

**In the Land of the People of the Dawn:
A reflection on people and place in the Champlain Valley at the time of
first European contact**

**Bjarki V. Sears,
Middlebury High School (9th - 12th Grades)
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During the week of July 23rd, 2007 I participated in “Lake Champlain Voyages of Discovery: Bringing history home”, a class offered by a collaboration of Chimney Point State Historic site, the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, and the Vermont Alliance for the Social Studies. The course, designed for educators, highlighted various topics concerning pre-contact and early contact periods in the Champlain Valley of Vermont, with a special emphasis on learning more about early French settlement.

Throughout the week a theme that emerged of special significance to me was the relationship between people and the land. It was a constant theme that stood out in our readings, our discussions, and even in the methodology and ways of knowing employed by the Archeologists from the University of Maine at Farmington who were involved. This essay is a summative assessment combining elements of a theme-based essay (centered on people and place) and a reflection of the experience and information learned in the course. To that end I have devised it in two parts. The first explores the historic background of the period, and sets a context for reflection. The second is reflective, as I focus on ideas, learning, and methods that I was exposed to, and consider how this growth will impact my teaching in the future.

In the early decades of the 18th century, the long struggle between France and Great Britain began to extend into the area that is today the Champlain Valley of Vermont. The French had been the first Europeans to “discover” this area, with the arrival of Samuel de Champlain in 1609, but it would be over 100 years before the French would establish settlements along the shores of the lake. Prompted by the arrival of British merchants intent on trading with the Abenaki and Mohawks in the area, and recognizing that it would be an important area both economically and militarily for the

new and growing colonies Europeans were establishing, the French set out to ensure the valley would fall into their sphere of influence, not that of the British.

In 1731 King Louis XV gave instructions to create a palisaded fort in the vicinity of Crown Point, at the most narrow section of Lake Champlain. An important spot because of its command of the narrows, “the construction of this post would favor the development of seigniories along Lake Champlain.” (Coolidge 88) A seigniory was in essence a feudal manor, a large area of land that could be parceled out by the holder to others, who would then be responsible for contributing back to the holder of the seigniory. The land was parceled out in narrow strips, with their length running perpendicular to the shore. Beginning in 1731, the French built a fortress, Fort St. Frederic, on the Western shore of the narrows. The fort acted as the economic center for the community, which according to an account by Robert Rodgers had over 300 people living in it. (Coolidge 98)

It must not have been a comfortable life. Moving to the wooded shores of a lake in a region much colder than their French homeland, these early *habitant* would have had to clear the land, build homes, plant crops, and create a community far from support or re-supply, in country where every wolf call, every nor'easter, and every Abenaki would remind them that they were farther from their Christian world than even the kilometers could count. It was not these that caused the French to leave the region, however. In 1759, as British troops moved toward the area from the south, the French, realizing themselves outmanned and outgunned, fled the region. The troops destroyed the fort as well as they could, the farmers burned their homes, and they all moved to safety in

Quebec. “When the English arrived nothing remained of the French villages but the blackened chimneys.” (Coolidge 99)

This destruction was more complete than the settlers may have realized. This period of French settlement is not well known, even for the inhabitants of the area. The British settled the area, and the French were to return only later, as Québécois farmers moving south into the United States. The British built a much larger fort at Crown Point, and British settlers such as John Strong would use the French cleared land as the beginnings of their own holdings. The French settlers, with a light footprint on the land that could easily be obscured by the changes brought by the British and the newly-minted Americans, were largely forgotten.

Not completely, however. Research is underway to better understand these settlers and their time, based partially on excavations being done at the seigniorie of Gilles Hocquart, on the eastern side of the lake north of Chimney and Crown points. This land is currently in Daughters of the American Revolution State Park (D.A.R.). The organizers hope to not only learn more about the time, but also to reach out to the community and inform them about a “hidden” period in the region’s history. To that end a class was offered for educators to come and learn both about the people and about the methods used to study them. As a Social Studies teacher at Middlebury Union High School, I participated in the project during the week of July 23-27, 2007.

Generally we dug in the morning and attended lectures and small group seminars in the afternoon. The morning tended to focus on the French, as we searched for Greenware ceramics, wide gunflints, and other indicators of French settlement

purportedly near assumed English cellerholes in the D.A.R. Working with archeologists from the University of Maine Farmington we learned how to properly dig and track artifacts from test pits, small samples dug into the earth. It was work that was at times compelling and tedious, but unfortunately, in the time I was there, only unearthed a potential piece of Greenware and a possible spoon of French origin.

The afternoons focused on the peoples who lived in the area before the “contact”, the meeting between the Indians and French. Most specifically we focused on the Abenaki, the indigenous people of Vermont, New Hampshire, and southern Quebec. We did this through readings, lectures, and discussions with two Abenaki visitors. These were absolutely fascinating topics in their own right; however at times they seemed to overshadow the stated intent of the project.

It was from the materials and discussions of the Abenaki that our class drew most of its energy and inspiration. This is not surprising, both due to the inherently interesting nature of their lives, the way the land around us was able to speak of older times (much of Addison county is comparatively underdeveloped, although it is certainly far more agricultural than it was pre-contact) , and the amount of knowledge those who were leading the class had regarding the Abenaki.

One of the most fascinating concepts we discussed was the difference in conceptualization of place between Abenaki and Euro-Americans. A particularly thought provoking reading was One Vast Winter Count by Colin G. Calloway. Mr. Calloway explores the idea that for the Europeans this was a new land, devoid of history, but for the Native Americans it was a timeless place, full of history and context, where areas were understood and valued not just as topographical places, but as parts of a society and a

cultural past. For Calloway, “land and lives were inseparable.” (7) I wondered, how did the land feel to the French? It could not have felt like “home,” without the context and history Calloway deems so important. I imagine people always a bit on edge, with fingernails digging barely into the landscape, dearly hoping not to be consumed by it. We get hints of this in the Jesuit Relations, annual reports produced by Jesuit priests regarding their missionary work to convert the indigenous people of “New France.” I come here,” wrote Paul Le Jeune, “like the pioneers to dig trenches and then the brave soldiers [will come to] lay siege and capture the field.” Clearly he saw a relationship with intrinsic animosity “where the forces of good and evil are waging a life and death battle.” (Canada.gc.ca)

The difference between indigenous and European viewpoints also became clear when we discussed the continuing relationship between the Abenaki and American government, specifically regarding Federal recognition for Vermont Abenaki. Abenaki are not recognized for a variety of reasons, but one important element for the federal government’s rationale is that there has not been a traceable line of chiefs. What is particularly shortsighted about this argument, as Robert S. Grumet points out in Historic Contact, is that the Abenaki did not traditionally have a single chief, but instead “organized their social and political lives around interlocking networks of families, friends, and associates.” (58) Thus, as disparate familial bands, they would never have qualified as a tribe under federal guidelines.

The understanding of place took on a beautiful form as I observed the Archeologists at work on the site and learned from them, often in seemingly casual discussion. Specifically through discussions with Steve Scharoun, the lead archeologist

on the site, I was able to get an appreciation for the ability to see the land in a holistic way, as both it sits today and how it may have appeared to people in the past. Discussions of where to look, of old roads and foundations, of clues to see, and how to research who had lived in an area previously, made me realize that others' ways of knowing are not gone. It takes a person willing to try to see it through the eyes of another, to try to think about house and community planning the way a 18th century French settler may, or to coax sustenance and spirit out of the land the way an Abenaki would. Even one of the diggers carefully removing an old ash pit from the ground, a pit identified by a change in ground texture I would have shoveled right through, took on the form of a beautiful and sensitive art. I came to appreciate that we are not limited by the prevailing conceptions of our time, just by our unwillingness to step beyond them.

As an educator these observation fostered and reinforced my belief that one of the most important things I can do is highlight to my students how connected to the land we have always been, and will continue to be. This is easy to lose sight of, I believe, in a world of air-conditioning, automobiles, and furnaces that run and clean themselves. It is easy for us to forget that we are of the earth, not simply living on it, but yet to do so is our own sad loss.

In my classes I can do this by highlighting the relationship between people and the land in the cultures we study, and the layers of this are many. Specific examples could include: how did the ever present existence of the sun in Egypt, and the cool desert air at night, contribute to a dualistic conception of the world to the point where an equivalent afterlife must have existed? How did the fertility of loess in the Huang He river valley contribute to a high population early on in Chinese history, and thus less of an impetus to

develop mechanized tools for farming? Why did the Scandinavians turn to raiding neighbors far from their homes when the Celts did not? And beyond the past, how do the students conceptualize their world? Do they see themselves as part of it, or do they stand apart? Would they think differently if they were from New York City, or Fiji? We can explore conflicting philosophies of nature, whether it is Lao Tzu's concept of a natural way (Dao) we can follow, a view of the earth as a divine gift to be "used," or Native American concepts of the Earth as our mother, who must be respected and replenished through ritual.

These are just some examples, of course, and the relationship between people and the place they live is just one of many concepts we explored this week. As A Vermonter, standing on land that my ancestors felt was home, both the farmers of European stock and the much smaller percentage that were here since the dawn, I can feel in myself that I am home. After my Voyage of Discovery I can appreciate that much, much more. I look forward to passing some of that appreciation on.