



Accomplice

Acknowledgment is knowing our place in the world & the cost paid for us to have that place

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February/March 2021

Acknowledgement is about knowing that we don't just stand where we are alone, but that we stand on the shoulders and backs of all who came before us. Acknowledgement is understanding that those who came before us paid a price for us to be here.

Acknowledgement is a recognition that we have not just pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps or single-handedly conquered a frontier, even though we may have been conditioned to believe those things were true, but rather that people and structures and labor came before us to make the lives we lead today possible. We are not here in this spot, enjoying the lives we lead by happenstance or our own doing, but we rest here in relative luxury through the sacrifices of those people, their traditions, and those structures that all came before us – and acknowledgement of that is the very least thing we can do to show gratitude and to help ground us in the spaces we inhabit.

My email signature line reads:

I acknowledge my presence on the traditional homelands of Native peoples including the Haudenosaunega, Miami, Peoria, and particularly the Pokégnek Bodéwadmik / Pokagon Potawatomi, who have been using this land for education for thousands of years, and continue to do so.

I adapted this from something similar that a colleague I admire, Perin Gurel, Ph.D., had in her email signature line. I couldn't believe I had missed the opportunity to simply acknowledge those who came before me here for the first several years I taught at the University of Notre Dame. In the years since I followed Dr. Gurel's good example, I have noticed land acknowledgements cropping up in a few colleagues' signature lines from around campus. I've been incredibly pleased to see this and to see many people expand on the idea as well. I've also had departments and institutions within the university reach out to me several times throughout the past year to see how accurate my acknowledgment is as they begin to work to craft their own. This is a start, but as I stated earlier, this is really the very least we as a campus community can do.

The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi have a beautiful flag. It has a distinct yellow background and the words "Pokagon Potawatomi" surround this gorgeous emblem designed



Insignia for the Pokégnek Bodéwadmik designed by David "Half Pint" Martin.

by “Half Pint” a tribal member also known as David Martin, who makes a living in the South Bend area as an artist.

The Pokagon fly this at their community and on the properties that their community owns. A simple recognition of the long history Notre Dame has with the Pokagon might involve displaying a Pokagon flag alongside the U.S. and/or Notre Dame flag at University events. This could serve an educational purpose by getting those unacquainted with the connection and legacy between the Pokagon and Notre Dame to ask questions. It could also serve as an official acknowledgment that we are here in part due to all the work and caretaking of those who came before us in this place. With this simple gesture of raising a flag in a place like Notre Dame Stadium, Notre Dame could go from educating about 8,000 undergraduates a day to educating more than four million people at a time on seven or eight Saturday afternoons a year as certainly NBC would capture this flag flying while the football team took to the field and audience members at home would have the opportunity to start asking themselves questions.¹

Additionally, on October 12, 2020 I was quoted in the university community newspaper, *The Observer*, as saying that at the start of every Notre Dame home football game the announcer should say, “Welcome to Notre Dame Stadium. You are in the traditional homeland of the Pokagon Potawatomi people and the home of the Fighting Irish!”² What a way to teach, what a way to hype up the crowd, what a way to acknowledge that while the University of Notre Dame has so many traditions, those traditions are built with and on the labors of those who came before Father Sorin ever set foot on this land. This would open up fields of inquiry and students would learn that Sorin was not the first Catholic on this land, that in fact LaSalle brought priests with him through the region more than 150 years before Sorin walked north from Vincennes to the vicinity of the fledgling city of South Bend in Northern Indiana. In 1679, LaSalle traveled along the St. Joseph River, which carried a Potawatomi name at that time (certainly rivers throughout America should return to their original names when possible or at least have those names acknowledged on signage), to a spot just across the river from modern day Saint Mary’s College. The history of Catholicism in the region thus more likely begins with that story as the inhabitants of this region greeted LaSalle and his crew on their landing near the south bend of the river, the river he renamed the St. Joseph, ignoring the Pokagon’s name of *Senathëwen Zibé* or even the Miami name *saakiweesiipi* for this waterway.³ Students and television viewers might

¹ [“Notre Dame Football on NBC Viewership Best in Eight Years.”](#)

² [“There’s Still a Lot of Work to Be Done.”](#)

³ *Senathëwen Zibé* comes via Marcus Winchster (*Pokégnek Bodéwadmik*) who serves as Director of Language and Culture for the Pokagon Band of the Potawatomi in a personal correspondence to the author on March 26, 2021. *saakiweesiipi* comes from Kara Strauss ’11 (*Myaamia*) in coordination with elders who serves at the Myaamia Center at Miami University of Ohio in a personal text correspondence to the author on March 8, 2021. Note in the Miami language the s would not be capitalized here.

learn that story with this kind of acknowledgement at the football games, but hopefully they would dig more deeply and learn that those original inhabitants are Potawatomi people.

Viewers might even think to visit the Pokagon people's governmental website and some of the histories they have posted, or perhaps they would think to sometime schedule a trip to one of the Pokagon's cultural (and educational) events for community members and non-community members alike. Ideally, viewers would also learn that the Pokagon support their people through health care, educational programming and more with revenues generated by the businesses and industries the Pokagon now own and operate. Perhaps that television audience would even think to frequent those businesses as a way to honor the relationship between the Pokagon and Notre Dame. Likely, many in that television audience would be pleased for the tip that some of the best food in the whole region can be had at Pokagon establishments.

Certainly, acknowledgement would also include the simple act of making attendance at the University of Notre Dame no cost for all Potawatomi peoples. This could serve as an acknowledgement that the land for the University had a different kind of 'ownership' prior to the arrival of the perpetrators of Western Civilization and their evolving ideas of private property. Currently, people like to point to ownership of property by showing that there is a deed to the property and that the name on the deed shows us who owns the land. But deeds have a specific start date and time, and often ignore in most cases the fact that there were nations and civilizations prior to the creation of deeds and particular land surveys.⁴ I often muse on the fact that one of the early history lessons we teach children is that of George Washington's time as a land surveyor. It is a tidy lesson in colonial thinking because if we regard Washington as "the father of our nation," then it follows make that he too would be charged with setting the boundaries on the land; his occupation literally conveys legitimacy on those first surveys. However, if we want to look to even the most rudimentary logic in Western Civilization, John Locke in his 1690 *Second Treatise on Government* makes the argument that putting labor into a thing, in this case the land, makes that thing your property.⁵ This certainly was not how most Native American communities would have viewed property, but if we want to argue deeds and land rights, then we probably should apply Lockean principles to this story and in so doing we would have to note all the improvements and labor and organization of land and water and other resources that so many Native nations did. In fact, histories of Native communities and even Lewis and Clark's own journals are replete with examples where westerners note these kinds of distinctions of property in communities.⁶ There was a time where it was at least partially understood that the land had some sort of prior occupation and ownership, but having that understanding and memories of those understandings were not always convenient, so they were conveniently forgotten.

The idea of waiving tuition for the Native people on whose ancestral lands an institution sits is not novel. It happens other places. Most notably the Miami people have a

⁴ For a larger discussion see Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*.

⁵ Locke and Macpherson, *Second Treatise of Government*.

⁶ Ronda, *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*.

strong presence at the Myaami Center on the campus of Miami of Ohio where citizens of the Miami can also attend at no cost.⁷

At a place like the University of Notre Dame where tradition is held so highly valued, it seems only natural that a tradition of Pokagon story telling would be launched for students and that tribal elders would come annually and tell the stories of their community to Notre Dame students. Perhaps this could even be done around a fire since the Pokagon are notably the 'Keepers of the Fire' in the larger Potawatomi tradition. Students and other community members could even come to learn what that means and have the opportunity to come to a non-Western way of knowing about the world. What a wonderful tradition this could become, and if it were guided by the Pokagon—by elders who were afforded faculty status in every way and were the faculty or elders in residence on our campus—we could then ensure things were done the right way and at the right time of year and that some things don't happen cleanly on a university calendar, but rather some things happen when they are supposed to happen at the time that is right in the community for things to happen. This is a good lesson for everyone, but especially for societies that are increasingly tuned into their clocks and calendars and less tuned into the broader world around them and what it is telling them.

Lastly, I'll suggest that we need a building named for either the Pokagon people (and the name should be pronounced in their language and properly) or for Simon Pokagon. Typically, on college campuses the older buildings are named for thinkers and faculty (including priests in our case) and the newer buildings are named for benefactors. In naming a building for the Pokagon, in some way we would be meeting both criteria as they were the original thinkers, philosophers, scientists, historians, theologians, business practitioners, lawyers, psychologists, and so much more on this land – moreover, in every sense of the word they too are our original benefactors.

There are so many more ideas and ways to think about using simple acknowledgements as an extension of our educational power here at the university. Most of these things have very few associated costs in the grand scheme of things. Which leads me to ask: are we not doing these things because we do not know that it is the right thing to do, or is it because in making acknowledgements we sometimes also, tacitly, acknowledge our own complicity in historical injustices? I sincerely hope it is the former; if it is the latter, then I hope that we can be strong enough and wise enough to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers going forward, but that we want to start thinking about the future through the simple acts of acknowledgement that we can do about the things that are in all of our pasts.

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⁷ ["Myaamia Center - Miami University."](#)