



Approved April 12, 2023

## VCNAA MEETING MINUTES

February 8, 2023

1:00 P.M. – 4:00 P.M.

Calvin Coolidge Conference Room  
6<sup>th</sup> Floor Davis Building, National Life  
Montpelier, VT  
and Virtually

## VERMONT COMMISSION ON NATIVE AMERICAN AFFAIRS



[vcnaa.vermont.gov](http://vcnaa.vermont.gov)

COMMISSION  
Richard Holschuh, Chair  
Douglas Bent, Vice Chair  
Melody Walker Mackin, Secretary  
Beverly Little-Thunder  
Jeffrey Benay  
Hillary Hoffmann  
Patrick Lamphere  
Deborah Reger  
Jon Bosley

**Members present:** Rich Holschuh (chair); Doug Bent (vice-chair); Melody Walker Mackin (secretary); Jeff Benay; Deb Reger; Patrick Lamphere

**Absent:** Beverly Little-Thunder; Hillary Hoffman; Jon Bosley

**Guests:** Jess Robinson (Vermont Division for Historic Preservation); Shalini Suryanarayana (Office of Racial Equity), Aaron Marcus (VT Dept. of Fish and Wildlife), McKenna Britton (Office of Rep. Tristan Roberts [Halifax]), Don Stevens (Chief – Nulhegan), Shirly Hook (Chief – Koasek of the Koas), Joanne Crawford (Chief – Missisquoi), Mali Obomsawin (Odanak), Isaak LaChapelle Gill (Odanak), Martin Gill (Odanak), Charly Lowry, Elodie Reed (Vermont Public), Patricia Prelock (UVM Provost), William Falls (UVM Dean of Arts and Sciences), Sherwood Smith (UVM Director for the Center for Cultural Pluralism), Amer Ahmed (UVM Vice-Provost for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), Kate

Frederick, Jane Barber, Rachel Hobart, Laurie Stravrand, Richard Whitting, Lokotah Sanborn, Christopher Roy, Auriel Gray, Jason M'Sadoques, Morgan Lamphere

Meeting called to order at 1:10 pm

The Commissioners and guests introduced themselves. At the conclusion of the introductions, Isaak LaChapelle-Gill (Odanak Abenaki) read the following statement. It was subsequently requested to be included in the minutes:

“My name is Isaak Lachapelle Gill, I am Abenaki from Odanak First Nation, formerly called St. Francis. I am here with my father, representing the true Indigenous people of Vermont. I am a direct descendant of Chief Greylock "Wawanoloath" of this region.

We are honored to be in our homeland today. We, the Abenaki of Odanak and Wolinak, have always defended this land where our relatives have lived, worked, and traveled since time immemorial. Our predecessors, the Abenakis and Sokokis, consolidated at Odanak and Wolinak between 1660 and 1800, but we never severed our relationship with the lands we come from in Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and parts of the surrounding states.

Our community has lived the challenges of being Native, but we were never targeted by the Vermont Eugenics Survey. We have been visible in our territory and active in Vermont society. We have not hidden, and you can find mention of us in Vermont's newspapers, public documents, and histories throughout the last several centuries.

We do not recognize the groups who claim to be Abenaki in Vermont or New Hampshire. We have asked them to validate their Abenaki claims, and show us how we are related, and they have not. Nor did the State ask them to provide historical or genealogical evidence as part of the state recognition process.

We understand that the VCNAA was created and staffed with members from these groups to ensure that the self-proclaimed "Abenakis" received state recognition. Odanak was shut out of these processes, and we have watched these groups appropriate our traditions and bring shame to the Abenaki people. We would like to remind Vermonters that, by the will of our Councils and citizens, the Abenaki First Nation has actively opposed these groups since 2003. We maintain this stance today.

All my relations.”

## **1. Changes to the Agenda**

Rich Holschuh asked that the UVM discussion of community relations be moved to the first item of business to accommodate the guests.

Mali Obomsawin made a request that the VCNAA invite the leadership of the Odanak to their next meeting. Rich Holschuh stated that the VCNAA would consider the request, but wanted to note that he had tried to contact the Odanak tribal leadership on several occasions in the past and had not received a response.

## **2. Approval of the October Meeting Minutes**

Jeff Benay moved to accept the November meeting minutes without alteration. Melody Walker Mackin seconded the motion. All present commissioners voted to approve the minutes by consensus.

## **3. University of Vermont Provost Patricia Prelock discussion of community relations**

Rich Holschuh began the discussion that noting that four tribes were recognized in 2010-11 in Vermont via a legislative process and they have been working with UVM in various capacities for years. He stated that the issue at hand was the Odanak symposium at UVM

last April and what many people perceive as official silence from UVM. He stressed that he the conversation today should be civil and compassionate.

Patricia Prelock (UVM Provost) stated that UVM has appreciated working with the Missisquoi Abenaki over the past 37 with their summer programming, Following the 2022 conference, UVM adopted a university-wide land acknowledgement. She stated that UVM has Indigenous students attending from all over the country. UVM's programming around Indigenous Peoples Day was partially spurred on by the state-recognized Abenaki, and she understands that the university is working with various state-recognized Abenaki tribal members on environmental initiatives. Regarding the conference, Patricia Prelock noted that there is a diversity of opinions at UVM, and the community is engaged in a constant milieu of opposing positions. She pointed out that this is what makes academic life at UVM exciting but also what sometimes makes it hard.

Patricia Prelock stated that academic freedom is a commitment not to censor. It is also a commitment to scholarship but not necessarily activism. She stated that UVM is a place to have an open dialogue, but statements should not be made personal. Having watched the video from the April event, she felt that the first portion of the symposium was appropriate and the second portion was disappointing. In her opinion it was not rooted in scholarship, and the administration has discussed this the organizing professors. She acknowledged that professors can have their own opinions, but that the format was inappropriate for a UVM conference environment.

William Falls (Dean – UVM Arts and Sciences) stated that it is important to defend academic freedom, but also to contextualize that freedom. He has met with the professors involved in the symposium and talked to them about the community that they are in and that they need to be respectful of that community. He didn't expect them to change their opinions, but he wanted them to understand that their opinions needed to be contextualized.

Amer Ahmed (Vice-Provost- UVM for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) stated that there are circumstances where academic freedom bumps up against the desire to have a positive learning environment for all. He wanted to make clear that he was approached prior to the April symposium last year about having an alternative program that was student-led to bring a different perspective, but that the program hasn't happened yet in part because of the logistics surrounding the planning of the event. He was disappointed to learn that there was an alternative program off-campus, and that as far as his office is concerned, the offer for another program is still available.

Sherwood Smith (UVM - Director for the Center for Cultural Pluralism) stated that he was personally disappointed in the political nature of the latter portion of the conference. He stated that he wanted UVM to be supportive environment for the Abenaki and all other students.

Melody Walker Mackin thanked the representatives from UVM for coming and for offering their positions.

Jeff Benay noted that the Missisquoi “Summer Happening” has been going on continuously for 37 years. He stated that he felt that a good, long-term relationship had been established between the Missisquoi Abenaki and UVM. He stated that the program offered high school students choices and exposed them to different perspectives.

Patricia Prelock indicated that she would be happy to talk with the Missisquoi Abenaki, because she understood as a first generation college graduate how important it is to have potential students exposed to a college/university setting. She stated that she has been talking with staff and faculty about how to specifically support Native students.

Jeff Benay added that critical thinking and life-long learning are important lessons students need to learn but that those skills need to be developed in a safe environment, and he felt that wasn’t the atmosphere promoted during the symposium was not a safe environment. He voiced his concern that state-recognized Abenaki families will no longer think that UVM is a nurturing place, and that he had received calls asking about the safety of state-recognized Abenaki students.

William Falls stated that he wanted to assure parents that UVM is a supportive community. He stated that all identities are supported.

Patricia Prelock stated that she has reminded the faculty that their assertions have to be supported by scholarship, and that they also have to engage in responsible scholarship. She added that doesn’t mean faculty and staff should not engage in difficult topics, but that there has to be a level of respect and compassion in their scholarship.

Amer Ahmed stated that he is happy to join Patricia Prelock and William Falls at a meeting with the Missisquoi Abenaki. He added that the UVM community is always navigating a lot of communities and identities, and that contentious issues of identity have emerged in other contexts as well. He felt that people need to engage in discussions that are proactive, and not reactive after an event takes place. He stated that his office is also working to address structural inequalities in the university system nationwide. He wants to move from a place of debate to a place of dialogue, and develop means to repair harms that are done in ways that are equitable and just.

Doug Bent thanked the representatives from UVM for attending. He stated that that he thought he heard an apology from the representatives, but that a public apology would be appreciated.

Rich Holschuh stated that what has happened has happened, and we need to move forward with respect and inclusivity. He noted that there is still a perception that UVM has been standing back and not commenting on this issue. Rich Holschuh stated that the state-recognized Abenaki are actually working with UVM in a number of different departments on a number of different issues, but in his opinion that is not the perception in the media.

Patricia Prelock reiterated that she was disappointed in the second portion of the symposium, which was not productive, and that she felt it also overshadowed the first portion of the symposium, which she felt was appropriate and scholarly. She officially apologized for the harm that that the symposium caused. She stated that UVM would do better in the future.

Rich Holschuh stated that the VCNAA is charged with looking out for all Native people in Vermont, regardless of affiliation or tribe. He acknowledged that the Odanak Abenaki are relations with ties to the land. He stated that he wanted the State-recognized Abenaki to have a relationship with the Odanak Abenaki. In that spirit he invited members of the Odanak Abenaki to speak.

Mali Obomsawin stated she heard the words “responsible scholarship” and “inclusivity” being discussed during the meeting. She asked why UVM then continues to ignore requests by the Odanak council to engage with them and develop a relationship. She stated that she was addressing the VCNAA as an individual citizen of Odanak and was not speaking for the Odanak council. She stated that her thoughts and Indigenous oral histories are forms of knowledge that should be respected, particularly because of the personal knowledge many Odanak Abenaki, as members of a sovereign nation, have about state-recognized Abenaki people in Vermont. She also stated that Odanak Council and governmental statements were shared during the second portion of the symposium, which were important factual documents and should not be discounted. She wanted to note that the history department at UVM is not one of the departments working with the state-recognized Abenaki.

Patricia Prelock stated that she greatly respects oral histories, but that she felt there were more appropriate ways of presenting the data. She also stated that UVM cannot get into the politics of recognition. She stated that the State of Vermont has recognized four tribes of the Abenaki, and that is the framework under which they are operating. Mali Obomsawin stated that history and politics are inextricably linked at Odanak, and that it affects the way they live and work every day.

Don Stevens stated that he agrees that politics are personal, but that the state-recognized Abenaki are undergoing the same issues that Mali Obomsawin raises with regard to the Odanak Abenaki. He stated that he wishes that Indigenous people could self-identify, but that is not the case, and it was not the case during the state recognition process.

Mali Obomsawin stated that she believed that the state-recognized Abenaki didn't have to prove genealogy.

Rich Holschuh stated that as a point of order, the State-recognized Abenaki did have to approve their genealogy as part of the application process.

Additional comments were taken by members of the public. The commission then thanked the representatives of UVM for attending, and thanked participants for their comments.

## **OLD BUSINESS**

### **4. Proposed Statehouse Awareness Day**

Rich Holschuh had no new information to impart. He stated that Joanne Crawford submitted an application for the Governor to recognize Native American Heritage Week. If agreed, a Statehouse lawn event might be coordinated to coincide with it.

### **5. Native Caucus 2023 – Discussion, Bills, Priorities**

Rich Holschuh noted that the caucus recently discussed the Tobacco 21 FDA action, which made it illegal for any person under 21 to purchase tobacco. He stated that this conflicts with certain Native ceremonies and they discussed potential actions, remedies, or carve-outs. He stated that beyond that the caucus is focused on supporting and stewarding recently passed legislation.

### **6. State of Scheduled Meeting with Governor**

Rich Holschuh stated that there was nothing new to report.

### **7. Act 182 – Land Access and Opportunity Board**

Rich Holschuh stated that he has been acting in Jon Bosley's stead as a representative on the board. He stated that there was nothing substantive for him to report, but that the board would likely be meeting for years to come.

### **8. Act 142 – Racial Statistics and Advisory Council**

Rich Holschuh stated that Stacey Gould has not been officially appointed to the council, and is awaiting the next meeting to begin her participation.

### **9. Vermont Justice Advisory Council**

Rich Holschuh stated that there was nothing new to report.

#### **10. Act 174 - "VT State Park - Abenaki names" progress, upcoming priorities**

Rich Holschuh stated that there was nothing new to report. The VCNAA will address signage requests and language as the State submits requests to it.

#### **11. Act 128 – Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

Rich Holschuh stated that there was nothing new to report.

#### **12. Seventh Generation Curriculum Grant Committee**

Jeff Benay stated that Eloise Biel and Vera Longtoe Sheehan will be the principal authors of the curriculum. Because the committee is committed to developing the curriculum in a collaborative way, it is likely going to take longer than originally anticipated to complete. The granting authority has been informed. He feels overall the process is in a good place.

#### **13. Status of the New VT hire for Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)**

Rich Holschuh stated that the Indian Child Welfare Act is in some jeopardy related to a pending supreme court ruling. It is a Federal law passed through to the States. He stated that the newly-hired ICWA staff person has been engaged in a long job onboarding process, but that he should be available to meet with the State-recognized tribes in the near-future.

#### **14. Fred Wiseman Visit**

Jeff Benay stated that he would like to discuss aspects of his book “Something of Value” which is going to be published by the Vermont Historical Society, and is also coming to the VCNAA to discuss other issues he feels might be of interest. He will speak for 30 minutes.

### **NEW BUSINESS**

#### **1. Tribal Representation Reports**

Missisquoi - Jeff Benay stated that he met last week with the Maple Run School board, which is a large Franklin County district. He stated that they are coming under an Indian Education jurisdiction. He stated that the development was a very positive step for Native children there.

Nulhegan – Don Stevens stated that their food programs are continuing to feed people. He also stated that their snowsnake games are scheduled for February 25<sup>th</sup>.

Koasek – Doug Bent stated that they have been talking with Native people in New Mexico about traditional gardening practices.

Elnu – Rich Holschuh stated that their snowsnake games are scheduled for February 26<sup>th</sup>.

**2. Announcements**

None

**3. Public Comment**

None

Jeff Benay made a motion to adjourn. Deb Reger seconded the motion. All present commissioners voted in the affirmative.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:42 PM.