

The Penobscot Indian Nation

By Ben Stanley

The Penobscot Indians are an interesting and overlooked subject, and they deserve to be recognized in Maine history. Traditionally known as the Penawahpskewi, which means “the place where the rocks open out,” the Penobscot Nation is part of the Wabanaki Confederation. The Wabanaki Confederation consists not only of the Penobscots, but also the Passamaquoddy, Micmac, Abenaki, and Maliseet. Indigenous to the Penobscot Watershed, their reservation is currently located on Indian Island in Old Town, Maine. The Penobscot tribe has a rich history and an interesting culture, dating over hundreds of years ago.

The story of the Penobscots begins in 1606, with Bessabez, or Bashaba as the Europeans called him, the great Penobscot chief and first recorded leader of the Penobscots. Bessabez ruled a nation of over 20 villages throughout present-day Maine. Around 1607, the French explorer and geographer Samuel de Champlain allied with Bessabez and his nation, which profited both the Penobscots and the French colonists greatly. In the alliance, the French were allowed to settle on Bessabez’s territory. In return, the Indians traded with the French and they also received protection from them, who had a higher quality arsenal of weaponry. This alliance benefited Bessabez greatly and made him even more powerful than before. At the height of his power, Bessabez fell ill and died suddenly of European-introduced small pox. This marked the start of an epidemic that would plague the Penobscots for years.

The Small Pox epidemic started around 1630. So many Native Americans fell ill to this disease because their bodies were not immune and therefore vulnerable to the disease. The “Great Dying” of the Penobscots was furthered along by their wars with the Mohawk tribe. At the start of “the Great Dying,” it was estimated that there were around 10,000 Penobscot Native American. By 1803, that number was reduced to 347, and the Penobscots were on the brink of extinction.

The Penobscots managed to survive through the plague and allied with the French and the other Wabanaki tribes in their war against England. Their rivals, the Iroquois, joined the British side. The war ended in 1760 but hurt the

Penobscots and their resources.

Still against England, the Penobscots were recruited by George Washington to join the colonists in their fight for liberty. Although the Penobscot fighters fought hard beside their American counterparts, they have been all but forgotten in their efforts in the American Revolution.

After the revolution, the Penobscots became part of America, and their territory was located in the northern part of Massachusetts. Soon, treaties were worked out between the state of Massachusetts and the Penobscots. These treaties gave the Penobscots land, goods, and services. The Penobscots were tolerant of their situation under the American government until Maine became a state. Maine assumed the obligations from the Massachusetts treaties, but soon they went back on their word and took large amounts of Penobscot land. By doing this Maine violated the Non-Intercourse Act, which forbids transfer of the Penobscots' land without permission from Congress. Years later, in 1965, Maine became the first state to create a department of Indian Affairs, which dealt specifically with problems with native cultures in Maine. This was short-lived, however, and the severely under-funded program was shut down only fifteen years later, in 1980.

The Penobscot Reservation is located on Indian Island in Old Town, Maine. The reservation has its own laws, police and government, although they also follow American laws. The people of the reservation elect the chief of the Penobscots. Also, they have a representative in the Maine State Legislature, but much like the representatives from U.S. Territories, the Penobscot representative cannot vote.

The Penobscot Nation has a rich and exciting history where they have come through many adversities to become the thriving tribe we know today. They have impacted the Wabanaki and the State of Maine both with their great leaders and struggles for the land they rightfully own. Their story is inspiring and deserves to be recognized forever.

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