

within parks and with other land managing agencies and organizations to identify and better manage significant archeological resources for the benefit of professional and public interests. Funding for these efforts has been limited to date, but as the Historic Contact theme study shows, the basis for NHL successes depends upon the willingness and cooperation of professionals and volunteers. We wish to express our appreciation

and continued support for all of those who have contributed in the past or who hope to contribute to future NHL nominations.

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*See page 14 for a partial listing of archeological National Historic Landmarks.*

Melissa Jayne Fawcett

## Shantok: A Tale of Two Sites



*Shantok Burial and Festival Grounds: Sacred Site, Mohegan Nation*

*Fort Shantok: National Historic Landmark, United States of America*

*Mohegans gather at Shantok in the 1920s. Left to right: Myrtice Fielding, Burrill Fielding (Chief Matahga), Loretta Fielding, Lemuel Fielding (Chief Occum), Medicine Woman Dr. Gladys Tantaquidgeon, Elmer Fielding. Thames River in background.*

**S**hantok tells a tale of two sites, or of one place viewed in two very different ways. To the National Park Service, Fort Shantok in the eastern Connecticut town of Montville, is a National Historic Landmark dedicated in 1993. It represents an archeological site of national significance in the early history of the United States. To the people of the Mohegan Indian Tribe, Shantok is a place of many stories. Some are ancient tales of great deeds by Sachem Uncas over three centuries old. Others are more recent, like my sister's wedding at Shantok last October, at which her nephew, David Uncas, sang a rap version of "Here Comes the Bride."

The spirit of Mohegan lies at Shantok. It is a place that we Mohegans come from, the place from which we draw strength, and the place where we ultimately journey to the Spirit Land. The Ancient Mohegan Burial Ground where many of our ancestors rest is the focal point of Shantok to Mohegan people. Marked burials range in age from five months to 350 years. Funerals for tribal members today still include the same offerings of arrowheads, tobacco, and prayers as in ancient

times. But Shantok is not only a place of burials. It is a living village whose story-trails follow...

*Seventeenth Century*

Our elders affirm that an independent-minded Pequot Sagamore named Uncas arrived with his supporters from across the Massapequotuck River (now known as the Thames River) to form the Mohegan Tribe at Shantok in 1635. Tradition holds that those 17th-century Mohegans first landed in their dugout canoes at the site of Shantok Rock. Located in Shantok Brook, this rock was destroyed by railroad construction in the 1840s. It is our version of Plymouth Rock. At Shantok, the first Mohegans created a fortified village, held festivals, and buried their dead. Since that time, 13 generations of Mohegans have also lived, played, celebrated, and been buried there.

By the 1640s, the Massapequotuck River had become a busy place as English newcomers invaded the region. Uncas began forming alliances between his people and these Wannuxsug (pale strangers). Other tribes, like the nearby Narragansetts, resisted the invaders. Clashes over Native policies toward the English eventually led the Narragansetts to besiege Fort Shantok in 1645. The Mohegans were saved by the success of their Moigu (shaman) in a duel with his Narragansett counterpart. Our oral tradition tells us that our Moigu swallowed a silver bullet two times. Passing it through his navel both times, he then loaded the charmed ball into his musket. Taking aim, he shot

and killed the Narragansett shaman. Shortly thereafter, the Narragansetts raised the siege and returned to their homes. Those killed during the siege were buried at Shantok facing southwest, the place where corn came from.

### *Eighteenth Century*

Things began to change during the 1700s. Although many Mohegans continued to bury their dead at Shantok in the traditional way, Christianized Mohegans were buried in an east-west direction at the nearby Cedar Swamp Burial Ground (known today as the Ashbow Burial Ground). These latter individuals were converted through the efforts of Mohegan minister Samson Occum and his sister Lucy Occum Tantaquidgeon. A notable preacher in his day, he is perhaps best known as the founder of Dartmouth College. An overpass named after Occum today leads to Shantok.

### *Nineteenth Century*

Mohegan people continued to bury their dead at Shantok throughout the 1800s. Tobacco was offered to the spirit of the deceased and spiritual leaders like Lester Skeesucks still sang the old death chant in Mohegan:

*Yu ni ne-un-ai; ji-bai oke ni ki-pi-ai; ni mus  
se-chu*  
Here I am; Spirit Land I am coming; Must I  
pass away

Fielding Falls, located near the Burial Ground at Shantok, was a favorite tribal gathering spot during the 19th century. The falls were named for the Fielding family, the largest clan in the Mohegan Tribe. One member of this clan, Fidelia Fielding (1827-1908), was a traditionalist, teacher, and the last fluent speaker of our language. Two other clan members, Chief Occum (Lemuel Fielding) and Chief Matahga (Burrill Fielding), served as Mohegan chiefs in the early 20th century.

Between 1861 and 1872 Mohegan reservation lands were largely disbanded, leaving Shantok vulnerable to encroachment. Gradually, the State of Connecticut assumed control of many surrounding tribal properties at that time.

### *Twentieth Century*

Shantok Burial Ground was taken from the tribe by the State of Connecticut by right of eminent domain through an act of condemnation in 1926. At that time, Shantok's roads were rerouted and the split rail fence around the burial ground was replaced with fort-like stockade fencing. A

ball field was placed on top of the Dolbeare family's graves... their location did not fit the state's park plans.

In spite of these affronts, the tribe remained actively involved at Shantok. In 1927, the pond at Shantok was renamed after Chief Harold Tantaquidgeon, who had saved a young woman from drowning there. During the 1930s, another chief, Little Hatchet (Courtland Fowler), assisted Chief Matahga in constructing the 100 "Giant Steps" near the pond under the auspices of the WPA. In 1936, a monument to Fidelia Fielding was placed at the Shantok Burial Ground. It was unfortunately vandalized on the night of its dedication, when the gold screws attaching the plaque were stolen.

As young people living on Mohegan Hill, members of our current tribal leadership ran down the path leading to Shantok to play in the woods during the 1930s and 1940s. They crossed the barway by the current park entrance to run to the old Tantaquidgeon, Fowler, and Fielding and Strickland homesteads on top of Mohegan Hill. The path was closed after a defense plant was built nearby during the 1950s. Local population soon exploded as the Shantok area began to develop.

In 1967, increased traffic congestion necessitated construction of the Mohegan Pequot Bridge immediately north of Shantok. Although bridge construction cut into Shantok's riverbanks, it did not directly damage the Burial Ground or village site. Mohegan leaders and tribespeople attended the bridge opening in traditional regalia. Chief Harold Tantaquidgeon participated in the ribbon-cutting ceremony with Governor Dempsey. Recently uncovered archeological field notes from the Shantok Cove site surveyed during bridge construction mention discovery of a child's skeleton.



*Dry-laid fieldstone foundation, Fort Shantok. Photo by Bert Salwen, 1962.*

Mohegans were not informed of that burial desecration at Shantok.

Burial desecration has always been of concern to the Mohegans. In 1973, for example, Chief Little Hatchet posted the following notice in the Shantok Burial Ground:

*The stone of Anna E. Nonesuch was stolen from this grave after being here for 100 years. It was stolen a short time ago. May the people who did this be cursed with a guilty conscience for the rest of their lives. With the help of God this stone may turn up sometime, somehow, somewhere... Please bring it back.*

*Little Hatchet, a relative*

Little Hatchet was right to be hopeful for the stone's return. Sometimes, with patience, gravestones do come back. In 1991, the Mohegans repatriated the 18th-century Samuel Uncas gravestone from the nearby Slater Museum. It was formally re-erected at the annual August Mohegan Festival at Shantok that year.

During the 1970s, Shantok became part of a controversial Tribal Federal Land Claim, which stated that Shantok lands had been illegally taken from the tribe in violation of the 1790 Trade and Intercourse Act. Because of this pending land suit, as Tribal Vice-Chair, I opposed the State of Connecticut's nomination of the Shantok archeological site to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985. Mohegans insisted that only the tribe ought to submit Shantok's nomination, since Mohegans were the legitimate landowners. The state proceeded with the nomination, and Fort Shantok was listed in the National Register on March 20, 1986.

Shortly thereafter, the Mohegan Tribe was notified that Shantok was being considered for study as a potential National Historic Landmark. Although the tribe maintained the same position it had taken with the state, it did not actively oppose the nomination. Mohegan leaders and tribespeople gathered together with state and federal officials on October 13, 1993 to dedicate Fort Shantok as a National Historic Landmark.

The tribe's land claim was finally settled when the federal government formally recognized the Mohegan Tribe on March 7, 1994. Tribespeople journeyed one mile north from the tribal office to Shantok immediately upon receiving notice of Federal Recognition. We navigated the snow banks and cried with joy, thanking the ancestors who had brought us to that day. Federal acknowledgement legally justified the tribal claim for Shantok. Yet, in the Mohegan

Settlement Act passed by the United States Congress later that year, the tribe received neither money nor the Shantok lands. Instead, the tribal was given permission to rebuy Shantok for 2.7 million dollars. At this writing, the Tribe anticipates imminent re-entrustment of the Shantok lands.

This summer an archeological field school is being conducted at Shantok. The archeologists are using ground penetrating radar and other unobtrusive techniques to survey the site. Shantok has been intruded on enough. Dr. Jeffrey Bendremer of Eastern Connecticut State University is directing this field school under the auspices of the Mohegan Tribal Cultural Resources Department. Students participating in the Mohegan Field School will be taught that they are studying something more than a mere archeological site. They will learn, as succeeding generations of Mohegan people have always known, that Shantok is a place of many stories. They will learn that Shantok is not just a storehouse of fascinating artifacts to be dug up and taken away. Shantok will not be presented to them as a mere agglomeration of postmolds, palisades, foundations, and other features. Working together with Mohegan elders, leaders, and tribespeople, they will come to understand that Shantok is the heartland of a nation.

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On August 30, 1995, Connecticut Governor John Rowland signed into law a bill returning Fort Shantok State Park to the Mohegan Nation. This is the first parcel of land ever returned to the tribe. Tribal Elders and Tribal Council members traveled to Hartford to witness the historic signing. Prior to that transferal, the entire Mohegan reservation equaled 0.4 acres. This acquisition of the Shantok lands will increase the tribe's land base to 138.4 acres. The tribe wishes to thank the editors of *CRM* for featuring the history of Shantok at this important time.

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