

The Mark of Uncas

Lesson Four

"They [the Chiefs] all had the same feelings: to do for their people, to do the right thing by their people..."

Roberta Cooney, Mohegan Tribal Elder

Video Segment

Final segment

13.5 minutes



Uncas' Pipe

Learning Objectives

1. Analyze the conditions for Federal recognition of American Indian tribes in relation to the Mohegan Tribe.
2. Examine how Uncas and Mohegan Tribal heritage contributed to the survival and eventual Federal recognition of the Tribe.
3. Speculate on how Federal recognition will influence the Mohegan Tribe and its survival.
4. Determine the shared values of the Mohegan Tribe and the non-Indian residents of the region, and how these values have contributed to good relations between the two communities.
5. Document the changing images and perceptions of the Mohegan Tribe since the time of Uncas.

Background Study

Reading One:

The United States Congress established seven criteria for determining the eligibility of an American Indian Tribe for Federal recognition. The U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs administers all relationships between American Indian Tribes and the Federal government. The Bureau makes the determination whether or not an American Indian tribe meets the criteria and if a Tribe will be recognized.

To be considered for Federal recognition, an American Indian Tribe must be able to:

- § Show that it has been identified from historical times to the present on a continuing basis as an American Indian Tribe;
- § Show that it has comprised a distinct community continuously, from first sustained contact with the Europeans, to the present;
- § Show that it has maintained political influence or authority over its members as an autonomous entity since historical times;
- § Present a tribal constitution or other governing document;
- § Provide a membership list of persons descended from the historical tribe;
- § Demonstrate that the membership does not consist of persons who are members of other American Indian Tribes; and
- § Show that it is not the subject of Congressional legislation that expressly forbids or terminates recognition.

Reading Two:

Since passage of the Indian Self Determination Act in 1975, there has been an explosion in scholarship on American Indian tribal law as tribes, states, and the Federal government grapple with Federal recognition, sovereignty, land issues, and a myriad of other issues. National, state and regional organizations, university centers and courses, professional journals all provide vehicles for discussion and debate. This reading is an excerpt from The New York Times, Virginia Groark, July 28, 2002.

“State and tribal experts say Indian law research at the [University of Connecticut Law School] couldn’t happen at a better time. With two of the nation’s richest and most powerful tribes in Connecticut and a handful of others seeking Federal recognition, Indian law issues are surfacing across the state, making expertise in the field welcome.

“ ‘The Indian law issues that people think about, a lot of them start in Connecticut,’ said Bethany Berger, a professor at the Law School. ‘The questions of tribal recognition, of Indian gaming, things like that, it’s all happening here.’ Berger will work with [Nell Jessup Newton, dean] on the revision of the Handbook of Federal Indian Law, which many refer to as the ‘bible’ in Indian law.

“ ‘I am absolutely delighted that more expertise and erudition will be devoted to a subject that is profoundly significant and increasingly so for Connecticut and the whole country,’ said Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, whose office has some lawyers who spend up to 90 per-cent of their time on Indian law issues.’

“In fact, Indian law issues have become increasingly common in Connecticut courtrooms as the Mashantucket Pequots and the Mohegans achieved economic power and handfults of other tribes sought Federal recognition and filed land claims. But until now, many lawyers and judges had not delved into that area of law.

“ ‘People sort of lack the understanding of why...have Indian tribes as separate governments within the United States, and of course people are really never taught that in our school systems,’ said Tom Acevedo, chief of staff for the Mohegans. ‘So that understanding sort of exasperates people because they always just think of the Federal and state system and they don’t understand that there’s a tribal system within the Federal government makeup of how the United States is governed.’”

Reading Three:

This reading is excerpted from the Brown Daily Herald, Will Hurwitz, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

“Native American tribes seeking recognition from the Federal government face societal obstacles and are often forced to present themselves through means not traditionally practiced by their cultures, panelists said Wednesday night, in a discussion that was part of the Native American History series.

“Professor of Anthropology Douglas Anderson, the panel’s mediator, described the history of tribal land policies.

“Anderson described the Federal Acknowledgement program, known as the Indian Recognition Act.... The act includes seven different standards – including that a substantial number of tribal members must live in a certain area [community], that the tribe must provide proof of membership, and that a tribe must prove it has maintained tribal political influence – that Native American tribes must meet in order to be Federally recognized.

“[Anderson] said that as of 1999, while 300 tribes had been Federally recognized, 245 were non-Federally recognized.

“‘Imagine the anguish of being in limbo of the Federal government telling you that you’re not you,’ Anderson said. ‘It’s unbelievable.’

“Panelist Darrell Waldron, executive director of the Rhode Island and Connecticut Indian Council, [stated that] he has a ‘serious problem’ with the Federal Recognition Act. He cited the seven standards for recognition,...explaining that ‘if it isn’t done in a certain way, then a tribe won’t be recognized.’

“A second panelist, Heather Whiteman, a student at Harvard Law School and a member of the Crow Nation, [commented that the Act makes tribes] comply with standards that are foreign to them. ‘Tribal people have their own standards of their identities, and it’s very difficult to put that in paperwork.’

“Whiteman explained that tribes seek Federal recognition because they can be given some sovereignty to have their own government systems. ‘There are responsibilities, privileges and obligations to being recognized,’ Whiteman said.”



Gladys Tantaquidgeon with her regalia.

Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, Ada Elizabeth Deer of the Menominee Nation. Acknowledgement by Ms. Deer was poignant; since she had successfully led her own Tribe’s fight for Federal Recognition after their termination by the Federal Government in the 1950’s.

Melissa Jayne Fawcett, Mohegan Tribal Historian, The Lasting of the Mohegans, Part I, The Mohegan Tribe, Uncasville, Connecticut, 1995.

Reading Four:

On March 7, 1994, the Mohegan Tribe was notified of its recognition by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Newspapers ran headlines such as “For Mohegans, a great day,” “Mohegans rejoice on special day,” “Mohegans’ 188-year quest for recognition is realized.” The Mohegans first petitioned for Federal acknowledgement in 1978. In a 1989 “Proposed Finding,” the Tribe was denied Federal status due to insufficient evidence regarding tribal social and political activities during the 1940’s and 1950’s. The system of Mohegan female sociocultural authority, prevalent during that time frame, had escaped the notice of government researchers who had limited their focus to male leadership.

The Tribe submitted more interpretive evidence in 1989 and the Federal Government conducted a Field Review of the Tribe in November 1993. Then on March 7, 1994, Mohegan Federal Recognition was approved in a “Final Determination” by the Assistant

Reading Five:

The video, The Mark of Uncas, is a story primarily told by, and interpreted by, members of American Indian tribes. In the early colonial and state records that document the activities of Uncas and the Mohegan Tribe, there is very minimal descriptive and interpretive information. Uncas and the Mohegan Tribe seem to be simply political and economic realities with which the colony and state had to deal. There is little interest in Uncas as a person, or the Mohegan Tribe as a social and cultural community.

That perspective began to change in the 19th century for several reasons. First, the Anglo/European settlement of Connecticut was firmly established. American Indian tribes no longer presented an economic, political, or security threat. Second, the early 19th century saw a resurgence of romanticism that brought with it a fascination with natural environments and Native peoples. This was the age of Henry David Thoreau and, of course James Fenimore Cooper. Third, the early 19th century also witnessed an era of social reform and Christian missionary zeal. The romanticism and social reform movements dramatically changed the image of Uncas and American Indians. Whereas the 17th and 18th centuries depicted them as diabolical heathens who must be exterminated or totally controlled, the 19th century depicted them as having admirable “natural” characteristics which only needed to be civilized and Christianized to make them productive members of society. By the early 20th century, historians were attempting to reconcile the wildly conflicting images of Uncas and the Mohegan Tribe.

The following excerpts by non-Indian commentators on Uncas and the Mohegans reflect this change in attitude.

Letter from James Fitch to Mr. Gookin, November 20, 1674.

“These [Uncas and other Mohegan leaders] at first carried it [preaching] teachably and tractably; until at length the sachems did discern that religion would not consist with a mere receiving of the word; and that practical religion will throw down their heathenish idols, and the sachems’ tyrannical monarch and then the sachems, discerning this, did not only go away, but drew off their people. Some by flatteries and others by threatenings, and they would not suffer them to give so much as an outward attendance to the ministry of the word of God.”

Eric S. Johnson, “Uncas and the Politics of Contact,” Northeastern Indian Lives, 1632-1816, edited by Robert S. Grumet, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst.

Excerpt from The History of Norwich, Chapter Eight, Frances Manwaring Caulkins, 1866

“The savage character of Uncas is by no means an exponent of that of his tribe. Whatever they may have been in the days of their heathenism, for the last hundred years they have been noted as a civil, teachable, active and intelligent people. With the sachem himself the inhabitants of the town always sustained amicable relations, and his tribe, the Mohegans, from the earliest period of the settlement to the present day, may be called favorites with the people of Norwich. They have been looked after with almost parental care, and the men of most influence in the town, on all public questions, have taken their part, against the state and against opposing tribes.”

Excerpt from “Uncas,” The Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Connecticut, Charles Frederick Chapin, esq., 1903.

“Who, then, and what was Uncas? He was a man who acted, within his limitations, as though he foresaw what was to be; a sachem who built up a tribe out of nothing, and left it at his death the chief Native body in Connecticut, with greater possessions than any other, and whose posterity still survives in Connecticut respectable in numbers, character and property; an Indian, unique among his kind, who formed a consistent theory of conduct and pursued it through life; a warrior whose personal courage never faltered, who never reached the limit of his resources, and who survived all his rivals; an ally of our fathers whose faithfulness mingles with their enterprise and piety in the enduring foundations of our commonwealth.”



Uncas’ Succotash Bowl

In the 20th century American Indian artifacts have become prized by archaeologists and art collectors. Archaeologists use the artifacts to determine timelines, movement and cultural heritage of American Indian tribes. Collectors value the fine craftsmanship employed in constructing the artifacts. Tribal artifacts often had practical value, such as Uncas’s bow. But there was always ceremonial significance to every artifact. Items were used for special occasions, such as the Tantaquidgeon Belt, or to mark an important historical moment or intertribal agreement, such as the Wampum Belt. The simplest basket or tool often incorporated graphic symbols and designs that held sacred significance to the tribe. For American Indian tribes, ancient artifacts are important because they document the stability and cohesiveness of their cultural heritage. These precious items both preserve the past and provide a way of learning from the past.

Discussion

§ Federal Recognition

"We are now officially recognized..."

Ralph Sturges, Chief of the Mohegan Tribe

1. Speculate on why the U.S. government would establish a specific Federal agency to manage its relationships with American Indian Tribes? How does the Federal government's relationship with American Indian Tribes differ from its relationship with other cultural, racial and ethnic groups, such as African Americans and Hispanic Americans? How might "tribal sovereignty" influence the Federal government's need for a Bureau of Indian Affairs?
2. Examine the advantages for an American Indian tribe to receive Federal recognition. Consider issues such as protection of lands, greater independence and sovereignty, eligibility for Federal funding, and other issues.
3. Discuss each of the criteria for Federal recognition of American Indian Tribes. What exactly is meant by "historic times?" What would be an appropriate definition of "prehistoric times," from the perspective of American Indian Tribes? Why might American Indian people prefer to use the term "pre-contact" to "pre-historic?" What does the concept "historic" versus "pre-historic" imply about American Indian culture? Why would the Bureau of Indian Affairs not choose to focus on "prehistoric," times?
4. The second criterion requires that the group requesting Federal recognition demonstrate that it has been a "distinct community continuously..." How might a group demonstrate that it has, in fact, been a distinct community? Speculate on why the Bureau's criteria do not include a requirement that the Tribe has maintained a "land base" continuously. Why might a Tribe not be able to demonstrate that it has maintained its land base? In the case of the Mohegan Tribe, was the Tribe able to maintain its land base? How did the Mark of Uncas video address the issue of the Mohegan tribal land base?
5. Considering The Mark of Uncas as providing documentation for obtaining Federal recognition for the Mohegan Tribe, determine if the Tribe meets each of the Bureau's criteria for recognition?
6. Define "sovereignty." Examine the ways in which the Federal government exercises sovereignty. Consider the relationship between the Federal government and the 50 states in relation to sovereignty, such as the ability to govern oneself, enter into legal agreements, provide for security, practice one's traditional values, spiritual ceremonies etc. How does American Indian tribal sovereignty "fit" with the sovereignty of Federal and state governments? When American Indian tribes talk about "a sovereign nation within a sovereign nation," what does this mean? How could it work?
7. Which aspects of sovereignty might the Mohegan Tribe particularly seek in order to assure their survival and well being? Consider their history, as presented in the video and these lessons.

§ Survival

"...the most important thing is to survive....So you have to come from a place where just existing long enough for things to become better is the sole goal of the people, and that's I think difficult for non-Indians to understand."

Jayne Fawcett, Mohegan Tribal Ambassador.

1. In The Mark of Uncas video, identify those events, people and places that are indicators that the Mohegan people have survived, and that things can "become better."
2. In his comments on Federal recognition of the Mohegan Tribe, Chief Ralph Sturges, instructs the members, "There's three words that they've got to remember, that they've got to have: perseverance, honor and integrity... That's three things that Uncas actually stood for, and those three words—it's very simple for any human being to live by them, but you've got to do it. You can't get carried away with money and crazy things. They gotta remember what they stand for and what they should be trying to develop..."

Does Chief Sturges see a new threat to tribal survival? If so, how does this new threat differ from what Uncas confronted more than 350 years ago? Apply Jayne Fawcett's observations to the new challenges facing the Mohegan Tribe, "I think the big lesson that we would derive from Uncas's life is that new situations require new

solutions....It takes a huge intellectual and cultural leap to think of something in a unique and totally different way." What new solutions, what intellectual leaps, will be required of the Mohegan Tribe in the 21st century?

3. Review the 1989 "Proposed Finding" of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the Background Readings for this lesson, and review the biographies in Lesson Three on the women of the Mohegan Tribe. Also, identify the number of places in the video in which women are able to provide the oral history of the tribe. Determine how important women were to the survival of the Tribe. Examine the implications of a culture, such as the Mohegan Tribe which depends on its women as the binding force of the community, in contrast to the dominant American society in which documentation of political, social and economic stability is determined by male leadership.

§ Shared Values

"Everybody knew who we were and because of our reputation, particularly living on Mohegan Hill there, we were well thought of."

Ernest Gilman, Mohegan Pipe Carrier

1. In this video segment, there are a number of incidents that express the shared values that have sustained neighborly relationships between the Mohegan Tribe and the larger community. Consider the return of Uncas's succotash bowl from the Leffingwell Inn Museum to the Mohegan Tribe. Recall the ways of knowing that have sustained the Mohegan Tribe and provided continuity and stability for the community. Did the same ways of knowing about their cultural heritage inform the decision of the Leffingwell Inn Museum? What does Ann Cannon, the proprietor of the museum, mean by the statement "When we gave the bowl to the tribe it was completing a circle of friendship that had begun with Thomas Leffingwell over 300 years ago." How does Cannon's remark reflect the importance of the Mohegan Tribe in providing continuity and stability for the entire Norwich community?
2. How does the eventual return of the ancient Mohegan Burial Ground in Norwich reflect recognition of the importance of the Mohegan Tribe to the cultural heritage of the community? Consider the account of Gladys Tantaquidgeon about the desecration of the burial ground long ago. Why might the Norwich community come to view the Burial Ground in a different light?

§ Uncas as symbol

"I am not only carving to bring the beauty out of his mark and the beauty in the stone, but I'm carving to create history that won't be dissolved for years and years to come"

Ralph Sturges, Chief of the Mohegan Tribe.

1. Uncas's mark appeared on numerous colonial records during his lifetime. It has real, concrete significance to the Mohegan Tribe because it documents land claims and other political and economic relationships between the Tribe and the English colonists. Review Melissa Tantaquidgeon's description of the meaning of Uncas's mark – what it meant to the real Uncas.
2. Consider how Uncas's actual mark evolved into a symbol for the Mohegan Tribe. Develop a list of single words that Uncas's mark came to symbolize.
3. Sam Deloria, in an earlier segment of the video, stated that Uncas was a historically well-known figure, not a vaguely known figure that is a part of ancient tribal knowledge. Why might it be important to shift the present-day understanding of Uncas beyond historical reality to symbol? Consider the comments of the local businessman, Johnny London. In the final comments of David Leff of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, is he interpreting Uncas as a historical figure or as a symbol of a kind of laudable behavior? Finally, consider the comments of the children of the Mohegan Tribe. How do their comments combine Uncas as historical reality and as a symbol of how to move forward?

Student Project

Prepare a Constitution for Student Government that provides for sovereign powers – that is, non interference from outside political, social, religious and economic influences. Also assure that the Constitution provides for the internal political, social and economic structures for its survival and well being.

Further Study

1. History of the Bureau of Indian Affairs
2. Indian Self Determination, sovereignty, Federal recognition
3. American Indian Archaeology