

3 Rhode Island towns adopt 'land acknowledgements' honoring Native American tribes

[Antonia Noori Farzan](#), The Providence Journal, December 31, 2021



Not too long ago, college campuses and gatherings of left-wing activists were the only places where you were likely to hear a "land acknowledgement" statement.

Now, you only have to go as far as Barrington Town Hall.

Over the last year, a few towns across Rhode Island have started honoring the area's original Native American inhabitants by adopting formal land acknowledgement

statements that are read at council meetings. Warren [started the trend this summer](#), followed by South Kingstown and Barrington.

"It seemed like the appropriate next step to really owning our history," said Warren Town Council president Keri Cronin.

Unlike the other towns, Warren doesn't require that its land acknowledgement statement be read at every council meeting. But the [full text](#) has been printed on a sign that was recently erected outside Warren Town Hall, welcoming visitors to "Sowams, the ancestral home of the [Pokanoket people](#)."

It's one of several new historic markers that have gone up around town in recent years, all highlighting the history of Warren's native people, and the town's role in [the slave trade](#).

Cronin and others credited the work of David Weed, the coordinator for the [Sowams Heritage Area](#) project, who hopes to see the equivalent of the [Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor](#) established in the region.

'People drive by it every day ...'



"There's a lot of history here," Weed said. "People drive by it every day but don't really know the whole story."

William Guy, the sagamore of the Pokanoket, [told The Providence Journal this summer](#) that he was gratified to see Warren "trying to right the wrongs that have been done."

While the Pokanokets are not a federally recognized tribe, they're still an active presence in the East Bay, and played a role in crafting the land acknowledgement statements that were adopted in Warren and Barrington.

Guy's daughter, Tracey Brown, is the Pokanoket's sachem. Her son, Donald Brown Jr., is the tribal historian. All three generations spoke before the Barrington Town Council in December, voicing support for the land acknowledgment.

"It helps connect people to the land, and when you feel connected to something, you care for it," Tracey Brown said.

So far, the land acknowledgement statements have been universally well-received, officials say.

"I am not aware of any pushback or anything negative," Cronin said, adding that there was a "stark contrast" with the responses that she received after Warren opted to [fly a Black Lives Matter flag outside Town Hall](#).

A one-day exploration: [Rhode Island's rich Native American history and culture](#)



After Warren formally recognized the Pokanoket, Town Manager Kate Michaud sent out a letter to other towns across the state, inviting them to contact her with questions if they were interested in following suit.

That prompted a discussion at a South Kingstown Town Council meeting, where some members suggested adopting a similar statement.

Paying homage in a fateful place

Present-day South Kingstown was the site of the Great Swamp Massacre, [the bloodiest event in Rhode Island history](#). In 1675, a white colonial militia slaughtered hundreds of Narragansetts, including women and children, even though the tribe had remained neutral up until that point in King Philip's War.

More: [Narragansett Indian Tribe sees return of land marking the Great Swamp Massacre](#)

In October, the Town Council unanimously approved a land acknowledgment statement proposed by Councilwoman Deb Bergner, which is now read at the beginning of each meeting, after the Pledge of Allegiance.

"The Town of South Kingstown pays homage to the indigenous people and land on which the town is now located," the statement says. "Let this acknowledgement serve as a reminder of our ongoing efforts to recognize, honor, reconcile and partner with the Narragansett Tribe whose land and water we benefit from today."

The town contacted the Narragansett Tribe for input but didn't get a response, officials said at the October meeting.

Barrington became the latest town to adopt a land acknowledgment statement in December after receiving a request from Barrington Interfaith Partners.

"We recognize the unique and enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories," says the statement, which will be read at the start of all council meetings. "We acknowledge that we are in the ancestral homeland of the Pokanoket Tribe within the original territory of the Pokanoket Nation. We commit to ongoing efforts to recognize, honor, reconcile and partner with the Pokanoket people whose lands and water we benefit from today. Aquene (Peace)."

Councilman Jacob Brier credited Warren for "taking the first step," as well as Weed's work to highlight the history of the area.

"The key is to back it up," Brier said. "If we just read it and leave it there, it's a little performative."

Return of land? So far, the point is acknowledgement

A common critique of land acknowledgements is that they amount to "virtue signaling" — allowing people to demonstrate how enlightened they are, without requiring any real sacrifice. The Tomaquag Museum, which has published [a guide to land acknowledgements](#), says they should be the first step in a process that ultimately ends in "land return to Indigenous nations."

Elected officials may be willing to recite a land acknowledgement at meetings, but how many are willing to follow the idea to its logical conclusion and give the land back to its original inhabitants?

"I think we'd get in a lot of trouble if we said, 'We're giving the land back,'" Brier acknowledged.

"And hearing from the Pokanoket representatives, they're not asking for the land back."

The town probably wouldn't say no if the Pokanoket asked for a few acres, Brier said. But the land acknowledgement is chiefly intended to be exactly what its name suggests— an acknowledgement. The goal, Brier said, is to recognize the "actual history" of the area.

"If we can acknowledge the reality of the past, and work together to move forward, we can arrive at a better place," he said.

Source: <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/local/2021/12/31/ri-towns-adopt-land-acknowledgments-honoring-native-american-tribes-pokanoket-narragansett/9032642002/>