

SEEDS OF RENEWAL

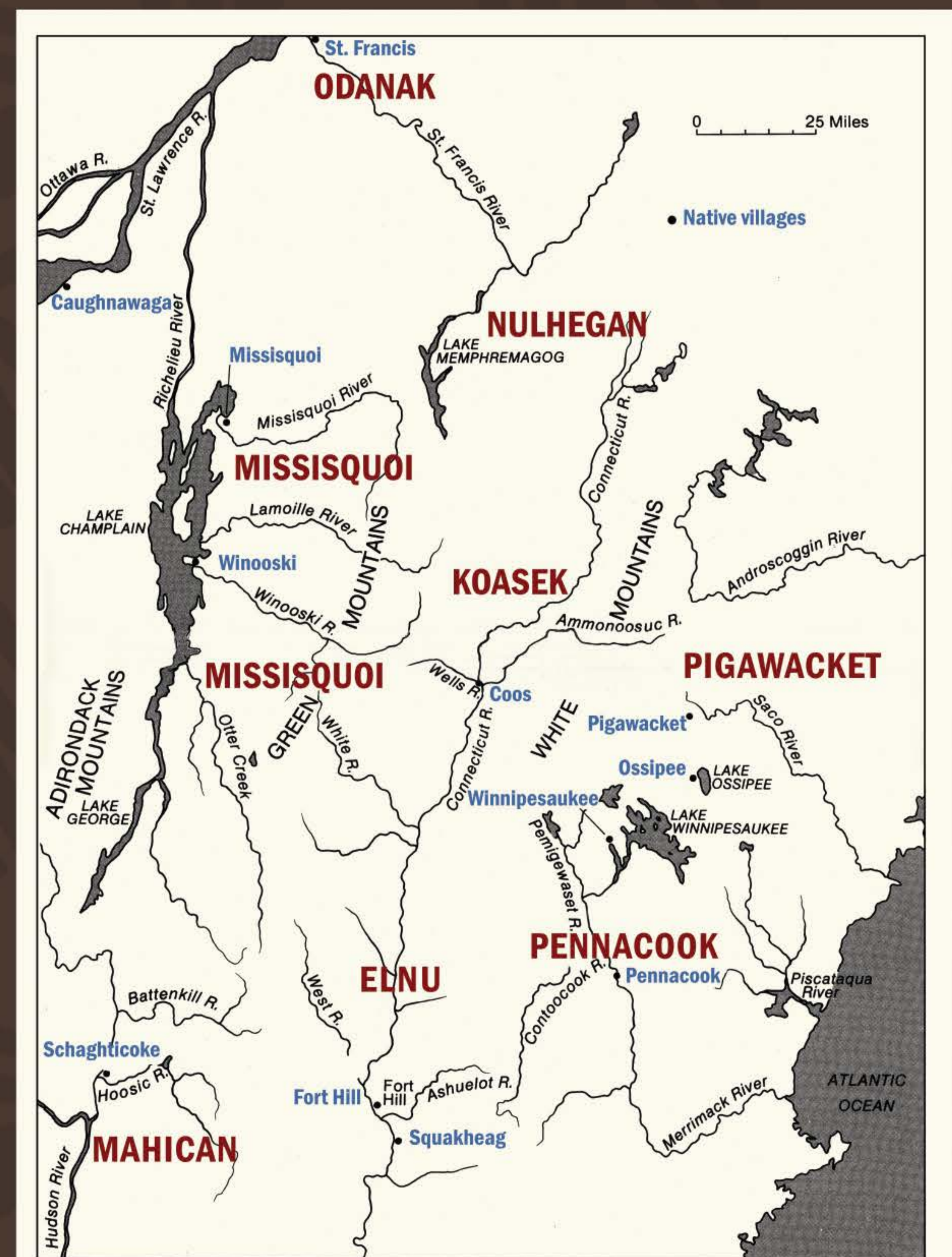
FOOD, FOREST, & FARMING

Vermont's Alnôbak have been farmers and gardeners for over a thousand years. The people, also known as the Abenaki, carefully planted and cultivated sacred seeds that came in successive waves over the years from the south and west. The crop plants adapted to the cool summers and short growing seasons of Northern New England climate, and the Abenaki became adapted to gardening. Today, we are re-discovering these ancestral domesticated plants and planting them once again.

The archaeological record in Vermont provides abundant evidence for the collection, processing and cooking of food. Skilled craftsmen manipulated rock types such as flint, chert, and quartz to create a wide variety of sharp and deadly projectile points. Each point was designed for a specific use. Large Otter Creek points took down deer and moose, while tiny, carefully-flaked Susquehanna points were used for birds and small game.

Within the last 1000 years, large-scale horticultural practices brought abundant change to Abenaki food systems. Carefully ground and polished stone axes, to clear the forest for planting, and large, wide-bladed stone "hoes," for cultivation of the soil, start to appear in the archaeological record.

We also find other evidence of changing food systems, such as knives, scrapers and other tools for cutting meat and vegetables; soapstone cooking bowls, pots, and griddles; "fire-cracked rocks" (the remains of stones that were heated in the fire, then placed in a wooden or bark container to slowly heat stews); and pottery, ranging from large stew pots to smaller bowls, jars and other vessels probably intended for food storage and serving.



The Western Abenaki inhabit the area that today includes Vermont, New Hampshire, north-central Massachusetts, western Maine, and southern Quebec. It is estimated that before contact with Europeans, the Western Abenaki population in Vermont was 10,000.



The Koas corn plant is relatively short (3-4' high) and produces small, plump-kernelled cobs.

THE THREE SISTERS

The Three Sisters are the main agricultural crops of various Native American groups in North America: squash, maize (corn), and beans (typically climbing varieties). Traditionally, the three crops are planted close together to provide mutual benefits for growth. Maize provides a structure for the beans to climb, beans provide the nitrogen to the soil, and the squash helps prevent the establishment of weeds.

KOAS CORN

Associated with the Koas Abenaki village, near Newbury, VT. In the 18th century the corn was given to early Euroamerican settlers in the region, where it was preserved before being given back to the modern Koas community in 2006. Today, the Koasek Abenaki use it for making the traditional summer and Three Sisters soups.

SKUNK BEANS

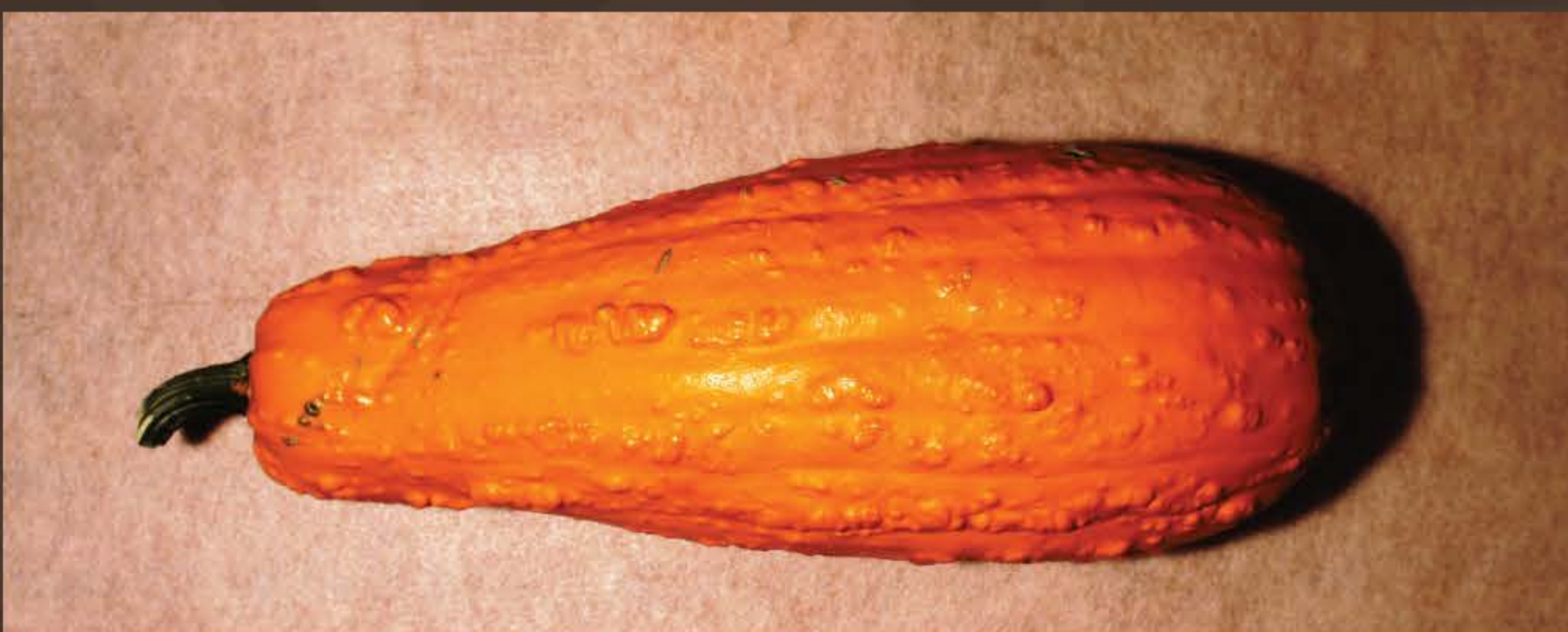
Originally from Chester, VT, in Abenaki territory, skunk beans traveled to Northern Maine, then to New York. Today, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) grow a variety there. The prolific white-striped black beans grow on long, highly invasive vines.



Skunk Beans can be harvested as green string beans, as immature beans for soups or stews, or can be allowed to ripen and harvested as dry beans.

CURTIS PUMPKIN

This quintessential Northeast Kingdom pumpkin is a long narrow orange squash. Its name honors the Nulhegan Abenaki family who originally raised it. Excellent for baking or making into Abenaki pumpkin cookies.



Besides eating their flesh, you can use the thick, hard rind of the Curtis Pumpkin as vessels when dried, and their seeds can be roasted for snacking or use in soups.

VERMONT'S INDIGENOUS HARVEST

Abenaki agriculture comprises a larger family beyond the traditional Three Sisters, with four more sisters including Jerusalem artichoke, sunflower, and ground cherry. The seventh sister may be a bottle gourd or a larger pumpkin. As with the Three Sisters, the Seven Sisters when planted in specific ways, can help each other to thrive. Ground cherries can repel Japanese beetles when planted next to beans. Abenaki corn varieties are not sturdy enough to support bean vines, but traditional sunflower varieties are.

These sisters are joined by a Brother, tobacco. The family of Seven Sisters and One Brother constitutes the breadth of Abenaki domesticated cultivars that came to their homeland thousands of years ago.

AUNT SARAH'S SUNFLOWER

In the photo to the right, Koas matriarch Aunt Sarah stands in full tribal regalia in front of the sunflowers that today bear her name, showing clear evidence for the presence of nineteenth century Abenaki regalia wampum and Indigenous jewelry. These sunflowers were thought lost until researchers found a descendant growing in Koas Gardens in New Hampshire. Today, many grow them as a symbol of tribal history.

HARDWICK GROUND CHERRY

This sweet relative of the tomatillo is the Abenaki's only domesticated member of the family that also includes tomatoes, peppers, and potatoes. The ripe fruits fall from their papery husks to the ground, hence the name "ground cherries." There are ancestral recipes using them in sauces for baked fish dishes.

CAMBRIDGE JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE

Growing along the Lamoille River in Cambridge, VT, is a 1/4 mile-long clone of Jerusalem Artichokes, estimated to be over 400 years old and therefore a living relic of ancestral Abenaki cultivation. The edible roots are equally delicious when pickled or made into salads.

DAWNLAND TOBACCO

An ancient Northern tobacco type that was grown by the Dawnland Center in Newport, VT, in the 1990s with modern seed coming from the Intervale Center in Burlington. The Abenakis are growing this northern variety to replace southern New England tobacco currently used in pipe ceremonies.



Jerusalem Artichoke, or sunchoke, plants can be easily spotted by their bright yellow flowers.



Dawnland Tobacco drying upside down from the ceiling



Aunt Sarah



Ground Cherries, also known as husk tomatoes, can be eaten fresh, but are often pickled or canned.





It's possible to see evidence of mound-based agricultural systems in early historic sources on Native American cultures, such as this illustration of St Lawrence Valley Iroquois planting corn. From *Moeurs des Sauvages Amériquains, Comparées aux Moeurs des Premiers Temps* by Joseph-François Lafitau, 1724.

THE ANCESTRAL SEEDED EARTH

The Vermont Abenakis were consummate gardeners. Remarkably sophisticated Indigenous North American agricultural systems have persisted among 21st Century Abenaki communities, utilizing a variety of modified earthworks and specialized combinations of crops.

HORTICULTURAL MOUNDS

The most common Abenaki agricultural earthwork is a simple earthen mound. Koasek gardeners noted that the mounds have to be small enough so that young Koaseks can reach right to the middle to pull weeds. Each spring the mounds are repaired and weeded, then a fish is placed in the center. If pole beans are being raised, a network of cut saplings is placed on the mound. They are present in all four Vermont Abenaki Tribal areas.



A Koasek horticultural mound, showing the sapling framework used to support climbing beans, is ready for planting.

FLOODPLAIN RIDGED FIELDS

This unexpected Vermont horticultural earthwork at present is only known from the Northeast Kingdom in Vermont. They are low linear mounds built in the lowest levels of active floodplains, specially aligned to the spring flood water, so that fresh fertile mud will be deposited on them each year. Only low crops such as beans and ground cherries can be grown here since larger crops may be swept away.

PLATFORM MOUNDS

Another Northeast Kingdom exclusive, these 1-3' high platforms hold numerous horticultural mounds as noted above. This complex system harkens back to the massive earthworks of Lowland Mexico and Central American civilizations that were designed to manage water and fertility in the moist tropics.



This example of a platform mound system from Brownington, VT had 77 mounds on it. Image courtesy of Luke Willard.

BIO-INTENSIVE HORTICULTURE

Planted upon these earthworks are crop mixes specifically designed to optimize light, humidity, fertility, soil moisture and drainage. In working with planting indigenous Vermont crops today on the ancestral mound systems, the plants taught how they wished to be organized, almost certainly a lesson learned by their original stewards hundreds of years ago. For example, traditional Abenaki corn is much too short to support the vines of pole beans like the Skunk variety. So, a framework of saplings arranged as a tripod is used, or a robust sunflower variety (*Morrisville*) is planted which can support the vines.

BLESSINGS FOR THE FIELD

Vermont's Indigenous communities are in the process of reestablishing lapsed horticultural ceremonies. Traditionally, nurture of the crops by their caretakers is not enough. Prayers asking for the blessings of the seed, field, sun, and rain are a preface to planting and are continued through the growing season.

Today, there are several major agricultural ceremonies practiced, as well as several minor ones. Research into Vermont Abenaki ritual history revealed that there were many modern examples of simple planting prayers practiced by all tribes, along with more complicated rituals involving tobacco, singing and drumming. As time goes by, the Vermont Bands will be adding additional ceremony to those currently practiced.

Please note that while ceremonies described here were public, some ritual elements were off-limits to photography. In the case of the Blessings, the Abenakis did a dress rehearsal on-site the morning of the ceremony, and the practice was able to be photographed.

SEED AND FIELD BLESSING (MAY 2018)

Missisquoi Field Blessing ceremonies had happened at the Intervale Center in Burlington previously, but had lapsed in 2010. The Missisquoi Tribe and Intervale Center came together to revive the ceremony and produce a new ethno-historically based Blessing.

The day began with a "Calling-In" or "Four Directions" Chant, welcomes from Intervale Director Travis Marcotte and Chief Eugene Rich, and welcoming songs from the Missisquoi chorus to alert the ecosystem that something wonderful was to happen. The story of First Woman's sacrifice that brought corn to the world prefaced the spreading of cornmeal ritual that blessed the land. Seeds were blessed, after which Missisquois, Intervale staff and audience members did the Round Dance around the containers of blessed seeds to bring their good wishes to the 2018 harvest that lay within the circle. At the conclusion, an osprey did a low level fly-over of the gathering, thought by many to be a sign of approval by the local environment.



Singing the welcome song at the Blessing ceremony



Spreading the cornmeal (dress rehearsal)



Previous ceremonial regalia and sacraments had been lost since 2010 and needed to be remade. Here Chief Eugene Rich makes the Sun Dance discs.





John Lawyer, Jesse Lawyer, and Patrick Lamphere with an ash splint basket by Aaron York harvesting Abenaki crops. They are wearing Abenaki made knives around their neck used for squash harvesting.

SONG OF THE GREEN CORN

Harvest of the Abenaki garden is undertaken by hand, often involving the whole family. The long winters and unfertile springs of our northern climates made food drying and storage absolutely critical to survival, and that tradition persists today. As the harvest seems assured, the ritual shifts to one of thanksgiving for the blessings of the harvest.

KOAS GREEN CORN CEREMONY, FALL EQUINOX (2013)

Held in Pike Hall in Piermont, NH, people assembled well before the ceremony was to begin to set up the kitchen and prepare the hall. Koas citizens and their invited guests were escorted to their seats, while the Voices of the Koas group sang the welcome song. After that there were greetings by the Chief and tribal dignitaries. These greetings were interspersed with storytelling by Koasek and Missisquoi tradition keepers. A heartwarming ceremony gave a descendent of the first Euroamerican settlers a few ears of the rare Koas corn, like their ancestors had in the late 18th century.

The afternoon saw the major ceremonies: the retelling of First Woman's sacrifice, the Knife Dance that is believed to commemorate her husband's anguish at having to sacrifice her so that her children would live, and the spreading of cornmeal, representing First woman's gift of corn seed and fertility. The day culminated with the Koas Sin Dancer and the Corn Dancers performing the Abenaki Green Corn Dance. The dinner ended with a feast of three sisters soup, various meat and vegetable dishes, and a small plate of the first significant crop of Koas corn. A social "round dance" followed for the weary revelers, and the day was over, with the attendees, and hopefully the unseen world, very satisfied.



The Green Corn Ceremony culminated with the Koas Corn Dancers performing the Abenaki Green Corn Dance.



Various varieties of baked bean dishes using Abenaki varieties, served at a 2016 Harvest Dinner.

ABENAKI CUISINE & CULINARY TECHNIQUES

Ancestral Abenaki cuisine was simple, robust, and very healthy. In addition to the Seven Sisters, animals from songbirds caught in small traps to the largest moose pursued on snowshoes joined almost every variety of fish in the stew pot, earth oven, or roasting spit. Tree nuts, abundant fruits, and condiments such as maple sugar or sea-salt added both nutrition and flavor to the diet. Teas made from root, bark, and twig were also brewed in earthen pots for health and healing. Today, many Abenaki elders carry on these traditions with their own proudly kept recipes for "Three Sisters soup" or "muskrat stew"

THE WABANAKI EARTH OVEN

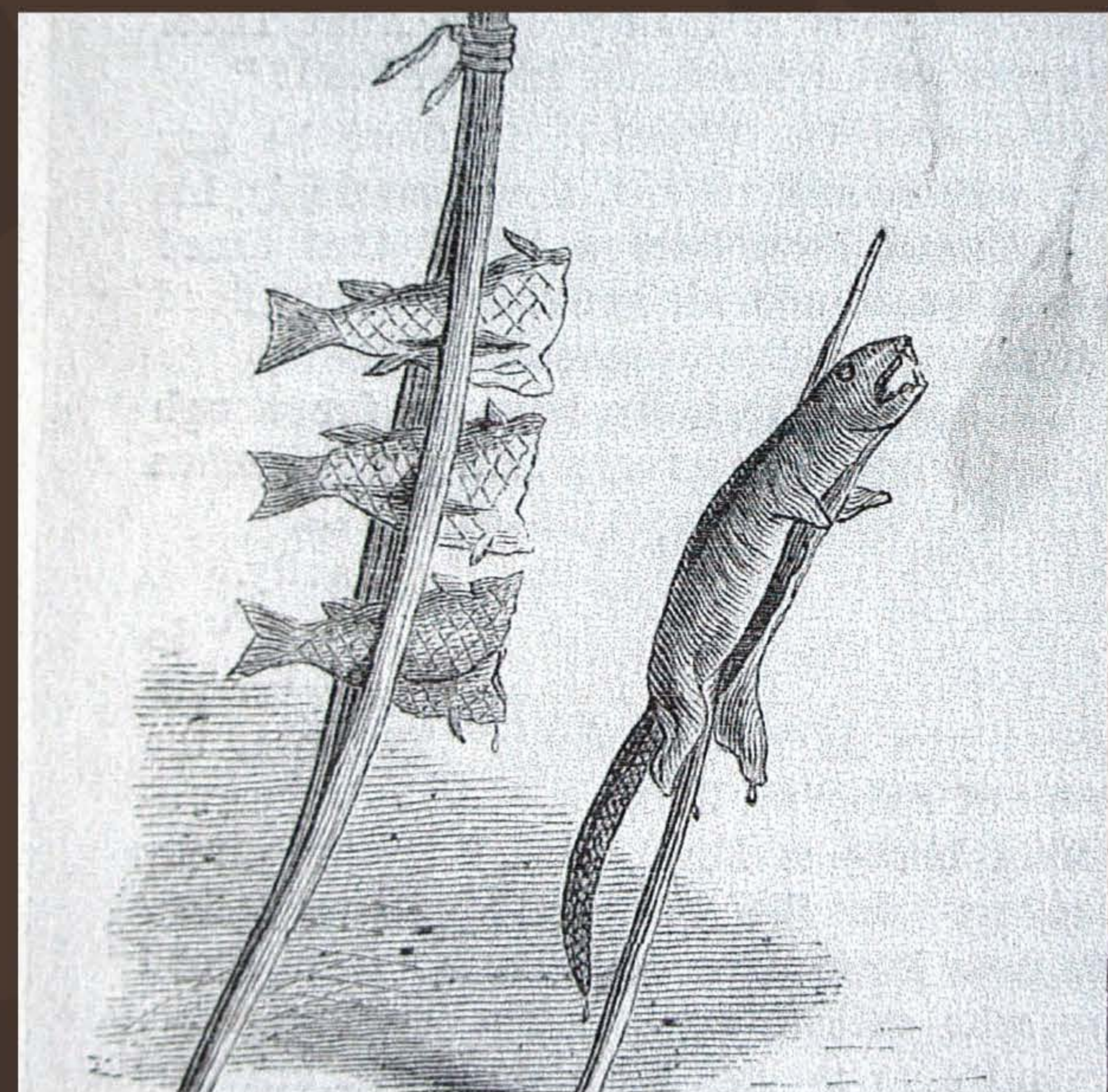
"Fire-pits," many originally used for baking foods, are found at archaeological sites throughout Vermont. A pit was excavated in the soil and lined with cobbles. A fire was set in the pit and allowed to burn until the stones were very hot. Once hot, food (such as meat or pots of stew) was placed in the hole. Ashes and coals were then raked back over the food and the pit was covered with earth and left to cook for a few hours or overnight. Today, the "Shore Dinner" and "Bean-Hole" dinners of New England are descended from this ancient Native technique.

ADDITIONAL ANCESTRAL CULINARY TECHNIQUES

Prehistoric earthen pots attest to the widespread culinary technique of boiling foods over an open fire, with a continuation of this tradition seen in historic paintings of Northeastern Native American camps and village life. Modern outdoor grilling has traditional Abenaki roots in broiling fish and meat on grates or impaled on sticks. Delicious "ash cakes" of cornmeal were buried at the side of the fire to emerge as the ancestor of our "Johnny-cake," or corn-pone.



Food pot being removed from an Abenaki style earth oven. Meat, or vegetables like squash, had to be wrapped in moist, fresh greenery such as corn stalks to keep from getting scorched.



Drawing by Rowland Robinson of Ferrisburgh, VT of 19th century Abenaki cooking of fish and game. (Courtesy of the Rokeby Museum)