

“To save their substance that they may live together”: Rethinking  
Schooling and Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Algonquian Communities in  
Southern New England  
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In the decades following the Protestant revivals known as the First Great Awakening, Algonquian-speaking peoples living in communities in southern New England began to attend formal schools and adopt English literacy and language skills. As a part of a larger process of cultural adaptation that occurred at Algonquian settlements in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and on Long Island (New York) during the eighteenth century, many Native men, women, and children expressed new and growing interest in obtaining the knowledge and literacy of their Euro-American neighbors, and linked the ability to read and write to the practice and growth of their new Christian faith. By the 1750s and 1760s, many children and youth attended colonial schools—namely Eleazar Wheelock’s Charity School located in Lebanon, Connecticut—where they were exposed to and instructed in a new language and letters. The new educational regimen that Algonquian students encountered at such institutions certainly reflected the prejudice and ethnocentric goals of colonial authorities, but also served to equip a number of Natives with new tools for communicating and strengthening the ties between their communities. Far from serving the goals of ministers and other officials to “civilize” Native children and their wider communities and to “purge” their “Indian” culture, schooling and literacy provided Algonquians with an innovative means for asserting their own voices, interests, and understandings of community and land. Using writing to protect communal interests and defend their homelands, Algonquians challenged the encroachment and dispossession they suffered throughout the mid-eighteenth century and strengthened, rather than diminished, kin networks and cross-communal ties.

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