

Margaret Bruchac and Peter Thomas, "Locating 'Wissatinnewag' in John Pynchon's Letter of 1663" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 34, No. 1 (Winter 2006).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

[masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu](mailto:masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu)

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.westfield.ma.edu/mhj>.



## Locating “Wissatinnewag” in John Pynchon’s Letter of 1663

By

**Margaret Bruchac and Peter Thomas**

The place name “Wissatinnewag” appears in only a single document preserved in the English colonial records: a letter from John Pynchon written on July 28, 1663. The original letter, written in English, is now missing, and only a printed text and a Dutch translation survive. Today, some assume that the name refers to a Native American Indian village situated in the present-day town of Gill, Massachusetts, along the northern shore of the Connecticut River near Turners Falls.<sup>1</sup> There appears to be no other surviving seventeenth century manuscript or primary source that confirms this name for this location. The archaeological evidence and oral traditions of Native use of the falls for millennia are indisputable, but there is no indication that a separate tribal nation lived there, nor that the residents of this site were engaged in diplomatic relations with John Pynchon. Furthermore, the association of Wissatinnewag with the Connecticut River Valley overlooks the complex history then unfolding in western Massachusetts and eastern New York, where Pynchon was trying to negotiate peace with the Mohawk and Mohican and establish a truck house to expand the potentially lucrative fur trade with them. This essay endeavors to more accurately locate “Wissatinnewag” by considering the historic and linguistic context in which Pynchon’s document was originally written.

---

<sup>1</sup> See John C. Huden, *Indian Place Names of New England* (New York: Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation, 1962), 291; Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Pynchon Papers Vol. I: The Letters of John Pynchon 1654-1700* (Boston, MA: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1982), 45-46. Our research suggests that these writers’ assumptions are based on questionable linguistic analysis and faulty speculation about seventeenth century tribal locations and relationships.

At the moment on July 28<sup>th</sup> of 1663 when John Pynchon sat down to pen a letter to the Dutch authorities at Fort Orange (now Albany, New York), he was perhaps the most powerful Englishman in the middle Connecticut River Valley. For more than thirty years, the Pynchon family had controlled the English fur trade with the Native American Indian inhabitants of Agawam (now Springfield), Nonotuck (Amherst, Hadley, Hatfield, and Northampton), Pocumtuck (Deerfield and Greenfield), Pojassic (near Westfield), and Woronoco (Westfield). The Pynchons had also opened trade with the Sokoki, the southernmost band of Western Abenaki who inhabited parts of present-day northern Massachusetts, southern Vermont and New Hampshire.<sup>2</sup> As a land broker, John Pynchon had designs on all of these territories. As Springfield’s chief magistrate, he also hoped to avoid inter-tribal warfare to ensure the safety of the fledgling English settlements in the valley.<sup>3</sup>

Pynchon’s original letter, written in English, is now missing, having apparently been destroyed during a 1911 fire in the New York state archives.<sup>4</sup> Following seventeenth century custom, his English missive was translated into both Dutch and Mohawk languages to reach his intended audience. The only version preserved in the New York archives is a Dutch manuscript with scorched edges, bound into a volume with other documents from New Netherlands. The text begins as follows:

Translatie uij het Engels

---

<sup>2</sup> Sokoki, in its many variant spellings, is a term in Western Abenaki indicating “the people who separated or broke apart.” It has yet to be determined how far to the north Sokoki territory extended. See Colin G. Calloway, *The Western Abenaki of Vermont, 1600-1800: War, Migration, and the Survival of an Indian People* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990); and Gordon M. Day, *The Identity of the Saint Francis Indians*. (Ottawa, Canada: National Museums of Canada 1981).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the careers of William Pynchon and his son, John, see Peter A. Thomas, *In the Maelstrom of Change: The Indian Trade and Cultural Process in the Middle Connecticut River Valley, 1635-1665*. Edited by David Hurst Thomas (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Harry Macy Jr., “The 1911 State Library Fire And Its Effect On New York Genealogy,” in *New York Genealogical and Biographical Society Newsletter*, (Albany, New York) Spring 1999.

Desen sijn door't versoeck von de indianen von Agawam. Pojassick. Nalwotog. Pacomtuck. ende de Wissatinnewag, Im u. e. [U Edelen] wij vrienden de Iroquois...[illegible]...de Sowquackiak Indianen, om dat hebben vermoord en doodgeslaegen...de Maquasen...<sup>5</sup>

The ink is smeared and faded, the abbreviations are inconsistent, and other idiosyncracies of the author's handwriting render much of this manuscript illegible. A rough translation says that an intermediary is writing on behalf of five tribal communities, begging "their honors" (the Dutch) to convey the message that "only Sokoki have been killing and slaughtering Mohawks." It contains Pynchon's distinctive signature at the end, suggesting that he approved of this rendition of his request.

A slightly different wording is found in the English version of John Pynchon's letter that was published in 1881 by B. Fernow, editor of *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*. The differences between the extant Dutch letter and this publication raise questions of translation and transliteration that are difficult to answer, since there is no indication where Fernow found the document he transcribed, or how that document characterized the location of each tribe. Fernow's printed transcription of John Pynchon's letter sent from Springfield on July 28, 1663 reads as follows:

This is written to your Honors at the request of the Indians of Agawam, Pajassuck, Nalwetog, Pacomtuck and the Wissatinnewag, to inform their friends, the Dutch, that they are very much put out, because the Sowquackick Indians had killed and murdered some of the Maquaas; all the above named Indians request herewith that the Dutch Commissaries will believe, that only Sowquackick Indians had been killing the Maquaas. As to the other Indians of the Caneticot [Connecticut] River, as Pacomtuck, Nanatan, Agawam and further

---

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this Dutch text follows Abenaki linguistic conventions when converting the singular "Sowquacki" [Sokoki] into the animate plural form "Sowquackiak," suggesting the writer had some familiarity with Algonkian linguistics. Unpublished manuscript, New York State Library. *Dutch Colonial Administrative Correspondence*, Series A1810-78, Box 6, Vol .15, pt 2, 72. Thanks to Harald Prins for his attempt to transcribe this document.

down, they deplore it exceedingly, repudiate the deed and swear at the Sowquackick, because they have killed the Maquas and they will have nothing to do with them, for they are resolved to keep up their intercourse and friendship with the Maquaas as before. The Indians of the several places mentioned before request the Sachems of the Dutch to assure the Maquaas and inform them how the matter is; they assure the Maquaas that they had no knowledge of it, they were at too great a distance, to prevent the proceedings of the Sowquackick and tell the Maquaas, that they will remain their friends. The Sowquackicks have indeed broken the friendship with the Maquaas and we will let the Maquaas act according to their pleasure. The Sowquackicks live at the head of the river of Caneticot and they are the ones, who, fell upon the Maquaas and the Indians beyond them to the North and Northeast as far as Nolongewock [Norridgewock], but the Southern Indians of Pacomtuck and Agawam and farther South assure, that they will remain friends with the Maquaas and hope, that they will live in peace with them.<sup>6</sup>

A solicitous John Pynchon seems to be trying to protect five Native tribes by directing Mohawk wrath against the Sokoki. But what events led up to this situation? What was Pynchon’s relationship with the tribes mentioned, and why did they trust him to negotiate on their behalf?

The first of several approaches to interpreting this document involves an exploration of the sequence of events that led to these impending hostilities. During the first half of the seventeenth century, Native American peoples living near or within the newly-imposed colonial boundaries of New England and New Netherlands became increasingly entangled in complex, delicate, inter-tribal and international diplomacy and warfare. English settlement up the Connecticut River in the 1630s had been preceded by Dutch maneuverings to the south and

---

<sup>6</sup> B. Fernow, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Co., 1881) Vol. XIII, 308-309. [this citation will henceforth be NYCD].

west. By 1628, the Mohican peoples of the Hudson River Valley<sup>7</sup> had been subdued by their Iroquoian neighbors, the Kanienkehaka Mohawk,<sup>8</sup> with the assistance of their new Dutch allies. The Connecticut River Valley tribes to the eastward were periodically harrassed by Mohawk raids after this time, but they retained their independence. After English colonists settled the town of Springfield in 1636, the Agawam, Nonotuck, Pocumtuck, Woronoco, and Sokoki communities in the Connecticut River Valley began developing close trading and diplomatic relationships with first, William Pynchon, and then his son, John.

Threats from the Mohawk and their Five Nations Iroquois allies led several tribes to consider the potential of new Native alliances that might include the French or the English. In 1650, the French Jesuit Gabriel Druillettes brought news that the Sokoki had brokered a new alliance:

On the twenty fourth of April, the Sokuockiois arrive, bringing a message on the part of four villages, -- to wit, of the Sokuockiois [Sokoki], the Pagamptagwe [Pocumtuck], the Penagouc [Pennacook], and of the Mahingans [Mohican], situated on the river of manate [Hudson]....He said that those four villages, having held a Council during three months of the past winter, had resolved to take the risks against the Iroquois with Onontio [the French Governor] and Noel [Tekwiramet, a Montagnais chief], whether the English did or did not undertake the war against the Iroquois; and, when the Iroquois shall be exterminated, they will oppose every other nation whatsoever that may wish to make war toward Quebec.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Shirley W. Dunn, *The Mohicans and Their Land: 1609-1730* (Fleishmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> The Mohawk were among the original members of the Five Nations, later Six Nations, Iroquois Confederacy. Although they are called Kanienkehaka ("people of the flint") in their own language, we are using the commonly understood term Mohawk throughout this paper.

<sup>9</sup> Father Gabriel Druillettes, "Narrative of the Journey made in behalf of the Mission of the Abnaquiois," reprinted in *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France*

Father Druillettes, accompanied by Sokoki and Abenaki ambassadors, approached the Commissioners of the United Colonies in New England for assistance. Although the English authorities initially expressed concern for the safety of the northern tribes who were their potential allies and fur trading partners, they refused, in the end, to join this alliance. On September 6, 1651, the Commissioners of the United Colonies sent a letter to the Governor of Canada, indicating that they were unwilling to risk exposing their plantations, and the Christianized Nipmuc and Wampanoag Indians living near them, to Mohawk attacks. The English colonies, they asserted, had “noe cause of just quarrell with the Mohaukes nor is it safe for us to engage in a controversy which wee neither doe nor have meanes satisfyingly to understand, the Mohaukes neither being in subjection to nor in any confederacon with us.”<sup>10</sup>

The correspondence of colonial leaders such as the Pynchons, however, reveals another motive for avoiding direct conflict with any member of the Five Nations: the English desire to eventually lure the lucrative Iroquois fur trade away from the Dutch, who maintained control over traffic in the colony of New Netherlands.

By 1660, the situation had changed little. The Mohawk were still making raids, as far east as Norridgewock and Penobscot in present-day Maine.<sup>11</sup> After a Sokoki war party retaliated by attacking Mohawk villages in the spring of 1663, the Pocumtuck and other Sokoki allies apparently feared Mohawk retribution, and sought John Pynchon’s help.

Thus, on July 28, 1663, John Pynchon, writing in his role as a trusted trading partner and Springfield’s chief magistrate, sent the aforementioned letter to the Dutch at Fort Orange (now Albany) on behalf of five Native communities. He insisted that the Sokoki Indians were

---

*1610-1791*. Edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland, OH: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), Vol. 36, 100-101.

<sup>10</sup> “Records of the United Colonies of New England” in *Historical Collections, consisting of State Papers, and other authentic documents*, Vol. 2. Edited by Ebenezer Hazard (Freeport, NY: The Books for Libraries Press, 1969 [reprint of 1792-94 edition]), 183.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon M. Day, “The Ouragie War: A Case History in Iroquois-New England Indian Relations,” in *Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies*, ed. Michael K. Foster, Jack Campisi, and Marianne Mithun (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984), 35-50.

guilty, and insisted that his own Native trading partners were innocent. As if to sharpen the knife, he also cast blame on other Western Abenaki peoples, particularly the Pennacook Indians then living at Norridgewock.

On October 22, 1663, a letter from D. V. Schelluyne, Secretary for the Colony of Rensselaerswyck, contained a hopeful Mohawk response:

This is the answer to an open letter of the 28th July, written in English by Mr. John Pynchon and handed to us by two Northern savages yesterday the 21st of October. We have translated the contents of this letter to a Maquaas, called Adogodquo alias the Big Spoon, who answered, It was well, that other savages, their friends, would have nothing to do with the Onoconquehagas or Sowquackicks, their enemies. But if the savages, their friends, would send hither some of their people with presents, then the friendship and peace would be so much firmer and he says, that he will then do his best. The Dutch, too, must make every possible effort to have the peace maintained. This was interpreted into the Maquaas tongue to the said Adogodquo by the Commissary Jan Thomas at Fort Orange...<sup>12</sup>

The records suggest that the Pocumtuck immediately began making plans for a peace conference. The Mohawk, on their part, began further preparations for war. On November 24, 1663, a war party of several hundred Mohawk and Seneca Indians passed by Fort Orange, taking “their course above the Cohoose [Cohoes, NY], that neither the Dutch nor the Mahinkanders [Mohican] should know or get information of it.”<sup>13</sup>

Letters from David Wilton, one of Pynchon’s sub-traders, indicate that the Mohawk attack on the fortified Sokoki village in present-day Hinsdale, New Hampshire occurred in early December. The log walls were set afire, considerable corn stores were lost, and about 40 Sokoki perished, but the fort was not destroyed. The Mohawk later admitted to the Dutch that they had lost about 100 men and had been forced to

---

<sup>12</sup> NYCD, Vol. XIII, 309.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 307-308.



retreat.<sup>14</sup> In the end, this attack actually strengthened Western Abenaki alliances. Wilton reported that the Cowass and Pennacook had provided reinforcements, and offered condolences to the Sokoki “in the los of theare Sachems as if it wheare ther owne and doe greatly thanke them for there vallor and great blow that they have strooke on there Enimys.” Other Abenaki and French allies from Canada also pledged assistance and began planning to seek retribution in the spring.<sup>15</sup>

By late spring, however, the Dutch had successfully brokered what seemed to be the first stages of a peace accord among the Mohawk and the Native peoples of the Connecticut River Valley. On May 17, 1664, during a Dutch Court session at Fort Orange, the Mohawk “very urgently requested” assistance in making amends with the Pocumtuck and Sokoki, since “war is now inconvenient to them and they prefer to live in peace.” They asked the Dutch to send some Mohican emissaries to the Sokoki “to procure the release of the Maquaas, who have been captured by the said savages, and to assist them in every thing and do what the circumstances shall require to conclude a peace.”<sup>16</sup> To demonstrate their sincerity, the Mohawk sachems brought forth 23 strings of wampum as a peace offering for the journey to Pocumtuck.

The records of these preparations indicate that the Mohican were keen to seek peace, but they were also concerned that the Mohawk warriors might not be easily restrained. A Mohican statement read to the Mohawk sachems before the Dutch authorities cautioned: “if you break it [the peace] again....you make us liars and deceivers; you must do no harm to the Northern savages, as you have threatened this day....”<sup>17</sup>

Just two days after this meeting, on a cold May 19, 1664, Jan Dareth and Jacob Loockermans left Albany, accompanied by three Mohawk and three Mohican ambassadors, for a long trip in freezing weather over the Berkshire Mountains to Pocumtuck.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 355-356.

<sup>15</sup> David Wilton, letters to John Winthrop, dated December 25 and December 28, 1663, in *Winthrop Papers* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1663).

<sup>17</sup> Journal of Jan Dareth and Jacob Loockermans, May 19-28, 1663, in NYCD XIII, 380-382.

Shortly before this meeting, three of John Pynchon's primary sub-traders, David Wilton, Henry Clark, and Joseph Parsons, had ridden up from Northampton to deliver the ominous message that if these differences with the Mohawk could not be settled, the colonists would have no alternative but to force the Pocumtuck to leave the valley. The role of the English in the ensuing negotiations is not entirely clear, but Wilton and the others remained at Pocumtuck, perhaps serving as translators. On May 25, after several days of meeting, Dareth and Loockermans recorded the Pocumtuck response:

We have had no war, for 36 years and have not troubled ourselves about our neighbors, the Soquackicks, when the Maquaes were at war with them last year. Let them send us a present, then we will release their prisoners and bring a present to their country, thus to renew our old friendship. This was agreed to and they promised to do it.<sup>18</sup>

The Pocumtuck sachem Onapequin assured the emissaries that the Mohawk captives taken from the attack on the Sokoki fort would be treated, "not as prisoners, but as visiting friends." Midway through the meeting, the Dutch sent for about 35 Sokoki sachems, and "talked long with them to induce them to make peace, for the war had been brought on by them and they were now too weak to have [a chance] against the Maquaes."<sup>19</sup> There is no record of the Sokoki response. On May 25, the Dutch, Mohawk, and Mohican emissaries were escorted westward as far as present-day Shelburne Falls, where they smoked a pipe with Onapequin before they left, having agreed to return one month hence with a gift of wampum to seal the peace.

In mid-June, the Mohawk sachem Saheda and several companions left Fort Orange for the return trip to Pocumtuck. A few days later, they were murdered, apparently upon entering Pocumtuck territory.<sup>20</sup> A Mohawk man named Cajadogo laid the blame at the feet of the English:

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>20</sup> NYCD, Vol. II, 371.

How will it be now...the English had told the Northern savages to carry on the war against the Maquaes....They say further, that at the time when the messengers of the Maquaes had come to the fort of the Pacamtecock savages to confirm the peace, several Englishmen were in the fort, who [urged] the savages to kill the Maquaes and they are dead now.<sup>21</sup>

John Pynchon denied any English guilt, and Peter Stuyvesant, Governor of New Netherlands, suggested that the Mohawk fabricated the story in an attempt to secure a Dutch alliance. The truth may never be known, but what is recorded is that within three weeks of Saheda’s murder, a number of Mohican warriors, apparently siding with the Pocumtuck and Sokoki, began attacking scattered Dutch farms, and then directed a concerted effort against the Mohawk. By the middle of August, the Sokoki and Mohawk had each sent raiding parties against the others’ villages. Dutch attempts to establish peace seemed futile.<sup>22</sup>

Pynchon might have then attempted to broker a peaceful solution to this diplomatic crisis, but for a crucial change in international relations that shifted the tide in favor of English interests in Dutch territory. On September 8, 1664, the Dutch relinquished New Netherlands to Charles II, King of England. On September 24, following the advice of the self-serving resident Dutch traders of Fort Orange, the Deputy Governor of the new royal colony of New York signed a treaty with the Mohawk and Seneca in the hope of enhancing trade and consolidating control in the Hudson River Valley. This new accord obligated the English and Iroquois to seek redress with each other through peaceful means, not by reprisals, and to ally against common enemies. The death of Saheda, in particular, was held up as a reason for English leaders to form a new alliance with the Mohawk and Mohican against the Native inhabitants of the Connecticut River Valley. In sum, the new administration promised:

---

<sup>21</sup> NYCD, Vol. XIII, 389.

<sup>22</sup> A.J.F. Van Laer, Jr., ed. *Correspondence of Jeremais Van Rensselaer, 1651-1674* (Albany, NY: The University of the State of New York Press, 1932), 358; NYCD, Vol. II, 371-372; NYCD, Vol. XIII, 389-391.

1. That the English do not assist the three Nations of the Ondiakes [Sokoki], Pinnehooks [Pennacook], and Pacamtohookes [Pocumtuck], who murdered one of the Princes of the Maguaas, when he brought ransomes & presents to them upon a treaty of peace...
2. That the English do make peace for the Indian Princes, with the [Mohican] Nations down the River.
3. That they may have free trade, as formerly.
4. That they may be lodged in houses, as formerly.
5. That if they be beaten by the three Nations above menconed, they may receive accomodacon, from ye English.<sup>23</sup>

These articles secured the Mohawk people's southern flanks, by incorporating all of the Mohican communities in the new alliance and guaranteeing that these tribes could continue to buy powder and shot from Albany traders. These articles also secured safe access to Hudson Valley furs for Pynchon and his sub-traders. But in dramatic contrast to Pynchon's 1663 letter, the 1664 English agreement now aimed Mohawk retribution against the Pocumtuck and their allies. Pynchon reported the concerns of his former allies to Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop:

Sir, as to our Indians' resentment of the peace with the Maquas, I find them variously affected by it: some liking it; others who have lost their relations by the Mohawks desiring rather revenge upon them.<sup>24</sup>

In the aftermath of this dramatic shift in inter-tribal and international relations, a Mohawk war party launched a devastating attack on the Pocumtuck fort.<sup>25</sup> In February of 1665, it was reported that the primary Pocumtuck war sachem, Onapequin, and his family had been killed.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> NYCD, Vol. III, 67-68.

<sup>24</sup> Bridenbaugh, 104.

<sup>25</sup> Epaphrus Hoyt, *Antiquarian Researches* (Greenfield, MA: Epaphrus Hoyt, 1824), 78.

The Mohawk attack did not entirely depopulate Pocumtuck, but it did render them more dependent on surrounding Native communities for their survival. Some Pocumtuck people moved to Nonotuck; others moved to Sokoki or other locales away from the encroaching English.<sup>27</sup>

As a result of this attack, the Pocumtuck position of power in the valley was seriously damaged, if not entirely destroyed. For three decades, the Pocumtuck had been among the Pynchons’ most valuable trading partners, but they and the Sokoki had also supplied the strongest resistance to English settlement upriver. Within two years after the Mohawk raid, John Pynchon was able to secure the first of several deeds to key portions of the Pocumtuck homeland.<sup>28</sup>

To better understand the impact of these events, it should be noted that the Connecticut River Valley’s Native communities had long been regular allies and trading partners, and thus their fates were intertwined. They made use of overlapping homelands, and often shared hunting territories in the mountains, and fishing sites at the various falls of the Connecticut River, which served as important social and ceremonial places. Their recorded political activities bespeak a great deal of fluidity, independence, and flexibility during the seventeenth century, but there is no evidence that they ever turned against one another in wartime.<sup>29</sup>

By comparison, colonial records suggest that, at least during the seventeenth century, alliances with other Algonkian Indian peoples living outside the Connecticut River Valley were frequently made or

---

<sup>26</sup> John Winthrop Jr. *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1863), Fourth Series, No. 6, 531-532.

<sup>27</sup> James Spady, “As If In a Great Darkness: Native American Refugees of the Middle Connecticut River Valley in the Aftermath of King Philip’s War,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* (Westfield, MA, 1995), Vol. XXIII, No. 2, 183-197.

<sup>28</sup> The first deed for Deerfield, MA, transacted on February 24, 1667, was signed by a Podunk Indian man named Chauk, who apparently represented himself as a Pocumtuck sachem. Harry Andrew Wright, *Indian Deeds of Hampden County* (Springfield, MA: Harry Andrew Wright 1905), 61-62.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Bruchac and Elizabeth Clinton, “From Pine Hill to Bark Wigwams: Reconsidering Historical Memory in the Middle Connecticut River Valley.” Paper for the Society for Historical Archaeology, Providence, RI (unpublished).

broken in response to the intrusions of Euro-American settlements, military pressures, and trading interests.<sup>30</sup>

Given the independence of these Native communities, the Pynchons recognized, early on, that face-to-face relationships with such individual sachems as Umpanchela, Chickwallope, and Quonquont at Nonotuck, Onapequin and Mashalisk at Pocumtuck, and numerous others, were crucial to their success in trading. As magistrates, William and John Pynchon held these designated individual sachems responsible for the actions of any Native people who perpetrated crimes in their territory, whether residents or not.<sup>31</sup> The records also suggest that, in some instances, English authorities designated willing individuals as “sachems” without any apparent tribal authority, when it suited English purposes. In practice, each tribal community had several sachems, a fact which often made it difficult to find one sachem who could definitively speak for a single community. As William Pynchon observed of the Pocumtuck relationship with the sachem Cutshamoquin, for example:

...there are several Smale [small] Sachims of Quahaug, & in all neer places [Pocumtuck, Nonotuck, Agawam] there are other smale Sachims no one Sachim doth Rule all: & one of these petti Sachims hath made friendship wth Cutshamoquin & that makes Cutchamokin cale [call] them his subjects, but I believe they will stick no longer to him than the sunn shines uppon him.<sup>32</sup>

Within this context, it should be noted that Pynchon’s letter, and his attempt at diplomatic intervention as chief magistrate of the Bay Colony

---

<sup>30</sup> Following the Pequot War of 1638, for example, the Pocumtuck became bitter enemies of Uncas, sachem of the Mohegan in Connecticut, who had allied with the English and was attempting to claim parts of the Connecticut River Valley.

<sup>31</sup> For example, in 1650, Attumbesund, a Woronoco sachem, was fined for a theft committed by a Quinnipiac Indian from New Haven, CT. Joseph H. Smith, ed. *Colonial Justice in Western Massachusetts (1639-1702): The Pynchon Court Record* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 223-224.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from John Pynchon to John Winthrop, July 5, 1648, in Josiah H. Temple. *History of North Brookfield, Massachusetts* (Brookfield, MA: Town of North Brookfield, 1887), 37.

in the Connecticut Valley on behalf of neighboring tribes, were by no means unusual. English participation in inter-tribal diplomacy in southern New England, for better or worse, had become routine by the mid-seventeenth century. The colonial leaders of Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Netherlands, and New France had much to lose or gain, based on the degree to which they could secure alliances and/or foment troubles among the different regional Native sachems and nations. William and his son, John Pynchon, as trader-brokers and land speculators, were particularly concerned with ensuring a ready supply of furs and cementing peaceful relations with the Native communities situated nearest to English settlements.

Four of the Native groups seeking protection in Pynchon’s letter of July 28 are easily identifiable and their names occur repeatedly in colonial documents, including Pynchon’s own account books, from the 1630s onward. The Native communities at Agawam, Pojassic, Nonotuck, and Pocumtuck all derived their names from Algonkian locative words referring to a particular landmark or aspect of the territory. Pynchon employed these names interchangeably to reference both tribal groups and places of residence -- i.e., “all the above named Indians” and “the Indians of the several places mentioned before.”

One method for evaluating Pynchon’s attempts to protect these Native tribal groups would be to examine the pattern of land transfers and displacements, both during English colonization and after Mohawk attacks. In the decades leading up to 1663, William and John Pynchon had already successfully maneuvered leading individuals in three of the five communities -- Agawam, Pojassic, and Nonotuck -- into a series of deeds and mortgages that alienated Indian land and enabled English settlement of a series of towns that were moving steadily up the valley towards Pocumtuck. The promise of English protection may have encouraging the valley’s Native peoples to sign these documents. All of these transfers were enabled by the patron-client relationships engendered through fur trade transactions, diplomatic interventions, and land use negotiations brokered by William and/or John Pynchon.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of how the diminishing availability of beaver fur also affected these transactions, see Peter A. Thomas, “Bridging the Cultural Gap: Indian/White Relations,” in *Early Settlement in the Connecticut Valley*. Edited by Stephen C. Innes, Richard I. Melvoin and Peter A. Thomas (Westfield, MA: Institute for Massachusetts Studies, 1984) 4-21.

Deeds were transacted to settle English towns on Agawam Indian lands in 1636 (Agawam), 1652 (Longmeadow), 1661 (Springfield), and 1662 (Agawam). The first Pojassic deed was signed in 1660 (Westfield). Deeds were transacted for Nonotuck Indian lands in 1653 (Northampton, Easthampton, and Westhampton), 1658 (Hatfield), 1660 (Hatfield and Williamsburg), 1661 (Hatfield), 1662 (Hadley), and 1663 (Amherst, Belchertown, Pelham and Shutesbury).<sup>34</sup> Many of these deeds reserved Native rights to hunt, fish, plant, and inhabit the lands supposedly sold, but there is no indication that the English intended to respect these rights.

In the years immediately following the Mohawk attacks on the Sokoki and Pocumtuck forts, Pocumtuck lands were signed over to the English, through deeds written in 1666 (Deerfield) and 1667 (Deerfield and Greenfield). Deeds signed by the Pocumtuck sunksqua Mashalisk in 1672 (Deerfield) and 1674 (Leverett, Montague, Sunderland and Wendell) indicate that both transactions were intended as payment for beaver debts and court fines imposed by Pynchon.<sup>35</sup> Nearby Quaboag Indian lands were transferred in 1665 (Brookfield), in a deed approved by the Pocumtuck sachem Mettawampe. More Pojassic and Woronoco Indian lands were deeded in 1669, 1670, and 1673 (Westfield). The first Sokoki deed was signed in 1673 (Bernardston, Gill and Northfield).

In effect, three out of the five Native communities listed in the letter of 1663 had already relinquished control of much of their tribal lands to Pynchon in the years leading up to 1663. The Pocumtuck and Quaboag released lands shortly afterwards, as did the Sokoki a decade later. But there is no mention, before, during, or after 1663, of negotiations, trade, deeds or other transactions by Pynchon to suggest that the people and place he called "Wissatinnewag" were in the Connecticut River Valley.

In the context of Pynchon's letter, the term *Wissatinnewag*, like Pocumtuck and the others, most likely refers to a tribal group, a specific village of people, and a place. When Peter Thomas wrote "In the Maelstrom of Change" in 1979, he concluded, based on both the closeness of phonetics and the historic context, that *Wissatinnewag* was a variation of the place name "Housatonic," and that it referred to a Mohican community in the westernmost part of Massachusetts, situated

---

<sup>34</sup> Transcriptions of all of these Connecticut River Valley Indian deeds can be found in Harry Andrew Wright's *Indian Deeds of Hampden County*, 1905.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, 74, 84.



on the Housatonic River.<sup>36</sup> That assumption stood virtually unchallenged until the 1990s, when a new usage of Wissatinnewag emerged.

In the 1990s, a group of Native people and non-Native activists organized to preserve what remains of a fairly large Native site they identified as “the last undeveloped quadrant of the ancient Pocumtuck village of Wissatinnewag.” They incorporated as the non-profit “Friends of Wissatinnewag” (abbreviated FOW). The site, commonly known as Mackin’s sand bank or gravel pit, is situated on a high sandy bluff on the west bank of the Connecticut River, in the town of Gill, Massachusetts, just downstream from a major set of rapids and falls across the river from the town of Turners Falls. After concerted protests and public education, the site was purchased through a joint conservation agreement between the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Management, assisted by FOW and private donors.

Private landowners, developers, and others have resisted local conservation restrictions and tried to dispute the evidence of Native presence, but archaeological surveys and accidental finds throughout the region over two centuries have uncovered numerous Native artifacts, habitation sites, fishing sites, and burial grounds.<sup>37</sup> The entire neighborhood of Riverside and the surrounding terraces and hills on both sides of the Connecticut River were intensively utilized by Native Americans for millenia. The oldest radiocarbon date from a location near the dam on the Gill side of the river is 8,650 B.P. (years before present).<sup>38</sup> Archaeological deposits nearby are more than four feet thick and confirm a continuous, but primarily seasonal, occupation by Native people who placed a heavy emphasis on fishing. Soils throughout this section are dark gray to coal black and contain significantly high levels of carbon, phosphate, calcium, mercury and iodine -- all byproducts of

---

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, 245-246.

<sup>37</sup> Michael S. Nassaney, “The Significance of the Turners Falls Locality in Connecticut River Valley Archaeology,” in *The Archeological Northeast*, Ed. Mary Ann Levine, Kenneth E. Sassaman, and Michael S. Nassaney (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1999), 215-234.

<sup>38</sup> Peter A. Thomas, “The Riverside District, the WMECO Site, and Suggestions for Archaeological Modeling,” *Early and Middle Archaic Cultures in the Northeast*, Ed. David Starbuck and Charles E. Bolian (Rindge, NH: Franklin Pierce College Press, 1980), 73-75.

the fish bones and guts that Native peoples discarded while processing large quantities of shad and salmon each spring.<sup>39</sup> Evidence of similar seasonal occupations extend at least a mile upstream from the current dam, including lands that are now submerged beneath Barton's Cove.

There is no question that the entire region around the falls is replete with Native sites.<sup>40</sup> Over time, thousands of Native people lived, died, and were peacefully buried there, long before European settlement. The evidence of what Native people actually called the falls and surrounding locales, however, is scarce. Colonial documents indicate that the name most commonly used for the falls in the seventeenth century was "Pasquamscut"<sup>41</sup> or "Peskeompskut,"<sup>42</sup> designating a place for fishing at the split rock. James Trumbull recorded a similar Algonkian place name in the word "Passompskodtut," which combines "pahshe-," or "pass-" (broken or divided), with "-ompske" (rock), plus "-ut" (a locative ending).<sup>43</sup> Before the first colonial dam was built in 1798, followed by a series of mill dams and then a hydro-electric dam in the twentieth century, the split rock was clearly visible, amidst a series of rapids and falls extending upstream from the mill village of Turners Falls.

FOW has designated the entire long sandy ridge downstream from the present-day dam, along with swampy areas beside present-day Route 2, as the original site of the Native village of "Wissatinnewag." Given the descriptive nature of Algonkian place names, it is entirely possible that Wissatinnewag could identify several different locations. But, for

---

<sup>39</sup> Evidence of similar archaeological deposits has been encountered at Bellow's Falls, VT, the upstream terminus for shad. Petroglyphs carved into the rocks by Native artisans further attest to the ceremonial importance of such locations.

<sup>40</sup> Peter A. Thomas, *A Phase I Assessment of Cultural Resources for a Proposed Wastewater Treatment System in the Riverside District of Gill, Massachusetts*. Report submitted to the Town of Gill, MA.

<sup>41</sup> Louis H. Everts, *History of the Connecticut Valley in Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincot & Co., 1879), 21.

<sup>42</sup> Huden, 182.

<sup>43</sup> James H. Trumbull, *Natick Dictionary*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1903), 119.

the purposes of this discussion, could this be the Native community that John Pynchon was referring to in his letter of 1663?

Based on conversations with the founders of FOW, their use of the name “Wissatinnewag” for the region appears to have been derived from John Huden’s 1962 *Indian Place Names of New England*. Huden was the first to suggest the following translation and location: “Wissatinnewag Franklin County, Mass.? Mahican, “slippery hill””? or Nipmuck, “shining hill””? This was an ancient village somewhere on the Connecticut River, 1663.”<sup>44</sup> In 1982, Carl Bridenbaugh, editor of the *Pynchon Papers*, followed Huden’s lead by suggesting that this was “obviously a tribe of Indians in the upper Connecticut Valley, probably of the so-called Pocumtuck Confederacy.”<sup>45</sup> Huden, however, put three question marks in this entry and remained vague about its location, indicating his own substantial doubts about this translation.<sup>46</sup> We find the conclusions in this case questionable for a number of reasons.

First, there is no documentation suggesting that there were two separate Pocumtuck communities in 1663. The Pocumtuck homeland was quite large: extensive planting fields were located in the broad fertile floodplains near the confluence of the Deerfield and Connecticut Rivers. Pocumtuck people made heavy use of the falls on both rivers for fishing every spring, just as they used surrounding forests for hunting in fall and winter. The fields, falls, and forests might be known by different place names, but seasonal camps in each do not necessarily represent different Native communities.<sup>47</sup> Second, if Huden’s translation is correct, the term might refer to a cliffside beside the falls that was, at times, covered with water, but such uninhabitable geographic features were rarely equivalent

---

<sup>44</sup> Huden, 291.

<sup>45</sup> Bridenbaugh, 46.

<sup>46</sup> Huden made his doubts clear in his introduction: “When followed by ?, this indicates that the place name has been found in early documents, but that its actual location is not known for certain today. The dialect or language is indicated in italics; if doubtful, that doubt is shown by ?.” Huden 1962, xii.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of this style of dispersed, flexible use of the land and mobile farming techniques, see Elizabeth Chilton, “Towns They Have None: Diverse Subsistence and Settlement Strategies in Native New England” in *Northeast Subsistence-Settlement Change: A.D. 700 – A.D. 1300*. Edited by J. Hart and C. Reith (Albany, NY: New York State Museum Bulletin, 2002) 289-300.

with the names of local tribes. Third, none of the extensive English, Dutch, and French documents of the time refer to any Native place or Native community by this name anywhere in the Connecticut valley before, during, or after 1663. Unfortunately, since Huden did not cite sources for any of his entries, there is no way of knowing where he got the information that he himself felt was triply questionable. It may be that he was freely interpreting Pynchon's letter. There could easily be more than one Native place called Wissatinnewag, since similar-sounding morphemes and phonemes are found among all of the Algonquian-speaking peoples of the northeast. But none of this suggests that the falls is the site of John Pynchon's Wissatinnewag.

Despite Pynchon's attempts at diplomacy, or, some might argue, because of them, the entire Connecticut River Valley was engulfed in conflict a decade after the 1663 letter was written. In 1675, the Wampanoag sachem Metacom, otherwise known as King Philip, led a force of Wampanoag, Nipmuck, and Narragansett warriors against English towns in southern New England. The Connecticut River Valley tribes joined this rebellion after Pynchon tried to disarm the Nonotuck and force them to submit to English rule.<sup>48</sup> The falls at Peskeompskut became an important place of refuge for Native non-combatants until May 19, 1676, when Captain William Turner of Northampton led the massacre of more than 300 Native people in a camp at present-day Gill. Yet in all of the documents and oral traditions describing the events of King Philip's War, not one makes mention of any tribe or place even vaguely resembling Wissatinnewag having been involved in this conflict.

It is suggested here that the most compelling historic and linguistic evidence for "Wissatinnewag" actually points westward, to the Mohican people commonly known as the "Houstatonic." In 1663, this well-documented group, closely connected to the Mohican of the Hudson River valley, was living in far western Massachusetts, along what is now known as the Housatonic River. They became better known as "Stockbridge Indians" after 1734, when they incorporated their Native village into an English town.<sup>49</sup> After a series of removals to New York

---

<sup>48</sup> Everts, 1879, 54-61.

<sup>49</sup> Ted J. Brassler, "Mahican," in Volume 15, Northeast, *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978).

and points farther west between 1758 and 1909, they folded in with the Munsee and other Mohican peoples to form the tribe known today as the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians in Wisconsin.<sup>50</sup>

The original name for this community of Mohican people, also spelled “Hoosatunnuk” or “Hoosetennuc,” derived from the river and the lands surrounding it. The Rev. Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth century missionary who lived among them, translated it to mean “over the mountain.” Eunice Mauwehu, a nineteenth century elder of the Schaghticoke tribe living downstream along the Connecticut section of the river, spelled it “Hous’atenuc,” and gave it the same translation. Linguist James Trumbull notes that all of these spellings and translations are “sustained by analysis; wussi (Delaware awussi;....Abenaki awas, or oost) meaning “beyond” or “on the other side of.”<sup>51</sup>

In his journals and correspondence, John Pynchon often referred to the Housatonic community situated west of Springfield and Pojassic, and over the Berkshire Mountains from Woronoco, as “Ausatinnog.” As noted earlier, Pynchon was notorious for inconsistent spellings. His variants for this particular place name include “Ausatimik,” “Ausatinnog,” “Ausatinoag,” “Ausotinnog,” and “Hoyottanick.”<sup>52</sup>

This might appear, at first glance, to be Pynchon’s own unique set of spellings, but the colonial records reveal similar spellings. For example, William Hubbard’s 1677 history of King Philip’s War notes that a large party of Connecticut River Indians were pursued by Major Talcott from Springfield westward “as far as Ausotunnoog River (in the middle Way betwixt Westfield and the Dutch River, and Fort Albany)

---

<sup>50</sup> Dorothy W. Davids, *Our History: Mohican Nation, Stockbridge Munsee Band* (Stockbridge, WI: Stockbridge-Munsee Historical Committee, 2001). Website <<http://www.mohican.com/history/oeh.htm>>.

<sup>51</sup> James H. Trumbull, *Indian Names of Places, Etc., in and on the Borders of Connecticut: with interpretations of some of them* (Hartford, CT: Press of the Case, Lockwood and Brainard Co., 1881), 15-16.

<sup>52</sup> Bridenbaugh, ed., *The Pynchon Papers*, Vol. I, 65, 142, 167; Carl Bridenbaugh and Juliette Tomlinson, eds., *The Pynchon Papers: Selections from the Account Books of John Pynchon, 1651-1697* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1982), Vol. II, 141, 144, 145.

where he overtook them, and fought with them.”<sup>53</sup> Other sources record “Ousatannock” (1823); “Ousetannuck” (1694), and “Oustonnoc” (1762).<sup>54</sup> Pynchon might also have been influenced by Western Abenaki speakers, including the Sokoki, who referred to Housatonic as “Awasadenik,” meaning “beyond the mountain; over the hill.”<sup>55</sup>

With so many different Iroquoian and Algonkian languages being spoken across the northeast, colonial documents reflect the fact that each European listener filtered what they heard through the languages they spoke, dialects they knew, or translators they employed. Clear dialectal differences among Algonkian peoples could be heard as one traveled across the region.<sup>56</sup> The Pynchons’ early exposure to Native languages at Plymouth and Boston may account for their spelling of the region around Northampton as “Nalwatog,” using a distinctly Wampanoag pronunciation and ending, rather than the “Nonotuck” of the Western Abenaki dialect, or the “Norwottuck” of the Nipmuc dialect.<sup>57</sup>

In cross-cultural settings, it was common to tailor one’s speech and spelling to one’s audience. The prefix “wis-,” rather than “aus-,” “hous-” or “ous-,” may have been an intentional choice to accommodate the intended recipients of this letter -- the Dutch Commissaries in Albany. This possibility is supported by the fact that all of the recorded Dutch variations for the word Housatonic use the prefix “wes-,” as in “Westenkuc,” “Westenock,” “Westauock,” and “Westenhuck.”<sup>58</sup> This suggests that the Dutch prefix “wes-” and Pynchon’s “wis-” are both

---

<sup>53</sup> Samuel G. Drake, *The History of the Indian Wars in New England* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1864), 279. The “Dutch River” is the Hudson River.

<sup>54</sup> Frederick Webb Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*. (Washington, DC: Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 30, Vol. II), 637-8.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph Laurent, *New Familiar Abenakis & English Dialogues* (Quebec: Leger Brousseau, 1884), 211.

<sup>56</sup> In the case of “Nonotuck,” for example, “Non, nol, and nor are the same word, as used in different dialects, and show the interchange of the n, l, and r.” Wright, 29. Similarly, endings “-uck,” “-ic,” “-ock,” “-ag,” and “-og,” found in Pynchon’s writings, are variant spellings of Algonkian locative or plural terms.

<sup>57</sup> For examples of variant spellings, see Hodge, “Nonotuck,” 81; “Norwootuck,” 85.

simply variants of the Algonquian prefix “hous-” or “aus-.” The modern scholar of Mohican history, Shirley Dunn, resolves this linguistic and locational confusion by definitively identifying “Ausotunnoog” as the “Mohicans of Westenhook on the Housatonic River.”<sup>59</sup>

In short, there is enough similarity in the orthography of these words to strongly suggest that Pynchon intended Wissatinnewag to refer to Housatonic, representing both a geographical place and a group of Native people. Furthermore, we cannot conclusively rule out the possibility that the unique spelling of “Wissatinnewag” in this particular document may have been accidental -- the result of John Pynchon’s inconsistent spelling, a Dutch translation, or a faulty transcription of a seventeenth century document by a nineteenth century scholar.

In addition to these phonetic similarities, the historical context of Pynchon’s own trading records strongly suggests that his Wissatinnewag was situated, not on the Connecticut River, but in Mohican territory.

The success or failure of English settlements in the Connecticut River Valley depended heavily on the Native fur trade. In the years between 1636 and 1673, the Pynchons and their sub-traders tapped into a broad territory, either directly or indirectly, with the assistance of Native trappers, starting with Tunxis and Podunk around present-day Hartford, and moving up the Connecticut River Valley into Agawam, Pojassic, Woronoco, Nonotuck, Pocumtuck, and Sokoki territories. Very early on, William Pynchon began to look west -- towards the Hudson River Valley -- for another source of pelts. He had to transport them overland somehow, and the path through Housatonic followed the easiest foot trails over the mountains and along the Westfield River to Springfield.

The Dutch were worried about Pynchon’s intrusion into areas they felt they should control. In 1649, patron Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, who owned large land holdings just outside Fort Orange, notified Governor Kieft that Pynchon had been in communication with the Mohican, and through them in turn with the Mohawk. He felt this encroachment must be thwarted. A year later, during Dutch-English boundary negotiations in Hartford, Peter Stuyvesant accused Pynchon not only of having usurped lands on the Connecticut River but also of trespassing into New Netherlands. He also charged Pynchon with offering the Indians higher prices for beaver than they were receiving from the Dutch.

---

<sup>59</sup> Dunn, *The Mohican World 1680-1750*, 39.

Pynchon's trading records clearly indicate that he was receiving furs from the Hudson Valley. Beginning in June of 1654, Pynchon commenced shipping what he labelled "Mowhaoake" beaver downriver from his trading post in Springfield for shipment to England. Several unexplained payments to the Nonotuck sachem Chickwalloppe for travels towards the Dutch territories are recorded around the same time.<sup>60</sup>

In 1659, Pynchon joined with a group of traders from eastern Massachusetts, headed by Major William Hawthorne of Salem, in an attempt to set up an English plantation and trading house closer to this new source of potential pelts, ostensibly to raise cattle to sell to the Dutch at Fort Orange. The proposed distances, situated "about 50 miles east of the Hudson and 40 to 50 miles west of Springfield," place the plantation firmly in the Housatonic River Valley. The official venture failed, due to Dutch refusal to allow the settlement. However, Hawthorne and company tried to secure authorization from the General Court of Massachusetts and the Commissioners of the United Colonies to dispatch men and supplies westward to open trading with the Natives.<sup>61</sup>

John Pynchon's account book reveals that he made a number of trips by horse to and from "Fort Aurania" (Pynchon's name for Fort Orange). An attempt was made to build a trading house at a site due west of Woronoco that Pynchon clearly identified as Ausatinnoag. In February 1662, Samuel Pearly was engaged "...at Aussatinnoag to begin sometime in Aprill he is to tend my worke & occasions of carpentry or otherwise & to find Toolles for 2 men beside himse & to spare his horse 2 voyadges thither." When miserable winter weather persisted into April, Pynchon charged the partners for a "Journy toward Ausatinnoag which journy I was forced to desist by Ice & Snow." He also submitted bills for monies paid: "To a Carpenter hired to Build & dwell at Ausatinnoag for his loss of tyme, Disapointmt & some Mony I pd to the Smith."<sup>62</sup>

The specific causes are unknown, but by March 1663, the trading house was apparently abandoned, since Pynchon was attempting to dispose of large quantities of trade goods, including stocks of cloth, wampum, rum, shot and gunpowder. It was just four months later that

---

<sup>60</sup> Bridenbaugh and Tomlinson, *Pynchon Papers* Vol. II, 52-55.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-59, 144-145.



Pynchon felt obliged to include the “Wissatinnewag” in his list of Native groups who should be protected from potential attacks by the Mohawk.

There are few records of the individual Native people who traded with Pynchon at Housatonic, but there was undoubtedly a resident Native community there. In 1650, a Native of “Ausatimik” captured a runaway Quinnipiac Indian and delivered him up to Pynchon.<sup>63</sup> Pynchon recorded his fears regarding the Mohawk threat to this group in, among other sources, a letter to John Winthrop, Jr., dated August 7, 1666. He complained that a huge Mohawk party had waylaid a group of Englishmen and Indians headed for Fort Orange:

400 Mohawks compassed them and took from them your Indians and bound them; and this Dutchman runs back to his house and tells an Indian that was there of it, who came all night to bring that news to other Indians at Ausatinoag.<sup>64</sup>

There is no doubt that Housatonic existed, as a distinct Native place and community.<sup>65</sup> The Housatonic were well-known to Pynchon’s contemporaries, including Dutch Captain Martin Cregier, who, in his 1663 “Journal of the Esopus War,” listed “another tribe of Indians that dwell half way between Fort Orange and Hartford” as a potential danger to Fort Orange.<sup>66</sup> As Algonkian peoples living on the shifting boundary of New England and New Netherlands, the Housatonic were subjected to considerable pressure from their Dutch, English, and Mohawk neighbors. In the context of the 1663 letter, they would have had a strong interest in keeping the Mohawks at bay if any attack were to come overland in their direction. As potential middle men in any future diplomacy and trade with potentially hostile neighbors (Dutch and English, Iroquois and

---

<sup>63</sup> Smith, 223-224.

<sup>64</sup> Bridenbaugh, *Pynchon Papers* Vol. I, 65.

<sup>65</sup> Shirley Dunn, *The Mohicans and Their Land: 1609-1730* (Fleishmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 1994).

<sup>66</sup> E.C. O’Callaghan, in NYCD XIII: 345. Housatonic is situated almost exactly halfway between Fort Orange (now Albany) and Hartford, Connecticut.

Algonkin) on either side, the Housatonic might well need protection. This situation may have inspired them to seek Pynchon's assistance.

This evidence all strongly suggests that Pynchon's Wissatinnewag was situated on the Housatonic, rather than the Connecticut River. The suggestion that Pynchon's letter refers only to tribes situated in the Connecticut River Valley tribe obscures his efforts to expand his trading relationships beyond the valley. It also obscures the fact that some Mohican people were willing to exercise their independence and ignore the colonial restrictions of Dutch authorities by courting trade and potential alliances with other Europeans or other tribal nations.<sup>67</sup>

In the end, the Housatonic/Wissatinnewag community appears to have benefitted from Pynchon's diplomatic efforts. Housatonic was left untouched in the wave of Mohawk attacks on the Sokoki and Pocumtuck in 1663 and 1665. Their tributary relationship with the Mohawk and kinship with the Mohican were likely other crucial protective factors.

In sum, the accurate identification of Wissatinnewag is more than just an academic exercise. Amidst the complicated political maneuverings of the seventeenth century, Euro-American interferences in tribal diplomacy, and shifting alliances among tribes, often had devastating effects on Native communities. Any potential misreading of the primary documentation may, therefore, skew the ways in which we understand these relationships and the subsequent course of history.

When interpreting colonial documents, one must make the extra effort to determine precisely which Native community, at which moment in time, is being discussed. The simple fact is that the meddlings of English, French and Dutch colonists could and did have serious impacts on the long-term survival of Native communities. Pynchon's participation in delicate inter-tribal diplomacy in 1663, and even the

---

<sup>67</sup> Several nineteenth century historians have confused Mohican relationships. For example, E.M. Rutenber, writing in 1872, claimed that the New England tribes were originally Mohicans who migrated eastward, and were governed by a Mohican confederacy. See E.M. Rutenber, *Indian Tribes of Hudson's River: Their Origins, Manners and Customs; Tribal and Sub-Tribal Organizations; Wars, Treaties, etc., etc.* Original 1872 (Saugerties, NY: Hope Farm Press, 1992), 41. Although the Algonkian peoples of the northeast are culturally and linguistically related, there is no evidence whatsoever that Mohican peoples controlled their contact-era choices. To the contrary, the evidence demonstrates that Algonkian communities, when beset by European pressures, frequently made or broke alliances for matters of self-preservation or political autonomy.

possibilities of miscommunication through faulty translation, must be factored into the subsequent Mohawk attacks on the Sokoki and Pocumtuck. The subsequent English alliance with the Mohawk and Mohican after the fall of New Netherlands saved some Native communities and sacrificed others. A decade later, changing tribal alliances directly contributed to the failure of Metacom’s Rebellion.<sup>68</sup>

During the subsequent large-scale dispersals of Native peoples out of the middle Connecticut River Valley, many Agawam, Nonotuck, Pocumtuck, and Woronoco families took refuge for a generation or more among the Mohican at Schaghticoke, New York.<sup>69</sup> Others joined with the Abenaki at Missisquoi, Cowass, Pennacook in Vermont and New Hampshire, or moved even farther north to Saint Francis in Quebec, Canada, creating confusion among those who have tried to track them ever since.<sup>70</sup> In the end, Pynchon’s diplomacy, the Mohawk attacks, King Philip’s War, and all of the deeds transacted during the seventeenth century opened the Connecticut River Valley up for further English settlement. The deepening alliances between the displaced Connecticut River Valley Indians and Western Abenaki peoples during the eighteenth century then provided the motivation and manpower for attacks on English settlements during the conflicts of the 1690s to the 1750s.<sup>71</sup>

It should be noted that these events resonate in issues of tribal sovereignty, even today. Six Native nations were referenced in Pynchon’s 1663 letter: Agawam, Nonotuck, Pocumtuck, Pojassic,

---

<sup>68</sup> Metacom’s army took refuge on the Connecticut River after being driven out of the Hudson River Valley by the Mohawk. After the war’s end, New York Governor Andros encouraged New England’s colonial leaders to formally welcome and thank the Mohawk sachems for their assistance (NYCD XIII: 502).

<sup>69</sup> For a fuller discussion of the village of Schaghticoke, New York as a refugee community for Connecticut River Valley Indians, see Calloway, *The Western Abenaki of Vermont...*; and Spady, “As If In a Great Darkness...”

<sup>70</sup> Margaret Bruchac, “Native Diaspora and New Communities: Algonkian & Wobanaki” in *Raid on Deerfield: The Many Stories of 1704* (Deerfield, MA: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 2004). Website <<http://www.1704.deerfield.history.museum>>

<sup>71</sup> Calloway, *The Western Abenaki...*; and Gordon Day, *The Identity of the Saint Francis Indians*.

Wissatinnewag/Housatonic, and Mohawk. The first four, who were Pynchon's closest neighbors and trading partners were, by and large, displaced from their lands, and have seemingly vanished as independent nations. Their closest relatives and allies, the Abenaki and Nipmuc, are still struggling for United States recognition of their persistence. The tribal nation that posed the greatest threat to the Connecticut River Valley, the Mohawk, still retains control of some traditional homelands, and is recognized as a sovereign nation by the United States federal government. The Housatonic took a chance by collaborating in trade with John Pynchon before the fall of New Netherlands. Although they later joined with other Mohican people and left their homelands, they, too, are recognized as a sovereign nation, the Stockbridge Munsee Band of Mohican in Wisconsin. Every Native nation who came into contact with European colonizers experienced some degree of resistance and accommodation, but in retrospect, the benefits of collaboration with the English, and the perils of resistance, seem all the more apparent.

In sum, although extensive evidence of northeastern inter-tribal and international conflicts is preserved in the colonial records, these records are by no means transparent, complete, or completely accurate. Colonial recorders were notorious for misrepresenting the complexity of inter-tribal relationships, and the distinctions and similarities among Native communities. Modern historians and readers, however, often do little better by repeating earlier mistakes. Such misunderstandings are not merely linguistic errors or historical dilemmas -- even in the most well-meaning hands, misreadings and mistranslations of documents can change our understanding of the past, thereby effecting historical erasures that can do lasting damage to Native peoples and Native histories, by whatever names they and their villages may be called.