

The Mohegan Tribe and the Massapequotuck (Thames)River

Thames River Docent Academy, February 2024

NAMING THE RIVER

The river was known among the Mohegan as "Massapequotuck" (Great Water).

In the late 1650s, English settlers renamed this vital body of water the "Thames" after the great river of the City of London.

The Origins of Tribes at the River

The Native inhabitants of what would become the Northeastern United States were nomadic, pursuing lands that would best sustain them.

The Lenni Lenape Tribe that had been living in the areas east and north of southeastern Connecticut began to hear of better opportunities for farming, fishing and hunting in the verdant and watery area of southeastern Connecticut, where the rivers flowed into Long Island Sound.

Lenni Lenape migrated, and became known as Pequots (translated as “invaders”) settling into life on the Eastern bank of the Thames River

Beginnings of the Mohegan Tribe

In the early 1600s, as the colonists began to encroach on the Native lands of southeastern Connecticut, Tribes faced the dilemma of how to deal with their increasing presence.

Two Pequot leaders, Uncas and Sassacus, came to a breaking point in their differing philosophies. Uncas believed that the Natives had to learn to live with the colonists, while Sassacus was in favor of resistance and conflict

Due to this parting of the ways, Uncas took his followers to the West side of the River, and the Mohegan Tribe was formed around 1635.



Shantok on the Thames

- **Western Bank of the Thames River, site of the first Mohegan village**



Wigwam Dwelling

FORT SHANTOK

HAS BEEN DESIGNATED A

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK

THIS SITE POSSESSES NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE
IN COMMEMORATING THE HISTORY OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

1993


NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



SHANTOK AS BATTLEFIELD



Southeastern Connecticut was rife with conflict between Tribes in the 1640s, leading to the Mohegan settlement becoming a battlefield (hence "Fort" Shantok). Uncas and the Mohegan shielded themselves there as the Narragansets laid siege to the Fort.



Uncas's English allies helped his cause, and one legend has it that Thomas Leffingwell of Norwich smuggled provisions down the Thames river and into the Fort. A side of beef was hoisted above the stockade fence as a sign to the enemy that the Mohegan would not be starved out.

River as Food Source

The Mohegan land diet was based on the “Three Sisters” – beans, corn and squash

Thanks to the proximity to the River and the Ocean, the diet was also rich in shellfish, primarily clams, but also crabs, oysters and lobsters. Deer and turkey were hunted, but cows and other poultry only arrived after the colonists.





The Source of Wampum

- Purple and white wampum jewelry was crafted from hard-shelled clams known as Quohogs found in the Eastern Woodland waterways.
- Wampum was given as a gesture of thanks or honoring by the Mohegan. Contrary to popular perception, it was not used as currency for trading until after colonialism.
- Uncas's collar shown on the right is a prime example of wampum. It is on display at the Tantasquidgeon Museum.

WAMPUM





The River as “Highway”

- Centuries ago, before the advent of rail and auto transportation, boats were a vital mode for indigenous people to explore their territory, and to establish contact with other Tribes.

- Using the waterways, the Mohegan established relationships with Tribes such as the Wampanoag and Nipmuck of Massachusetts and the Shinnecock and Montaukett who lived across the sound on the Eastern area of Long Island.

Other rivers figured into Mohegan life. including the Connecticut River, where Uncas's son Joshua established a base in Lyme that allowed him a broad view of the River's happenings. The area is now known as Joshuatown.

Tributaries of the Thames in Norwich (the Yantic, and the Shetucket) were sites of hunting and fishing, and also provided a route from Shantok to the Tribal burial ground in Norwich.

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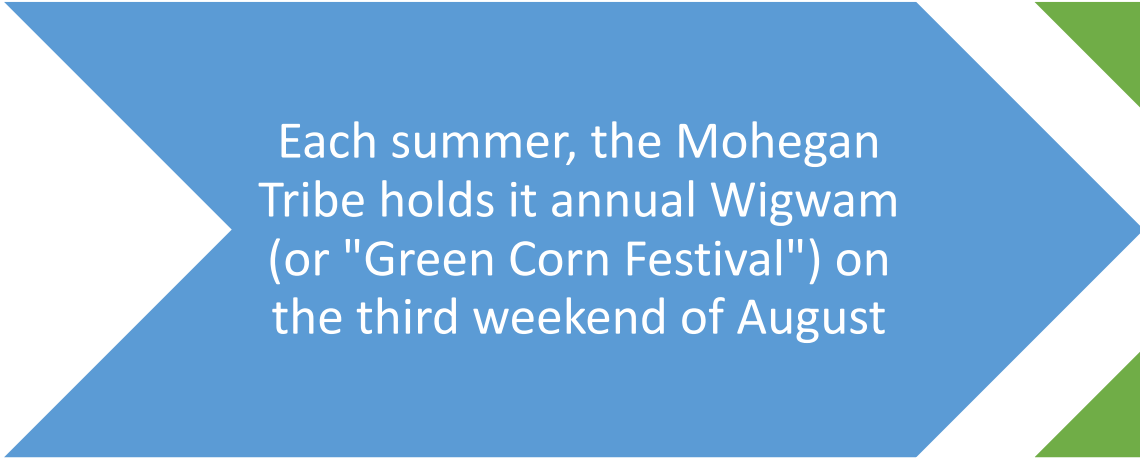
Joshua's Rock, a vantage
lookout point on the
Connecticut River in
Lyme . A site of
quarrying in later times.



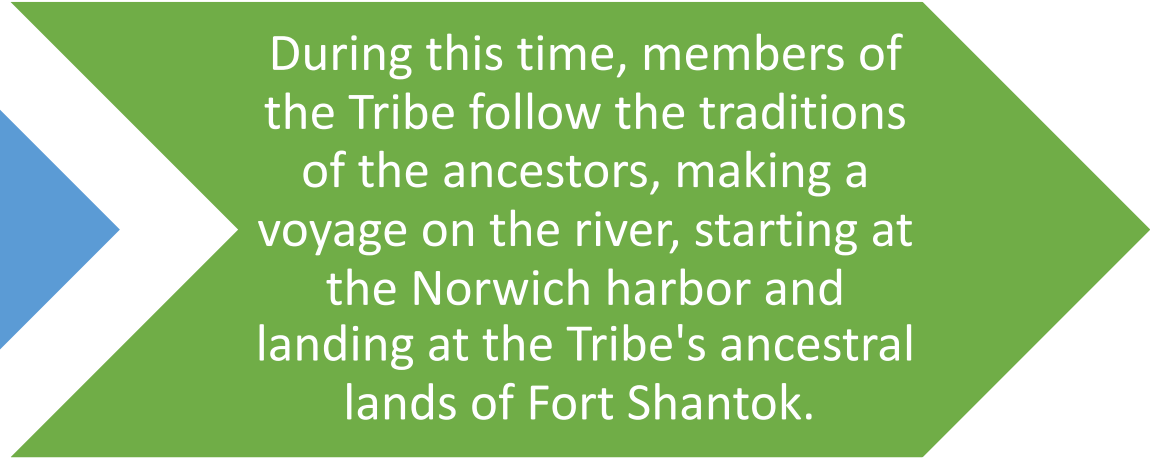


Modern Dugout Canoe

Traditional Voyage on the River



Each summer, the Mohegan Tribe holds its annual Wigwam (or "Green Corn Festival") on the third weekend of August.



During this time, members of the Tribe follow the traditions of the ancestors, making a voyage on the river, starting at the Norwich harbor and landing at the Tribe's ancestral lands of Fort Shantok.



Looking Upriver, Uncasville to Norwich



Present-day
Mohegans
gather at
Norwich Harbor



Mohegan boats arrive
at Fort Shantok

Brewster's Neck

Jonathan Brewster (1629-1661) was the son of William Brewster, one of the original Mayflower immigrants.

He migrated to southeastern Connecticut in 1649, and proceeded to set up a trading post and alchemical laboratory on a spit of land on the Thames River granted to him by Chief Uncas.

Brewster was one of Uncas's English allies, and aided him with warning about Eastern enemies approaching Mohegan territory.

Brewster was buried on Brewster's Neck, in a cemetery which stands to this day, and his descendants visited the site in 2021.

USGS Map of
Brewster's
Neck area



In Memory of
Mr. Jonathan Brewster,
eldest son of
Elder Wm. Brewster;
Born in England.
Came to Plymouth
in 1621 & to New London
in 1648-9.
removed to this,
Brewsters Neck
in 1650.
History speaks of his acts.
Deceased A.D.
1661.



Brewster's Neck Cemetery



Brewster Descendants gathering at Brewster's Neck Cemetery, November 2021





Funeral Traditions

- The deceased of the Mohegan were carried to their final resting place in Norwich via the Thames River and its tributaries. The journey was upriver from Uncasville to Norwich.
- The area known as the Royal Mohegan Burying Ground was a 16 acre plateau located above the river, now known as the Chelsea Parade area.
- Centuries of encroachment and development in Norwich obliterated the sacred ground
- In 1999, the Tribe gained that land back, and in 2008 dedicated it as a memorial grove



Royal Mohegan
Burial Ground,
Aerial View

Corner of
Washington and
Sachem Streets,
Norwich
Connecticut



- Burial Ground Memorial Grove
- 13 pillars named for the 13 moons of the Lunar year



Burial Ground Dedication, 2008

- Mohegan Allan Saunders with
Drum and Regalia

Whalers

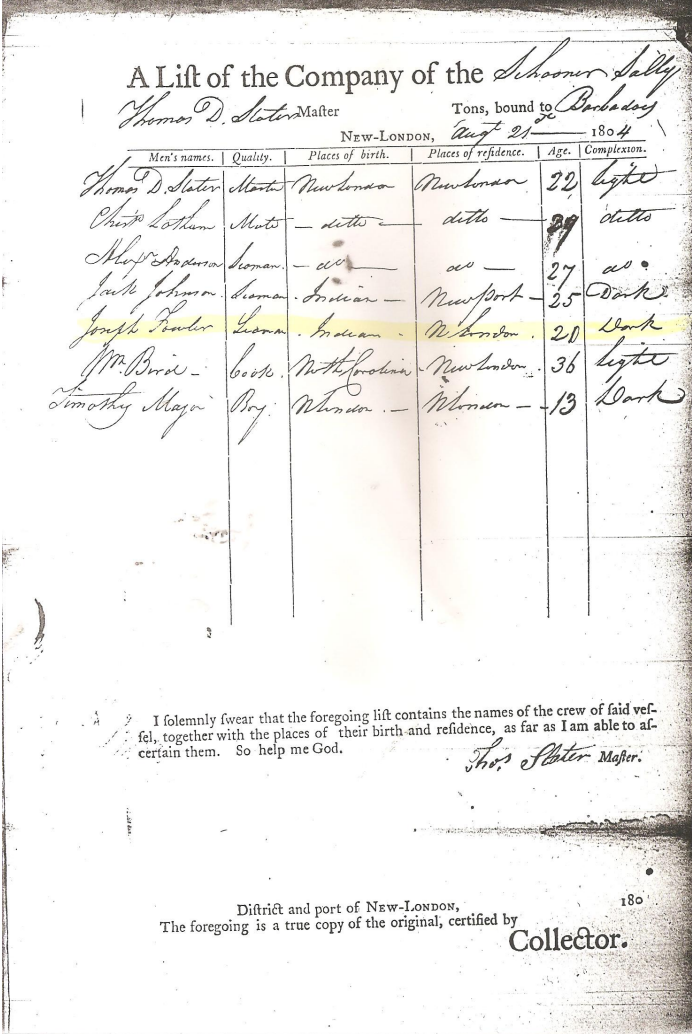
- Men of the Mohegan and other indigenous tribes of the region found work on the whaling boats sailing from New London.
- This work was open to any able-bodied man, and unlike "city" jobs, racial discrimination was not a factor.
- Edwin Fowler of Montauk married Mohegan Sarah Hoscott and brought his whaling knowledge with him.
- Mohegan men would bring back mementos of their voyages, some may be viewed at the Tantaquidgeon Museum.

Whaling Crew Records

G. W. Blunt White Library
New London Crew Lists Index: 1803-1878
Search Results

Name	Age	BirthPlace	Residence	Complexion	Voyage
Fowler, Jacob	23	Montville	Montville	Indian	Connecticut (Ship): 06/27/1825
Fowler, Jacob				Colored Man	Ann Maria (Ship): 06/27/1828
Fowler, Jacob	25	Montville	Montville	Indian	Ann Maria (Ship): 06/15/1829
Fowler, Jacob	25	Montville	Groton	Indian	John & Edward (Ship): 06/30/1830
Fowler, Jacob	31	Montville	Montville	Indian	Julius Caesar (Ship): 04/19/1833
Fowler, Jacob	36	Mohegan	Mohegan	Indian	John & Elizabeth (Ship): 06/20/1840
Fowler, Jacob	39	Montville	Montville	Copper	Mogui (Ship): 10/01/1842
Fowler, Jacob	40	Montville		Indian	Izaak Walton (Ship): 10/07/1844

[Search Again](#)



Mohegan
Whaler
Edwin
Fowler
(1845-1928)



Whaling Artifacts –
whalebone cane,
fish hook, scrimshaw
knife sheath, whale
teeth, bone harpoon,
net-making needles



Spanning the Thames River

Traffic increased in the region during the 1960s, mainly due to increased activity at the General Dynamics plant on the Eastern shore of the Thames River.

The state of Connecticut devised a plan to add a new bridge on the Thames, north of the Gold Star Bridge which already linked Groton and New London.

The new span would link Gales Ferry and Uncasville. In 1965, Mohegan leader Gladys Tantaquidgeon appeared before the state legislature to argue that it should be named after the Mohegan and Pequot Tribes that lived on either side of the river. It is now known as the Mohegan-Pequot Bridge.

Kin of Chief of Mohegans Urges Span Honor Indians

HARTFORD (AP) — A dainty little gray-haired lady, a direct descendant of Uncas, chief of the Mohegans, gave testimony at a legislative hearing at the State Capitol yesterday.

Miss Gladys Tantaquidgeon whose last name, freshly translated from the Mohegan Pequot language means "fast runner," spoke in favor of a bill that it dear to her heart.

It would authorize naming a new-to-be built bridge across the Thames river the "Mohegan Pequot" bridge.

The bridge, authorized by the 1963 session of the General Assembly will be between the towns of Preston and Montville.

Spanning the bridge under the bill would commemorate the early residents of the Montville-Preston area, the Mohegan and Pequot Indian tribes.

The once powerful Mohegan tribe played an important role in the early Indian history of New England, but today their numbers have dwindled to fewer than 200. About 35 live in the Montville-Preston area.

There, Miss Tantaquidgeon and her brother Harold have an Indian museum that is open to the public. It houses a collection of objects made by Mohegans and other New England Indians—some dating back to the 1600's, as well as arts and crafts of Southwestern and Northern Plains Indians.

The Tantaquidgeon's land has never been owned by white men. Miss Tantaquidgeon reports, and up to 1895 was an Indian reservation.

Miss Tantaquidgeon is not a full blooded Indian. "I'm about five-eighths," she said, "but 100 per cent Indian minded."

She has written books on the Indian's use of plants for medicinal purposes and also on Indian folk lore and decorative arts.

Worked for Indian Service
She studied at the University of Pennsylvania and worked for

more than 15 years in the U.S. Government Indian Service — in Sioux areas and the Dakotas. She doesn't really speak any Indian languages, however. Her own has been lost. She does know enough Sioux to get around however.

Speaking in favor of the bill with Miss Tantaquidgeon was Mrs. S.B. Butler of Ashaway, R.I., another writer on Indians and also state Rep. Charles K. Cray, D-Preston, who filed the bill. In his pocket was an Indian good luck piece — a miniature battle axe—presented to him by Harold Tantaquidgeon for whom Rep. Cray presented the legislation.

Law Urged to Allow Expulsion Of Married High School Students

HARTFORD (AP) — State Rep. Ella Mae Nucci, D-Deep River, testified yesterday at a legislative hearing that fewer girls would get married while still in high school if it meant they had to cut short their education.

Mrs. Nucci is sponsoring a bill that would authorize school boards to expel or suspend married students.

"By allowing the school board to have a policy barring married students," she told the Legislature's Education committee, "they are giving the student a choice where they may get married and join the adult world — or remain in school and get their education."

If forced to pick one or the other, Mrs. Nucci said, most girls would probably decide they wanted school more than a husband.

Her bill would also authorize school boards to arrange for pregnancy tests for girls, but only if their parents or guardians consent, she said.

A girl under 17 found to be pregnant and suspended from school, would be entitled to schooling at home for the duration of the pregnancy. In the case of an older girl, the school board could provide this service at its option.

SHOP WITH

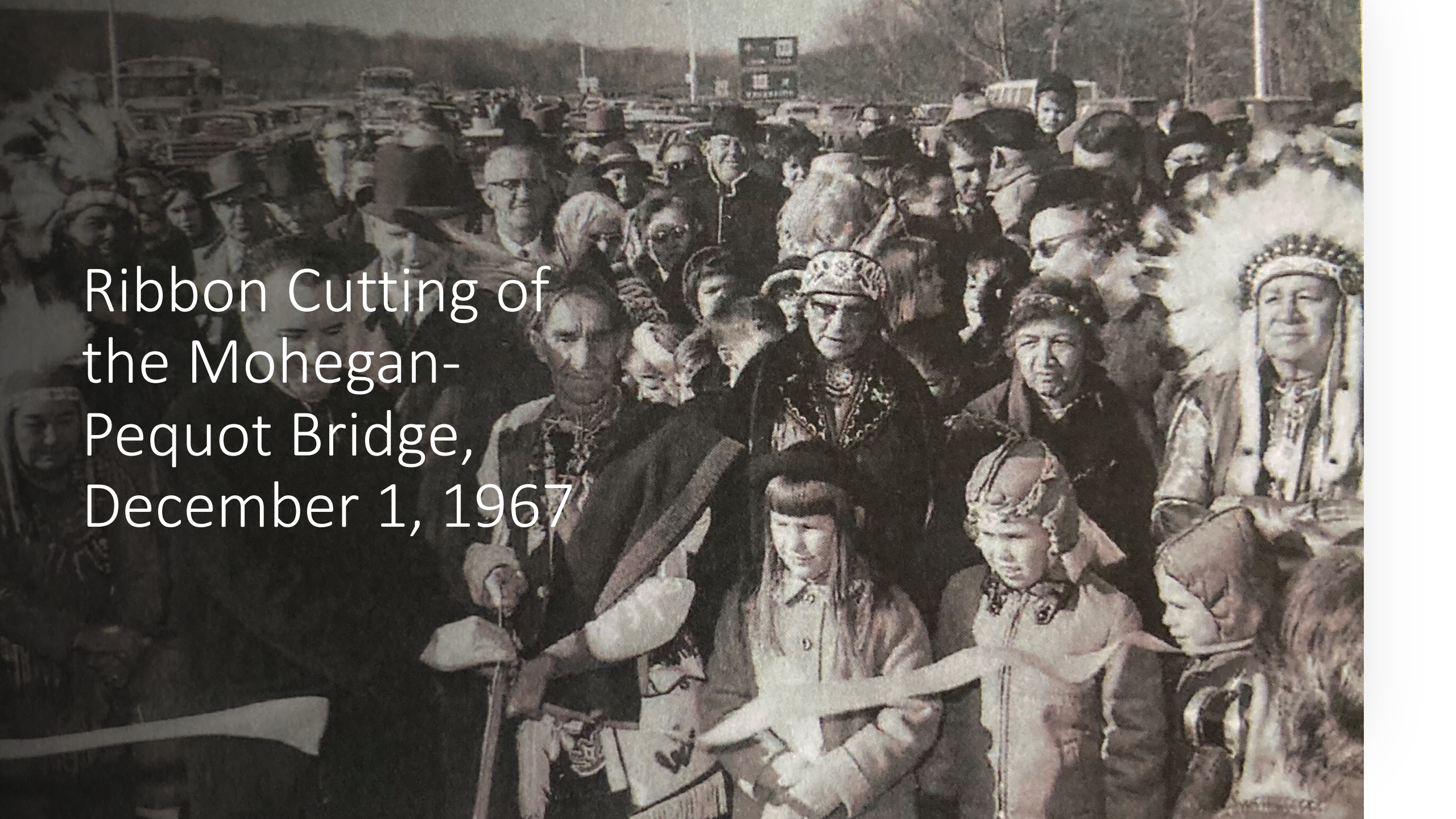




Mohegan Pequot
Bridge, looking East

(railroad tracks at
Fort Shantok)

Ribbon Cutting of
the Mohegan-
Pequot Bridge,
December 1, 1967



KUTAPATOTAMAWUSH (Thank You)

Mohegan history experts
Melissa Tantaquidgeon
Zobel, Jason LaVigne, the
late Faith Davison, and
Beth Regan

Mohegan Council of
Elders

Tantaquidgeon Museum

Jason Mancini and the
Mystic Seaport Museum

The late Gladys
Tantaquidgeon

Florence Griswold
Museum

Archives of
Newspapers.com