Wabanaki people have lived continuously in the Kennebec River region for at least 13,000 years, since time out of memory. We continue to call this place home, no matter where we are.

**Abenaki and Wabanaki identities and place names**

The term “Abenaki” has been widely used to describe Wabanaki tribal communities in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and southeastern Quebec. *Abenaki* is a mistranslation and mispronunciation of *Wôban-aki*, our word for describing the land and ourselves, which signifies the People of the Dawnland, the First Light, or simply of the East.¹ The Wôbanaki or Wabanaki nations are understood today as the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, Penobscot, Mi’kmaq, and Abenaki.

In the contact era, the French had particular difficulty pronouncing the “wô” sound in *Wôbanaki*, as it does not naturally occur in the French language, and came to use the word Abenaki to signify the Wôbanki of Acadia in writing and speech.² English language speakers, who make frequent use of the “w” sound but not the nasal “ô,” came to soften the vowel and use the term Wabanaki. Both names have been preserved in the lands historically disputed in the French, English, and (w)Abenaki wars.

While “Abenaki” was not originally its own tribal entity, and could have historically been equated with Wabanaki, it has developed its own significance in the colonial context, and now describes the tribal peoples originating from central Maine westward to the loose boundary of Lake Champlain and the Hudson river. The tribal communities of this region have been categorized into the “Eastern” and “Western Abenaki” by linguists and historians, together comprising over twenty tribes of origin, whose stories intersected and diverged throughout the colonial wars.³

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¹ After extensively reviewing the morphology, specialist of northeastern Algonquin languages Jessie Little Doe Baird thinks this could actually mean the first people.
² In Father Sebastien Râle’s *A Dictionary or the Abnaki language in North America*, he writes, “They have several letters which are sounded wholly from the throat without any motion of the lips; *ou*, for example… frequently I made mistakes [in pronunciation]; because, not having been trained in the use of their gutturals, I only repeated parts of words,” noting the specific difficulty of the “ou” (also written “w, “wô,” and “8”) vowel. (576).
The tribes originating from central and western Maine are generally considered *Eastern* Abenaki, mostly based on linguistic similarities. Many of their descendants are now part of the Wabanaki tribes of Maine or the federally recognized Nation Waban-aki du Quebec, which comprises the Odanak and Wôlinak communities. However, many of the Wabanaki peoples who ended up at Odanak and Wôlinak—especially the earlier waves of migrants in the 1600s—came from what is now understood as *Western* Abenaki territory. Western Abenaki peoples are generally considered to have originated from what is now New Hampshire, Vermont, northern Massachusetts and upstate New York.

Wabanaki communities traditionally identified ourselves by the rivers we traveled along, such as the Penobscont and Kennebec, or by our specific, more permanent villages located along them. This speaks to the centrality of waterways to our identity as Wabanaki peoples. Wabanaki place names (and therefore community names) typically described significant landforms or the activities performed in those places, often expressed from the vantage point of paddling in a canoe. For example, *Pนuwáhpskek* (Penobscont) means “where the rocks widen,” and refers to the region surrounding Verona Island, where a permanent community lived at the mouth of the Penobscont river. *Peskotomuhkati* (Passamaquoddy) means “pollock-spearing people,” and refers to their main food source as a primarily coastal community.

The Wabanaki of western Maine lived along the Androscoggin and Kennebec river watersheds and tributaries, and along the Atlantic coast, and had numerous permanent villages. A few examples are Ammasokanti village on the Sandy River, and Narrakamagog and Rockamekas on the Androscoggin. On the Kennebec (“Kwenebek(i)”), which means “deep river,” there was Koussinok in August/Hallowell, Ticonic in Waterville/Winslow, and Narantsouak (anglicized as “Norridgewock”), in the region between Madison and Caratunk Falls.

**Background and significance of Narantsouak to the Wabanaki people:** *Familial and tribal organization*

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Penobsconts in eastern Abenaki, but excludes the other recognized tribes of Maine. Some accounts include Passamaquoddy.

4 Day concludes that the largest groups contributing to the tribal population at Odanak by the year 1800 are of Schaghticoke, Missisquoi, Sokwaki-Penacook, Cowassuck, Androscoggin, and Kennebec/Norridgewock origin. Day, 1981. 115, *Figure 4*. – However, the twenty-one tribal identities that appear in surviving records at Odanak (after multiple burnings of the church registries), are as follows: Penobsconts, Wavenocks, Norridgewocks, Amonoscooggins (Androscoggins), Pigwackets, Ossipees, Saco Indians, Winnepesaukee, Penacooks, Wamesits, Wampanoags, Narragansetts, Mohegan-Pequets, Podunks, Agawams, Woronokes, Norwottocks, Pocumtucks, Sokwakis, Nipmucs, and Cowasucks. Day, 1981. 3.

“Narantsouak” signifies “at the confluence of rivers,” and was a large tribal community living in the area between where the Sandy River and Carrabassett River meet the Kennebec. The Kennebec tribe has sometimes been referred to as the “Norridgewock Tribe,” but this is misleading, as Narantsouak was just one of the communities or “bands” of Kennebec peoples. It was also often an intertribal space, where chiefs and relatives from many Wabanaki communities would come together.

Wabanaki political, social, and physical organization was perplexing to the English during the Anglo-Abenaki wars, which served to our strategic advantage at times, but has left a confusing historiographic trail. To this day, historians and Euro-Americans have difficulty understanding traditional Wabanaki lifeways and social structures, seeking to fit us into a western conceptualization of “tribes” and “towns,” when in reality our people were in constant movement throughout the year. The historical confusion speaks to the complexity and fluidity of our communities, our deep knowledge of this land and its weather patterns, and the strength of our kinship networks.

*Cultural, economic, and political “kinship networks”*

For thousands of years, the Wabanaki have lived in what we call *kinship* with our homelands, culturally guided by principles of reciprocity and relationality. This means that we consider the rivers, animals, plants, and all beings of Wabanakiak as our kin, beliefs that are represented in our clan systems and ceremonial practices that honor such a relationship.

In recent centuries, Wabanaki peoples have lived in extended kinship networks throughout and beyond our homelands, establishing expansive agricultural fields and villages, and moving seasonally between these and smaller family settlements in a sustainable fashion. When natural foods were in abundance in the summer months, we would live, farm, and harvest together in larger groups. In the colder months when food was scarcer, we would travel in smaller family bands and spread across the territories to find sustenance, mostly through hunting and trapping. These practices upheld kinship bonds with the animals and plants by ensuring that we would not overexploit one area or take more than we needed to survive.⁶

The Kennebec River has long been a critically important part of these food and kinship networks, as during what scientists have called the “little ice age,” from around the 1300s until the 1700s, it was the easternmost stretch of land where corn could be cultivated. Narantsouak, Ticonic, and Koussinok and their satellites were among the large villages where Wabanaki from across the territory would gather in the warm months. Narantsouak's location at the confluence of rivers made it the most fertile land in central Maine, and thus the community there grew corn, beans, and squash (three sisters) for their relatives to the north and east as well. To this day, you can

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⁶ Smith, Ashley, 2020. *This is Wabanaki Homeland*, working document. – As a key planting place and center also for ceremonial life, Narantsouak Village may even be the birthplace of the traditional Corn Mother creation story, a story that tells of Wabanaki peoples’ kinship with the land and the waters of their home.
find edible tubers and sunchokes at the edges of these villages, evidence of Wabanaki care and cultivation.

This practice of agriculture and trade was a keystone for upholding familial and economic relationships across our land. The location also provided a gateway to all points in northern and eastern Wabanaki territory by water. Relatives would travel to and from Narantsouak using its tributaries and headwaters at Moosehead Lake (Mozódupi Nebes). Using the Kennebec river, one could access the St. Lawrence, Androscoggin, Allagash, St. John, Sebasticook, Penobscot, Machias, and the Saint Croix rivers, and the open ocean. One can imagine that such a central location physically would give the place a deep spiritual significance to the Wabanaki, a riverine people: Narantsouak was literally the center of our world, where intertribal bonds and kinship relations were protected and maintained. It was a place of diplomacy, ceremony, agriculture, and trade, where families would gather and reunite regularly.

**Warfare and diaspora**

Its centrality to Wabanaki life, strategic location, and fertile planting fields made Narantsouak a critical target of colonial warfare. The Kennebec people had allied with the French in the 1600s, who sent Jesuit priest Père Druillettes and later Père Sébastien Râle to build a church and mission at Narantsouak. In 1647, an English law banned Jesuit Catholic priests from the Massachusetts Bay Colony – making the disputed Kennebec territory even more contentious. The borders of Acadia would be challenged and re-negotiated until 1842.

In 1724 after decades of war and treaty disputes among the French, English, and Wabanaki, an English militia group led by Captain Moulton attacked Narantsouak, massacring many of our people while they were locked inside of a Catholic church. Others were pursued and shot while fleeing across the land and river. The French Jesuit priest, Father Râle, was also murdered, and it is said that the Iroquois scouts hired by the English performed a dishonorable death ceremony upon his body for having betrayed the tribe. At least thirty were killed, many of them women and children, and over 150 are believed to have escaped. Among the first deaths was the Narantsouak leader, Chief Bomazeen (Abomozeen, Abemesin) and his daughter, who were shot

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11 Ibid.  
13 Estimates from different sources range between 30 and 80+. We do know that Moulton's men brought 26 scalps, plus Rasle's scalp, back to Boston to claim their bounty, so it was more than that; We actually believe that more people escaped than this. According to Charlevoix, 150 people arrived at the Jesuit mission village where Rasle's superior was* and reported that Rasle was dead. But the oral stories suggest that not everyone went that direction together, so more people must have survived. Smith, 2020.
in the river just south of the historic village site at the Pines, in the section now known as the Bomazeen Rips.

The political centrality of Narantsouak and our culture of extended kinship networks, meant that those living in the village had relatives all throughout and beyond Wabanakiak. Survivors of the massacre went in all directions, many taking refuge with family in Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Maliseet communities to the east, and many traveling north to the established Jesuit missions in Quebec, including Odanak, Wôlinak, Sillery, and Trois-Rivières.

The missions at Odanak (also known as St. Francis and Arsigôntekw) and Wôlinak (Bécancour) were established in the latter half of the 1600s by the French Jesuits. Since their creation, they have been intertribal reserves, accommodating Indigenous peoples from Wabanaki and surrounding nations. The first groups to arrive there and take refuge from New England settlers included the Sokoki, Pegwacket, and the Ammasokanti. Other small Algonquin bands also joined the missions from their territories in lower Canada and southern New England.\(^{14}\) Additionally, there was regular movement between Odanak and the historic Missisquoi (Mazipskwi) community at the head of Lake Champlain (Betobagw). The large group that came from Narantsouak after the 1724 massacre included surviving members of Chief Bomazeen’s family.

However, it must be understood that while many Wabanaki from western Maine took refuge at the Odanak, Wôlinak, or in other communities, the massacre at Narantsouak was by no means the end of the Kennebec tribe’s presence along their river: Historians, traditional Wabanaki knowledge keepers, and oral accounts all recount that many stayed behind or returned to Narantsouak the very next year. The Kennebec sent chiefs regularly to represent their tribe in treaty negotiations up through the 1760s, and were burning and attacking English settlements in defense of their land, or in response to treaty violations, throughout the rest of the 18th century. Some also integrated into English and French society. In 1776, Benedict Arnold's men came across Kennebec peoples living north of Nanrantsouak village in small encampments, near where the Dead River stems from the main branch. There are local stories in the Starks area about planting fields that Indigenous women continued to tend well into the 19th century and perhaps even later.\(^ {15}\)

Piecing together the written records of Euro-American historians, the histories recovered by Indigenous scholars and descendants, and the oral traditions preserved in Wabanaki and non-Native communities alike, the past and presence of the Kennebec peoples can be understood. Much of this work is being done by Wabanaki peoples ourselves, who, with the


insight of ancestral, geographic, and cultural knowledge, are best equipped to tell our own histories.

Today, there are entire families at Odanak, Wôlinak, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot Nations whose lineage traces back to the Kennebec River. Descendants of the Narantsouak community, and the survivors of centuries of English and American warfare, have always remembered where we come from, and our ancestors interred there remember us. This land and water continues to draw us to it – whether we have been sheltered by kin in other communities for hundreds of years, or remained here all along.