Building community, trust, and relevance through diversifying, decolonizing, and digital storytelling

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Decolonizing Museum Practice
Informed and inspired by the work of Amy Lonetree (Ho-Chunk)

- Decolonizing practices at the Abbe are collaborative with tribal communities. We are open to and actively seek ideas for projects or initiatives from our Native advisors and stakeholders. Native collaboration needs to happen at the beginning and throughout the life of the project.

- Decolonizing museum practices privilege Native perspective and voice. When we prioritize the accounts and observations of Indigenous scholars and informants, the story broadens, expands, shifts, offering non-oppressed perspectives of Native history and culture.

- Decolonizing museum practices include the full measure of history, ensuring truth-telling and the inclusion of difficult stories. Issues around water quality, hunting and fishing rights, and mascots are connected to the past and the present. When we present this full history we have a better opportunity to identify harmful statements and practices.

If you want to start learning about decolonizing museums:

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THEMES

The Abbe interprets the history and culture of the Wabanaki people, placing emphasis on Wabanaki perspectives and experiences and their context in the world and American history. There are three major content areas encompassing the stories of the Abbe Museum.

CONTINUITY & CHANGE

• The Wabanaki experience is a 12,000+ year history and this is demonstrated by several lines of evidence, including, but not limited to, archaeology and oral history.
• The Wabanaki live in their homeland and continue to build family and community in New England and Eastern Canada.
• The Native perspective, as told by women and men, on Wabanaki history and culture is a story of unity and complexity.

ENCOUNTER & CONTACT

• The experience of encounter between cultures was and is both wondrous and violent.
• The contact period initiated a time of oppression and destruction that continues today.
• Cultural survival was and is a deliberate act, guided by Wabanaki leaders and tribal citizens.

NATIVE VOICE & COLLABORATION

• Native voice as primary voice in exhibits, programs, and events is paramount.
• Native consultants, staff members, trustees, volunteers, and contractors are crucial informants and collaborators.
• Acknowledging and knowing one’s own culture and history is key to a better understanding of Wabanaki culture and history.
• Understanding Native sovereignty and the protection of the sacred is essential.

OUR PERSPECTIVE

Created as an anthropology-focused museum, the Abbe works from a history perspective today. This recognizes native history in a 12,000 year continuum that includes insights from anthropology, archaeology, and ethnology, but is viewed through the history discipline.
people of the first light
“The past is present. Time is like the ripples from a canoe as it moves through water. The ripples are constant and present.”

– Jamie Bissonette Lewey, Abenaki
This place is a Wabanaki place, and has been for thousands of years. Explorers, colonizers, and non-Native people and governments have imposed boundaries, and given their own names to places across the landscape. Despite this, the Wabanaki have retained the original names and stories of their homeland.
John Banks, Penobscot
Norman Bernard, Mi’kmaq
Jamie Bissonette Lewey
Cassandra Dana, Passamaquoddy
Natalie Dana, Passamaquoddy
James Eric Francis, Sr.
Suzanne Greenlaw, Maliseet
Sherri Mitchell, Penobscot
Brenda Moore-Mitchell,
Passamaquoddy
Elizabeth Neptune, Passamaquoddy
Simon Nevin, Mi’kmaq
Bonnie Newsom, Penobscot
Molly Neptune Parker,
Passamaquoddy
Gabe Paul, Passamaquoddy

Jennifer Pictou, Micmac
Darren Ranco, Penobscot
Percy Sacobie, Maliseet
Donna Sanipass, Micmac
Mary Sanipass, Micmac
Maulian Smith, Penobscot
Chris Sockalexis, Penobscot
Donald Soctomah, Passamaquoddy
Fred Tomah, Maliseet
Maine-Wabanaki REACH
Penobscot Nation GIS office
Maliseet GIS & Natural Resources
Passamaquoddy GIS office
Allies & Adversaries

Stopping the Bulldozers

By the 1960s, the state and private landowners had taken much of the land reserved for the Passamaquoddy Tribe in earlier treaties. The Passamaquoddy decided to fight back – and an opportunity quickly presented itself.

In 1964, a local non-Native man “won” a parcel of land at Indian Township in a poker game. When he began to bulldoze a road across the property, the Passamaquoddy took a stand. A group of women were soon arrested for blocking his equipment. In the process of fighting the charges against the women, the tribe found that they could take the fight for their treaty lands to the courts, and win. This laid the groundwork for federal recognition and land claims.


Plaisted’s camps, Indian Township, 1950s. Courtesy of Donald Soctomah.

Explore all encounters

Learn about how Maliseet and Passamaquoddy allies helped the Americans achieve their independence.
Colonization and Human Rights

Colonialism is the establishment, maintenance, acquisition, exploitation, and expansion of colonies in one territory by people from another territory. It is a set of unequal relationships between the colonized and the colonial power.

The process of colonization began with the first arrival of Europeans in the Wabanaki homeland. Believing they were justified in the eyes of a Christian god, colonial powers sought to assimilate or destroy Wabanaki cultures and people. Colonizers believed in a cultural superiority that privileged them over Indigenous peoples.

The impact of ongoing colonial relationships in the U.S. can be seen when the human and collective rights of the Wabanaki are violated.

“Deep in the subconscious of many Native people is the unfinished story that begins with the exploration of the European powers and the way things could have been before that.

– Donald Soctomah, Passamaquoddy Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, 2005