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N'dakinna: Our Homeland...Still – Additional Examples of Abenaki Presence in New Hampshire

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“N'dakinna: Our Homeland...Still – Additional Examples of Abenaki Presence in New Hampshire”

Michael Harris

Project URL: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/8b910ac77fca48e5bcd430d508d31274>

The land we now know today as “New Hampshire” is just a small part of N’Dakinna, the large traditional homeland of the Abenaki people. The history and continued presence of the Abenaki in this land is visible through the place names peppered throughout the region that have Abenaki etymologies. I created an ArcGIS Story Map, which allows viewers to interactively explore the state, of several place names of Abenaki origin throughout New Hampshire and their possible meanings and etymologies. Also included are three miscellaneous sites that are of importance to Abenaki history, as well as a map showing where Indigenous Peoples’ Day has been adopted in New Hampshire. I chose to do this project because of my background in geography and also because as a UNH student who is not from New Hampshire, I knew little about the Indigenous place names in the state and wanted to learn more.

I have always found it curious that although colonizers tried their hardest to eliminate Indigenous people, culture, and language, they willingly adopted the names that Indigenous people gave to some places. The continued existence and usage of these place names are a testament to survivance – a word Indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor coined to describe the survival and resistance of Indigenous peoples (Vizenor 2000). This is because these are some of the few words that resisted the onslaught of colonialism, and yet so many people rarely even think about how these words we use to describe places are Abenaki. They are just another familiar part of the local lexicon and the Indigenous history and presence in New Hampshire is ignored by too many people.

Throughout this project, I thought about the concept of survivance and how language revitalization efforts are a testament to this. The Abenaki people refused to let their language die entirely. Alternative spellings were encountered during my research that were closer to how the Abenaki people actually pronounced the words. These new spellings are another example of survivance - resisting the Euro-American corruption of the spellings and pronunciations.

I downloaded an outline of NH towns from the Census Bureau, but decided to trace out the lakes and rivers myself. I did this so that I could explore and virtually experience the landscape on the map, and to see if I could determine why these places may have been named as such. It is easy when mapping to fall into the very technical Western understandings of space and place. I tried to employ the Indigenous descriptions of places to take part in participatory mapping, which involves incorporating local knowledge and exploration with the more modern cartography techniques (see Herlihy and Knapp 2003). By doing so, I hoped to gain more insight into Indigenous ways of thinking about the environment. One of the places referred to a “shelter,” which made me think about how possibly this was considered a safe, communal place to shelter from the elements - a different concept of land usage than the strict individual ownership of the Euro-American worldview. While tracing the lakes and rivers, I looked for clues - and I was amazed when I was tracing Lake Sunapee, I suddenly saw the shape of a goose’s head at the main harbor. One of the possible translations was “wild goose”!

This project is important because learning the possible etymologies of Indigenous place names are a first step for people living in settler colonial states to recognize the historic and continued Native presence in the region they inhabit. It can lead to questions about how pre-contact Native people interacted with the landscape and had different ways of knowing and

understanding concepts like resource allocation, natural processes, land ownership, etc., than the now-dominant Western school of thought.

Recognizing the Indigenous presence of a place is only the first step, however. Learning about place names and history can lead to questions about the Indigenous peoples of a place today. Where do they live? What is the status of their language and traditional religion? What have non-Native people done to try to acknowledge and correct historical injustices? All in all, reflecting on a place's Indigenous heritage can lead to greater awareness and appreciation.

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