Even the seasons form a circle in their changing, and always come back to where they were. The life of man is a circle from childhood back to childhood and so it is everything where power moves. (Brown 1953, 1989)
INTRODUCTION

Located in the northeastern area of North America, or Turtle Island as many Indian nations refer to it, the Mohegan Tribe is a federally recognized, Algonquin descent, Indian tribe in southeastern Connecticut situated upon what is now known as the Thames River. Once known by local Indian tribes as the Great River, this great river is fed by three large rivers that frame old Mohegan hunting grounds. The original settlement of this Eastern Woodland Mohegan Tribe on this western bank of the Great River today, Shantok Fort of Uncas (Shantok) is located in Uncasville, a section of Montville named for Mohegan’s seventeenth century Sachem Uncas. In the rolling hills and rich soil of Uncasville, Connecticut, the Mohegan community is rich in oral tradition winding through a communal value system that fosters tribal commitment to care for past, present and future generations of Mohegan. Framed by written and unwritten cultural policy, this communal value system corbels the foodways of Mohegan around the spiritual center of Mohegan community atop Mohegan Hill, building course upon course focusing the lens on the center of this space in the rolling green hills of Mohegan’s homeland.

While not a complete, exhaustive, all-encompassing study of Mohegan foodways, this project is an attempt to bring together bits and pieces of research about Mohegan traditions that involve food in a ceremonial or spiritual way, or in a nutritional way, or in a utilitarian way. Some Mohegan traditions have been recreated in modern times, yet some originate as far back as our oral history can travel to Creation and our roots. All of these collaborate contributing to
our cultural survival, identity and distinction from the outside community. Making this study “accessible” in modern terms for research, longevity and sustenance is a secondary goal – some old stories and historical speeches are included in entirety for this purpose. Deciding what to leave in and what to leave out has been an ongoing challenge. While outside anthropologists and ethnographers have in some cases provided good resources, the cultural bias of well-intentioned anthropologists is difficult to overcome; hence, it was important that this project be completed by an insider, a Mohegan, with collaboration with a respected, educated Mohegan elder. Stephanie Mugford Fielding was chosen as an advisor for the project because of her service to Mohegan as a member of the elected body of the Council of Elders, her experience with Mohegan law and the Mohegan Constitution, and her revitalization of the Mohegan language. Long term project goals (beyond a Master’s Degree Capstone Defense) include a potential publication of sorts after extensive consultation and collaboration with other Mohegan resources including Medicine Woman Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel, who also serves as our Tribal Historian. Further motivation driving this goal of publication is the lack of resources available to study the Eastern Woodland Indian, who is still here after over four hundred years of intense pressure to assimilate. Contrary to many myths of extinction the Mohegan Tribe and many other area tribes are still here in this northeastern corner of Turtle Island.

The foodways of Mohegan traverse every aspect of life at Mohegan. Mohegan traditions, ceremony, stories, oral tradition, history, spirituality, familial celebrations, the general health of the community, community transitions and migrations and alliances, and the Tribe’s physical
location all intermingle with Mohegan foodways. The archeological record of Mohegan’s homeland at Shantok, Fort of Uncas speaks to successful community agriculture further supported by the natural fauna and flora bounty of sixteenth century Turtle Island. This exploration of Mohegan foodways examines the interrelations of past practice, present conditions, and the community commitment to the future while encompassing the founding principles and oral tradition of Mohegan.

Through fractured lenses impacted by rapid loss of land base, and continual struggle for autonomy, identity and survival, all aspects of Mohegan life touch upon Mohegan foodways affecting how food is obtained, handled, served, utilized, discussed, discarded and shared. Sharing food and feast are at the center of seasonal celebrations, social gathering and ceremony. “Some of our deepest values and beliefs – about the cosmos, the world, other people, our culture, and ourselves – are expressed in the ways we use, think about and talk about food (Moonsammy 2012).” Foodways at Mohegan are choreographed in the community through interrelations of past practice; present conditions; Mohegan leader’s commitment to take care of future generations; Mohegan stories and oral histories; the rolling, lush hills that constitute Mohegan’s homeland on the mouth of a great river; Mohegan’s written and unwritten cultural policy; and simply, by the Mohegan people.
WHO’S WHO IN THIS PUBLICATION?

**John Whit Davis:** Current owner of Stanton-Davis Farm and known as “Whit” by his friends, Davis was born in Pawcatuck in 1924, and is just in 2012 deciding to “retire,” and turn over the reins of the farm to his son Larry. Larry will be the 12th generation of the Davis-Stanton family to farm this waterside land that has not missed a crop since 1654. The first non-Indian to cultivate this land, Thomas Stanton, was a friend to Sachem Uncas in the 17th century, and also served as Indian-English interpreter for the colony of Connecticut.

**Fidelia A. Hoscott Fielding.** Jeets Bodernasha, Flying Bird, 1827-1908. Fidelia was a Mohegan culture-keeper commonly known as the last fluent speaker of the Mohegan language. The regalia belt now displayed in Tantaquidgeon Museum was passed to Fidelia from her grandmother Martha Uncas.

**Stephanie Mugford Fielding:** Mohegan Linguist who studied at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Fielding currently serves Mohegan on the governing body called the Council of Elders. Word by word, Fielding continues to awaken the sleeping Mohegan language. Fielding has created and maintains an interactive website for the Mohegan language including audio files, a Mohegan to English dictionary, an English to Mohegan dictionary, common Mohegan phrases, lesson plans and a Mohegan orthography and grammar paradigms.

**Susan W. Meehan, Golden Wolf:** Author of this manuscript, Meehan is a Mohegan citizen currently employed by as Outreach and Traditions Specialist in the Community & Cultural Programs Department of the Mohegan Government.

**Gladys Tantaquidgeon:** 1899-2005. A small but strong Indian woman who lived in three centuries, Gladys was born in 1899. Gladys lived to witness and document 106 years of life in Mohegan and her unpublished papers are known as the Tantaquidgeon Papers. Never married, Medicine Woman Gladys was aunt to all and mother to no one. Gladys spent countless hours with her niece, Mohegan’s current Medicine Woman, Melissa (Jayne Fawcett) Tantaquidgeon Zobel.

**Harold Tantaquidgeon:** Brother to Gladys, Harold served as Chief of the Mohegan Tribe from 1952-1970. Harold and Gladys together with their father John established the Tantaquidgeon Museum in 1931. Today, Tantaquidgeon Museum, managed by the Mohegan Tribe, is the oldest Native-American run museum in the world.

**Elaine Thomas:** Elaine serves Mohegan government as the Archeology Coordinator. Elaine is a Mohegan elder who attended Mohegan’s Archeological Field School, held a shard of Shantok pottery in her hand, and was immediately enchanted by the art of her ancestor. Elaine has
apprenticed to a Master Potter to learn how to replicate the beautiful functional art of Mohegan ancestors.

**Sachem Uncas**: Late 1500’s-1685. Sachem Uncas is the first Mohegan Sachem to serve Mohegan in what is now known as Connecticut. In 1635, Uncas led a group of Mohegans away from the leadership of Sassacus on the eastern banks of the Great River (Thames). When Uncas split from Sassacus, the group reclaimed the original tribal name of Mohegan and relinquished the name Pequot, which the group remaining with Sassacus continued to be known as.

**Melissa (Fawcett) Tantaquidgeon Zobel**: Educated in Mohegan culture by her Aunt Gladys Tantaquidgeon, Melissa currently serves as Tribal Historian and Medicine Woman for Mohegan. A published author, Melissa also serves as Executive Director for Mohegan’s Cultural & Community Programs.
Once part of the wolf clan of the Lenne Lanape, or “Real People,” in what is now the Delaware Bay area, Mohegan people migrated to the shores of what is now Lake Champlain, near Iroquois country (upstate New York) many centuries ago. Turtle Island trade networks were extensive, especially along river channels and tributaries, and Iroquois country maintained well-developed trade networks with nations residing in what is now Connecticut. A primary trade-item that Iroquois desired from the Connecticut area was seashell, specifically quahog and conch shells to use in wampum production for tribal documents kept as wampum belts. Driven by evidence of excellent hunting and the abundance of seafood, Mohegan migrated from the vicinity of Iroquois country to the salty-fresh water basin of the “land of the tidal river” (Connecticut) long ago.

In this migration, Mohegan became known as “invaders” or “Pequot” when they settled on the eastern banks of the Great River. In 1635, wedged between irreconcilable leadership and survival beliefs, Pequot Sachem Sassacus and Uncas went their separate ways. While Sachem Sassacus wanted to fight the newcomers and hope no more would follow, directed by Tribal oral tradition that foreshadowed the coming of many new people to Turtle Island, Uncas believed that the only way to ensure survival of the Tribe would be to align with these powerful new people. After several attempts at reconciliation with Sachem Sassacus,
Uncas was directed to return to the area known as the “hunting lands of his father,” on the western bank of the Great River. At Shantok, Fort of Uncas, a couple hundred Pequot who sided with now Sachem Uncas, in an effort to assert their autonomy from Sassacus, reclaimed the ancient tribal name of the wolf people, Mohics or Mohegan. Shantok proved easy to defend and cultivate with its eastern border protected by a steep drop to the mildly saline Great River that mingled with the nearby ocean, and its western border fed by a babbling crystal-clear brook. Within the palisade walls of Shantok, Fort of Uncas, 17th century wigwams and longhouses sheltered the families for sleeping and gathering areas, but Eastern Woodland life revolved around the outdoors. Supported mostly by the natural bounty of Turtle Island that surrounded them, Eastern Woodland Indians typically farmed only a few staple needs: corn, beans and squash, commonly referred to as the Three Sisters; and sunflowers (Jerusalem Artichoke) from which seeds and root tubers were harvested. Other flora-commodities were gathered as ripe or as needed by Eastern Woodland Indians to complete a diet rich in nuts, berries, tubers, wild game, fowl and fish.

Present day (2012), the citizenship of Mohegan is about 2,000 people. Most of these citizens live in or around Mohegan’s ancestral lands in southeastern Connecticut. The factors that bind Mohegan are many. As citizens of a sovereign nation, Mohegans answer to Mohegan government, which includes a legal system, a code of laws, a court system and more traditional forms of “law enforcement” such as “good standing” criteria set forth by an elected body of elders, called the Council of Elders. Citizens of both the United States and Mohegan, Mohegans are answerable to two entirely separate legal systems. Rich oral traditions detail ancient stories
transmitting tribal history creating a common life-governing thread Mohegans share with one another. From generation to generation, the same stories are told, the same history is kept, and Mohegans today do the same things as our ancestors did for the same reasons, such as grinding *yohkik* or *yokeag* (corn meal ground from dry roasted corn kernels in mortar and pestle) during the [homecoming] week preceding Wigwam, physically linking past to present.

**The Land:** *Wiqômun ahki wuci Mohiks, Wiqômun ahki wuci Ônkas.* Welcome to the Land of Mohegan, Welcome to the land of Uncas.

Map by S. Meehan, not to scale
From 1861 until 1994, the Tribe was without a reservation to reside upon as a community. The spiritual, physical, social and political center of Mohegan, the two acres upon which sits Mohegan Congregational Church, was the only land to remain in Mohegan possession since European occupation and colonization. Rippling outward from this spiritual center atop Mohegan Hill, since 1996, Mohegan has purchased back parts of the original reservation piece by piece. Currently, Mohegan Reservation is about 400 acres, including many of the sites pictured on this map. Fort Hill Farm was one of the last pieces of the reservation to be held by 19th century Mohegans. Connecticut legislature stated as such, "...1. That three commissioners shall be appointed...who shall proceed to make a new distribution of all the ‘common lands’ (except the Fort Hill farm)...of Mohegan tribe of Indians...,” and with that devastating swoop of the pen on June 22nd 1860, the reservation was taken from Mohegan for over eight generations and one hundred and fifty years (Legislature 1860). Around 1862, Fort Hill and Mohegan Church Parsonage were also lost to Mohegan possession, leaving only the two acres upon which is Mohegan Church.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF MOHEGAN

While Mohegan Church is central to spiritual, political and social themes within Mohegan, it is a Congregational Church with a mixed attendance of about half Mohegan and half non-Mohegan parishioners. The importance of Mohegan Church is not what kind of church it is, but more that the Church provided a place and sanctuary for continuity of long standing Mohegan social, political, and cultural ties. Within the non-tangible, non-physical boundaries of Mohegan, goals are readily established by some common tribal documents, accepted long standing principles and special historical sites. The vital importance of learning from the past provides a basis for common goals for our community. The accepted tribal belief that life comes “full circle” in time and that every day on Mother Earth is a sacred event, continually directs Tribal actions (Brown 1953, 1989), especially in context of Mohegan relationships with community neighbors.

Known in the 21st century as the Mohegan Way, community-wide relationships and alliances are historically a matter of Mohegan survival. The survival of the Mohegan nation in the 17th century was in part due directly to Sachem Uncas’ decision to form a powerful alliance with English settlers. This alliance was a serious life changing decision by which Uncas stood at all cost. Uncas’ statesmanship, leadership, and warrior skills led Mohegan from the smallest, perhaps weakest Tribe in the area, to fundamentally, the most powerful Tribe in the area. This alliance was beneficial to Mohegan and English alike. In 1645 during a war with Narragansett,
the Mohegans were outnumbered and surrounded, trapped in their palisade fortress at Shantok; the Mohegan’s were starving. Facing the starvation and death of his people, even Uncas likely doubted his decision to split from the protection of the largest tribe in the area to the smallest tribe of a couple hundred warriors. Alliance with the English saved Mohegan from the brink of starvation when the English, including Thomas Leffingwell, Thomas Miner and Thomas Tracey, smuggled food up the Great River to the Mohegan People under cover of the night, thus saving their lives. In morning light, by hoisting a side of beef high up in plain sight above the palisade walls, Uncas convinced his enemies that they were not in fact starving the Mohegans in their own walls. Retreat eventually ensued, and the Mohegans were indebted to their English allies. In return, in the year 1659, Uncas would sign over the 9-miles square (81 square miles) that has become Norwich, Connecticut, and several smaller towns. This true friendship between the Mohegan and their neighbors has been referred to the Mohegan Way in modern times.

“Yo mutah mutu nutah, wipi kutah.” This heart is not my heart, but your heart.
Sachem Uncas, 17th Century

The story of this monumental shift in Tribal history is told by the wampum collar known as the Uncas Collar that lives at the Tantaquidgeon Museum in Uncasville, Connecticut. The dark, purple background tells a tale of a time of great disruption, turmoil and change. The two distinctly separate, white triangles tell of two leaders with people who respected the leadership of each following Sassacus on one side and Uncas on the other. Keeping Tribal treasures such as the Uncas Collar and in keeping the Mohegan Way true to form were part of John, Harold
and Gladys Tantaquidgeon’s vision when they built the Tantaquidgeon Museum and started the Mohegan outreach and in-reach programs in 1931. Harold Tantaquidgeon was known to frequently say, “It is hard to hate someone you know a lot about (Fawcett, The Lasting of the Mohegans 1995).” The *Mohegan Way* was established as an alliance, an established protocol of how the Tribe treats neighbors, and this certainly encompasses hospitality and foodways. This formational guiding principle subliminally directs the backstage facets of Mohegan relationships, friendships and alliances in what is now Southeastern Connecticut.

More tangible than the *Mohegan Way* is the Mohegan Constitution. While Mohegan has operated as a democratic representative nation all of time, in the tradition of many Tribes in the area, the Mohegan Constitution has only been put to pen since 1983. The current version was adopted and ratified in 1996, and several amendments have kept it in line with Tribal goals. Of high enough importance to be mandated in Mohegan’s supreme, written governing document, the following are noteworthy: Mohegan culture, traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and traditional education. The Council of Elders is an elected body of seven charged to uphold and interpret the Constitution, much like the United State’s Supreme Court. Within the Constitution, among other duties, the Council of Elders is charged to:

(1) To establish and enforce rules of tribal custom...for the management of tribal society, including but not limited to, the conduct of tribal ceremonies and rituals; (Mohegan Constitution, 1996, Article X, Section 2, h)

(2) To promote and protect the health, peace, morals, and general welfare of The Tribe and its members, and to establish traditional policies regarding education of tribal members; (Mohegan Constitution, 1996, Article X, Section 2, h).
In addition to understanding the guiding principles of a community, integral to understanding foodways is knowing the land from which a people originate. The land upon which a community lives dictates foodways in many ways. With abundance of seafood, fresh water fish and aquatic plants, lush vegetation, a great variety of wildlife and fowl, and nutrient-rich soil, life in the rolling hills of northeast Turtle Island is fundamentally different from life in the flat plains. The stories of the Mohegan Community as told in oral tradition and in storytelling symbols connect the people to the land upon which they live with indelible ink. For example, Mohegan’s common life-trail symbol represents the rolling, lush hills, and the meandering ups and downs of life, and the dots along the trail represent the people you meet along the journey that is life. This symbol would lack fundamental meaning to a person who lived on a flat desert.

A primary concern for all Mohegan is sustaining our homeland’s important historic sites because these sites hold components of our history, our stories, our foodways – overall our culture and that which makes Mohegan the Mohegan Tribe. Mohegan’s homeland, cultural policy, history, relationships and demographics intermingle in the foodways of Mohegan. Many historic parcels of the Mohegan homeland surround that which is tribally known as Mohegan Hill, where Mohegan Church and Tantaquidgeon Museum are located. One by one, many sites have been purchased back by Mohegan since 1994. In 1994, Mohegan purchased the land that *Mohegan Sun* sits upon. This area has always been known as the “sandy desert,” and
purchasing it for the purpose of a casino required special permission from then Medicine Woman, Gladys Tantaquidgeon, and Chief Ralph Sturges. In 1996, Mohegan purchased Shantok, Fort of Uncas, from the State of Connecticut for $2.3 million dollars. Fort Hill was purchased from private owners and Mohegan’s Elder Housing, an assisted living facility was built there maintaining the beauty of the natural landscape, stone walls, pine groves, planting fields, and open space. Overlooking both Shantok and the Thames River, on the highest notch on the reservation, Mohegan’s Government and Community Center opened its doors in 2011.
**CONNECTEDNESS: THE INDIGENOUS WORLD VIEW**

“Native science is born of a lived and storied participation with the natural landscape (Milburn 2004).”

A study of a community’s foodways cannot be complete in a vacuum, but becomes meaningful through understanding the community’s comprehensive culture. Many moons ago our ancestors were certainly hunter-gatherers; however, long before European invasion, the people of *Turtle Island* formed stable communities around their foodways including carefully planned companion-plant agriculture, extensive knowledge of Mother Earth’s natural bounty, comprehensive drying and preservation techniques, and efficient storage facilities harbored within the root cellars they constructed in the hillsides of Mother Earth. What motivated our ancestors to transition from a strictly hunter-gatherer Archaic Period to agricultural-based, permanent communities is likely a sociocultural factor rather than a socioeconomic factor. Knowledge shared generation to generation about the foods one can eat, the plants that are safe, and the animals that taste good can almost be called the “common sense” or the “common knowledge” transmitted through the years. Long before European invasion, during the Late Archaic period the copper-shell exchange was in full swing (Ford 1985). The exchange of ornamental goods and not only need-based goods demonstrates culturally inherent value, and not simply need-based survival. The indigenous view of the connectedness of life encompasses the landscape of spirituality, art, relaxation, and balance in the community and
the individual. In addition to basic human needs, these factors contribute equally to the health of the person and of the community.

From very first encounters, outsiders were surprised by the indigenous view that all things are connected. In a 1584-1585 English explorers visited an Algonquin Tribe in what is now known as Virginia first documenting this strange, connected worldview. The English journalist noted that “…any strange sickness, loss, hurt, the natural inhabitants impart ‘cause’ to offending their god or that of offending their visitors (Hariot 1588).” Many natives died after being visited by this exploring crew – in some towns sixty or more died after these visitors left the town. The natives detailed to their visitors the prophesy of their medicine people (pauwaws): the medicine people of the natural inhabitants told the visitors about the recent eclipse and the passing of a burning comet in the sky that came just before their visit, heralding the coming of these visitors and the sickness. The 16th century ethnographer, Thomas Hariot, never described the symptoms of the illness which afflicted the natives as it did not affect the English visitors, so it is impossible to say what this illness was – the common cold? In the English group of 108, only 4 were lost (Hariot 1588). Hariot confirmed siting this same comet and eclipse on the journey across the sea, but he minimized the connection of the celestial happenings to his journey to New Virginia. The Indian worldview of connectedness – of comet and eclipse, of newcomers, of illness and death, and ultimately of European invasion and conquest – was completely lost on 16th century Euro-centric thinking. While the English could not comprehend that the Algonquin Tribe could not sever the connection of the celestial to the earthly, on the same plane, the English could not comprehend a connection of the celestial to
their earthly existence: the two groups spoke completely alien languages in linguistics and in belief systems. This circular connectedness of life in the Indian worldview – that connection past, present to future, and people to land and the heavens – is that tacit knowledge so difficult (impossible?) to re-create once skipped over by one or more generations.

“Tacit knowledge is what we display when we recognize one face from a thousand without being able to say how we do so, when we demonstrate a skill for which we cannot state an explicit program (Argyris 1974).”

In 1628, Isaack De Rasieres in a letter to Samuel Blommaert, speaking of Long Island, Godyn’s Point, described the natural inhabitants as “...savages who plant maize, trade with other groups with sewan or wampum, and each nation of savages has a democratic form of government of their own..... They fish with hemp woven nets that are superior to those of the English woven with wild Indian hemp. These savages play games, celebrate marriage and make tools such as mortars of wood, pestles of stone and small woven basket sifters... (De Rasieres, 1909).” Ironically, De Rasieres still refers to these people who have a democratic government, play games, celebrate marriage and make tools as savages (De Rasieres 1909).

Taking only what things were necessary and letting most things grow as naturally intended, the Mother Earth was an abundant provider. “Nature was their storehouse and supplied them with everything they needed to build their abodes, weapons, instruments, and to maintain themselves (Redwing UNK).” With Mother Earth as storehouse, there was no need for “domesticated animals” as a food source; however, if an animal were eating the foods...
cultivated to feed the family, then the animal was fair game. Indians who killed animals belonging to the English even when these animals were eating Indian crops were punished. Colonial court records indicate that the courts did not often side with the Indians on this matter, but required they build fences or walls to keep the animals of the colonists out of their crops (Legislature 1860). The some 6-foot tall walls surrounding Mohegan’s Fort Hill are some of these actual court-mandated walls. The walls surrounding much of the property incorporate small arched openings framed into the architecture. These low openings were perhaps to let small animals enter and exit while at the same time keeping large deer out. These differences in ownership of land and property boundaries, ideology, policy and law still impact Mohegan foodways at present. The idea that people live on Mother Earth on the land, rather than in a palisade, or in a reservation may stem from this ideology. Though Uncas and his people sought shelter in a great palisade at Shantok, Fort of Uncas, Mohegan hunting and trade networks extended throughout southeastern Connecticut far west to the upstate New York border.

“While in Western cultural tradition there is a separation of science from art and religion, Native science is also religious and aesthetic. Native science is born of a lived and storied participation with natural landscape (Milburn 2004).” Naming and viewing the molecular components of food and nutrients is not necessary to knowing a holistic solution to that which ails a person. For example, when Jacques Cartier and his crew landed upon the northern shores (Canada), the natural inhabitants of the land knew how to cure their scurvy. The Indians advised a tea made from the needles and bark of the Eastern Cedar – no more scurvy (Milburn 2004). Native science, with its integrated approach to knowledge, emphasizes
webs of relationships rather than the study of components in isolation. This integrated approach is well suited to achievements in agriculture and nutrition.

This integrated, holistic solution to health and nutrition is well-defined by the original companion gardening technique of the indigenous of Turtle Island called the Three Sisters, meaning corn, beans and squash. The relationship of the Three Sisters is symbiotic on the level of agricultural science, indigenous spirituality, nutritional science, and long-term preservation of food.

Gladys Tantaquidgeon

A woman who never ate a nitrate-preserved hotdog in her entire life, Gladys Tantaquidgeon learned in this old way, from her three grandmothers, as she called them: Emma Fielding Baker, Mercy Ann Nonesuch Mathews and Lydia Fielding. Of these women, only Lydia was biologically Gladys grandmother. Gladys was well traveled in Indian Country and academically schooled with anthropologist Frank G. Speck at the University of Pennsylvania. Gladys’ notes on the subject of Mohegan culture and traditions were kept in journals in boxes under the bed and in closets until it was time to awaken her historical treasures. During Mohegan’s bid for “federal recognition,” these tribal records and documentation proved valuable resources proving social and political continuity within Mohegan without a doubt. Born in 1899, some attribute Gladys’ simple diet, in which she consumed no processed foods, to Gladys living to see three centuries. Quietly at home at the
homestead connected to Tantaquidgeon Museum on Mohegan Hill, Gladys passed on at the age of 106 in 2005.

Officially Medicine Woman from 1992 until her death in 2005, unofficially, Gladys was Medicine Woman for far longer than that: “During the 1970’s, neither the sovereign authority of chiefs (outlawed by Connecticut in 1769) nor the spiritual title of medicine woman [or man] (ridiculed from the eighteenth through most of the twentieth century) was widely broadcast by Mohegans, as a result of continued mainstream denigration of native right and religious beliefs (Fawcett, Medicine Trail, 2000).” Gladys was an authority on Mohegan culture and traditions, including those unwritten but deeply understood policies that impact everyday life at Mohegan. Though Gladys never married and never bore children, Gladys spent countless hours with her niece, Melissa Jayne Fawcett (now Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel), sharing with Melissa the lessons of the world, and the language of the artifacts at Mohegan’s Tantaquidgeon Museum. Gladys ensured that the lessons of her grandmothers would carry on to the next generation. Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel, Mohegan’s current Medicine Woman and Executive Director of Mohegan’s Community and Cultural Programs, ensures that these teachings continue.
At Mohegan, the corn, bean, and squash complex appears in simple form. We find the three vegetables planted close together without the usual ceremonies that are characteristic of the Iroquois planting season (F. G. Speck 1928). According to Gladys, when the leaves of the “shad blow” or the dogwood tree are the size of the squirrel’s ear it is time to plant corn. The seed corn is soaked overnight in warm water and it is then ready to be planted. In former times the corn was planted in hills with an occasional squash seed, and rows of beans were planted among the hills. About planting the garden, Gladys writes, “There were also many rules for planting…. The three sisters – corn, beans, and squash – need extra care…. It must be planted when the dogwood leaves are the size of a squirrel’s ear. The seeds are soaked in water overnight before planting. White beans must be planted when the chestnut trees are in full bloom, and squash should be planted when the moon is waxing (Fawcett, Medicine Trail 2000).”

According to Frank G. Speck (1928), the same idea of keeping the three vegetables close together is carried out at Mohegan, but the legends and stories of the sisters, according to Speck, are unknown at Mohegan. When the corn silk turns brown, it is ripe. At this season, when the green corn is ripening, Mohegan hosts a grand festival that is said to be a survival of the ancient “green corn dance.” According to Speck, this is the only ceremony in connection with the cultivation of corn that has survived amongst the Mohegan (F. G. Speck 1928).
A Corn Legend: Long, long ago, further back than even the oldest grandfather could remember, a crow brought the Mohegans their first corn and beans from the garden of the Creator in the far off Southwest. Corn soon became a principal crop, and in time, mixed varieties of white, yellow, red or blue corn were cultivated. Corn became a mainstay for most meals, and as the kernels nourished the body, the idea of corn nourished the spirit. (F. D. Davison 2000)

Corn is corn, but not all corn is alike. Because no wild relative is found, it is scientifically deduced that corn was bred by the Indians by continuously choosing larger and closer grains and saving seed from the plants with the most desirable characteristics for the following year’s planting. The agricultural development of maize was significant for the rise in crop surpluses, populations and complex cultures. Corn is a genetically independent grain and a fruit technically, and it is indigenous to the Americas.

Corn is an anomaly in the fruit world. Other fruits turn starch into sugar as they ripen — corn is sweetest when the stalks are fresh and green, and corn converts this high sugar content into a more stable starch the longer it stays in the field. If corn stalks are being grown for the sugar content as a sweetener, this “green corn time” is the time to harvest. The longer corn ripens, the more sugar is converted into a more stable starch.

Nearly every part of every plant or animal our ancestors took from Náhkas Áhki was utilized. The stalk also dries hard to a sturdy, hollow tube useful as a kind of pipe to channel maple sap from tree to collection container. Additional food uses of the corn plant included use of the stalk for a sweet sap, corn syrup. Plants that did not produce corn ears were used for the sweet sap running through the stalks in August (“green” corn time) – it is “…as sweet as if it were sugar-cane (De Rasieres 1909). Cornhusks were woven into mats, baskets, and food
containers. Some of these items, as old as the 17th century, survive in controlled museum atmospheres. Aside from making durable clothing and bags, cornhusks were also used to wrap corn cakes in before baking in the ashes of the fire, making a “...good bread, but heavy (De Rasieres 1909).”

Known as “common” or “original corn,” the variegated variety is highly regarded by Mohegan. “I have observed that my own group at Mohegan, Connecticut, and the people of Gay Head, Massachusetts, regard varicolored corn to be the original variety and regard it very highly (Tantaquidgeon 1972).” Corn-parched-and-pounded is a tradition surviving today with the Mohegan Tribe and with many neighboring tribes. Known as yokeag in older Mohegan language, and yohkik in modern Mohegan and nohihick in Narragansett, and as “traveling food” in English, yohkik was the premiere traveling food in the day.

At Mohegan, and in many area tribes, the Three Sisters are planted together in a mound of gathered earth atop Náhkas Áhki, Mother Earth. Sister Corn is planted first, and when she is about knee high, Sister Beans and Sister squash can be planted around her established stalks. The physical relationship amongst the sisters is that Sister Corn, the nurturer, provides the stalk upon which Sister Bean, the provider, can climb; Sister Squash, the protector, provides a mulch-like cover of broad leaves to keep moisture in the soil. Sister Squash’s prickly vines keep animals like raccoons from eating the produce.

The chemical relationship of the Sisters keeps the soil healthy and balanced. Sister Beans provides nitrogen to the soil for all the plants to share. This symbiotic relationship does
not deplete the soil’s nutrients, and the same mounds of earth can be planted year after year. The nutritional relationship of the Three Sisters is powerful. The food combination of corn, beans and squash provides all nutrients necessary for health: proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. The ease of preservation of the sustenance of the Three Sisters is noteworthy: all three of the sisters offer parts that preserve and sustain for the long winter. Beans and corn dry to hard morsels that can be stored and reconstituted for years. Squash seeds, for example pumpkin seeds, are rich in protein and preserve well. The flesh of most squash varieties can also be dried and stored for reconstitution.

The spirit of the Three Sisters is said to dance under the green dance shawl of nurturer Sister Corn. Six Nations (Iroquois) culture recognized the inherent need for the ‘spirits’ of the three sisters to be together, building a beneficial web of relationships both agriculturally and nutritionally (Milburn 2004). The beneficial web of relationships of the Three Sisters illustrates the advantages of simple food diversity solidly built upon the foundation of food combinations to offer balance and diversity of nutrients.

This is how Mohegan ancestors grew the few foods that they did not manage and gather from the bounty of forest and field. It was a foreign idea to Indian ancestors that all of our foods must be controlled, contained, domesticated and orderly. According to Medicine Woman Gladys Tantaquidgeon, domesticated food was considered contaminated and sub-standard to wild foods. Companion gardening is not only a nice story about sisters and community caring, but it is also an ecosystem of plants working together in physical symbiosis. The plants support
one another to form a nutritionally symbiotic relationship complementing one another to create a complete nutritional powerhouse. When Mohegan plants the annual Three Sisters Garden, elder and children side-by-side learn and remember the lessons of our ancestor’s foodways.
GENETICS, FOOD TOLERANCE AND FOOD DIVERSITY

DNA: Deoxyribonucleic Acid

Modern foodways have contributed to rampant increases of nutrition-related diseases such as diabetes, obesity, irritable colon syndromes, and many autoimmune related diseases. Consumption of the typical American diet comprised mostly of wheat-based breads and pasta laden with simple carbohydrates, and high fats from animal sources (milk, butter, cheese, beef, pork) contribute to the high obesity levels amongst Americans. To some extent, human ancestry and DNA dictate the foods upon which people can thrive, certainly influence foodway formation and perhaps how foodways should be repaired and better-planned. For example, Native Americans and people of Asian heritage have the highest rates of lactose intolerance in the over-the-age-of-two population (Denis 1998).

Foods indigenous to the place from which a people “originate” are vital to the health of a people. Biologically speaking, humans of European descent are better programmed at the DNA level to digest the typical European diet rich in bread-grains, fermented hops (alcohol), milk and cheese (Denis 1998). Common foods that comprise a large part of today’s American diet that were not indigenous to this land include: wheat, rye, barley, milk, butter, cheese, beef, lamb, pork and chicken. The diversity of foods indigenous to North America are better tolerated by people of Native American descent.
Seed Diversity, Hegemony and Heritage Seed

Diversity, the key to our ancestors’ health and survival, is the one thing that is continually under attack by the capitalist structure of our American food systems:

Seed Saver found that 943 open-pollinated varieties available in 1984 were no longer available from seed companies in 1987, and between 1987 and 1991, 1263 more varieties of open-pollinated vegetable seed (23.8% of the catalogues varieties) were dropped from the seed company catalogues. In addition, of the 5797 vegetable varieties appearing in commercial seed catalogues, 3002 are offered by only one company, with another 883 offered by only two companies. In other words, unless strenuous efforts are made to save these seeds, there could be a tremendous loss of genetic diversity in just this area of vegetable seeds in the next few years (Kneen 1995).

Uniformity is not a natural part of food production, but it is the key to success of industrialized food production. The modern industrialized farm is completely dependent upon consumerism.

Gone by are the days in which the farmer saved seed for next year’s crop. Hybrid seed produces one crop, creating a dependence upon the seed source for the mass production farmer. These hybrid plants are sensitive to new pests, so the farmer must also purchase pesticide control products to manage the crops. Hybrids are bred to produce a product in which everything is ripe at the same time, unlike “nature” in which ripeness is staggered. Staggered ripeness and companion gardening do not work with machine harvest systems, so the farmer must also purchase machinery and fossil fuels to operate the machinery. The nutrient-depleted soil must be fertilized, and the farmer must purchase fertilizer. When it is time to plant, the farmer must purchase seed again completing the consumer circle. What used to be an independent food production model that was the farm, is now completely consumer dependent.
People have become dependent upon the supermarket food system and no longer realize that Mother Earth produces food – not the supermarket. A term coined by Canadian farmer and researcher Brewster Kneen describes this phenomenon as *distancing* (Kneen 1995). Simply put, humans have forgotten the simple foundation of our existence: obtaining food independently. There is great physical distance, time from food to table, and hands-on involvement between food and consumer. Children and many adults believe that food comes from the supermarket. Human nutrition is becoming an industrial process in which one must swallow pills to supplement lack of food diversity instead of building an intimate, spiritual connection to the land’s plants and animals. The survival of the spirit has been ignored, replaced by the industrial age. (Kneen 1995) This lack of involvement in obtaining and producing food further contributes to the decline of heritage seeds of indigenous plants – if no one wishes to nurture these heritage seeds to full grown plants, another plant species is lost to humans forever.

The heritage seed crisis and *distancing* directly relate to Mohegan foodways in that the many varieties of corn once grown on Mohegan land in the days of Sachem Uncas have fallen into the unknown. One heritage seed known to be a Mohegan Flint Corn was saved from this hegemonic process by none other than Sachem Uncas. In 1654, English settler Thomas Stanton started farming a plot of land in Pawcatuck, Connecticut and the farm has never missed a crop since. With seed gifted from Sachem Uncas, friend and interpreter Stanton planted Mohegan Flint Corn on this land beside the sea marshes and here it has flourished ever since (F. M. Davison 2000).
The historic heritage corn grown on the farm from the seeds gifted by Uncas is as hard as flint stone when it dries, hence the name, Flint Corn. This heritage corn is most suitable for grinding and is still ground into a fine corn meal today to be sold at local Farmer’s Markets as Johnny Cake Meal. Unlike modern hybrids, traditional (Mohegan) Flint Corn is not sensitive to drought or over-saturation. It is a hearty, long lasting corn with a hard outer shell. Traditionally left at field until mid-October, Flint Corn begins the preserving process in the field turning nearly all sugar to starch and drying to a hard storage-friendly texture. Low in sugar, this corn preserves well without webbing (molding).

Corn is a very promiscuous plant, cross-pollinating with great ease if left to its own accord. Gladys was also taught about corn’s promiscuous nature: “The different varieties of maize are not planted near each other because it is said, ‘One will visit the other and forget to come back.’” While newcomers to this land strived for ‘hybrid vigor,’ the indigenous of this land kept this uniquely-self-pollinating-male-and-female-all-in-one-stalk-fruit isolated one kind from another. Mohegan Flint Corn grown by Stanton has been protected carefully on the Stanton-Davis Homestead. Stanton knew that the Indians kept their corn separated. While Mohegans had corn for popcorn, sweet corn for eating fresh on the cob, and this Mohegan Flint Corn for yohkik, these varieties of corn were always planted good distances away to prevent cross-pollination (Klindienst 2005). Descendent of Thomas Stanton and current operator of the Stanton-Davis Homestead, John Whitman Davis, says, “Corn must be separated to prevent cross-pollination – either two weeks or two acres!” John Whitman Davis is known as “Whit” by his friends, at Connecticut Farmer’s Market circles, and at Mohegan.
The Stanton-Davis Farm and family are as rich in stories as the soil is rich in nutrients. It is said that at the same dark wood kitchen table that now sits there, Uncas signed his Last Will and Testament that was put to pen for the great Sachem by his friend Thomas Stanton. “Whit” tells tales of Stanton traveling to Hartford to support Sachem Uncas in a dispute, and Sachem Uncas traveling to Hartford to support Thomas Stanton in a dispute. Listening to Whit, one can visualize Thomas Stanton and Uncas sharing cider over that old, dark kitchen table. This friendship between Mohegan and the Stanton-Davis family continues today. In 1996, Whit Davis returned to Mohegan bearing the gift of Mohegan Flint Corn to celebrate when Mohegan purchased Shantok, Fort of Uncas back from the State of Connecticut. Whit Davis is a regular visitor to Mohegan during the special week preceding the Wigwam Festival in August in which the Tribe privately celebrates Mohegan culture prior to the open-to-the-public celebration. Whit Davis is one of very few non-Mohegans always invited to Mohegan Cultural Week for his stories and his yokeag journey cakes and fresh ‘green’ corn for corn on the cob!

As area Tribes received federal recognition, John Whitman Davis, has gifted each of these Tribes with ears of their traditional Flint Corn. Davis has gifted the Wampanoag, Pequot and the Mohegan with this traditional Flint Corn. In order to protect the property from development, in 2006, Davis transferred much of the property to “common-owner property” to start the Stanton-Davis Homestead Museum while retaining rights to farm the property, and Whit continues to have a hand in farming the property into his 9th decade of life there.
Because corn is one of the most valued of Mohegan foods, saving Mohegan Flint Corn from demise is of utmost importance. This heritage seed is grown by several Mohegan culture bearers and by the eighty-nine-year-old Whit Davis (F. M. Davison 2000). While it would be nice to be able to say that every year, when the Council of Elders approves the plans for the Three Sister’s Garden, Mohegan Flint Corn is on the menu, sadly, this is not the case. Sometimes, Mohegan plants sweet corn on the cob hybrid, and other years, Mohegan plants Mohegan Flint Corn with the Three Sister’s Garden. This inconsistency in Mohegan cultural policy places this heritage seed at great risk. While a few “culture-bearers” at Mohegan consistently cultivate our heritage seeds, the community garden sways between the hybrid and the heritage, the modern and the old ways. This is a problem that must be realized and addressed in order to ensure the survival of Mohegan’s heritage seeds. Mohegan’s heritage seeds require mandated protection.

In the same jeopardy as traditional Flint Corn, Pink Shell Beans were gifted to Davis a “few years back,” in the words of the aging Whit. A farmer in Virginia, fearful that his family would not keep the seeds growing, sought out a person who would – and found Whit Davis. Though Davis has lost the hand scribbled paper with the Indian name for these Pink Shell Beans, Davis recalls that the English translation literally meant “bean with bright scarlet flower.” Pink Shell Beans are an essential ingredient in traditional Mohegan succotash, though modern recipes substitute the more common Lima Bean.

In 2010, Meehan was gifted a few Pink Shell Bean seeds from Whit Davis, and these few seeds have produced over 30 seeds to plant next season. Meehan will be certain to share these
with other culture-bearers who will continue the seed. These are a seed that cannot be searched out on the Internet, are not in Seed Saver seed banks (yet), and are grown by only a handful of people. The crisis of allowing a seed to die into extinction is mammoth in Indian terms, perhaps in terms of all of human existence and survival. Mohegan medicine people tell us that the Creator created a cure for every disease that would ever exist. Every loss of a seed may sacrifice the cure to a known or unknown disease.

_Trees in Jeopardy: the Decimation of the American Elm and the American Ash Tree_

As with heritage vegetable seeds, other flora species are placed at risk by unintended negative consequences. In the late 1800’s, American scientists wanted to crossbreed American and Asian Elm trees in hopes of producing a tree with the larger trunk of the American variety and the larger chestnut of the Asian variety. The unintended negative consequences were devastating. At contact, the Asian trees transmitted a fungus-based blight to the American Elm that spread on the air worse than wildfire. In 1904, the Elm blight was identified at New York Zoological Gardens. Though the Asian Elm is resistant to this Asian fungus, the American Elm has been virtually destroyed by it. In about 25 years, nearly half the canopy of the Eastern states’ forests was decimated by this invasive fungus. The parallel to the decimation of the humans of many Indian nations on this continent is ironic. Just as the humans in the forest primeval often became ill and died at “contact” from foreign pox and plague, so too did this tree.
Elm trees on this North American continent were once a flourishing, fast-growing, large hardwood in the Beech family that provided the nutritious chestnut that fed many animals as well as the humans who lived here. These tree trunks could reach an enormous eleven-foot diameter. This food source and trade source supported many Eastern tribes, squirrels, and wild turkeys, and the chestnut was the food of choice for the black bear just before a long winter’s hibernation. Nineteenth century furniture and barn boards were made from this fast-growing hardwood. The “chestnuts roasting on an open fire” are typically Asian imports nowadays.

Today in 2012, a similar story is perhaps the largest ecological crisis facing the Eastern United States and Canada: the Emerald Ash Borer Beetle. Native to Asia, the Emerald Ash Borer Beetle is devastating the Northeast Ash Tree canopy. When humans destroy the foundation for the environment, the forest canopy, humans directly impact temperature controls and sea levels – it is all connected. Humans brought the beetles to North America and now humans are playing a major role in the spread of the insect. Dr. Deborah McCullough is an entomologist at Michigan State University states, “The emerald ash borer problem is a human driven disaster,” because for the most part the beetle is transported by humans in campfire wood and timber products. On its own, the beetle can fly less than ½ mile in its lifetime. McCullough continues, saying that the beetle "...has become the most destructive forest insect ever to invade North America." Very important economically, Ash trees are used for landscaping, furniture, baseball bats and tool handles. (Hub Pages 2012) For Mohegan, this ecological crisis directly impacts basketry, a cultural mainstay at Mohegan. Post “Super Storm Sandy,” (10/29/2012) fallen trees and timber from New Haven, Connecticut was quarantined due to the Emerald Ash Borer
Beetle. These unintended negative consequences of human interactions jeopardizes foodways directly and indirectly by impacting the material culture that humans create to support their foodways.

**Share and Share Alike**

Prior to European invasion, the plagues that wrought Europe with nutrition-deficiency diseases such as gout, scurvy and pellagra had been long recognized and prevented by dietary diversity on Turtle Island. The misconception of Turtle Island habitation at European contact is one of a caveman-like hunter and gatherer society retarded from Europe’s commodity based advances by about ten millennia (Jaimes 1991).

In actuality, fully two-thirds of all the vegetal foodstuffs now consumed by humanity were under cultivation in Native America and nowhere else at the moment Columbus first set foot on Hispaniola. An instructive, but by no means exhaustive, list of these crops includes corn, potatoes, yams, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, squash, pumpkins, most varieties of beans, all varieties of pepper except black, amaranth, manioc (tapioca), mustard and a number of other greens, sunflowers, cassava, some types of rice, artichokes, avocados, okra, chayotes, peanuts, cashews, walnuts, hickory nuts, pecans, pineapples, bread fruit, passion fruit, many melons, persimmons, choke cherries, papayas, cranberries, blueberries, blackberries, coffee, sassafras, vanilla, chocolate and cocoa. (Jaimes 1991)

Not to say that every food item on this list was grown or gathered by Mohegan in the Eastern Woodlands, but the indigenous diet was naturally extremely diverse and not at all in
need of Europe’s wheat, sugarcane and domesticated animals. At contact, Europe’s diet was already broken. Consuming domesticated meats, dairy, cereal grains and few vegetables, Europe was wrought with endemic, nutrition-deficiency disease at this time. Supplemented by extensive trade networks, this highly diverse agricultural food base of the indigenous of this land warded off diseases caused by nutritional deficiency such as scurvy and pellagra. Not only did the indigenous of South America and North America trade copper, obsidian, flint and shell, but they also traded food, seed, ideology, medicinal knowledge and understanding of how all of these things worked together to promote balanced health and wellness. “Western science must reintegrate human emotions and intuitions into its interpretation of phenomena (Deloria 1979).” Foods are not only basic necessity in that humans need to eat, but foods are medicine as well. Consider strawberries, for example.

Like corn, strawberries are another outcast of the fruit world. A member of the rose family, strawberries wear their seeds on the outside of the fruit. In Mohegan, the Wutáhim Wiyon, or Strawberry Moon is around the middle of June. Medicinally, (wild) strawberry leaves, collected after the strawberry fruit harvest, are dried in the sun, crumbled and are steeped as a tea. This vitamin C rich drink has served generations of Mohegans medicinally and nutritionally. Elders in the community tell us this tea can help a cold or flu, and even cure kidney and stomach ailments (Carson 2007). Wild strawberries are very difficult to find as the deer like them very much as well. The literal meaning of the Mohegan word for strawberry, wutáhim, is “heart berry” in English. Strawberries herald the courtship season of summer, and this medicinally powerful heart berry is the sweetest berry found in Mohegan territory.
Key to cultural sustainability broadly, and specifically to Mohegan, is transmission of knowledge generation to generation. Generational knowledge about the foods and medicines of the land is lost when indigenous people are removed from their homeland. Whether this removal is physical or spiritual, points of contact are impacted. When the connections to the land are continually imitated by inadequate substitutes, these connections are broken. Dale Carson, a cookbook author and food columnist for the newspaper Indian Country Today says, “Food is something that needs to be shared…I hate the idea of a secret recipe (Braccidiferro 2002).” Secret recipes, secret sources and secret methods die with the cook. The concept of sharing food and foodways knowledge was key to community survival in the wigwam and longhouse and ideologically, to the present day. If one member of the community had a successful hunt, the entire community would partake in the bounty (Mohegan Archives, F. Davison). “Breaking (corn) bread together” has a spiritual and communal value as well as common sense – especially pre-refrigeration and the potential for foods to spoil before being consumed. Without refrigeration, foods had to be eaten while fresh, or carefully smoked and dried to be preserved. Prior to European contact, the indigenous of this continent used the healthier food preservation methods of root cellar storage (Mohegan Mugg's Holes), drying and smoking as opposed to salting.

_The Archeological Record at Shantok: Something Smells Fishy, and_ Early Ethnographic Accounts

Every year, as Mohegan gathers at Shantok for Cultural Week, a kernel falls, or a bead from a craft project is dropped to the ground, creating another archeological record for
Mohegan descendants to discover. Maybe four hundred years from now, a Mohegan descendant will unearth a glass bead or a partially carved, broken wampum blank, or a Shantok pottery shard incised with a familiar Mohegan symbol. If generation-to-generation of Mohegan have done their jobs well, this Mohegan descendant will recognize the stories held by these artifacts and symbols. She will know about her ancestor’s annual homecoming and Cultural Week gatherings at Shantok. She will tacitly recognize the Mohegan symbol for corn and the tree of life.

While our stories discover our spiritual artifact connecting us to our ancestors, archaeology discovers our physical artifact and those physical clues left in the rubble of everyday life by our ancestors. The rubble left by Mohegan ancestors speaks of a diet rich in fish, abundant in shellfish, and wildlife from small prey such as squirrels to fowl to big game deer. The extent to which Mohegan ancestors consumed shellfish cannot be over-exaggerated, as it is the remnants of this shellfish responsible for Shantok’s remarkable preservation. In very few northeast sites are items as fragile as fish scale and bird bones so well preserved as at Fort Shantok. If not for the calcium content of the soil fed by many shell middens, Shantok would not hold so detailed a physical history of our people. The archeological record at Shantok, Fort of Uncas, holds volumes of Mohegan history well preserved in a calcium-rich soil. Archeologically in terms of hundreds of years, fish bones and fish scales do not usually preserve well, but the calcium rich soil at Shantok is an exception to the rule. The only fish archeologically recorded throughout most of Connecticut are many sturgeon, and less frequently, shark, bluefish, cod, salmon, shad and grouper, and the many shellfish of the region.
The ethnographic material is far more diverse than the physical record: alewife (oldwife), barracuda, striped bass, bluefish, bream, carp, catfish, cod, eel, fluke, haddock, hake, halibut, herring, lamprey, mackerel, perch, pickerel, pike, pilchards, rockfish (scup), salmon, shad, smelt, sturgeon, swordfish, tautog (blackfish) and trout. Shellfish included all kinds: clams, oysters, lobsters, mussels, scallops and crabs. On the shores of the salty and fresh water brine at the mouth of the Great River (now called the Thames), Mohegan lived in their summer wigwams and fished. The earliest written and illustrated accounts of Turtle Island in 1585 detail the fishing and drying methods of the natural inhabitants of this land.

On an expedition sponsored by entrepreneurs and the Crowne of England in the years 1584 to 1585, an educated gentleman known as Thomas Hariot and an artist known as John White prepared for journey to “New Virginia” to study the landscape, the inhabitants and the potential commercial interests in the new land. Hariot’s primary account of the Algonquin inhabitants of what is now North Carolina provided England’s first accounts of what awaited settlers traveling to this land of plenty. Especially interested in the foodways of the inhabitants for the obvious reasons of arriving in this new land and being able to feed themselves, Hariot and White focused much energy upon foods both harvested and husbanded, hunting methods, cooking methods, what familiar foods might grow here, and what worked or what didn’t work. John White’s watercolor painted penciled drawings provided the very first ‘photographs’ of this land to awaiting eyes in England.
Written as propaganda to attract settlers and adventurers to the New World, Hariot’s report was a reputable source with this signed submission to the Crowne. Hariot was a well-known author, mathematician and astronomer also hired to assist in navigation on the journey. John White, the hired “camera-man” was a less-renowned artist gentleman of the day. White drew detailed accounts of his observations, in some cases directly accompanying Hariot’s verbiage. That these seventy-five (75) prints survive and visualize an Algonquin history closely related in time and place to Mohegan (also an Algonquin Tribe) is miraculous. In 1865 the prints were stored in a warehouse that caught fire. The prints were found three weeks later heavily water damaged, with books lying atop the pile. On the paper found in between each print was an offset print of the original painting. The original prints are currently owned and preserved by the British Museum last on “tour” around the world in 2007. These images coupled with Hariot’s verbiage provide an incredible glimpse into the past even if it is slightly discolored through damage and through the ethnographer’s personal interpretation lens.

The planting methods of the natural inhabitants surprised ethnographer Hariot. The “...natives do not do as the English and mix dounge with their dirt for fertilizing, and neither do they scar the earth with plowing and unnecessary digging, but rather, the people gather mounds of dirt and plant in these raised mounds atop the Earth (Hariot, 1588). Planting methods detailed in Hariot’s account are remarkably similar to historical Mohegan gardens. Even more remarkable is that this planting method is still assumed by ethnographers to be driven by need in Connecticut because of the rocky fields; however, Hariot describes this “New Found Virginia” as devoid of rock and boulder. There is more to the relationship of the Three
Sisters than need mandated by rocky soils, as the same raised mound planting method is found further south devoid of Connecticut’s rocky fields. Yield is described by Hariot as being about five times that of English wheat: in the space that English wheat yields forty bushels under the best conditions, the natives harvest about two hundred bushels of their “wheat” (corn), beans, peas, squashes and melons, and giant sunflowers from which they use the seeds and the extensive root tubers (now called Jerusalem Artichoke). The aforementioned are the only plants that Hariot observes the natives husbanding, yet historically, these six food types constitute sixty percent of the pre-European-contact Turtle Island diet. The extensive list of other flora consumed by the natives is found growing naturally. Hariot finds it intriguing that the inhabitants do not “husband” and control the naturally growing bounty of the area, but prefer to gather it from nature’s storehouse when the time is right. It was a foreign idea to our Indian ancestors that all of our foods must be controlled, contained, domesticated and orderly. According to Medicine Woman Gladys Tantaquidgeon, domesticated food was considered contaminated and sub-standard to wild foods.

All in all over sixty food types are listed in Hariot’s journal. Seafood has names that are more easily identified than plants listed in Hariot’s report. Identifying the plants with Algonquin words, sometimes a mistaken English equivalent, and a written description is challenging, and in itself an entire research project. In some instances, a “photograph” by John White accompanies Hariot’s descriptions making identification somewhat easier.
Hariot and White detail in verbiage and picture many Algonquin fishing methods. Without an abundance of stone, as is found in Mohegan territory, Hariot describes fishing weirs made of saplings tied together with Indian hemp twine, extending into the water creating entrapment areas in which the fish are speared as needed. Dugout canoes with a fire blazing in the center, attract the fish to the vessel giving the skilled spearmen ample advantage. Hariot notes that the “natural inhabitants” were so skilled in spear fishing that they sometimes even took porpoises and whales. Edward Fowler notes of Mohegan fishermen, “Every Mohegan is a whaler at heart (Tantaquidgeon Museum, Whaling Display).” Several primary documents cite that the first white men to explore the coast, found that the Indian fishermen bravely took even the largest whales and porpoises. Colonial laws against an Indian attaining higher than rank of steersman or harpooner prevented an Indian, regardless of skill, from attaining rank of captain in the colonial whaling industry.

Line and hook fishing (hemp line, bone hook) was an inefficient method rarely used to successfully feed a community, though bone carved hooks are within the archaeological record of New England, including Mohegan. More remarkable and more community sized ventures of the indigenous were their ingenious fishing weirs. While those detailed in Hariot’s report are made of wooden fences built into the water, typical of the area now known as New England are permanent stone walls built into the water with additional length being achieved with bent saplings. In the more southern New Virginia area, Hariot described beaches and landscape devoid of large rocks, but finds rocks available in the nearby (a day’s travel) mountains in plenty some distance from the area (Hariot, 1588). Hariot was obviously not describing Connecticut in
which the locals joke that the state flower is the rock. These weirs in Virginia and Connecticut, made of different available materials, work on the same principle providing fish a wide entry into a long narrow tunnel into a larger trap area where they could be speared as needed. The largest fishing weirs were built from stonewall extensions built into Connecticut waters, extended with woven saplings. Stone remnant walls built into the water dot Connecticut rivers, streams and bays. Fish could easily find their way into the weirs’ wide mouth, but could not find their way out of the narrow tunnel from the entrapment holding area. When the water is low, the remains of these stonewalls emerge along the New England coastline. American Indians built fishing weirs in rivers, or stonewalls in the shape of a V, to funnel fish. They would walk along the top of the weir where fish collected, then use spears or nets to catch them (Straszheim n.d.).

The archaeological evidence of charcoal remains at clam bake sites that dot the shoreline of Turtle Island reveal hard woods like oak and hickory as the primary fire fuel for these bakes (Coffin 1946). Archeologically, the great shell middens that dot the Connecticut shoreline are a byproduct of the large-scale preservation of fish for winter consumption (Warner 1972). Fishing and the preservation of the catch was not a seasonal past time, but it was a survival skill upon which the community depended. Earliest colonial journal records from the European entrepreneurs to Turtle Island, including that of Hariot and White, document the smoking and drying of the bounty of the sea. Without added salt, the indigenous smoked and dried this bounty over small fires that also kept the bugs at bay. Frank Speck & Gladys Tantaquidgeon documented oyster and clam drying methods consistent with oral traditions.
(Speck 1928). Steamed open, the meat of provisional clams was strung upon cordage tied to a wooden framework above small “smudge fires” to keep the flies away while the natural rays of the sun dried clams into a concentrated, smoke-flavored, nutritional power house for cold winter days. Clams preserved in this manner could be added to soups over the long winter, or could provide a nutritious, salty, chewy snack. This pre-industrial age way of smoking, drying and preserving food requires no ice and no electricity and is still a sure way to secure a meal for the long haul.

While our Mohegan ancestors did not use salt from the great salt mines, they certainly recognized the salt of the ocean, and the salty, dry ocean fish. Just as the indigenous of Hawaii let salt water dry in indentations in the rocks by the ocean for collection after it was dried, it would seem contrary to instinct to venture that our ancestors did not know that evaporating the salty ocean water which they so depended upon for sustenance would leave a white grainy spice known now as salt. “Reports from Onondaga, New York in 1654 indicated the Onondaga Indians made salt by boiling brine from salt springs (Saltworks Inc 2001).” Far-reaching trade networks of goods, medicine, foods, knowledge and material trade items dotted the trails, rivers and streams of Turtle Island upon European invasion and colonization, so it can safely be assumed that if one Tribe in the area knew about salt, many other Tribes learned about salt.

Food Storage: So, What’s in a Mugg’s Hole?

These area root cellars used for food storage and, some hypothesize, for ceremony, range from simple to very complex architectural structures. The caballing structure of a complex
arched roof remain remarkably stable with a basic architecture of large header-roof-stones that overlap the side wall structures – these remain structurally intact, a rather architectural wonder. How did those stones weighing well over a ton come to be just so placed? Other Muggs’s Holes were far less manpower-intensive with a log-laid rooftop that are disintegrating and falling today. Whether simple or complex, “They are called Mugg’s Holes because they belonged to the Mohegan people, the Wolf people. **Muggs or Muks** is the Mohegan word for **wolf**. So this phrase is half Mohegan and half English,” says Stephanie Fielding, Tribal Linguist of the Mohegan Tribe. While it is exciting to discover a site or a feature left somewhat intact by our ancestors, it is concerning that these features and sites cannot always be preserved. A “site” cannot be carried off to the museum and displayed for all to appreciate and is at the mercy of the current landowner. Sometimes we are fortunate enough that a site is preserved by a current landowner, or in an historical site registry. Mugg’s Holes were features noted in colonial journals as food storage root cellars built of stone into area hillsides. Some of these archaeological wonders survive in Mohegan territory on privately owned properties.
This Mugg’s Hole is a couple of miles southeast of Mohegan Fort Hill, and is located on private property: this is an example of a Mugg’s Hole with architectural headers of very large stones. This Mugg’s Hole is about ten feet by six feet. In the 1900’s Mohegans were noted to use these Mugg’s Holes of their ancestors as root cellars (F. G. Speck, 43rd Annual Report 1943) but it is unclear whether these were ceremonial structures or root cellars for ancient Mohegans.

MOHEGAN FOODWAYS FRAMED BY MOHEGAN CULTURAL POLICY

Cultural norms often learned generation-to-generation affect cultural policy within a community. Whether written or unwritten, cultural policy affects nearly every aspect of our lives. These policies can be persistent cultural beliefs or rules unwritten yet widely understood, or these policies can be written law. In exploration into the depths of the impact of Mohegan cultural policy on Mohegan foodways, consider:

how cultural policy within Mohegan is recognized,
how it is spoken and unspoken,
and what cultural policy (if any) in regard to foodways is written and unwritten.

One particular food can perhaps illustrate all these modalities of cultural policy in Mohegan foodways: yohkik, or traveling food and the tools to make yohkik including mortar, pestle and the people. An old Mohegan tale demonstrates many Mohegan cultural policies and ideals. The character of Chahnameed is a greedy, cheating glutton who eventually pays the ultimate price of his life for his deeds. Chahnameed’s demise is told in this final tale of the three tales of Chahnameed.
Long ago there lived a man upon an island some distance from the mainland. His name was Chahnameed, the great eater, the glutton. On the island he had a house, and in a cove nearby he kept two canoes. One day as he stood on the beach looking toward the mainland, he saw something moving, but he could not make out what it was. He looked for some time and then saw that it was a beautiful young girl walking along the beach. He said to himself: ‘She is looking for shells to put on her dress,’ for her garment was of buckskin, covered with colored beads, shells and fringe. She was very beautiful and Chahnameed thought so. So he put his hands about his mouth and called to her. When she looked up, he called to her and asked her to come over and live with him. The girl hesitated, but Chahnameed urged her, and at last she consented. Then he got into one of his canoes, and paddled to the mainland. When he got there the girl said: ‘I will come back but first I must go and get my mortar and pestle.’ So she went away to her village, and Chahnameed waited for her. When she came back, she had a mortar, a pestle and some eggs. Then he took her in the canoe and paddled to the island, and after that they lived together for a long time.

Now Chahnameed was accustomed to stay away from home for long periods, during which his wife did not know what he did, or where he went. She did not like this, but said nothing to him about it. After a while, however, she made up her mind that she would leave him, for she did not like to be left alone so long. Quietly she set about making some dolls. She made a great many, decorating them with paint and shells, but one doll was made larger than the rest. These she put away, so that her husband should not find them. Waiting until he had departed as usual one day, she took her mortar and pestle and some eggs down to the canoe. This canoe Chahnameed had left at home. Then she went back to the house, and went to the dolls, which she put against the walls in different places, all facing the center. The large one she put in bed, and covered it up with robes. Before she left she put a little dried dung about each doll and then crawled into bed and voided her excrement where the large doll lay. She then left her handiwork, went down to the canoe and paddled towards the mainland. in the canoe with the mortar, the pestle and the eggs.

By and by Chahnameed came home. When he got to the house he looked for his wife, but did not find her. Then he went in and looked around. He saw the dolls and went towards one. Immediately the one against the wall behind him began to scream. When he turned to look at it, the first one began to scream. Every time he turned to look at one doll, the one that was behind him would begin to scream. He did not know what they were. Soon he saw that something was in the bed, and taking a big stick, he went over to it. He struck the large doll that
was under the robes, thinking that it might be his wife. The large doll then screamed louder than the others. He pulled down the robes and saw that it was a doll. Then he threw down his stick and ran down to the canoe. He knew that his wife had departed for he saw that the mortar and pestle were gone.

When he got to the shore, he put his hands to his eyes, and looked for a long time toward the mainland. Soon he saw her paddling very hard for the land. He leaped into his canoe and went after her. He soon began to gain, and before long he was almost up to her, and would have caught her, had she not crept to the stern of her canoe, and lifting up the mortar, thrown it out into the water. Immediately the water where the mortar fell became many mortars. When Chahnameed got there, he could go no farther. But he jumped off his canoe and dragged it over the mortars, then pushed it into the water and jumped into it again. He paddled very hard to catch her up. His wife paddled very hard too. But again he began to gain and soon almost caught her. As before, however she crept back to the stern, and raising the pestle threw it over. Where it fell, the water became pestles. Then she paddled on again very hard. Chahnameed could not pass these pestles either, so he jumped out and dragged the canoe over them as before. This time as he approached her, she threw out the eggs. Where they fell, the water became eggs. This time he had to work very hard to get through the eggs, but at last succeeded. He paddled harder than ever, and soon began to catch up again. Now he would have caught her, for she had nothing more to throw out. But she stopped paddling and stood up. Quickly, she raised her hand and from the top of her head pulled out a long hair. Then she drew it through her fingers, and immediately it became stiff like a spear. Chahnameed thought he was going to catch her now: for he did not see what she was doing. When he got quite near, she balanced the hair-spear in her hand, and hurled it at him. She threw it straight; it hit him in the forehead, and he fell out of the canoe and sank. He was dead.

This all happened a very long time ago, back in the beginning of the world. The woman went back to her people. She was a Mohegan. (F. G. Speck 1903)

As Fawcett illustrates in her study of Mohegan, “…ancient lifeways reflected in the story include the central significance of mortars and pestles as tools and spiritual possessions for women (Fawcett, The Lasting of the Mohegans 1995).” Ironically, at least to a Mohegan reader, this is cited as a story about Pequot-Mohegan witchcraft, demonstrating a complete lack of understanding about Mohegan culture. Indian traditions, religion and ceremonies were illegal
for many years in the United States, and this speaks loudly to how outsider anthropologists misunderstood Native American and other indigenous cultures. From a Mohegan perspective, the woman’s powers were quite ordinary – not witchcraft at all – especially since the story is staged “back in the beginning of the world” when the magic of Creation was still fresh and new. The important cultural policies dictated within the Chahnameed tale are many: Mohegan elders say the Mohegan woman in the story is unnamed, because any Mohegan woman honored with mortar and pestle would have these powers (Fawcett, Medicine Trail 2000). A woman honored with mortar and pestle forms a spiritual connection to the generations of Mohegan women who came before her with mortar and pestle. Grinding corn is a community event, not often done on an island. These Mohegan material culture components and the Final Tale of Chahnameed directly connect to Mohegan cultural policy.

Grinding corn into yohkik with mortar and pestle is so central to being a Mohegan woman that mortar and pestle are two of the three items the unnamed Mohegan woman takes to an isolated island home. These are the objects that save her life from the glutton Chahnameed, and gain her the freedom to return to her Mohegan people. Some mortars and pestles pass from generation to generation “...in a sacred chain of remembrance...,” while some mortars and pestles are buried with Mohegan women (Fawcett, Medicine Trail 2000). This sacred chain of remembrance refers to those oral tradition memories, those tacit, naturalized things about being Mohegan that cannot be well explained to the outsider. There is a spiritual connection to our ancestors when we do the same thing for the same reason the same way over many thousands of years.
Pounding *yohkik* is historically central to the anticipation of the annual Wigwam, a celebration of the sweet green corn harvest held about the third week of August, thus connecting last year’s harvest (yohkik) with this year’s harvest of green corn. In her notes, Medicine Woman Gladys Tantaquidgeon made careful and thoughtful observations about this ritual. As the Wigwam celebration revolved around the current year’s harvest, the corn being ground would be the dried, roasted kernels from the harvest of the prior year, thus completing another circle in the cycle. While women traditionally owned their own mortar and pestle, high-ranking men in the tribe also pounded *yohkik*. From Gladys’ journals, Fawcett details, “The pounding of the *yokeag* bound men and women into a circle of memory. They taught Gladys that this circle linked her too...They connected each generation of Mohegans with ancestors who had done that same act for that same reason for thousands of years (Fawcett, Medicine Trail 2000).” This explains why the beautiful young Mohegan woman might leave her people to live with a worthy husband, but would naturally take her mortar and pestle to maintain this ancestral connection. This explains too why she must return home to her Mohegan people from the isolation of this lonely, unhappy island. The Mohegan woman’s instincts that she has to leave this man were proven correct as he intentionally beat the doll in the bed thinking it was his wife. Chahnameed ultimately pays for his deeds with his life.

Because mortar, pestle, and the process of growing and preserving corn is such a spiritual matter that connects one generation of Mohegan to the next, as cited in Fawcett’s book above, the importance of Gladys’ words on the matter cannot be underestimated. From her grandmothers, Gladys learned about the full circle of the three sisters (corn, beans, squash),
and the proper process by which to grind Mohegan’s sacred food, yohkik. Anthropologists, including Frank Speck who lived with Mohegan people in the late 1890’s into the early 1900’s, missed the spirituality of growing and processing corn for yohkik.

As illustrated by Speck’s description of the Final Tale of Chahnameed as a *Tale of Mohegan/Pequot Witchcraft*, Speck clearly did not understand that grinding corn was not just a step-by-step process with a meaningless mortar and pestle. To Speck, the Final Tale of Chahnameed was fiction that spoke of witchcraft and nonsense, not of an ancestral connection generation to generation. Mohegan oral tradition teaches that “back in the beginning of the world,” the magic of Creation was still fresh and new, and Mohegan places this story in the ancestral time when Mohegan resided on the shores of what is now Lake Champlain. In her journals, Gladys wrote, “The inability of Speck, a longtime student of Mohegan [nanus – elder women], to comprehend an Indian worldview... (Fawcett 2000)” illustrates how significantly *other* this Indian worldview was even to respected anthropologist Frank G. Speck. Speck spent years on Mohegan Hill, but still, “Frank Speck forever misunderstood the true magic of Mohegan Hill (Fawcett 2000).” Gladys actually spent summers in Speck’s household, yet this truly accepted anthropologist of Mohegan could not understand the significance of Mohegan traditions, culture and the oral tradition that is “storytelling.”

Often that which seems trivial can be the most important of details. These seemingly trivial misunderstandings of anthropologists, the colonists and others were frequent, and sometimes important. Indian processing of corn – into what modern Mohegan calls *yohkik*,

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what Narragansett call *nohik* and what nearly every Tribe has a word for across the entire continent – is a spiritual and exact process. Left in a field until nearly all sugar has turned to starch – about early October here in Connecticut, the corn is dried with the husk peeled back to expose the hard flint corn’s kernels. The exposed corn is hung to dry from the pulled-back braided husks – a long time ago, from the “rafters” of the longhouse and wigwam. When dry, the corn is broken from the cob with the jawbone of a deer. It is sometimes said that the deer chews our corn first. At this point the corn spends its first moments in the mortar and pestle and is pounded just to break the whole kernels before its rebirth by fire.

The kernels are then roasted directly in the ashes of a fire, and herein is the secret of thousands of generations of Indian people. Once the roasted kernels are sifted from the ashes in special fine mesh hemp baskets, the magic of the process is sealed within. The rebirth in fire is the exact step that mattered, and it was the exact step that was misunderstood as trivial by three hundred years of newcomers. This is the very magic that was lost when the settlers moved into Indian land and first colonized Turtle Island (North America). Europeans brought with them cast iron pans from their homeland. In many ways, settlers to this continent improved upon the tools of indigenous people on Turtle Island. However, in the instance of roasting corn kernels in the ashes of the fire, the settler’s tools actually caused a widespread problem. The settlers did not have to roast the corn kernels in the dirty ashes of a fire when they could use their pans. Settlers suffered from an ailment they termed *Indian Disease* because they thought this disease was caused by the Indian’s unrefined cornmeal-based diet in this new place. Pellegra was actually caused by rejection of the directions, and the lack of the
chemical reaction between ashes and corn kernels. Pellagra plagued the settlers until the
discovery of vitamins in 1929 – for about three hundred years (Fussell 2004, 1992).

Ironically, this *Indian Disease* did not plague the Indians. When the Indian roasts corn
directly in the ashes of the fire, niacin is released from the corn, and the lye in the ashes reacts
with the niacin, making the niacin more available for use by the human body. Strangely enough,
the indigenous of what is now Central America would soak their hominy in a hollowed out log
with the ash from a fire creating the very same chemical reaction practically a world away
(Fussell 2004, 1992). Pellagra is caused by lack of niacin. After the magic rebirth in fire, life-
sustaining kernels were sifted from the ashes, and the crunchy, nutty tasting kernels were more
easily pounded in the sacred mortar and pestle into the nutritious “traveling food” that
Mohegans call yohkik.

A hunter could carry enough yohkik in a small leather pouch to sustain one person for
days. Yohkik meant survival during the lean hunting times when added to any soup, porridge or
meal: yohkik has fat, the B vitamins, two amino acids short of complete protein, fiber, vitamin A
and C – a near perfect food. Eaten together with any other vegetation, corn makes a complete
set of amino acids, a complete protein (Klindienst 2005). To Mohegan, the story of
Chahnameed and the Mohegan woman, a story that is as old as time, illustrates how important
the mortar and pestle, corn and the processing of yohkik are to the survival of Mohegan as a
people. Mohegans have processed yohkik the same way, generation after generation, because
this is the way it is done – this is perhaps the “cultural policy,” the directions that were to be meticulously followed.

1934 New London Day, Interview with Lloyd Gray, Mohegan and his Wife Regarding Yokeag(e):

“Mrs. Gray explained how yokeage is made, adding that she still makes it and uses it for a breakfast cereal or for sprinkling on ice cream. What would old Chief Uncas have thought if he could have known that the meal from which his staple cakes were made was to be used as garnish for a cold sweet icy substance some centuries later? Yokeage according to Mrs. Gray, is made from the kernels of field corn. The short ears are stripped of their kernels which are parched to a rich brown. They are then poured into the mortar and ground with the pestle. The pestle is nothing more than a long round stone, about 12 inches in length and a couple of inches in diameter. Lolly picked it up and explained how it was used. ‘You hold it like this and go thump and then around and then thump and then around,’ he said, striking the bottom of the mortar with the largest end and then scraping the sides in a circular motion. While his mother, a half-blood Mohegan, was explaining the preparation of yokeage, Lolly brought out a stone ax used by the Indians for scraping charred wood in hollowing a canoe, a bowl…” or a mortar. (Colby 1934)

During Cultural Week in the year 2005, Mohegan recalled the lessons learned from our elders and we made yohkik again for the first time in a long time. For many years, we had not shared this process at Homecoming or during this preparation week for Wigwam. Once again, Mohegans took turns at the circular motion of the mortar and pestle grinding roasted kernels into sweet, nutty-tasting yohkik to enjoy it in a modern way on our vanilla ice cream. As part of this busy week of preparation, yohkik completes the circle bringing Mohegan together, one generation to the next. In modern Mohegan, wámi skitôpak means “all my relations,” meaning all present family, all past generations and all future family. This phrase was a favorite of Mohegan culture bearer, Fidelia Fielding who passed in 1908 as the last fluent speaker of
Mohegan. In Fidelia’s *womme skeedombork* all-the-people-fashion, we connect Mohegan to Mohegan readying for Wigwam week. When Mohegan do as their grandmothers taught, Mohegans are connected to “…generations of Mohegans with ancestors who had done the same act for that same reason for thousands of years (Fawcett, Medicine Trail 2000).”

Many indigenous households still keep a can of hardwood ash burned clean in a fire-safe vessel to add to any corn dish – as corn plus ash was that important (Fussell 2004, 1992). “Clean” ashes are burned from a known plant or hardwood such as Ash Tree or Oak Tree or Indian Salt Plant (Meldon) in a clean pottery container that is placed in a fire pit. Not everything stays the same, however. Niacin is less critical to the human diet nowadays as it is added to all refined flours, cereals and grains. Admittedly, most Mohegans roast corn in a dry cast iron pan and never has an elder thrown ash into the pan. Perhaps it is wrong, perhaps it is some kind of sacrilege to omit the ash, or perhaps Mohegans today do not know why the chemical reaction of the lye in the ash and the corn is important. At one time, the entire step-by-step process was key to survival, but perhaps there is another unnamed key nutrient that is lost by disregarding the processes of Mohegan ancestors. When we break just one part of the set of rules, do we lose the meaning or do we risk losing the entire process? What parts of the process will our children improve upon and modify, and will it matter? Some Mohegans think it matters; some do not.

This may sound simple – just do it the way the ancestors did it! But this is a very difficult quandary, because Mohegan ancestors also knew a better tool when they saw a better tool. In
a 2009 storytelling workshop on Mohegan’s reservation, profound storyteller in Indian country
Trudy Lamb Richmond from Schaghticoke, shared this story about Mohegan Chief Harold
Tantaquidgeon, who passed in 1970. Trudy and Harold were great friends. One of the founders
of Mohegan’s homestead-like Tantaquidgeon Museum, Harold Tantaquidgeon built a wigwam
at the museum. Having served in three out of four branches of the military and in World War I,
World War II and the Korean Conflict, Harold was nearly as familiar with military ways as he was
with Mohegan woodland ways. He covered the wigwam with free military surplus canvas rather
than traditional tree bark. Trudy came to visit, witnessed unconventional wigwam canvas and
exclaimed, “Harold, we did not cover our wigwams with canvas!” Harold replied, “Trudy,
Indians are smart. Indians use what is available to them, and me, I had canvas.” At her next visit
a couple weeks later, Trudy brought Harold a gift, a new pair of moccasins: the white canvas
Woolworth tennis sneaker type ones that she had hand-beaded with intricate Eastern
Woodland designs. Harold wore them. Rumor has it the “moccasins” are still in the depths of
Tantaquidgeon Museum somewhere.

So the old what to leave in and what to leave out dilemma still rages on the Mohegan
reservation daily – if it is not about corn, it is something else. Should we be roasting yokeag in
the fire or in a pan? Should we plant the corn of our Chief Uncas or that hybrid sweet corn?
Should we plant pole beans like our ancestors or should we use the easier bush beans? What is
really important and what is due for a change in policy and procedure? These are sometimes
impossible quandaries.
Other Mohegan Beliefs and Traditions that Mingle with Mohegan Foodways

The scientific origin of these beliefs is not the subject of this study, and it may seem easy to dismiss these beliefs and traditions as trivial, childish or primitive, but consider that the silliness of the phases of the moon control millions of gallons of water influencing the tides of all bodies of water on Nāhkas Áhki. Those same moon phases correlate with a woman’s menses cycle, dictate when fish spoon, when deer rut and when storms are deemed “perfect.” Humans do not understand every nuance in the scheme of nature, but this does not trivialize the beliefs and traditions around those nuances of nature. Some of these traditions date themselves as “post European contact” by material goods or foods that were only available post European contact.

Potentially pre-European contact are these:

If you wish to fill your basket with berries pick a few and throw them over your right shoulder for luck before putting any in your basket.

The best time to dig clams is when the moon is full.

Amongst the post-European contact traditions are these:

If a hunter can hang his powder horn on the points of the new moon it is called a wet moon. It is full of water and he cannot go hunting. If the ends point downward the hunter knows that the water has all run out and the weather conditions will be more favorable. (post contact – powder horn...)
If hogs are butchered when the moon is waning the pork will shrink. It is customary to butcher when the moon is full. (post contact – hogs)

Gladys was an authority on Mohegan culture and traditions, and even those unwritten but deeply understood policies that impact everyday life at Mohegan. These that are unwritten are perhaps the most difficult to grasp of cultural policy. With unwritten cultural policy, there is always that “…risk of arbitrary application, the undemocratic and the unaccountable …” (Atlas 2008).

Oral tradition is more than hearsay: it is something that is heard again and again, and intentionally communicated from generation to generation. The oral tradition is actually a very democratic process as it is continually corrected – elders will correct the error should one really get it wrong. Mohegan plant the three sisters together because they nurture one another when they are grown together (Fawcett, The Lasting of the Mohegans 1995). There is a traditional story about the Three Sisters that Meehan often shares when storytelling in the community:

The Cornhusk Doll
A long time ago, when the magic of creation was still fresh in the air, three sisters lived and worked together. Their names were Sister Corn, Sister Beans, and Sister Squash. Together the sisters farmed a small area, gathered foods they needed, and supported one another. Sister Corn was the oldest of the sisters, she was tall and strong, and stretched for the sun. The Creator charged Sister Corn with being the nurturer, with caring for her younger sisters. Sister Beans was the provider, providing nutrients to the soil so all could grow strong and tall. Sister Squash, the protector, grew close to the ground with prickly vines and broad shade-giving leaves to protect the exposed roots of Sister Corn. Every day, Sister Corn would take the same job of gathering the gourds and retrieving the water from the nearby, gently flowing stream. Sister Corn would be gone for hours while Sister Beans and Sister
Squash toiled, breaking the soil, making their planting mounds, weeding and waiting for Sister Corn to return with the water. At the gently flowing stream with a shiny glass-like surface, Sister Corn would lean over to scoop up water, and she would be rooted there staring at her beautiful reflection in the glass-like stream surface. For hours and hours, Sister Corn would stare at her golden hair and her eyes the color of the sky and her beautiful green dance shawl. As the sun began to set, Sister Corn’s reflection would fade, and she would finally return to her sisters with the long-awaited water. Day after day this went on, with Sister Corn forgetting to nurture and take care of her sisters, and Sister Beans and Sister Squash toiling all day. The Creator decided that Sister Corn had to be punished for forgetting her sisters. As Sister Corn leaned over the glass-like surface of the water on a clear, blue-sky day, the Creator sent the owl to ripple the water and to take away Sister Corn’s face. This is why we make our cornhusk doll with no face.

In the story, Sister Corn learns her lesson about not taking advantage of her sisters and not being vain to a fault. Mohegan foodways speak loudly to the importance of corn — corn is probably mentioned on every page of this manuscript. Sister Corn can grow nearly anywhere — in dry soil, moist soil, or sandy soil. Sister Corn knew she was important, yet Sister Corn was punished because she forgot to take care of her sisters who were equally important parts of the sisters’ relationships.

Aside from the obvious foodways in the Corn Husk Doll Story, this story speaks of our family relationships as well: the biblical story of Cain and Abel and Cain’s explanation as to “not being his brother’s keeper” would never work in Mohegan. Here is conferred and accepted another cultural policy within the oral tradition about corn: our elders mandate that we are in fact are our brother’s keeper. If a child is ill, dirty or hungry, it is the duty of any and all adults to
take care of that child’s needs. It is not unusual for extended families of “aunties” (any older adult female relation such as a cousin would be referred to as an “aunt”) and their children to live together under one roof in a consolidated household. Children are not raised by only the parents, but in some cases still are, raised by a community inside the home as well as outside the home. This concept of caring for the community goes far deeper in the meaning of the term “wámi skitôpak” a phrase from our modern Mohegan language. In the diaries of the last fluent speaker of the Mohegan language, Fidelia Fielding, it is written, “womme skedumbork.”

(Fielding 1904)

In the long paragraph that this phrase is cited from, Fidelia is writing about Jesus Christ, the Creator and the Great Spirit, and all people. It is difficult to translate word for word, but the underlying theme is the subject matter – God and ALL people. Perhaps the closest understanding of this outside of Native American circles is the concepts presented by Juana Bordas. Good social leadership and creating the theoretical “family” starts with the understanding and listening in the indigenous sense of the word. Bordas asserts that the leader’s willingness to work side by side the people in a true, "all my relations" circular fashion, determine whether great things can happen (Bordas 2007). The indigenous reference to “all my relations” encompasses past, present, and future: ancestors, family, and descendants.

Mohegan stories that are often thousands of years old dictate policy and process to the community. The entire process of corn, seed to yohkik, and its less prominent two sisters bean
and squash is “documented” and subject to “policy” within the context of oral tradition and the
kinesthelic process (actually following a process to learn the process). Mortars and pestles, the
tools used for pounding corn into a nutritious, fine, powdery, nutty tasting treat, are also very
spiritual items in the lives of Mohegan women as demonstrated by the Final Tale of
Chahnameed. Ultimately, as do many Mohegans, the woman returns to Mohegan, to her family
and to her homeland. This is the Savova idea of space and place: space and place cannot be
over-emphasized when learning about a culture (Savova 2009). Farmland and secondary fort of
Mohegan’s Sachem Uncas, Fort Hill carries the spiritual connection to those who came before
as Mohegan today does the same thing in the same place. Through these kinesthelic motions,
like the physical action of pounding yohkik, the process of learning transpires to memory and is
internalized becoming tacit knowledge, connecting one generation to the next all through the
fourteen generations since Uncas and beyond.

“We plant the three sisters together because they nurture one another like a family
[from generation to generation] when they are grown together (Fawcett, The Lasting of the
Mohegans 1995).” As in family, another common thread within these Mohegan traditions is the
interaction between our elders and our children. Historically, Mohegan children learn from the
women in the Tribe, and often from a generation older than that of the children’s parents
(Fawcett, Medicine Trail 2000). Sustaining the three sisters garden is sustaining a natural
intersection of our youth interacting with the generation of their grandparents. At Fort Hill, and
less at Museum, the Three Sister’s Garden is planted great-grandparents, grandparents, parents
and children working side by side.
The threats to these critical intersections of youth and elders are numerous in modern society. Mohegan children have a foot in two worlds: though Mohegan, these children also have a foot in the Wii, PlayStation, and Facebook world. These children primarily live in America and are very much typical American children, attending American schools, watching American TV, and listening to American music. Inside and outside of Mohegan, this is of great concern. While parents are busy tending to survival, traditionally grandparents have had the time to sit and listen, to share their wisdom of the years and to pass on the family traditions. This chain is in danger of breaking in the modern era. Many grandparents today are still in the workforce. Often, while ailing elders spend their final days in nursing homes, the children spend their time in daycare and video games. The time between generations elder-to-child is worth sustaining (Hawes 2008).

This concern is demonstrated by another oral tradition – this one from memory as Elder Sharon Maynard, Accomac, recently shared it with the author to gift it to others.

Listen and remember. A long, long time ago, a great chief lived in the longhouse with his large family of children, their spouses, and his grandchildren. The great chief was a renowned hunter, respected for his good advice, and he had particularly strong bond with his grandson. As the great chief aged, and his daughter’s husband began to take over the hunting for the family, the chief would often sit outside the longhouse through the long day. Throughout the day, many a community member would stop by to talk to the wise chief. All day, the chief would listen in the way only the elders can listen, and would speak only a few words sometimes in riddle and often only pointing toward the right path. His young grandson would listen to Grandfather and these lessons hour after hour from the time the sun woke up to the time the sun went to sleep. The daughter’s husband was a mighty hunter and good provider, and every dawn as he left for the hunt, he would see the old man sitting and sitting and talking and listening and nodding his head. Every evening as he returned from the hard labor of the
hunt heaving his bounty, he would see the old man sitting and sitting and talking and listening and nodding his head. After a long time, the great provider became tired of providing for this old useless man. The great hunter called his son to him, gave him a blanket and explained.

"Son, Grandfather has outlived his usefulness. It is time for Grandfather to move on, to meet the Creator, so here is what I want for you to do. Take Grandfather out to a nice place in the forest, perhaps under a mighty tree, near a gentle stream. Leave Grandfather there and wrap Grandfather in this blanket so that he may be comfortable as he greets the Creator." The son was a good son, and always did as his father asked. With tears in his eyes, the next morning, the boy took his beloved Grandfather out to the forest to do as his father had asked. He found a comfortable place near a gently bubbling stream. Before he wrapped Grandfather in the blanket, he viciously tore the blanket in half with the strength of all of his anger and sadness at this horrible task he was given. He kissed Grandfather, and left him as he was instructed.

As the son returned to the village and approached the longhouse, his father stopped him. His father asked if he had done as he was asked. The boy responded dutifully that he had done as his father had asked. The mighty provider thundered as he grabbed the blanket from the boy's hands, "Boy! Then why do you still have this blanket that I instructed you to wrap Grandfather with to keep him comfortable?"

The boy trembled as he responded, "Father, I did as you instructed, but there will be a day when I am the hunter, and I am the provider for our family. There will be a day when you become old and useless. There will be a day when I must bring you to the forest to greet the Creator, so I saved half of this blanket for that day."

Understanding flashed across Father's face like lightning. He instructed his son to go get Grandfather and to bring him home. We remember how to care for our elders, to always feed our elders first and best, when we share this story. Listen and remember.

Fort Hill, one of the original forts of Sachem Uncas, now provides a unique opportunity for casual and natural interaction between Mohegan children and their grandparents' generation. Sadly, the Three Sister’s Garden is no longer located at the site of Mohegan elder’s housing, but it is located in a much smaller public display site at Tantaquidgeon Museum. For
several years the garden was located on the site of our elder’s housing: Fort Hill Drive, also known as Fort Hill Farm. While the apartments on this property are strictly those of the elders, the property is vast, and the apartments are not at all like a nursing home. The lodge-like atmosphere melds with the forest surrounding it, and the cedar post and beam construction offers large sunny rooms. The end of each hallway is graced by a roomy sitting area surrounded by windows where neighbors can share a story or a grandparent can share tales of Mohegan oral tradition while viewing old Mohegan hunting grounds.

This farm has been part of Mohegan farms and forts since the days that Uncas walked Mohegan, fourteen (14) generations ago. In our oral history, Fort Hill is one of the strongholds of Mohegan Chief Uncas, and it is located less than a mile from the first fort of Uncas, Shantok. If the as-tall-as-me-stone walls that surround the property could tell us their story, perhaps they would tell us about how Uncas’ people took a clam-shell hoe to the very same piece of Náhkas Áhki (Mother Earth) that these children break to plant their seeds, the very same seeds that originate with their common ancestor Uncas’ Mohegan flint corn.

Both the story and the seed survive and transmit one generation to the next. "Stories, like seeds," Klindienst tells us, "hold the power to sustain a people” (Klindienst 2005, 239). The three sister’s garden contains the stories, the seeds of corn, and the seeds of memory of our people at least as old as fourteen generations of Mohegan sustainability. “Culture is the total of human ingenuity. Culture is the stories about the natural world, the language, signs, symbols, tools, foods, toys – everything people fill their worlds with – this is culture (Goldbard 2002)."
This year, as is custom, at our annual Homecoming picnic, Mohegan will share yohkik, ground Mohegan flint corn. In the week that follows Mohegan will grind yohkik together in mortar and pestle. Mohegan will share in the labor and the fruits of the labors just as their ancestors did in the very same place as Uncas and his warriors settled, in a grove of trees at Fort Shantok in what is now called Uncasville. In a “sacred chain of remembrance,” we do the same thing our ancestors did, in the same way, at the same place and for the same reasons (Fawcett, Medicine Trail 2000).
Material Culture: Mohegan Foodway Artifacts

Wooden Bowls and Utensils

Indians, including Mohegans, were quick to realize the value in speed and labor efforts of metal blades. The adjustment from curved scraping devices such as the edge of a thick quahog shell to the straight, metal, knife blade was made more smoothly with the modification of the straight blade to the classic, Indian, “crooked knife.” Because metal lasts longer than wood, there are perhaps more artifacts of the curved knife in many collections than there are the wooden bowls and utensils that were once shaped with these knives. Having become so dependent upon department stores and purchasing wares rather than making wares, many wonder, why one would want a crooked knife. Carving a bowl out of the knot created where large branch meets tree trunk, one will appreciate a curved knife – or a thick quahog shell. Stone and shell rapidly gave way to steel knives after the first third of the 17th century. Wooden spoons and ladles were often a traditional wedding gift from father to daughter soon to be wed. A common feature of these carved wooden utensils is the curved upper ‘extremity’ that catches the edge of the bowl to prevent the utensil from immersion in the food. Ingenious, yet most spoons humans use today lack this “primitive” feature. This feature was also utilized as an opportunity to showcase artwork as it was often an extension of a relief carved figure at the top
of the handle: the beak or tail of this relief carved effigy meets the third dimension in this curved extremity (Willoughby 1908).

A wampum-inlaid wooden bowl is thoroughly described in Willoughby’s article as being nearly circular, and about eleven inches by 4 inches deep. Perhaps many years after it was made, the handle of the bowl was inlaid with wampum in the shape of “L”. An “early owner” of the bowl is listed as Lucy Occum Tantaquidgeon – it is theorized that Samson Occum carved the groove in this bowl and inlaid the white wampum in the shape of Lucy’s first initial, L (Willoughby 1908). Some 16th and 17th century Mohegan bowls were unique in that they were carved from Pepperage (Pepperidge?) wood and the more familiar Dogwood. Perhaps the most famous Mohegan wooden bowl is the Uncas Bowl from which it is said the great statesman and sachem ate his succotash. There were actually two bowls described as “Uncas Bowls” in 1908: one owned by Miss Emily S. Gilman whose ancestors passed this bowl down from ancestors who have lived in the Pequot-Mohegan region since about 1650. This circular bowl had a handle likened to that of the head of an owl. (Willoughby 1908)

The second bowl is currently known “the Uncas Bowl” and is oblong and has two handles carved as two wolf-heads facing one another. Owned by the Slater Museum until Mohegan repatriated it in 1997, the Uncas Bowl was unearthed “...in what is known as the Royal Mohegan Burial Ground, an area in the center of Norwich that was supposed to have been preserved but was dug up during the development of the city. The Slater Museum was built in the 1880s on part of the burial ground. Fawcett [Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel] said the bowl
has been out of the ground at least 150 years. It...is believed to have belonged to Chief Uncas, who lived from 1598 to 1693.” Bowls such as the Uncas Bowl were known as chief’s succotash bowls by the Mohegan Tribe and other area tribes (Bixby 1997).

During the smallpox epidemic of 1635, Bradford states that the Indians of the area, being too ill to gather firewood, kept themselves from freezing by burning “ye woden trayes and dishes they ate their meals in (Bradford 1898). Sadly, along with many lives lost to disease, the fine work of many an Indian artist was burned in this manner and lost to disease. The choice serving utensils and food containers of our ancestors were perhaps not as archaeologically durable as their cooking container counterparts: pottery.

*Material Culture: Shantok Pottery – Cooking with Fire!*

“Among Algonquians in general, the art of the potter was applied almost wholly to the production of cooking pots, and while food was often served in the pot in which it was cooked, pottery vessels exclusively for serving food seem generally to have been unknown, vessels of wood and bark being used for that purpose (Willoughby 1908).” The globular shape of Mohegan pottery, also known as Shantok Pottery or Shantokware, would fall over outside the ashes and coals of the fire – Shantok pottery was not intended to be used from fire to table.

Archeology Coordinator for the Mohegan Tribe, and a potter in training to make Shantok replica pottery, Elaine Thomas states, “Abundant within Shantok’s archeological record is the treasure of Shantok Pottery or Shantokware,” and within the thin, smooth shards of Shantokware is discovered another use of the abundance of shells as a tempering agent for
Shantokware pottery. Finely ground white flecks of shell dot the clay of Shantokware pottery creating a durable cookware that can withstand the heat of cooking with fire. Mixed into the raw clay mud, the shell makes an extraordinary clay temper allowing Shantokware to withstand the great heat of cooking with fire.

Mohegan foodways are intertwined with Mohegan art and Mohegan culture in the circle of Mohegan life. Shantokware is a functional yet beautiful element of Mohegan material culture. Without a potter’s wheel, 17th century Mohegan potters demonstrated remarkable skill in their thin, durable pots. Shantok pottery is soapstone-smooth, about 1/8 inch thick, and it is difficult to discern where one coil ends and another begins. Most pots are as uniform in their globular shape as though they had been formed on an electric potter’s wheel. Compared to same era pottery across the area, the advanced artistry and skill of 17th century Shantok potters is clearly evident.

Formed of coil upon coil, the smooth globular body of Shantokware is a difficult accomplishment for most potters, wheel or not. Working with clay, once the artist starts an outward, widening tendency with the pot, it takes great skill to bring that outward tendency back in to make a globular shape. During the creation of a pot the serpent-like coils lay one upon the last working the way up to the collar and the castellations of the pot. In creating her own pieces, Thomas reports that she cannot deny the serpent-like nature in the construction of a coil pot. She relates it to the serpentine walls that meander across the New England landscape weaving in and out of Náhkas Áhki, Mother Earth. Produced at the site of Uncas’
original fort at Shantok as a material of trade and of utility, the recovered pots and the many shards of Shantokware leave an indelible mark at Mohegan.

Gently caressing the rim of a replica Shantokware pot she made, Elaine Thomas speaks about the first time she held a shard of Shantokware in her hand. “As I gently handled the shards of this four hundred year old pot, my thumb slid perfectly into the thumbprint of my ancestor on the collar of this Shantok pot.” This is the very moment that sparked Thomas’ interest in Mohegan archeology, specifically in Shantokware, and led Thomas to apprentice under Master Potter and award winning international artist, Brenda Hill (Tuscarora/Choctaw) to learn how to form this beautiful, functional cookware of our ancestors. Less in weight than a soapstone dish, and in time, equally as non-stick, Shantokware provided a utilitarian cookware pot for our 17th century Mohegan ancestors. While the “castellations” or points typical in a Shantokware pot could be pouring spouts, these potentially utilitarian points are thought to convey meaning about the balance of life. Thomas elaborates that in some ways, the castellations seem to be corn cobs. In other ways, perhaps they have a female anatomy resemblance, and yet from the inside of the pot, they could even resemble the male anatomy. Perhaps the castellations are all three, the corn plant, the male and the female anatomy. By accident, Thomas and Hill discovered that the imprints on the original Shantokware shards were identical to imprints created with scallop and quahog shells. For the most part, the language of Shantokware is yet to be awakened from its sleeping state, so the definitive on these matters remains elusive. Like the stories held secret by our basketry designs for so long and only recently recorded, the artwork incised in the cookware of Mohegan ancestors remains
to be rediscovered. As Thomas hypothesizes, “Perhaps the form of Shantok pottery, like the plant of corn that is both male and female, is shaped so that the castellations represent a balance of both the male and the female form (Meehan 2012).”

**Material Culture: Mohegan Baskets**

While Shantok Pottery was made with only one technique – with coils – there are three basic ways to weave a basket. The three basic techniques to weave a basket are coiled and sewn, plaited, or twined. Also in contrast to Shantokware, the archeological record of basketry is far less reliable as the materials of baskets simply do not preserve like that of fired clay. Long grasses, wood splints, bark, cornhusks and hemp cordage can be very durable materials for a lifetime, but not so much for generations of lifetimes. Some museum items are preserved, handed down from one generation to the next from the 17th century with birch bark, porcupine quills, corn husks and oak splints perhaps being the most durable of basketry materials.

Constructed of the materials strewn about in abundance in their natural worlds, basketry provided the first storage containers of the indigenous of the world – the first Tupperware, and baskets can be found at the start of every indigenous people worldwide. Baskets initially were a utilitarian material culture driven by need and ingenuity. Collecting a quantity of blueberries or nuts with only one’s two hands can be a difficult task. A fold of deerskin may work, but stains in time. Necessity is the parent of ingenuity, and what started as perhaps a fold of birch bark developed into a sewn vessel. In clearing a path, perhaps a stubborn Hemp branch held fast and strong, fiber-by-fiber refusing to break with twist after
twist. When twisted together, hemp cordage can yield long, strong strings and ropes. When one cord is twisted to another, the strength of many strands is found to be far more than the strength of one.

Mohegan baskets filled many needs. Baskets made of bark peeled from a tree and typically sewn together with the strong conifer roots pulled out of the ground create durable watertight containers. Combined with pine pitch, even the sewn seams can be made watertight. Without the luxury of running water, containers that hold water are vital to survival. Birch bark filled with water or soup broth can even be brought to a boil over a moderate fire. An animal bladder can hold water, and dried hard-shelled gourds provided excellent water containers, but the ability to make a water container whenever one requires a liquid storage container and to be able to cook in that container, clearly has an advantage. Tightly woven grass baskets can also hold water for some time, but grass baskets at Mohegan were typically ceremonial and small. In more modern times, Mohegan thimble baskets were commonly sewn of sweet grass, but sweet grass was more typically used at Mohegan decoratively as an accent at the rim of a wood-splint plaited basket.

Typically woven from Ash Tree or Oak Tree wood-splints peeled off a length of log, wood-splint plaited baskets are the most common Mohegan. These are sometimes called berry-baskets, and sometimes called Mohegan square-round baskets as they start off square at the base and finish round at the rim. Specific directions for collection of the wood logs for the splints for Mohegan basketry are held in Mohegan oral tradition. In an interview with Richard
Fawcett on January 24, 1962, Richard Fawcett details the lesson of wood collection that Harold Tantaquidgeon gathered from his father John Tantaquidgeon:

Mr. Tantaquidgeon tells of a time when his father sent him into the woods to obtain limbs of white oak for basket making. The latter cautioned him to be sure that he selected wood from trees on the north side of a hill only. Harold, thinking his father would not know the difference, selected some pieces of wood from a fine white oak on the south side of a hill. After he had brought the wood home and his father had been laboring over it for some time, Harold asked him, “Doesn’t it split well?” His father replied, “You didn’t get this from the north side of the tree (Fawcett, The Lasting of the Mohegans, 1995)!”

Mohegan splint baskets for food storage are typically made with accompanying lids or covers, but as with modern kitchen containers, the covers were frequently lost. Most museum baskets are missing the cover, yet a few survive cover intact in Mohegan archives. With so many options in modern America, Mohegan baskets today are created for utilitarian purposes sometimes, as teaching tools and for artistic value. Most folks own a backpack, but some still prefer their Mohegan berry basket to a modern implement. Splint baskets made of Oak and Ash are made from splints pounded and peeled off of fresh, green logs of wood and are quite hearty. Splint gauges are used to create uniform thickness and width in basket splints, and many basket makers these days purchase wood splints ready to weave. Baskets are used to collect and gather any harvested fruits, vegetables or nuts, or to contain a set of items, for example a set of storytelling props. While Mohegan basketry directly connects with Mohegan foodways as the original kitchen container, basketry was also a way in which the tribe held its stories and its history. A Schaghticoke elder, Trudy Lamb Richmond, divulges that she always
speaks to her baskets as she delicately and skillfully weaves them, and in this discussion, she apologizes to her creation as she readies to part with it and to sell it for money. This is yet another example of the intertwining of artistry, foodways, spirituality and culture woven into the circle of Eastern Woodland Indian life.

Driven by early tourism at the dawn of the 20th century in America, basket ornamentation changed from utilitarian, spiritual and historical to being driven by what sells. Symbolism that once held a story and a history, perhaps now was only a decorative implement. Historically, the symbols gracing Mohegan baskets were intentional, detailing tribal politics and tribal on-goings of the times. Much of this secret language of the symbols adorning Mohegan basketry is detailed in A Key into the Language of Woodsplint Baskets (1987).

Baskets and nets woven of Indian hemp are amongst the finest respectively. Many 17th century colonists raved about the superior quality of Indian fishing nets made of Indian Hemp fibers that would not stretch or yield when wet. A hemp bag held by Narragansett Tribe is a 17th century woven Mohegan bag. The superior fibers of the hemp plant are evident upon even amateur inspection.
Even to the amateur inspection, the stem of Dogbane or *Apocynum cannabinum* ("like cannabis") is secondary in fiber quality, quantity, and length to *Cannabis* Sativa; however, Dogbane still grows legally and wild all across the United States.

Dogbane fibers:

The native people from many nations in North America produced various useful items from the hemp fibers. They made cordage and thread from the plant with no other equipment than their hands and thighs. Fibers of the dogbane plant were rolled together to make a
functional material stronger than cotton. The twine was excellent for making fishing lines and nets because it keeps its strength under water and does not shrink. It was also used in the manufacture of many other items, including deer and rabbit nets, slings for hunting small game, nooses for snaring grouse and other game birds, hide stretchers, bowstrings, moccasins, clothing, straps and tumplines, woven bedding for baby cradles, wheels used in a type of dart game, carrying nets, and cat-tail mats. Dogbane fibers have been found in some archeological sites thousands of years old (Labiste n.d.).

Hemp Woven Yohkik Bag by Author Susan Meehan:

![Hemp Woven Yohkik Bag by Author Susan Meehan](image.jpg)


**Foodways Framed by Cultural Markers**

*Ceremony and Performances: Homecoming and Wigwam*

The week preceding the most important Mohegan celebration – the celebration of the green corn festival – of the year is a week of busy preparations and gathering of goods and people. Traveling across sea and land, Mohegans who have moved away return to Mohegan to celebrate. Over time, this week prior to Wigwam has become formerly known as “Homecoming,” and we open the week with the Homecoming cookout. In the tradition and spirit of Sachem Uncas, elected Mohegan government representatives traditionally cook the food and serve the People at Homecoming. This is the lead in to the longest enduring food-based cultural tradition at Mohegan, the Green Corn Festival.

“The Wigwam Festival, or Green Corn Festival is all at once a celebration of thanks, a symbol of Tribal survival and the chance to feel connected to other Tribal members, past and present (Mohegan Tribe, 2004).”

Being a Federally Recognized Tribe within the United States borders, Mohegan was required to meet seven very stringent requirements as set forth in Federal Law. Mohegan had to be recognized as a distinct community by its neighbors; and Mohegan had to demonstrate that as a Tribe, they had political influence over its citizens; and that they had social contact with each other. While these criteria do not necessarily define Mohegan, they certainly paint a picture. As a “cultural marker” perhaps our biggest celebration of the year, is the ancient Green
Corn Festival or Wigwam Festival. Dating thousands of years back – to Mohegan ancestors who lived near the Iroquois nations in what is now upstate New York, the festival is a harvest celebration, a sort of “thanksgiving.” Written record of the celebration at Mohegan dates back to an 1860 revival after a colonial period of dormancy due to unfavorable legal aspects. Many Indian ceremonies were outlawed in the colonization and assimilation process of America. It is actually quite astounding that this flyer advertises “Indian Entertainment in Regalia”. Had these celebrations not been Mohegan Indian Church-sponsored, these events would never have been allowed. For this documentation of gardens and food, what is remarkable as a cultural marker in this document is that today the menu is much the same – “Famous Indian Succotash, Yokeag(e) and Clam Chowder...” Another point in the cultural significance of this is that the Wigwam is one of the few events in which the public is welcome both then and now: “We invite our friends to visit us.” The word wigwam is from the Mohegan word for welcome, wigwoman.

There are other critical cultural markers to be aware of when working with Mohegan. Men and women have separate roles, but these roles are balanced, and not subservient to either gender. For example, while the Mohegan Sewing Society, comprised primarily of the elder women at its formation in 1860, did not actually “appoint” elected chiefs and other positions, no one was going to get elected without the approval of the “old ladies” as Mohegan fondly refers to the ladies of the Mohegan Sewing Society (Zobel 2010). Knowing the people you are working with is crucial to success. When you are working with an Indian Nation, you are working with a government, a country within a country... “You might not have to worry about so many cultural issues when doing business with other entities,” said Gray-Proctor, during one
of the event’s sessions. “But each tribe has its own unique sovereign nation structure that will help determine how you should interact (Capriccioso 2010).” The author continues with an example: when working with a matriarchal tribe, the company’s executives only addressed the male staffer in the room when speaking. This cost them the business – the women leaders walked away (Capriccioso, 2010).

Like understanding Mohegan symbols, understanding Mohegan humor and native humor in general, takes some inside knowledge. We often portray the classic stoic Indian image, even today. This stoic, serious warrior-like Indian image is serious business. In 1984, a Mohawk artist called Bill Powless shattered the image of the stoic Indian in the memory of Indians and non-Indians. Imagine a heavy-set native with a feather in his cap, eating a melting ice cream sitting on a park bench. To an Indian person on the “inside” this outside image of the serious, stoic Indian is rather amusing. Our elders continuously use humor, teasing and even what some psychologists would condemn as “belittling” and harmful to “self esteem” to teach, to balance life and to balance power amongst the people. Celebration, laughter and deeply culturally rooted humor are an essential part of our past, present and future. To understand humor in any culture (except maybe “slapstick”), takes some measure of intelligence, and some “inside knowledge.”
Meehan says: A friend and I once attended a one-person comedy play in a public theater in Providence, Rhode Island by Drew Hayden Taylor, an Ojibwa comedian. She (a Micmac Indian) and I were holding our bellies roaring with laughter, and I assume every other person in the audience simply “did not get the joke...” Throughout the performance, other members of the audience continually glared at us with great offense for our roaring laughter. We paid to see the show again the following night – it was that funny.

Festivity, fun, humor and ceremony are a vital part of the circle of Indian consciousness, the circle of life.

From “European contact” to the present day, many Indian nations faced incredible pressure to assimilate from both the outside and inside the nations. Yet there survive sometimes subtle reminders, sometimes famous vocal rebels, and often secret festivals, ceremonies, ceremonial appointments and rituals that kept pieces of many Indian nations’ cultures alive. Governmental policy to eliminate and assimilate the savage from contact well into the 20th century impacted the survival of many tribal festivities, celebrations and so-called-pagan rituals. “Underground” or in disguise, some of these elements persevered. One such symbol of perseverance that managed to adapt and survive this assimilation process is that of the Mohegan Green Corn Festival or the Wigwam.

**Mohegan Archives and Newspaper Article about Wigwam**

Over the years, many local newspapers document this annual green corn festival event at Mohegan. It is enlightening to see accepted euphemisms of different eras in references such as “real red men” or the “beauties of the forest” surely headed toward extinction.
1842: “Mohegan Church Fair featured yohcake, wild strawberries, succotash, baskets, wooden spoons, birch brooms, whalebone riding whips and modern goods produced by the Mohegan sewing circle.” (Caulkins 1880-1885)

1880-1885: “In this ‘Wigwam’ as it is called, they have on sale various Indian trinkets, such as baskets, wooden spoons, bows and arrows, and various other articles of their own make. Fancy articles are also sold: bed quilts, ... Various styles of eatables are also furnished the patrons, including that famous Indian dish, ‘succotash,’ and ‘yokeage.’” (Baker 1894-5)

1899 Real Red Men, NY Times. “It is a huge affair combining the beauties of the forest and the sea [Massapeag is on the Mohegan/Pequot River or the Thames River, not the sea...] with the gay colors and lively manners of the red man.”

1900: “She is famous as a cake baker too, and that night at the fair she had a great box loaded with cakes which she was selling between times as she talked to me. She makes her own living, though now well along toward three score and ten, and these cakes she bakes are given to the church to help keep it going. [Gertrude Harris?] ... Another old chap is Mr. Matthews, who at 80 past every year makes by hand a whole pile of beautiful wooden spoons to sell at the fair. I bought one for 15 cents... (Lampton 1900+)

1909: From “European contact” to the present day, many Indian nations have faced incredible pressure to assimilate from both the outside and inside the nations. Yet there survive sometimes subtle reminders, sometimes famous vocal rebels, and often secret festivals, ceremonies, ceremonial appointments and rituals that kept pieces of many Indian nations’ cultures alive. Governmental policy to eliminate and assimilate the savage from contact well into the 20th century impacted the survival of many tribal festivities, celebrations and so-called-pagan rituals. “Underground” or in disguise, some of these elements persevered. This project is not a study of these policies, prejudices and methods of assimilation, but it is the study of a specific Mohegan festival that managed to adapt and survive this assimilation process, the Green Corn Festival or the Wigwam.

Celebrations or seasonal thanksgivings were sadly misunderstood by European settlers as pagan religious practices, or as ‘savage,’ or as ‘childlike.’ Indian celebrations revolved around life – corn was vital to the survival of Indian people, and also to European settlers, so why
would a person NOT be incredibly THANKFUL for that which saved them once again, that which sustains them physically and to the Indian people, spiritually? There is a clear distinction in “thankful FOR” and “thankful TO” – the festival is not about “worshiping” (worshiping in the European sense) corn. In Mohegan, we thank Mundu, the Creator for the gift of corn, and all of the other gifts in life. Life and survival and ritual are intrinsically connected and cannot be severed into bits and disjointed pieces in the circle of Indian consciousness, the circle of life. Sadly misunderstood to be pagan rituals, many celebrations, like the “Green Corn Festival” were considered illegal pagan celebrations in colonial America. Like many Indian traditions in the 1800’s, the tradition of the Green Corn Festival started to fade under intense pressure to “Christianize” and assimilate.

In 1831, faced with rapid dispossession of Tribal lands distributed at the hands of corrupt government overseers, three Mohegan women made a monumental, strategic decision that would directly result in the survival of their people, of Mohegan, to this day. Cynthia Hoscott, her mother, Lucy Occum Tantaquidgeon, and her grandmother, Lucy Tantaquidgeon, deeded a piece of property into “Trust” for Mohegan for “…as long as one Mohegan remained living…” and upon this two (2) acre parcel, the women also deemed that a church should be built. And so it came to be, Mohegan Congregational Church in 1831 with eagle feather hung just above the cross representing the high ideals, wisdom and purity that the Eagle represents to Indian people. Around the year 1950, a temporary pastor serving Mohegan Church removed the feather because he found it offensive. After a heated discussion, Mohegan Chief Courtland Fowler returned the feather to its proper place. Since it opened in 1831, Mohegan Church has
been open to both Indian and non-Indian alike. With help from area missionaries, especially one Sarah Huntington of Norwich who rallied for Mohegan at the state capital in Hartford, Mohegan proved the Tribe “Christianized and civilized” by building Mohegan Church.

The two (2) acres that Mohegan Congregational Church sits upon is the ONLY parcel of land in Mohegan homeland that has always been in Mohegan possession – that has not had to be purchased back by Mohegan in modern times. It was upon this piece of land that another visionary Mohegan woman made a monumental decision that would positively impact the survival of her people for generations to come. In 1860, Medicine Woman Emma Baker dreamt about the spirit of her mother who passed on to her a message. In her dream, her mother’s spirit directed Emma to revitalize the Wigwam, the Green Corn Festival on the parcel of land that contained Mohegan Congregational Church under the big chestnut tree, the tree that would become known as the “Fair Tree.” Sadly this fair tree fell with most of its breed to the Chestnut Tree blight in the early 1900’s.

At Wigwam Festival 2010, the huge arena tent actually encompassed two large Maple trees, and it was reminiscent of this days-gone-by Fair Tree like setting. As a direct result of Emma Baker’s dream, the Mohegan people supported Emma Baker in her efforts, and the “Mohegan Sewing Society” was formed. Under guise¹ of a fundraiser for Mohegan Congregational Church, the ladies planned to awaken an ancient traditional “festival,” the Green Corn Festival, or the Wigwam. The year 2010 was the 150th anniversary of the Mohegan

¹ A guise only in that Mohegans were allowed to awaken this traditional practice that would otherwise be illegal – the funds did support Mohegan Congregational Church.
Sewing Society, and hence, the 2010 Wigwam theme commemorated this landmark in Mohegan history. Encompassing the trees into our arena tent, however accidental, was so very appropriate for this commemoration. “The Wigwam, or thanksgiving for the Corn Harvest, has always been connected to the trees (Fawcett, The Lasting of the Mohegans 1995).” The traditional house known as the wigwam is also framed with tree saplings bent into the dome shape, and these same kind of young tree saplings form the entrance to the Wigwam Festival in a ceremonial arbor in 1860 and today. It is no accident that our ancient symbol for corn is the very same symbol we use for the “tree of life,” as life, trees, and corn are all intricately and vitally connected.

This is the ancient Mohegan symbol for CORN and the TREE of LIFE. The symbol may be used in the upright position or in the horizontal position. The symbol may be used alone or in conjunction with other symbols. This symbol frequents Mohegan artwork from any era – past to present. Housed at Tantaquidgeon Museum at Mohegan, an artistic rendition of the same symbol is used as the tree of life on a belt passed down from Martha Uncas to Fidelia Fielding, and traditionally to our Medicine Woman. It is currently in Tantaquidgeon Museum upon a life-size sculpture of Gladys Tantaquidgeon and worn by Mohegan’s Medicine Woman on special occasions.

“As with any culture, traditions and symbols serve to connect us to our history, our spiritual life and each other. One of the tragedies for many Indian tribes is that years of repression have caused many of these traditions to be lost. Still,
one of the most unifying traditions for the Mohegan people survives today. The Wigwam, or Green Corn Festival is all at once a celebration of thanks, a symbol of Tribal survival and the chance to feel connected to other Tribal members, past and present (Tribe 2004).”

Baskets, pottery, clothing, quillwork, weaponry, adornment, stories and tools: all bear witness to Mohegan symbols and a common shared language, eloquently understood by the community member’s collective memories, yet rarely spoken, and until recent years, very rarely penciled and published. Mohegan storytellers have discovered the power of the pencil since Fidelia Fielding’s 19th century examples and Gladys Tantaquidgeon’s 20th century examples, and several contemporary Mohegan authors. A pencil is like “…a talking stick likened to the talking feather…makes the truth come out…finding a balance between strong, simple voice of oral tradition and formal, unimaginative manner of public schools…We must bridge by walking the delicate balance between these two worlds of speech (Pritchard n.d.).”

A member of our younger generation, of the 13th generation from Uncas, spoke the idea out loud, “Mohegan symbols are like our secret alphabet (Meehan, Catrina Autumn Sun).” Catrina recently submitted a poster presentation to her 7th grade world history class detailing some of the secrets of this Mohegan alphabet as she called it. Many of these symbols speak to our foods and our lands. The rolling hills of southeastern Connecticut are represented in the ups and downs of our life-trails. Perhaps the most widely used symbol is that of the Tree of Life, also used to represent corn. Complex combinations of the symbols actually tell entire stories.

Appointed chief in 2010, Sunsqá Mutáwi Mutáhash, Chief Many Hearts, Lynn Malerba, remembers Wigwam Festivals of days past much the same as today, albeit a bit smaller: “It was
just a big family get-together,’ she said, and the festival remains that way today. Malerba recalls other, smaller gatherings in the grove of cedars near the fort, where the tribe gathered as a family, welcoming members of others tribes and the neighbors from the surrounding towns (Mann 2010).” Mohegan does not need to advertise far and wide because friends know what the Tribe is up to, according to Malerba.

The history of the Wigwam and its location is a telltale sign of the times. The festival had fallen out of favor for sometime – last documented in 1842 by the Connecticut Historical Society notes of Frances Manwaring Caulkins. With an eighteen year gap in this thousands-of-years-old festival, when the Wigwam Festival was restored in 1860, the Festival was held at Mohegan Congregational Church for several reasons. As a church fundraiser, Indian regalia and Indian foods and Indian dances would be allowed – after all it was a fundraiser for bringing the gospel to the Indians and for educating the Indians in this church that also served as a school. Under the Chestnut Fair Tree, this 1860 Wigwam Festival was re-born.

For many years, under this legendary Fair Tree, the Festival remained. At some point, the Festival outgrew the Church and the Fair Tree. The Festival in the following years was said by outsiders to be “…on the commanding mound of Massapeag Mountain, overlooking the Thames River (Times 1889).“ This could describe parts of Fort Shantok, the site of the first Mohegan fort in the area settled by Uncas and his men. The 1889 article paints an interesting picture. The article headline is: “Genuine Indians Holding Their Annual Festival,” and the article goes on to state, “The Indians, in return for kindness to the English, were given several
thousand acres of forest land at Massapeag, which they have since occupied.” This one statement illustrates many differences in the outside view and the inside view. The Indians were given land? Except for that two (2) acres upon which sits Mohegan Church, Mohegan’s reservation was relinquished on June 22, 1860. Albeit, the 1889 article goes on to further explain the annual festival:

> It is a huge affair combining the beauties of the forest and the sea [Massapeag is on the Mohegan/Pequot River or the Thames River, not the sea...] with the gay colors and lively manners of the red man. It is enjoyed by all members of the tribe, which is said to be slowly but certainly becoming extinct...The youthful descendants of the tribe are few. Probably another century will see scarcely one of the representatives of this once eminently fierce and warlike nation. (article 1889)

Luckily this vision of extinction was proven false. The 1889 article does cite the reason for the festival, the celebration of the “green corn” when it is sweetest, and the article details our traditional yokeag, our roasted corn meal like treat. This must measure to at least some success: the outsider knew what it was the Mohegans were celebrating – “…green corn in its fullest milk..(Times 1889).” The message was clear enough even to the outsider looking inside. There is a 1935 account of the Festival in the Norwich Day that cites the Festival “at Mohegan” drew in large crowds pleasing the Indians. Further the article states that the Indians were pleased to be able to be part of the celebration of the area’s tercentenary (300 years). Interesting is the view of the outside on the annual festival.
In more recent history, the Wigwam Festival took on a new character, became known as a “powwow” (late 1980’s?), and moved around a bit. As the name of the event changed, it seems so too did the event. In the late 1990’s the event was held at a rented location, upon the football fields and grounds of a Catholic school that sits upon lands that once belonged to Mohegan, Saint Bernard’s in Uncasville, Connecticut. The “powwow” at Saint Bernard’s took on a whole new perspective and feeling of BIG – it no longer felt like the same celebration of the green corn. Mohegan Sun Casino is the second largest casino in the world, and for a while, perhaps the glitz, glory and money of success impacted our old “traditional” Wigwam. Somewhere we lost the sacred fire and put too much emphasis on the wonder.

With this change in venue and change in location, came other changes. It seems this is when “dance competitions” began to be more commonplace at Mohegan “powwow” – in the early years of the first decade of the 21st century, Mohegan Powwow advertised $42,000 in dance award money! In recent memory (2002) is a Wigwam planning meeting, in which an elder known as Red Moon spoke. Red Moon spoke passionately about returning our Wigwam Festival to a Wigwam Festival, and to stop calling it a powwow. Further, Red Moon continued that Mohegan needed to bring the Wigwam back to our home, to the “place where Mohegans gather”, to Fort Shantok. Red Moon’s speech was met with exuberant applause in Mohegan’s Wigwam planning meeting. A respected Elder and an elected member of the Tribe’s Council of Elders, Red Moon’s words were taken to heart. Mohegan moved the Wigwam Festival home to the trees of Shantok in 2003. Since that time, each year, there has been a trend to decrease the emphasis on dance competitions and money, and to increase the emphasis on the festival
celebrated with entry under the traditional arbor around the center stage of the small sacred fire.

This was a transition that took a couple years – changes need to happen with great caution in the festival environment. Josh Kohn of National Council for the Traditional Arts (NCTA) at a seminar during an August 2010 residency at Goucher College put it well, "Tradition is ever-evolving and ever-changing (Kohn 2010)." Kohn went on to state that changes must happen to entice the younger generations to attend, but must proceed with caution as to not turn off the older generations. After a presentation by author of Folk Festivals, Joe Wilson, at Goucher College in Towson, Maryland in August 2010, the concept of growth and change hit home. These concepts of inclusion and exclusion are discussed on the very first page of “the book” about [Folk] Festivals by Wilson and Udall:

Much of the tension created by exclusion is relieved if the organizers have a clear idea of what they are celebrating, why they are celebrating it, and what presentations are appropriate to the celebration. (Wilson and Udall 1982)

For a while, as Mohegan grew and changed, Mohegan perhaps forgot what it was Mohegan was celebrating. As is “traditional,” a respected elder reminded Mohegan to do things better, and to make things right. Táput ni (thank you), Red Moon. It took some time, as prescribed. Mohegan moved the festival to Shantok, and reclaimed the name, Wigwam Festival. The 2010 Wigwam was held at Fort Shantok after a Cultural Week with just Tribal Members in which Mohegan came together as a community:
Mohegan beaded a bandolier bag together for our new Chief;  
Mohegan started a granite mortar that will take perhaps 100 years to look  
like a mortar;  
Mohegan danced and sang, drummed and rattled together;  
Mohegan ground yokeag and shared it over ice cream;  
Mohegan camped together at the site of Sachem Uncas’ original fort, Fort  
Shantok

In short, we were the Mohegan community: a family and a Tribe. In 2010 it was as though we  
really moved back to the trees: our festival tent encompassed the maple trees and embraced  
the community. The feeling was peaceful, light and fun, in the perfect sun of day one, and even  
in the sweet hay laden air and rain of day two. Since we have moved home to the place where  
Mohegans gather, to Shantok, our sacred fire has burned in the center of our dance arena once  
again. The original purpose is to be thankful for the harvest of the sweet corn, the green corn,  
wiwácumunch, and in being thankful for something, it is “traditional” as Indian people for us to  
dance, sing, drum, have social dances that bring us together with our neighbors, have  
ceremonial pieces that thank the Creator – to celebrate in other words.

There are components of the Festival that have evolved over the years, such as the  
young lady’s dance that celebrates the harvest of the green corn, though historically, there is  
some kind of “green corn dance (Mohegan Church Observes 100th Anniversary Corner Stone  
Laying 1931).” There are components that are “age old” such as the sacred fire burning in  
center stage (“center arena”) that is tended 24-7 for four full days by the Mohegan Fire Keeper  
or by anyone who volunteers to tend the fire for the Fire Keeper and is trusted by the Fire  
Keeper to tend the fire. The fire is treated as a person – it is fed first, it is offered ceremonial
tobacco, and it is never left alone until it is completely asleep as the festival comes to an end
Sunday evening. During the festival, many Indian Nations will come with their best dancers,
their children who are taking their first dance steps, and their families to celebrate and
compete in friendly categorized dance competitions. Social dances will be called by the Master
of Ceremonies. Most social dances are “intertribal” which means that these are open to
audience participation, and are fun and entertaining. Intertribal means that ANY race person
(from any ‘tribe’ in the world) can participate, not only Indians.

And as luck would have it, it rained 'cats n dogs' on Sunday of the Wigwam 2010, but the
rain actually comes with so many good effects for the Wigwam Festival. We have a huge arena
tent anyway, so all of the dancers and their very intricate regalia are protected. The heavy rain
provides the only acceptable exception to entering the arena at the natural tree arbor. In the
rain, the Master of Ceremonies will allow dancers to enter the Grand Entry procession from
anywhere in the arena, and it all works out in the circle of the dance. Grand Entry is a sort of
parade of all of the competition dancers AND those who just want to dance and not compete...
Grand Entry is an amazing site of about one hundred nations of Indian dancers all in their best
dress. Here is where we have the “resonance and wonder” in the Mohegan Wigwam Festival as
preached by Chris Williams of the National Council for the Traditional Arts.

Another exception made for the heavy rain is bare feet are allowed. Moccasins are
usually required, but the Master of Ceremonies allowed bare feet this year to save some
moccasins from certain doom. This is rather amusing because once upon a time our moccasins
would have stood up to the worst of conditions, but to make moccasins like they used to be
made is costly and awkward – bear grease is not widely available and most modern Indians
don’t care for the smell of real bear grease. Moccasins are a very – and in some cases the most
– expensive part of one’s regalia. Hay was scattered all around, and everyone helped dig small
trenches to direct the water away from the sacred fire. The hay added a sweet scent to the rain
smell, the clean earthy mud smell and the smoke from the fire smell. It is such a warm and cozy
feeling in that huge arena tent with all of the dancers under shelter, and the spectators who
braved the rain (still many!), and the employees and the volunteers. On the unusual surface,
the dancer’s feet sound different: oddly muffled by the cushion of hay. The rain fell heavy on
the canvas roof, and the air felt cool, but very humid. The campfire like smell of the smoldering
sacred fire hung low in the damp air. There is very little smoke from the hardwood cedar and
oak splints. The sweet smell of late summer hay mingles with the burning wood smell in a
campfire-barn-like potpourri wafting far to mingle with the guaranteed scents of Indian food:
buffalo chili, Indian tacos and clam chowder.

Much like the scent-scape, the soundscape plays the sounds of various dancers’ regalia
ringing in the dense air. The musical clanking of deer toes, the clear ringing of commercial bells
and the tinny jingle of the jingle dancers’ tin cones all beat in rhythm with the heartbeat of the
drum, the heartbeat of Náhkas Áhki (Mother Earth). People may join the round dance at
anytime. The sound of a dancer’s deer toe regalia is in contrast to the tinny bell sound of the
modern jingles. The sound of the rain on the canvas adds another element: Father Sky’s drum
beat in tune with the festival drum of Náhkas Áhki (Mother Earth). Rain may impact vendor sales, but the show is free and the show goes on, come rain, shine, hail or thunder.

Mohegan came to this point in time through rain, sweat, tribulation and trial, from the time our respected elder Red Moon spoke, beyond our return to Shantok in 2003, with less and less funding devoted to awards, and more time devoted to careful selection and invitation of “performers” and artists. Mohegan transitioned here slowly, and there is always more transition and growth yet to be accomplished. Upon the land settled by Sachem Uncas, upon Fort Shantok near the Cedar Trees that gently sway in the wind holding the spirit of our ancestors, Mohegan remembered:

The Wigwam, or Green Corn Festival is all at once a celebration of thanks, a symbol of Tribal survival and the chance to feel connected to other Tribal members, past and present. (Tribe 2004)
CONNECTING THE DOTS

Shantok

Shantok and the surrounding area including the hill upon which Mohegan Church sits has always been referred to as “Uncas’ father’s hunting grounds,” so it has long history with the Mohegan people even before Uncas’ settlement there. The village centered around Shantok was the heart of Mohegan life encompassing commerce, trade, hunting, farming and celebration. Shantok includes the entire Mohegan life cycle from births in wigwams to the burial ground that Mohegan still utilizes today – and everything in between.

Pilfered extensively in the 1960’s, many grave goods have been repatriated by Mohegan, but the archeological record at Shantok is so extensive that Mohegan’s Archeology Coordinator Elaine Thomas says that Connecticut Archeologists were known to brag, “At Shantok, every shovel full you dig has artifact within it (Meehan 2012).” Many Mohegan markers that intersect Mohegan foodways happen today at Shantok as it was the first fort of Uncas. Mohegan purchased the property back from the State of Connecticut in 1998, and this is where our ancestors gathered, grew and shared food; lived and played and died; fought to survive and were laid to rest. Shantok intersects all facets of Mohegan life past, present, and future.

Mohegan Church
Prior to purchasing Shantok back from the State of Connecticut, rather than pay to gather on our reservation (Shantok was a State Park with an entry fee.), Mohegan would gather at the one “place” we have continually held onto since European contact: Mohegan Church. It is a point of continuity for Mohegan, a tangible symbol of Mohegan resistance. In 1831, the church was little but a meetinghouse. In 1832, the church was organized under the name Indian Congregational Church of Montville. Known today as Mohegan (Congregational) Church, it was a missionary who lived in Norwich, Sarah Huntington, who solicited support for the “friendly, Christianized” Indians on Mohegan Hill. The presence of a Church, and letters from Ms. Huntington to influential leaders of the time, helped Mohegan remain on Mohegan Hill through the Federal Indian removal policies of the 1830’s (Fawcett, The Lasting of the Mohegans 1995).

What this has to do with Mohegan foodways is that the Church has continued to be a political, social, and educational, connecting-point for the Mohegan people. Standing upon this stronghold, Mohegans know that it is the symbol of our resistance as it is the only physical location never relinquished, that never had to be purchased or negotiated back to our possession. Because the Church provided a reason to have a “church fair” or a “fundraiser” or a “festival,” Mohegan had reason to dress in our feathers and leathers, to wear our regalia, to hold onto but a few of our songs, and to celebrate our food and our ways.

While the Church provided the physical location, the Mohegan Sewing Society provided the political presence for the elder ladies to get together to talk. Within the weekly sewing times of the Mohegan Sewing Society within the walls of Mohegan Church, Mohegan found a
haven for Tribal politics, as well as surviving Tribal ceremonies, traditions and foodways. Mohegan Church is the place grandmothers of today’s Mohegan Tribe remember passing the basket or passing the hat to take up a collection to send mail to all the Tribe’s people. This is the safe haven in which Mohegan cooked the succotash and prepared the yohkik to feed the Wigwam Festival attendees. In 1994, this is the haven in which Chief Ralph Sturges relayed the news of Mohegan’s Federal Recognition.

Reviving the Wigwam Festival in 1860 was a breakthrough for the sustenance of Mohegan cultural markers, especially the remnants of the green corn festival. In 1931, Gladys Tantaquidgeon delivered a long speech about the 100-year history of Mohegan Church detailing the history of the modern Wigwam Festival from 1860 to 1931, Mohegan yokeag and the 100th anniversary cornerstone laying at Mohegan Church. In her elaborate history of Mohegan Church, Gladys Tantaquidgeon delivered this speech:

It was also in the year 1860 that the first church festival was held in a ‘wigwam’ built in the church yard. This celebration has an extremely interesting and significant background in connection with the religious life of the people, it being the survival of the ancient green corn festival which was held to propitiate the spirit of Mother Corn. The traditional ceremony and feast deserves a few words of review. Upon the occasion, they also returned thanks to the Creator for his soft light, the thunder and rain, for their aid in the growth and maturity of corn. This food has ever been regarded as sacred by the Indian because it is believed to nourish the soul as well as the body. In the early accounts, we find mention of corn as a staple food with especial reference to yokeag which was said to be indispensable to the travelers because of its highly concentrated food value. In recent times, however, yokeag has been regarded more as a ceremonial food and is made by the more conservative families here and elsewhere. Among the Delawares of Oklahoma corn is revered in much the same way and we find them serving corn foods at their annual Big House ceremony in the form of a sacrament.
Yokeag was one of the features of the annual festival, as were succotash and quahog chowder. The reason for this being that in the beginning of this form of worship the people were instructed to partake of only clean foods, that is, indigenous of animals and plants which were free from the contamination supposed to result from domestication.

The Modern Festival [according to 1931 standards]
The modern type of festival which was sponsored by this church organization and with which most of us are familiar, was conceived by the late Mrs. Emma Fielding Baker, Mrs. Mercy Nonesuch Mathews, and Mrs. Lydia Eliphalet Pegee Fielding at a quilting. It had been customary to hold yearly feasts, but those farsighted women decided to form a society of women who would meet weekly during the year to make articles which could be offered for sale, along with other Indian handicraft and food, to secure funds to be used for the maintenance of this church. This was an important step on the part of those women toward the preservation of the surviving elements of this ceremony which was of paramount importance in the culture of the aborigines of this area.

... In this annual celebration were vestiges of the ancient rite which was peculiar to the aborigines in this section of the east who practiced agriculture. It may be said that these were so fused with the alien innovations as to be almost entirely indistinguishable to the casual observer who would have regarded the performance as that of the usual church bazaar. But if he were to consider for a moment the structure of the ‘wigwam’ which conforms to that of former times, the use of ceremonial equipment and serving of sacred food, not to mention innumerable details of minor character, he will be impressed by its significance.

Wigwam Mecca of Hundreds
During its sixty-six years, the wigwam grew to great renown and every year, early in September or late in August, Mohegan became the mecca of hundreds of people who joined with us in that glorious event. Five years ago [1926] we were forced to discontinue the wigwam due to decrease in number of our members and the frailty of the remaining. Unfortunately, as insufficient of the younger generation were so schooled as to perform in the same capacity as their predecessors.

... It is now nearly 300 years since the first English settlements appeared in this region. The land was in a wild state, but never a desert. In some ways it must have been more beautiful than now. Think of that “forest primeval” with which its hills and valleys were covered. The paths of the woods were trodden only by the moccasin-ed feet of men and women and children who knew each tree and understood the call of every bird and beast.
The children of the forest were so near to nature that they were also near to God. They were conscious of the presence of the ‘Great Spirit.’ As they came into friendly relation to the new settlers they learned the religion of those who had come across the sea. It was more an addition to their natural religion than a substitute for it. And they could give us of a later day some religious and poetic interpretations of nature which would bring us into closer and more happy relation to the world in which we are all living together. Both the church and the wigwam have much to contribute to the full round truth in which our lives can become complete. (Mohegan Church Observes 100th Anniversary Corner Stone Laying 1931)

During the supper served in the wigwam patterned after early days, C. Lloyd Gray ("Lolly") of Noank sang the Mohegan death song and gave the Mohegan war dance, appearing in Indian regalia. Mr. Gray was taught these by his grandmother, Mrs. Mary Fielding Storey, when he was twelve years of age (Mohegan Church Observes 100th Anniversary Corner Stone Laying 1931)

Recall the story of Chahnameed the glutton, the cheater, and eventually, the dead. Chahnameed’s wife, the Mohegan woman, takes with her to their island home the most important artifacts of Mohegan material culture: her mortar and pestle. The very magical tools of the Mohegan woman save her life, and ultimately reunite her with her people. The power and reverence bestowed to Mohegan mortar and pestle and the spiritual, physical process of making yokeag has forever been misunderstood as simply a food-process: a nutritional, methodology devoid of spiritual meaning. The connectedness of the Indian worldview is imparted when Mohegans make yohkik, the entire process is governed by “cultural policy,” written and unwritten. The stories that are hundreds of years old connect present day
Mohegan to those hundreds of generations of ancestors and to the descendants yet to come. The parched corn and the tools of the trade combined with the work of the people transform that simple flint corn into the spiritual and physical food of Mohegan travelers as they gather annually for the most important celebrations of the Mohegan calendar year, Homecoming into the Green Corn Festival, the Wigwam Festival.

This ancient corn ceremony is elaborated upon extensively at this centennial celebration of Mohegan Church, a site of primary importance to Mohegan. This site is the only Mohegan land that has been in Mohegan possession since the days of Uncas, and this ceremony, one of the few ancient-to-present-connecting strands of Mohegan culture and tradition. Mohegan Church, pounding yohkik and the Wigwam Festival offer Mohegan a kind of continuity of place and of tradition.
Conclusions

The foodways of the Mohegan community are continually evolving around current events. The foodways are choreographed by Mohegan cultural policy breathed into the tales of our elder storytellers, and the histories we oblige to “always remember and never forget,” (Harold Tantaquidgeon). The policies of our democratic representative government are steeped in the sweet strawberry leaf tea and nutty roasted yokeag of our medicine people. Mohegan foodways intermingle with all facets of Mohegan culture and are served up to the Mohegan people for the health and welfare of all Mohegan.

The foodways encompass the simple mounds of Náhkas Áhki patted firm by children’s hands and the complex rules detailed in oral histories shared by grandparents. With power shifts and up and down turbulence, corn silk threads of consistency weave centuries of tradition into the tapestry of Mohegan life. The circle revolves from dented corn-kernel-seed to damp-dark-soil enveloping the best-of-crop seed ready to spring anew as the Dogwood leaves unfurl on Mohegan Hill. Cyclically speaking, the foodways at Mohegan are choreographed in the community through interrelations of past practice; present conditions; Mohegan leaders’ commitment to take care of future generations; Mohegan stories and oral histories; the rolling, lush hills that constitute
Mohegan’s homeland on the mouth of a great river; Mohegan’s written and unwritten cultural policy; and simply, by the Mohegan people.

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