

The Long Journey Home

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The Return of New York's Papscanee Island to the Stockbridge-Munsee Community

A Story Map project by the **Stockbridge-Munsee Community** and the **Open Space Institute**.

Introduction

For thousands of years, the Mohican people inhabited an island along the Mahhicannituck, known today as the Hudson River.

Now, almost four centuries after their ancestors' painful removal from the region, Papscanee Island is being returned to the Stockbridge-Munsee Community.

Named after a former chief, Sachem Papsickene, the Papscanee Island Nature Preserve is located just 10 minutes from downtown Albany in Rensselaer County, New York.

An artist rendering of Papscanee Island, circa 1600. Because the land was protected from development by OSI, the property remains much as it was when Sachem Papsickene lived there. (*Painting entitled "Pap-scan-ee" by Len Tantillo*)

Learn more about the history of Papscanee Island and the Stockbridge-Munsee Community; and how the Open Space Institute protected Papscanee Island from development before returning it to the Mohican Nation.

Video by Steve Gong.



'Our land is intrinsic to who we are, it's our identity. The greatest gift is to have our land back.' - *Bonney Hartley, Stockbridge Munsee-Mohican Community Historic Preservation Manager*

The Long Journey

Long ago, ancestors of the Mohican Nation settled along a river whose ocean tides reached far inland and nourished fertile soils. In time, the people came to call themselves the “Muhheaconneok,” meaning, “People of the Waters That Are Never Still.”

After the arrival of Europeans, pandemic and violent conflict brought on by colonization killed countless individuals, and land theft became widespread. European attempts to “purchase” Mohican lands were incompatible with the Mohican worldview, in which land stewardship was shared and gift exchange was a diplomatic protocol.

The first permanent Dutch settlement in New York, located in the present-day city of Albany and just miles from Papscanee Island. (*"Fort Orange, 1635" by Len Tantillo*)

On April 13, 1637 leaders of the Mohican community signed a deed transferring Papscanee Island to Dutch diamond merchant Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, a founding member of the Dutch West India Company. When the land was immediately settled and farmed by Dutch tenants, the Mohican community learned that the Dutch intended that their ownership of the island was to be exclusive.



'Because of our traditional views of shared land ownership, our ancestors thought they were participating in a gift exchange and being hospitable to neighbors asking for use of Papscanee Island. They thought they could always return to the land.' - *Bonney Hartley, Stockbridge Munsee-Mohican Community Historic Preservation Manager*

With the loss of their island, and subsequent process of removal from what remained of their territory in New York's Hudson Valley, the Mohican community continued to experience an odyssey of land dispossession.

1

1730s

From New York's **Hudson Valley (1)**, the Mohicans relocated to territory along the Housatonic River in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Here they became known as the Stockbridge Tribe. They set up homes and infrastructure including a gristmill and schoolhouse.

2

1770s

Though they fought on the side of the Americans in the Revolutionary War, the warriors returned home in diminished numbers to find that missionaries and settlers had taken over their land. Additionally, although the members of the Mohican Nation were supposed to have equal representation in local government, increasingly they were being excluded from key votes. Shortly after, they were removed from their **Stockbridge, Massachusetts (2)** home.

3

1770s - 1820s

Members of the Oneida Indian Nation invited the Stockbridge-Munsee Community to live on their New York lands, in what became known as **New Stockbridge, New York (3)**. Again, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community tried to put down roots, reconstructing a school, sowing crops, and building homes. Soon, however, tensions between non-Indians and Indians over the land began to build, and New York settlers began a series of illegal land grabs.

4

1820s

As settlement pressure increased in New York, a portion of the Mohican community struck West to land promised to them on the White River near **Muncie, Indiana (4)**. Arriving in the new territory, they found the land had already been taken by American settlers. The community members, together with their Munsee relations, moved to rejoin the Stockbridge community in Wisconsin.

5

1820s – 1850s

The remainder of the Stockbridge Mohican community secured lands in Wisconsin, moving three times until finally finding land in **Shawano County (5)**, where the community remains today, more than 150 years later.

Demonstrating a remarkable resilience and ability to survive, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community has remained largely intact – carefully passing down a rich history and maintaining their cultural inheritance.

The community has also remained connected to Papscanee Island, returning to the land and other cultural locations time and again throughout the centuries.

Long Journey Home to Papscanee Island

The video above is an authorized excerpt from a Wisconsin PBS interview, adapted by Mackenzie Hastings. A full version of the video can be found [here](#).

Saving Papscanee Island

After its acquisition from the Mohican Nation, Papscanee Island passed through the hands of Dutch, English, and finally American farmers, with its rich soils continuously under cultivation.

By the 1990s, however, a new threat loomed with the expansion of the nearby coastal industrial port. In response, the Open Space Institute stepped in and purchased the property through a series of transactions totaling half a million dollars.



'While we recognize that our human histories and experiences are dramatically different, our love and careful stewardship of Papscanee Island is shared with the Mohican Nation.'

- Kim Elliman, Open Space Institute President & CEO

The Open Space Institute, through the dedication of Dan Luciano, then partnered with Rensselaer County to create the 156-acre Papscanee Island Nature Preserve, with the county managing the Preserve for more than two decades. It was during this time that the Open Space Institute's collaboration with the Stockbridge-Munsee Community took shape.

What was once an island is now a peninsula, due to siltation from local railroad and port projects. In recognition of its history, the property still retains the name "Papscanee Island."

Today, more than 380 years later, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community has resumed ownership of Papscanee Island.

Under its new ownership by the Stockbridge-Munsee Community, Papscanee Island will continue to be maintained as a nature preserve.



‘The Open Space Institute’s return of the property is a celebration and acknowledgment of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community’s rich history, cultural resilience, and land stewardship during and beyond this important moment of historical reckoning.’ – Kim Elliman, Open Space Institute President & CEO

A conservation easement permanently protects the land, and an arrangement with Rensselaer County and the Rensselaer Land Trust will keep the trails maintained and open for public enjoyment.

Papscanee Island Nature Preserve

Featuring wetlands and deciduous woodlands, Papscanee Island Nature Preserve serves as habitat for federally endangered species including the Karner Blue Butterfly and the Indiana Bat. Species critically imperiled in New York State including the Northern Bog Violet and the Green Rock-Cress have also been identified on or nearby the property.

L - R: Karner Blue Butterfly, Green Rock-Cress, Northern Bog Violet. (Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission; Flickr user [Jerry R. Oldenettel](#); Flickr user [Joshua Mayer](#))

Seasonal vernal pools at Papscanee Island Nature Preserve support several amphibian species. The land also provides habitat for fish and other wildlife, including ducks, geese, deer, rabbit, and fox.

Papscanee Island vernal pond in the rain. (Footage by Charlie Burgess, OSI)

Parts of Papscanee Island Nature Preserve serve as the northernmost wetland area for the Hudson River estuary, and the land is critical to maintaining water quality and filtering rainwater before it enters the Hudson River.

Archeology of Papscanee Island

In 2009, Papscanee Island was identified as eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places because of the historical and archaeological significance of the site; and for its direct association with its long-ago chief, Sachem Papsickene.

Because the land was permanently protected from development, the property remains much as it was when Sachem Papsickene and his people lived there.

Now, with Papscanee Island under their ownership, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community can move ahead with an application to list the land on the National Register and as a federally designated Traditional Cultural Property.

Members of the Mohican Nation, the Open Space Institute, and the New York State Museum visit the property. (Photos by Steve Gong)

Other efforts to document the land's rich history are well underway. In 2018, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community and the Open Space Institute, in partnership with the New York State Museum, completed an archaeological survey on a portion of the property using non-destructive geophysical techniques like magnetic susceptibility and ground-penetrating radar.

In addition to offering new insights into the Mohican Community's history on the property, this research is helping scientists better understand the lives and roles of enslaved people during the 17th and 18th centuries as part of the New York State Museum's Archaeology of Slavery in the Hudson Valley project. Learn more about the effort [here](#).

The Stockbridge-Munsee Community also continues to fiercely defend the lands near Papscanee Island, which remain under threat from developments like highways, industrial sites, and oil pipelines. Learn more about their efforts [here](#).

Stockbridge-Munsee Community Today

Today, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community is a federally recognized Indian tribe situated on reservation lands in Shawano County, Wisconsin.

Approximately half of the 1,500 members currently live on or near the reservation, where they have their own government and police force but are also U.S. citizens.



"We have always been a very political people... never afraid to stand up for what we believe is right." - *Kimberly Vele, Stockbridge-Munsee Community Former President*

Today, members of the Mohican Nation live throughout the United States and in other parts of the world, making their careers as lawyers, doctors, teachers, and scientists.

Many members of the Mohican community still hold onto their indigenous beliefs and traditions. They publish books about their leaders and ask young adults to record the memories of older residents. This way, they will have these stories for generations to come.

Members of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community are active in state and local politics. They celebrate their heritage and their ancestors, while looking toward the future. (Images from the Stockbridge-Munsee Community [Facebook page](#))

The Stockbridge-Munsee Community's Arvid E. Miller Library Museum, located in Wisconsin regularly holds online educational events that are open to the public. More information can be found on the museum's [Facebook](#) page.

Information in the section above was largely excerpted from The Mohicans by Aileen Weintraub and Shirley W. Dunn, Fleischmanns, NY, Purple Mountain Press, 2008.

Learn About the 'Land-Back' Movement

Land, and the access to land, is a basic human right. The land sustains, nurtures, and shelters us.

Yet for centuries across North America and beyond, land ownership and related practices have been translated into power and used to oppress, deny rights, and segregate.

Here in the United States, our nation's history is littered with instances of land practices and policies used to diminish people's rights and wield power over them, resulting in systemic racism and economic disparity.

Now, a new movement is underway, to reunite indigenous peoples with their lands that were taken from them. Read more about this effort, and how you can get involved:

- **'Piecing together a broken heart': Native Americans rebuild territories they lost.** Article in *The Guardian*, February 2021
- **Native Land Map** of Indigenous lands
- **Land Grab University**, a *High Country News* report about the little-known injustice at the heart of the US Land Grant University system

Visit

Papscanee Island Nature Preserve is a 156-acre public preserve situated along the Hudson River, about 10 minutes from downtown Albany.

Featuring more than two miles of trails that wind past a tidal creek system, marshes, freshwater tributaries, fields, and woodlands, Papscanee Island Nature Preserve is **open to visitors daily from dawn to dusk.**