

## More than a Pandemic:

*How Covid-19 has reinforced the histories of eugenics and controversies of recognition of Native Americans in Vermont*

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## Abstract

*It is widely known that Covid-19 puts black people, indigenous people, and people of color at a higher risk than white people. To Native Americans, however, Covid-19 also places a significant cultural burden. Many of their elders have passed from the disease, and with them goes their knowledge of traditional culture, language, and practices. In addition, the pandemic compounds what Jack Healy of the New York Times refers to as “a deadly toll of a tattered health system and generations of harm and broken promises by the US government.” Those patterns have caused many Native Americans to be rightly skeptical of non-traditional medicine, especially when it is delivered or mandated by the government. Vermont, in particular, had a eugenics survey carried out by UVM from 1925 to 1936, which focused on institutionalization and sterilization in order to create a “pure” state. This report documents the sentiments of four indigenous Vermonters when it comes to the ways how histories of past health-related violences affect whether or not their communities receive the Covid-19 vaccine. The interviews reveal corroboration that many indigenous people are indeed very skeptical about the vaccine especially because of the eugenics movement, and also introduces parallels and connections to the controversial process of Abenaki recognition in Vermont.*

## Introduction

Although Native Americans have been living in Vermont for 12,000 years, it is only a decade ago that four tribes - the Elnu Abenaki Tribe, Nulhegan Abenaki Tribe, Koasek Traditional Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation, and Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi - have been recognized by the state. They remain, however, unrecognized by the federal government, cutting out their eligibility for various relief programs through the CARES Act (Gokee 2020). The status of Native Americans and their history with both the Vermont and federal government is especially crucial now, as the Covid-19 pandemic puts Native Americans at a three times higher risk than white people (Reed & Lee 2020). According to Sara Chesbrough, the equity technical adviser for the Vermont Department of Health, “we know that marginalized racial identities generally have higher rates of chronic disease, comorbidities, and poorer health outcomes because of unequal access to health care, health systems, food, housing, and generational wealth” (Gokee 2020).

In addition to posing a severe health concern to Native Americans, the pandemic also poses a cultural concern, as important cultural events have been interrupted, and elders are dying at an alarming rate, taking their cultural knowledge with them. It seems that the increasingly available vaccines seem like a beacon of hope for Native Americans, but even they pose their own concerns.

The pandemic has done nothing but deepen “the deadly toll of a tattered health system and generations of harm and broken promises by the US government” (Healy 2021). Because of these troubling histories, many Native Americans are rightly skeptical of non-traditional medicine, especially when delivered or mandated by the government. Therefore, the recognition of the scientific and health benefits from the vaccine conflict with the historical memories of hurt and distress, and may influence the decisions of many indigenous people.

Elders are most at risk by the pandemic, would represent a significant cultural loss, and are simultaneously the ones who have experienced the most discrimination and deceit on behalf of the US government in their lifetimes. Above all, they are the first in line for the vaccine.

My research questions, therefore, are as follows:

- *How have the Abenaki people, namely elders, been affected by Covid?*
- *How has the history of the Abenaki people in Vermont influenced their perceptions of the coming vaccines?*
- *How do issues around tribal affiliation or recognition and self-identification connect with experiences related to Covid-19?*
- *What are indigenous people's hopes and visions for the future?*

“Vermont is often celebrated as a contemporary refuge for independent and progressive thinkers. But not enough people are aware that less than 100 years ago, the state was an isolationist bastion in which Native Americans had to hide their identities to avoid sterilization” (Donovan 2020). Even today, indigenous people in Vermont are still overlooked when talking about minorities. They want more of a voice, but it's challenging when there are so few people to represent them. Their overlooked and sparse

status in Vermont makes the recognition and protection of elders even more important, as elders hold a huge amount of knowledge when you have so few people (Donovan 2020).

Throughout all Native American tribes in the US, elders are the glue that hold communities together, especially since most traditions are passed orally from generation to generation. After all of the ways Native culture has been erased through forced assimilation, elders are integral to revising the language, knowledge, dialect, medicine, and traditional practices of many Native American tribes ("Native American Tribes" 2020). With the pandemic, however, elders are dying.

Vermont Abenaki people are similarly worried about their elders, who are often too scared to leave their homes because of the virus, and many live alone (Gokee 2020). In addition to isolation and not getting the help they need, they also have higher risk for preexisting conditions like diabetes and heart disease. Diabetes affects 20% of Native Americans and heart disease affects 19%, while they only affect 9% and 8% of white Vermonters respectively (Gokee 2020). This risk only increases with age.

Although Native communities and their elders have been the hardest hit by the pandemic, “reservations may also be among the places most resistant to the clearest way out” (Reed & Lee 2020): the vaccine. It is not all skepticism, and some leaders have completely embraced vaccination. The Hopi people are confident that traditional Hopi medicine and Western medicine can coexist, and the Navajo president Nez planned to get vaccinated immediately to set an example for the people on his reservation (Reed & Lee 2020). The majority, however, remain skeptical. They remember the bad historical relation between health and the government, citing mass-deaths from the introduction of smallpox, the 1970s wave of sterilizations that affected 42% of women that were childbearing age, examples of using Natives for trials without their consent, like when Arizona State University in the 1990s took blood from the Havasupai Tribe and shared samples with other researchers without consent, and the general failure of the government to protect Natives from Covid, 2.2 million people into the hands of the financially-struggling Indian Health Service (Reed & Lee 2020).

As a result, not many Native people are willing to get vaccinated. During a survey by the Indian Health Service on the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota, 50% of the 8,197 field workers surveyed

said they would definitely or probably not take a vaccine, while only 35% said they definitely or probably would (Reed & Lee 2020). Once again, elders become very important because it was their generation that was subjected to medical testing, shipped to boarding schools, or punished for speaking their own language, but are now expected to step up to the front of the line to get vaccinated, or take their chances with Covid (Healy 2021).

This trend of government mistrust, especially when it comes to health services, is reflected in Vermont and may affect how indigenous people view the vaccine. As Tabitha Moore, the Rutland NAACP President reminds us, “Vermont is not white by mistake” (Donovan 2020). The most glaring example is the infamous eugenics survey carried out by the University of Vermont from 1925 to 1936. The survey focused on institutionalizing or sterilizing the poor, mentally or physically disabled, and Native American people of Vermont in order to create a more hereditarily pure state. As a result, many Natives are still hesitant to self-identify, and are fearful of discrimination. However, there are still instances of Abenaki leaders expressing support for the vaccine. Don Stevens, chief of the Nulhegan Band, was one of the first volunteers at a Covid-19 trial, even though his grandmother had to change her name so she would be called to “volunteer” to be sterilized (“Why the COVID-19” 2020). Therefore, the perception of the vaccine in the eyes of the Abenaki may not be all negative.

There are a handful of news articles about the Abenaki and their experiences with Covid-19, but there are very few that go into depth about Abenaki elders, and/or the Covid vaccine. Much of the data, in fact, relies on self-reporting because many Natives are hesitant to identify themselves as such. In addition, it is important to note that while I originally intended to focus on Abenaki people, I learned that they are only one component of Vermont’s indigenous population. There has been very little acknowledgement of other indigenous people living in Vermont or Abenaki people who are not tribally affiliated, and I hope to bring to light some of the controversies surrounding the process of recognition and how that is connected to experiences with Covid-19. As a result, this research can pave the way to a better understanding of both the complexities of recognition and open discussions about the Covid-19 vaccine in order to solve this

crisis in a way that simultaneously mends relationships with indigenous Vermonters in ways that are based on mutual respect and collaboration.

This research will be exploratory due to the low prevalence of similar studies, and will be limited to Vermont. It is recognized that the Abenaki are not confined to Vermont because of both mass-migration from European settlers and because tribes have never used borders, but for the purpose of this research, the study will only focus on the Abenaki and other indigenous people who currently reside within Vermont's borders.

## Methodology

The first part of my research was conducting a literature review (discussed in the "Introduction").

Some of the research themes from my literature review are:

- Covid-19 and Abenaki communities
- Eugenics survey of the 1920s
- Covid-19 and Native Americans
- Vaccination concerns for Native American tribes
- Comorbidities of Native Americans
- Importance of elders in Native American culture
- Elders and Covid-19
- Recognition of the four Abenaki tribes in Vermont

I also watched a Vermont legislative testimony in which Judy Dow and Carol McGranaham spoke about JRH2, which is the bill for a eugenics apology letter.

The next phase of my research was interviews. I was able to interview four indigenous Vermonters:

- Jim Taylor, a tribal councilman and elder of the Elnu Abenaki Tribe, one of the four recognized tribes in Vermont
- An Abenaki person who works with non-Abenaki indigenous Vermonters

- Andrea Brett, an Abenaki person who is not tribally-affiliated and works in a health center at UVM
- Nathan Pero, Chief of a band of the Koasek Abenaki Nation that failed to gain state recognition

After conducting recorded video interviews over zoom, I created transcripts of each interview. I then turned each transcript into an outline divided by main themes and included paraphrases, quotes, and my own notes. During the interviews, Nathan Pero allowed me to use his name on any interview references, while the rest wanted me to keep all information anonymous unless they gave express permission to include their name. Therefore, after creating the outlines, I sent each one to the respective interviewee, to ask their permission for using their name, and had them highlight anything they wanted taken out. Jim Taylor gave me permission to use his name on all quotes and notes, and Andrea Brett also gave me permission to use her name after requesting certain quotes to be left out. The last person has not yet given me permission to use their name, so that interview will remain anonymous.

## Results

In this section, I will provide a table of important notes from each interview that is organized by theme.

### Interview 1

Name, Tribe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Jim Taylor</li> <li>● Elnu Abenaki Tribe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Smaller tribe</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
How vaccination rollout has been	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Elders vaccinated by choice</li> <li>● Some Abenaki hesitant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Eugenics study in the 20s is a big reason for that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Still resonates with many people</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>● Some have chosen not to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>"It's their choice."</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>● Overall, though, rollout has been pretty good, a lot of people have been vaccinated</li> </ul>
Chief Don Stevens of Nulhegan and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Nulhegan is tribe of more than 2,500 people</li> </ul>



vaccination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Chief Don's family was directly affected by eugenics survey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ But he has been proponent among his people to be vaccinated</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Worried about comorbidities like diabetes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>"He's urged his people to look past some of the history, and do what they feel is right"</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>● Don has been a big part of vaccine rollout in Abenaki communities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>"He's actively trying to make sure everyone is taken care of"</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Both within his tribe and in other Abenaki tribes</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Vaccination priorities and the BIPOC rule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Personally would not take advantage of that rule and go to front of line, because wants to make sure all those who need it, and elders (in his tribe and in general), get it before he does <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>"I'd rather see people that truly need it, get it"</i></li> <li>○ In their society it is traditionally elders, women, and children first</li> </ul> </li> <li>● What it means to be "first in line" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Many look at it as back rent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Their land was taken from them, and this is some way of helping them</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ But lots of non-indigenous are ready to take it negatively <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Running joke <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>"When people find out I'm indigenous they say, 'oh well you get free education.' And I say 'Well no, we don't, it's not that simple.'"</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Aren't "taking from the state," but rather are "working with the state" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Eg. Got free hunting and fishing licenses, but still pay for tags, or permits for certain animals/trapping</li> <li>■ State-to-state relationship, working with the state government <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>"We try to make it palatable for the state so they wouldn't be losing a big chunk of revenue"</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>
The process of recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Submitted genealogies and historical records to the state <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Then scholars and others went through those and either granted recognition or didn't</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Very lengthy process</li> </ul>
Self-identification vs. recognition: issues with misinformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Recognition as a double-edged sword</li> <li>● Internet trolls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Claim they gamed the system to get recognition - factually incorrect</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- *“Have printed genealogies but left out indigenous people in those genealogies just to prove a point”*
- One particular person responsible for a lot of misinformation
  - Was banished from Missisquoi years ago for pedophilia
    - His way of getting back at that is to try to prove that there are no Abenaki left
- *“I can self-identify, and I would never criticize or question anyone who self-identifies as indigenous, but if you’re going to you have to have something to back that up.”*
  - Example: His Cherokee roots
    - Removal Cherokee on his father’s side
      - Hid in the hills during Trail of Tears and became farmers
    - Great-great-grandfather was full blood Cherokee
      - Chose not to go on Dawes Rolls because according to him, *“‘nothing good ever came from being an Indian’”*
    - Therefore, Jim can self-identify as Cherokee because of documentation from his relative’s birth certificate, but can’t be a tribal member of the Eastern band because his relative did not go on the Dawes Rolls
  - Another example: possible imposters in the community
    - Someone from Western Mass who claims to be indigenous
    - Has done very negative things against women and nobody knows who he is
    - *“That’s the problem we sometimes run into. You have someone who claims to be indigenous, they start dropping names, and then they do something pretty terrible and all of a sudden we’re left picking up the pieces with people claiming he’s part of your community even though we’ve never even heard of this person.”*
- Native Americans are the only minority group that need identification cards to prove their identity
  - *“If I meet somebody and they say they’re Mexican, I’m not going to ask them, ‘hey, do you have a card to prove that you are’, whereas we’re the only minority in the country that has to have an ID card so we can sell our crafts as indigenous people.”*

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Even when they were recognized by the state, they found out they could not sell baskets and other crafts unless they were recognized by the Federal Indian Arts and Crafts Board <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Had to go through the whole process a second time</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Recognition has helped them secure some land by working with the Vermont Land Trust <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Otherwise, they would need a 501c3 nonprofit status to accept gifts they've received from donors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Elnu is a poor community, couldn't afford to pay the taxes</li> <li>■ <i>"As much as someone could give it to us, we couldn't afford it"</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Vermont Land Trust <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Have land near the Retreat Farm on Route 30 near Brattleboro which is a sacred burial site</li> <li>■ <i>"We don't own it, but we retain rights to it"</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Working with the state to get the same rights as a church so they can accept parcels of land with having to pay taxes</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Resources for tribally unaffiliated or non-Abenaki indigenous people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Eg. His experience living in Rhode Island <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>"As an Abenaki, I'm a guest here"</i></li> <li>○ If he wanted to take advantage of their tribal services, he would have to show his tribal ID</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Recommends they contact the VT Commission on Native American Affairs, or Chief Don Stevens <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>"This shouldn't just be the Abenaki in Vermont, we should be serving all indigenous people within the state, whether they are members of a tribe, or whether they are guests, like myself."</i></li> <li>○ Eg. Had a food drive, and got so much food they were almost begging people to take it <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>"I'm constantly receiving emails from Chief Don saying, 'Do you know any indigenous people who need meat, vegetables, etc', or 'If you know anyone that needs anything, have them contact me'"</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>● <i>"[The recognized tribes] are only a decade old. There's still some things we haven't worked out for ourselves, but we're trying."</i></li> </ul>

## Interview 2

Name, tribe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Anonymous</li> <li>● Not tribally affiliated</li> <li>● Works with indigenous people in Vermont who are not Abenaki</li> </ul>
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Funding and resources for Covid-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conflict with the four recognized tribes</li> <li>● <i>“We have other indigenous people, other than Abenaki recognized groups, that live in Vermont.”</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ But funding goes primarily to the four tribes</li> </ul> </li> <li>● <i>“When Covid hit, I knew I needed more money for my budget, but I had to go nationally for that money, because the state of Vermont did not give me anything.”</i></li> </ul>
Community’s opinions on vaccination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Anxiety about waiting for dates - anxious to get the vaccine as soon as possible</li> <li>● Different kinds of vaccination rollouts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Reservations: had their own program, vaccinated elders first and then the rest <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>“There was no hesitation; people were counting the days until they got their shots, because when a reservation gets a case, they go into total lockdown.”</i></li> <li>■ <i>“The importance of elders is critical to their survival.”</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Non-reservation: anxiety about waiting for dates, worried about their communities, a lot still going through the process (at the time of interview)</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Comorbidities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>“For Natives, it’s not a matter of if they will become diabetic, it’s a matter of when.”</i></li> <li>○ Also higher rates of hypertension, alcoholism, lactose intolerance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>“Natives don’t possess the enzymes to digest milk, raw sugar, or alcohol.”</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Makes them very vulnerable to many diseases, and Covid</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Younger people deciding to wait and not use their identification as indigenous to “cut the line” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Depends on each person’s situations and specific vulnerabilities</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Vaccinations of elders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Most elders have been vaccinated in Vermont because Vermont did it by age</li> <li>● Other states have not been as successful, like Massachusetts or Maine</li> <li>● Reservations were the most effective in getting everyone vaccinated in a timely way</li> </ul>
Controversies around recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>“Vermont’s laws tend to focus on the four recognized tribes.”</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Eg. public health bill (HB210) that just give money to the four tribes</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Eg. Eugenics apology letter (JRH2) recognizes Abenaki and elevates them to a higher level even though the majority of the names were French-Indians from other tribes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>“Everyone in the records is of mixed ethnicities, so to elevate Abenaki to a level above everybody else is wrong.”</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>● <i>“There are Mohawk tribes here, Apache people living here, people from many different tribes who would not be recognized by the four tribes.”</i></li> <li>● Also there are many Abenaki who do not want to be affiliated with a tribe</li> </ul>
Covid-19 and eugenics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>“Historically, we’ve had to deal with a lot of pandemics. That’s how our numbers were reduced so greatly when the first settlers arrived.”</i></li> <li>○ Have their own educational program because of controversy surrounding history and eugenics</li> <li>○ Isolation has been their survival tactic for pandemics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Provided education and talking circles to support isolation</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Covid-19 salience for issues around recognition and financial support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>“It did bring more attention, but it didn’t make any difference.”</i></li> </ul>

### Interview 3

Name, tribe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Andrea Brett</li> <li>● Abenaki</li> <li>● Not affiliated with a tribe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ But has an application to Mississquoi</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Involvement in community/jobs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Bachelors in Social Work</li> <li>○ Independent Abenaki on VT Commission for Native American Affairs</li> <li>○ Chair of VT Racial Equity Advisory Panel</li> <li>○ Has worked at UVM Medical Center for 10 years <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Works with under and uninsured Vermonters</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Controversies around tribal recognition / affiliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Some irony because some people who are not Abenaki have been accepted, while others who are Abenaki have not been accepted because they are told they don’t have sufficient proof</li> <li>● <i>Meti</i> means mixed</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Has been a push that <i>meti</i> shouldn't identify as Abenaki, which is controversial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ But back during the eugenics movement, even being an 8th Abenaki was too much</li> <li>■ <i>"And so we can't win."</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>○ <i>"I know who and what I am."</i></li> <li>● On having tribal affiliation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>"I don't want whichever tribe I may be a part of to think that I have allegiance only for them. I have allegiance for all Abenaki in Vermont."</i></li> <li>○ Many don't get tribal affiliation for that purpose</li> <li>○ Important to remember that many Abenaki don't have tribal affiliation</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Eugenics, self-identification, and hospital work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Never thought she would be working for the hospital <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Prefers homeopathic/natural remedies over doctors and medicine</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ But believes it's important to be in this role so she can help people navigate healthcare <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Wants people to feel that they are in control of their health and that she won't force them to do anything <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>"I say, 'you are in control, you are the driver. You tell me what you want to do. These are the parameters, but we will work together.'"</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Experiences with health-related violences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Family in her neighborhood <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Four of their five girls had polio in the 60s, and three of those four survived</li> <li>● Good friends with one of the girls who had leg braces and crutches, "and she was lucky"</li> </ul> </li> <li>■ Her paternal grandparents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Grandmother was French Indian, Grandfather was Scotch/Irish</li> <li>● <i>"My grandfather's family used to hide the children when they would get word that state officials were coming through, because the first batch of kids disappeared and didn't come home"</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>■ Her father <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Had rheumatic fever and was sent away to recover</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Supposed to be gone for a year but it took three years total to bring him back <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Missed the passing of his maternal grandmother who was Abenaki, they were very close</li> </ul> </li> <li>● <i>“Every time we talked about it, my grandmother would get angry, my grandfather would get sad, and my father would get a mixture of both.”</i></li> <li>● Her father taught her Abenaki, but when she began school she was only allowed to speak English <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Currently regaining her language</li> <li>○ <i>“Whenever someone spoke sharply to me if I used an Abenaki word, my mind panicked and I forgot it.”</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>● Her maternal grandfather was Abenaki and wasn't allowed to get married, so her mother was born out of wedlock and sent to an orphanage</li> </ul>
Vaccination and self-determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Believes issues around public opinion and distrusting the vaccine/feeling nervous about it is more prevalent than anxiety about when they will have a chance to get it</li> <li>● Part of the AstraZeneca vaccine trial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Her family tried to talk her out of it</li> <li>○ <i>“I didn't enter into this study lightly”</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>● A lot of distrust because of the eugenics history <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Has heard people say things like: “‘It's happening too fast’, ‘They didn't do enough research’, ‘Injecting us is their research’”</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>● Is the vaccine the only way to get past this? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Some say yes</li> <li>○ Some don't feel like they have a choice to say no</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Should elders be vaccinated? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Self-determination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>“It should be their choice”</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Should respect their decision regardless of age <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ We live in a society that doesn't value age</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Death is not viewed the same <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Not feared as much <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Elders have told her “If it's their time to go, it's their time to go”</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>● Importance of self-determination</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Having first women's gathering at end of May, and probably won't be wearing masks if they don't have to           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ They believe they should be able to make their own responsible decisions, not be coerced into following those in authority</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Tribal recognition and Covid-19 resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Will give some tribes credit because if there are other indigenous or non-affiliated Abenaki who need help, they will offer help because of the severity of this pandemic</li> <li>○ She acts as a referral source for people at her job           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Will direct them to resources they might have available</li> <li>■ Also offers help in applying for funds</li> <li>■ Supports them in accessing various resources</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Always reminding people on the Racial Equity Panel and Native American Commission to remember those who don't have tribal affiliation           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>"I can remind them, 'hello, we're still here and we're still real, they're not the only Abenaki'"</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● You can hear people scribbling during testimonies when she says that</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Covid-19 salience for issues around resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>"It's made it more apparent, yet also a bit harder to reach those folks, because of isolation and all the rules."</i></li> </ul>

#### Interview 4

Name, tribe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Nathan Pero</li> <li>● Chief of an unrecognized band of the Koasek Abenaki Nation</li> </ul>
About Koasek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Koa = white pine, Sek = place/people           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ People/place of the white pine</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Around 600 people</li> <li>● Were 2 tribes in VT in 1970s and 80s           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Missisquoi in northwest, Koasek in CT river valley</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Koasek tried to get people back together in various communities after eugenics</li> </ul>
Controversies around recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Koasek tried twice for recognition and failed</li> <li>● The tribes had split off from Koasek and started their own (Ko'asek "Co'wasuck" Traditional Band of the Sovereign Abenaki Nation)</li> <li>● <i>"When we went for state recognition two different times, everybody ganged up on us."</i></li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Chief Nathan no longer wants recognition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>"We're pretty happy the way we are right now"</i></li> <li>○ Just would be helpful to be able to sell crafts as indigenous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Instead they have to put down 'descendent'</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Eugenics, visibility, and self-identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>"To most other people, they are just ordinary neighbors."</i></li> <li>○ Lots of people moved during the 50s and 60s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>"During that time we still had to be quiet about who we were, so we'd say we were Canadian or French-Canadians"</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Two of his cousins were sterilized and never had children</li> </ul>
Recognition, visibility, and self-identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● CBS claiming that natives are getting their shots <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Upset because he wasn't counted</li> <li>○ <i>"Nobody's contacted me, nobody's asked if my tribe has gotten their shots."</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Vaccination rollout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Everyone he knows has received their shots</li> <li>● Not sure of people's opinions over them</li> </ul>
Eugenics apology letter (JRH2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Nathan says the law is still on the books and he contacted the governor to take it off</li> <li>● <i>"I can't see how a letter of apology is gonna make anything any better. It's gonna make them feel better, that's it."</i></li> <li>● <i>"1988 was when they sort of unofficially ended it, 1988. That's not that long ago."</i></li> <li>● <i>"If you wanna say you're sorry, take it off the books, don't just apologize."</i></li> </ul>

## Discussion

### Vaccination

*"Historically, we've had to deal with a lot of pandemics." - Interview with anonymous*

When seeking answers to my research question about vaccination, the overwhelming conclusion was that many if not a majority of elders have been vaccinated by this point as well as other age groups, but there has definitely been a tangible sense of hesitation and distrust. Much of that distrust stems, understandably, from the eugenics survey of the 1920s. My interviewees have had experience with other indigenous people telling them that the vaccine was developed too fast, there wasn't enough research, or

that injecting them *was* their research. It was clear that the eugenics survey is still very much a part of indigenous people's lives in Vermont, and during my interviews, most had at least one and usually several personal stories to tell me connected to the eugenics movement or discrimination that stemmed from it.

Two of Nathan Pero's cousins never had children because they were sterilized. In addition, he says even after eugenics ended, "we still had to be quiet about who we were, so we'd say we were Candian or French-Canadians." According to him, the neighbors of his tribal members often have no idea that there are Abenaki living among them, because many still feel compelled to hide their identities. On her father's side, Andrea Brett's grandparents used to hide the children when they got word of state officials coming through, "because the first batch of kids disappeared and didn't come home." In addition, her father was sent away to heal from rheumatic fever and while he was only supposed to be gone for one year, it took three years to get him back. Any time the subject was broached, "my grandmother would get angry, my grandfather would get sad, and my father would get a mixture of both." On her mother's side, her grandfather was Abenaki but was not allowed to get married, so her mother had to be born out of wedlock and was sent to an orphanage. Finally, Andrea herself was only allowed to speak English in school and lost her language which she is currently trying to regain, because "whenever someone spoke sharply to me if I used an Abenaki word, my mind panicked and I forgot it."

However, while distrust was a commonly shared sentiment, so too was worry and anxiety about the effects of Covid, mainly because of the comorbidities of many indigenous people. One interviewee told me, "for Natives, it's not a matter of *if* they will become diabetic, it's a matter of *when*." According to them, Native Americans don't have the enzymes to digest milk, raw sugar, or alcohol, which in turn makes them susceptible to a whole host of comorbidities like diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, or alcoholism, greatly increasing their vulnerability to Covid and other diseases. In reaction to this risk, there have been some Native leaders like Chief Don Stevens of the Nulhegan tribe who have urged people to look past the histories and do what they felt was right, and some had even entered into vaccine trials to set a precedent.

Giving these competing tensions, I asked some interviewees what they thought their communities should do, and I learned that it is not just about survival. Many native cultures have different perceptions on age as well as death. Death is not feared as much, and for elders it is not a matter of having to get the vaccine to protect themselves, but rather respecting that despite their age, they should be able to make their own decisions.

However, because of comorbidities and other pressures, some don't feel that they have a choice to say no. Andrea, who works at the UVM Health Center, told me how she never expected to be in that role because of the eugenics movement. She personally opts for traditional healing and homeopathic methods over doctors and medicine. However, rather than swearing off hospitals in general, she uses her role to encourage people to make their own choices and be in control of their own health. She told me that she tells many of her patients, 'you are in control, you are the driver. You tell me what you want to do. These are the parameters, but we will work together.' To her, the vaccine is not the only way to get past this. Indigenous people have been coerced into making decisions that were not truly their own, and therefore what is most important to them is the ability and freedom to make their own responsible decisions for themselves. At the end of the day, it is not necessarily about "protection", but "self-determination."

### State resources during Covid-19

Talking about vaccinations usually led the conversation to include talking about state support during Covid, and how that relates to issues regarding recognition of the four tribes. Chief Nathan, for instance, was upset that CBS had put out a statement that cited percentages of indigenous people receiving shots, when their people had not been counted and had never been contacted about getting vaccinated. He told me, "nobody's contacted me, nobody's asked me if my tribe has gotten their shots." In addition, those that are not recognized have trouble receiving funding for Covid-related expenses or support, because they have to go federal to apply. "The state of Vermont did not give me anything," one interviewee said. Others expressed grievances that Vermont legislation focuses on the four tribes, when there are many other indigenous people in Vermont, abenaki or other, who are not affiliated and don't feel

supported by the state. Andrea told me that sometimes when she is in meetings with the Vermont Commission for Native American Affairs, of which she is a member of, she will have to remind people: “Hello, we’re still here and we’re still real, they’re not the only Abenaki!”

However, even with recognized tribes, state support only goes so far. Some have had independent donors try to give gifts, but cannot afford the taxes on those gifts. In Jim Taylor’s experience, he was gifted a parcel of land by an independent donor, but could not afford the taxes on that land. He also found out that even though they were state recognized, they still could not sell crafts that were labeled as made by Native Americans unless they submit another application for federal recognition from the Federal Indian Arts and Crafts Board.

#### Recognition and the conflicts that follow

As I heard more and more of these grievances, I began to wonder whether recognition, painted as a very positive step of progress in the media, was not all it was cracked up to be. Before the Elnu Abenaki Tribe, Nulhegan Abenaki Tribe, Ko’asek (Co’wasuck) Traditional Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation, and the Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi, became recognized, they had to follow a very lengthy process. They had to find and submit extensive genealogies and historical records to the state, after which scholars read through and decided whether or not to grant recognition.

As it turns out, recognition is very much a double edged sword. Some of the ways it is beneficial is, as mentioned previously, to gain more access to state resources that could involve funding, land, hunting and fishing permissions, etc. It also protects from imposters who could be dangerous or try to take advantage of the benefits of recognition.

Jim Taylor told me of a story, for instance, of a person who had a history of violence towards women, who claimed he was part of their tribe even though nobody knew of him. He told me, “you have someone who claims to be indigenous, they start dropping names, and then they do something pretty terrible and all of a sudden we’re left picking up the pieces with people claiming he’s part of your community even though we’ve never even heard of this person.”

However, on the other hand, there is the discomfort and perhaps frustration on behalf of indigenous people that Native Americans are the only minority group that needs identification cards to prove their identity. As documented on a Cowasuck Band [website](#), “any other ethnic or religious group need only declare their existence. Only the American Indian is required to document genealogy to the beginning of time and blood quantum to show how much real “Indian” they are.”

Both the positives from recognition and the negatives have stirred up a lot of controversy. My interviews involved stories, scandals, and secrets I have been requested not to disclose. What this means, however, is that there is a huge sentiment of internal conflict and divide among the indigenous people in Vermont, and much of it ties back to the process and implications of recognition.

It is very difficult to get recognition, especially if you don’t have sufficient written records to prove it. But the histories of assimilation and need to hide their identities, or even be born out of wedlock because of marriage restrictions in some cases, is not exactly conducive to clear records and lineages. As was told to me by Andrea, during the eugenics survey, being an 8th Abenaki was too much. Now, they are being told that they are not Abenaki enough. And so, according to her, they can’t win.

## Conclusion

*“We are not truly healing ourselves or healing our community as we continue with these colonized viewpoints” - Anonymous*

While much of the media has focused on the benefits of recognition or an apology for eugenics and how the community can start healing, this very minimally reflected on the ground by community members themselves. Based on this research, I think a large part of the reason is because they are still having to work within these very restricted channels provided to them by the government. They urge the necessity of self-determination when it comes to protecting themselves from Covid or getting vaccinated, and it seems that recognition has only provided a partial, or even false sense of self-determination that has managed to divide rather than unite. Whenever I would ask my interviewees what they imagined as a

future for their communities, they would give me specifics that had to do with navigating the current laws and policies that were being enacted or the issues of the day, and I wonder if perhaps they have so much on their plate weighing them down that it is hard to be idealistic anymore.

I hope this research can bring to light some of the internal conflicts that seem so rarely talked about outside Native circles. I also hope that it helps non-indigenous Vermonters more deeply reflect on the complexities of Native American history in the US and in Vermont, and how there is no simple direction forward, even though lawmakers are eager to make it seem that way.

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