reviewed by a panel housed within the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs, and six of the seven reviewers had long affiliations with these “tribes” – a conflict of interest in direct violation of the legislation which states that [“No member of the review panel may be a member of the commission or affiliated with or on the tribal rolls of the applicant.”](#) The legislature’s “measured consideration” described in Holschuh, Stevens, and Sheehan’s article was a process of self-Indigenization, self-recognition, and obfuscation of readily available historical and genealogical evidence. We would like to ask the government of Vermont: why would you recognize a group as Abenaki that [your own Attorney General’s Report](#) had found to be non-Indigenous just seven years prior?

The State of Vermont recently formed a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address harms caused by the State to marginalized communities. The state repeated its mistake by appointing Melody Mackin, a self-identified “Elnu Abenaki” who has no Abenaki ancestry, to this powerful Commission. The first step to Reconciliation is Truth. How can a process of truth-telling be stewarded by someone who is personally invested in a decades-old lie that actively harms the state’s First People?

About Abenaki Heritage

The Grand Conseil de la Nation Waban-Aki Inc. (GNCWA), founded in 1979, is the Tribal Council that brings together the Abenaki bands of Odanak and W8linak. From the eight objectives stated in the letters patent of the Waban-Aki Corporation Inc., the mandated committee has identified its mission’s three main elements: Representation, Development, and Administration. The political representatives of Odanak and W8linak, supported by the GCNWA, are responsible for the ongoing mobilization campaign directed at its members residing in the United States.

Source: Abenaki Heritage \ <https://abenakiheritage.org/>

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