

# Report says VT tribes are illegitimate

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## FULL TEXT

Abenaki leaders in Canada released a cache of genealogical research on high-profile members of the Vermont-recognized Abenaki tribes, further evidence, they say, that their New England counterparts are illegitimate — in other words, mostly descended from Europeans.

Representatives of the Odanak and Wôlinak First Nations unveiled their findings Oct. 17, saying that experts had pieced them together from about 10,000 documents spanning the 1600s to the 2000s.

The 731-page report, available on the Abenaki Heritage website, details the alleged family histories of five prominent Vermont-recognized Abenaki figures: Chief Brenda Gagne of the Missisquoi Abenaki Nation; Chief Don Stevens of the Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation; Chief Shirley Hook of the Koasek Traditional Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation; and siblings Joseph and Marge Bruchac of the Nulhegan Band.

All the subjects, including three New Hampshire tribe members, are at least 96.9% European, according to the report. For most of the people named, the report looked at generations from the 1580s to the 1920s. Some have one or two distant Indigenous ancestors, but none was Abenaki, the report says.

"These false claims have allowed illegitimate groups to obtain official recognition and rights that rightfully belong to the true Abenaki people," said Jacques Watso of the Abenaki Council of Odanak during the press conference. "This undermines our sovereignty, of Odanak and Wôlinak, our ability to define who we are and our access to our rights and our resources on our traditional territory."

The First Nations leaders did not inform the state-recognized tribes about the research results ahead of time, Watso told reporters.

Stevens, chief of the state-recognized tribe in the Northeast Kingdom, told the Burlington Free Press he is convinced of his Abenaki heritage and had not read the new report.

"That's their opinion," Stevens said in a phone call after the Oct. 17 press conference, which he did not watch. "I don't know the credentials of their people. We have our own."

Stevens said proof of his Abenaki ancestry can be found on the Vermont-recognized tribes' joint Abenaki Alliance website, including a case study published by the American-Canadian Genealogical Society of New Hampshire. (The paper was written by Sherry Gould, a member of the Nulhegan Band who is also named in the new report.)

Stevens called the First Nations report "flawed" and argued that "anyone can twist things" in their favor.

"I don't accept whatever they presented," Stevens said. "They have no authority over me."

He added that he "doesn't need to prove" himself to Odanak and Wôlinak.

Gagne, the chief of the Missisquoi tribe, told the Free Press following the press conference that she and the other chiefs in Vermont would release a joint response.

"We're done with this stuff," Gagne said. The statement came Oct. 23: two pages from Gagne, Stevens, Hook and Elnu Abenaki Tribe Chief Roger Longtoe Sheehan condemning "the false, greed-inspired attacks launched by the leadership of the Canadian Odanak Abenaki," which the four chiefs described as "malicious propaganda which are only opinion-based."

"The recent so-called 'report' issued by Odanak is junk science, compiled with bias and full of factual and interpretative errors," the leaders said, adding that reputable researchers "all agree that relying on documentation created by white people with their own biases against native people is not a valid way to determine ancestry."

In the joint statement, the four chiefs accused the Abenaki in Canada of attempting to claim Vermont land and "erase the rights of Vermont and U.S. Abenaki citizens."

"Our tribes and people do not take anything away from Abenaki people in Canada, nor do we prevent Canadian Abenaki from sharing their culture and heritage with whomever they choose," the statement said.

### **The genealogical claims for Vermont-recognized Abenaki tribes**

The report makes the following claims about the five Vermont-recognized tribe members:

Brenda Gagne, chief of Missisquoi Abenaki Nation: from the 1580s to the 1880s, 99% European, with two identified Algonquin ancestors

Joseph and Marge Bruchac, members of the Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation: from the 1580s to the 1900s, 99% European, with one identified Mohawk ancestor

Shirly Hook, chief of the Koasek Traditional Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation: from the 1580s to the 1920s, 99% European, with one identified Algonquin ancestor

Don Stevens, chief of Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation: from the 1580s to the 1920s, 96.9% European, 3.1% African American, with one Algonquin ancestor and one Wampanoag ancestor

Documents from the 1600s to 1700s came primarily from the Drouin Institute in Quebec or the Historical Demography Research Program at the University of Montreal, the report says, while most from the 1800s were from the U.S. and Canadian national archives. Records from the 1900s are available from national, regional and provincial archives, as well as local histories, the report says.

Odanak Chief Rick O'Bomsawin said during the press conference that the subjects of the report were chosen because they "spoke the loudest" about being Abenaki.

"One person may have an ancestor 300-400 years ago," O'Bomsawin said. "That doesn't make them a Native."

The report follows one the Abenaki in Canada published in 2023, which primarily studied the root ancestors claimed by the Vermont-recognized Abenaki tribes in petitions for federal recognition, said Daryl Leroux, a Canadian sociologist and professor who was commissioned to head the most recent project, during the press conference.

Those ancestors, Leroux said, were found to be French Canadian, German and English American.

### **What's next for the Abenaki in Canada**

Wôlinak and Odanak representatives called for Vermont lawmakers to rescind recognition of the four tribes in the state and for institutions to stop working with "groups falsely claiming to be Abenaki."

O'Bomsawin said Wôlinak and Odanak planned to show the report to state leaders and "prove to them that the state of Vermont did not do their job."

"As politicians, our job is to do full research before we make claims, and the state failed to do that," O'Bomsawin said. Despite the public conflict between Abenaki nations in Canada and the New England-based tribes, O'Bomsawin said the true disagreement is with Vermont's government.

"No foreign government has the right to identify someone of a nation that they are not a part of," said O'Bomsawin.

"The only people who have that right is the nation themselves."

He added that many of the people named in the report "have done some very good work for Native people," like establishing food banks.

"We have nothing against that," O'Bomsawin said. "You just can't do it in our name — that's the whole point of this."

O'Bomsawin extended an olive branch to the state-recognized tribes, saying, "If you can show us any difference than what we've found, please do."

"We do come in peace," he said. "We are willing to sit down and meet with them and discuss it without war."

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