

Native Americans/Native Vermonters

Background

The name Abenaki means “People of the Dawnland.” According to their creation story, the Abenaki have always lived in Vermont. Archaeological records show that they have lived here for at least 10,000 years. The name Abenaki refers to many different groups of Native Americans who speak the Algonquian language. However, not all Algonquian speakers are Abenaki.

The Abenaki are one of the five tribes of the group known as the Wabanaki Confederacy. The other four are the Micmac, the Pasmaquoddy, the Pensobscot, and the Maliseet. The tribes of the Wabanaki Confederacy are spread across New England and Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and southern Quebec.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Abenakis in what is now Vermont lived in small family-based groups, gathering in larger groups to hunt, fish, plant, conduct ceremonies, or prepare for war. They lived in dwellings with log frames and bark coverings. They hunted game such as deer, turkeys, and moose, caught fish, and gathered nuts and berries. They made bows and arrows, fish weirs, hoes, and other tools from wood, bone, and stone.

The Abenaki s also farmed, growing the “three sisters”—corn, beans, and squash. Abenaki traders brought in goods such as shells, metal, and stones from Native Americans living on the Great Lakes, the Atlantic Coast, and the Gulf of Mexico. Relations between the Abenakis and other Native American groups such as the Hurons and the Iroquois, occasionally erupted in warfare.

The arrival of Europeans in Vermont in the 1600s changed Abenaki life. Abenaki trappers began to trade the skins of beavers and other animals to Europeans for goods such as metal axes, cooking pots, cloth, and guns. This brought short-term benefits to the Abenakis—and to the Europeans, who profited from the fur trade and learned survival strategies from the Abenakis. Eventually, however, the Abenakis became dependent upon European goods. The need to trade for them caught the Abenakis up in a cycle of commerce that gradually moved them away from their traditional ways.

Diseases brought from Europe, such as smallpox and measles, took a terrible toll on the Abenaki people. So did war. The Abenakis fought back against incursions by English settlers, and fought on the side of the French in battles against the English over trade routes and territory. The Abenakis also defended themselves against the Iroquois, who raided Abenaki villages using guns provided to them by Europeans. By the late 1700s, many of Vermont’s Abenakis had died of disease or in battle, had migrated to Canada, or had blended



Abenakis living in a French mission village on the St. Lawrence River in New France (later Quebec) in the mid-1700s.

City of Montreal

in with other Native American groups.

For hundreds of years afterward, the Abenakis remaining in Vermont suffered from discrimination, and many hid their heritage as a result. Today many Abenakis proudly display their cultural traditions, and work to keep them alive.

The Abenakis have long worked for official tribal recognition from the state of Vermont and the United States government. In 2006, Vermont officially recognized the Abenakis as a People, but not as a Tribe. In 2011, Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin signed legislation that gave official recognition to two groups of the Abenakis, the Nulhegan band of the Northeast Kingdom and the Elnu tribe of southern Vermont.



Jesse Larocque, Abenaki computer technician and basket weaver, featured in this segment.

About This Segment

The Abenaki, by Nora Jacobson and Jesse Larocque, features interviews with a number of Abenaki residents of Vermont. Their conversations range from their cultural heritage to the prejudice that caused many Abenakis of earlier generations to deny that heritage, the connection of Abenaki people to the land and its resources, and how the Abenaki have blended in with other ethnic groups in Vermont. Traditional basket-maker Larocque takes viewers on a walk in the forest, where he demonstrates how to make a simple birch bark basket. Later, he demonstrates how to cut splints for basketmaking from an ash log.

Before Viewing

- What do you know about Native Americans who lived in Vermont long ago?
- How did peoples of long ago make their living off the land?
- How do you think Native American people in Vermont today make their livings?

Vocabulary

discrimination: treating a person unfairly because of their race, gender, ethnic background, or other trait

intervale: land along a river that was a traditional place for the Abenaki to harvest wild plants and game and grow crops. In the Abenaki language, *Pasahana* refers to a long, narrow valley on a river running east and west. *Wolhana* refers to a long, narrow valley on a river running north and south.

For the Abenakis, the intervales were a “common pot” of resources. The river flooded there every year and brought nutrients to plants. Herbs and berries were harvested there. Animals that came in search of food were killed for food and their skins. Clay deposited there could be used to make pottery.

After Viewing

- Why does Jesse Larocque call the forest the grocery store, the pharmacy, and the hardware store?
- Why have some older Abenaki people chosen to avoid telling others about their Native American identity?
- What surprised you most about the lives of present-day Abenakis?

Grades 4-5

A Simple Basket In the video, Jesse Larocque shows how to make a simple basket using a piece of birch bark and ash “clothespins.” You can make a basket like this yourself. First, find a place where you can harvest some birch bark. Make sure to get permission from the landowner first. Then form a basket as Jesse does in the video. You can use clothespins to hold the corners together. Finally, pour some water in your basket and see if it does the job. Then, in a group discussion, compare this basket to modern water containers such as water bottles. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Connect past with present (3-4:8; 5-6:8); Human interaction with the environment (3-4:12; 5-6:12); Understand how cultures change (3-4:13; 5-6:13); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (3-4:18; 5-6:18)

Questions and Answers Imagine you are a French explorer traveling with Samuel de Champlain on his first visit to Vermont in 1609. Write a list of questions you would like to ask the Abenaki people you meet. Have a partner imagine he or she is an Abenaki of that time. Your partner can write questions he or she would want to ask a French explorer. When you have written your questions, exchange them for your partner’s. Each partner can then do research to find answers to the other’s questions. First, make a list of possible resources. Then do your research and write down answers to the questions and share the answers with your class. Be sure to identify the sources for each answer.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (3-4:1; 5-6:1); Design research (3-4:3; 5-6:3); Conduct research (3-4:4; 5-6:4); Communicate findings (3-4:7; 5-6:7); Understand how humans interpret history (3-4:9; 5-6:9); Understand how cultures change (3-4:13; 5-6:13) Understand issues of human interdependence (3-4: 16; 5-6:16)

An Abenaki Legend Abenaki stories were used to teach children valuable lessons about life. One such legend, “Gluskabe Changes Maple Syrup,” teaches an important lesson about the value of hard work. Another, “Gluskonba and the Four Wishes,” helps people learn that getting what you wished for is not always a good thing. You can read some of these stories in collections of Native American stories online at native-languages.org/abenaki-legends.htm. Choose one of the stories and rewrite it, then create illustrations to go along with the legend.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (3-4:1; 5-6:1); Design research (3-4:3; 5-6:3); Conduct research (3-4:4; 5-6:4); Communicate findings (3-4:7; 5-6:7); Human interaction with the environment (3-4:12; 5-6:12)

Grades 6-8

Abenaki Dictionary In this video segment, people talk about other names for Lake Champlain and even the Abenaki tribe itself. Do some research online to find some Abenaki words for people, places, things, and animals. Then create an illustrated Abenaki dictionary and use it to learn some words in Abenaki. Be sure to point out words that are in common use in Vermont today.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Understand how cultures change (5-6:13; 7-8:13)

Image of an Encounter Artist Bea Nelson makes wonderfully detailed drawings of encounters between French explorers and Abenaki peoples long ago. Do some research to find out more about these early encounters. Then make some historical drawings of your own. You might, for example, draw a scene of Abenakis trading furs for goods such as steel axes or cooking pots. For ideas about clothing, do some

research or use Bea Nelson’s drawings as inspiration. Under your drawing, provide some information about what is happening in the scene, and how events like it impacted life in Vermont.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Connect past with present (5-6:8; 7-8:8); Understand how humans interpret history (5-6:9; 7-8:9)

Interview with an Herbalist In this segment, Abenaki basketmaker Jesse Larocque refers to the Vermont forest as “the pharmacy.” Long ago, Abenaki people used the forest as a source of plants for herbal medicine. Today, many herbalists use these same plants to practice healing. Do some research to find an herbalist working locally. Prepare some questions to ask the herbalist, then invite him or her to visit your classroom for a video interview. After shooting the interview, have the herbalist take your class on an “herb walk” in the outdoors and show you some herbs that can be used as medicine. Film the herb walk and combine it with the interview to make a short film about herbal healing. Be sure to compare how ancient people used herbs to how herbalists use them today.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (5-6:1; 7-8:1); Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:3); Human interaction with the environment (5-6:12; 7-8:12); Understand how cultures change (5-6:13; 7-8:13); Interaction/interdependence between humans, environment, and economy (5-6:18; 7-8:18)

Grades 9-12

Traditional and Contemporary The Abenaki built homes with log frames and a bark exterior. A family might build a smaller home shaped somewhat like a teepee. A larger group might build a longhouse—a rectangular-shaped home that could hold many people. Do research to find out more about how these dwellings were constructed, then build a model of them. Put your model on display where others can view it. Then make a model of a Vermont home today. Create a presentation that shows similarities and differences between traditional Abenaki dwellings and houses of today. Be sure your presentation shows the different ways in which people have used natural resources, including land.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Connect past with present (9-10:8; 11-12:8); Human interaction with the environment (9-10:12; 11-12:12); Understand how cultures change (9-10:13; 11-12:13)

Gaining Recognition The efforts of the Abenaki to gain tribal recognition have taken many years. Still, some people believe that the Abenaki should not receive recognition by the government of Vermont or that of the United States. Do some research to find out more about the Abenaki quest for recognition. Be sure to examine the facts, as well as the opinions of both sides. Then take a position—should the Abenaki be given recognition, or shouldn’t they? Present your opinion in the form of an editorial. Be sure your argument is well supported.

Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations

Initiate an inquiry (9-10:1; 11-12:1); Develop a hypothesis (9-10:2; 11-12:2); Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Connect past with present (9-10:8; 11-12:8); Understand how humans interpret history (9-10:9; 11-12:9); Understand how cultures change (9-10:13; 11-12:13)

On the Road

The James B. Petersen Gallery of Native American Cultures at the University of Vermont’s Fleming Museum brings together more than 2000 objects that date from c. 800 CE to the present and represent

diverse culture groups from across North and South America. Museum Explorations are the most popular choice for teachers wishing to make the most of their visit. They include activities in the galleries as well as an art project related to the exhibition. Museum Explorations are two hours in length.

The Fleming also has an Abenaki artifact kit that can be rented for the use schools, libraries, and home schoolers. The kit contain objects, curriculum activities, and a variety of instructional materials that engage students in hands-on learning and support different learning styles. The Fleming is located in Burlington, Vermont. For more information about the museum and its programs, visit it online at uvm.edu/~fleming.

The Vermont History Museum in Montpelier offers students guided tours and self-guided tours of its permanent exhibit, “Freedom & Unity: One Ideal, Many Stories.” This exhibit explores 350 years of Vermont’s history, from Abenaki life to European settlement to the present time, including a recreation of an Abenaki longhouse. The Museum also offers “You Be the Historian.” During this program, students study documents and artifacts from Vermont’s past to learn about the skills used by historians. Many classes combine a visit to the Museum with a tour of the State House or a program at the Vermont Supreme Court. For more information about the Vermont History Museum, visit the Vermont Historical Society online at vermonthistory.org.

Career Corner: Historical Illustrator

When filmmakers need to recreate a historical scene, they often do a reenactment with costumed actors. Sometimes, however, they call upon the services of a historical illustrator. A historical illustrator needs artistic talent. But what is also required is a knowledge of history that will make the clothing, tools, and even dwellings in an illustration look authentic. Historical illustrators often use old photographs or illustrations as a source of their work. Because of this, they are often excellent researchers. If you like to draw and are interested in history, this might be a great job for you.

RESOURCES

Links

The Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi St. Francis/Sokoki Band: abenakination.org/

The Elnu Tribe of the Abenaki: elnuabenakitribe.org

The Koasek Traditional Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation: koasekabenaki.org

Abenaki Legends from Native-Languages.org: native-languages.org/abenaki-legends.htm

Nedoba.org: A site for exploring and sharing the Wabanaki history of interior New England

Oyate.org: An online source of books about Native Americans for children

The Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont: uvm.edu/~fleming

Books

Brooks, Lisa. *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Bruchac, Joseph. *The Wind Eagle and Other Abenaki Stories*. Greenfield Review Press, 1985.

Bruchac, Joseph. *The Winter People*. Puffin, 2004

Calloway, Colin G. *The Abenaki*. Indians of North America Series, Frank W. Porter III, General Editor. Chelsea House Publishers, 1989.

McBride, Bunny. *Women of the Dawn*. Bison Books, 2001.

Tsonakwa, Gerard Rancourt and Wapita'ska Yolai'kia. *Seven Eyes, Seven Legs: Supernatural Stories of the Abenaki*. Kiva Publishing, 2001.

Wiseman, Frederick Matthew. *The Voice of the Dawn: An Autohistory of the Abenaki Nation*. University Press New England, 2001.