

A Short History of the Wampanoag People in Massachusetts

The following information is intended to stimulate further exploration and research, and to underscore that our land acknowledgement statement is only one small step toward understanding our community. This supplemental information is provided with the knowledge that it is a tiny fraction of the Wampanoag's history, significant portions of which were intentionally destroyed or suppressed by English colonists and subsequent historians.

Ancestors of today's Wampanoag people were living in what is now called Southeastern Massachusetts within 1,000 years after the retreat of the last glaciers 14,000 to 16,000 years ago. By the 1500s, there were 67 villages under the organization of and tribute to the Pokanoket sachemdom out of what is now Rhode Island. These groups spoke Wompanaak and were affiliated to different degrees for trade, protection, and other purposes, but were distinct communities in many respects. Their political structures were comparatively egalitarian.

The Wampanoag were semi-nomadic hunter gatherers who moved from their permanent winter inland homes to their fishing grounds in summer. They cultivated maize, squash, and beans, and harvested abundant finfish, shellfish and other marine resources in addition to hunting mammals. They were guided in these and all their other pursuits by their understanding of and relationships with the earth, their fellow creatures and Creator. Parts of what is now Brewster were the territory of the Saquatucketts group.

Starting in the early 1600's, waves of European diseases introduced by traders devastated indigenous populations throughout Eastern New England. By the time the Mayflower landed in 1620, 90% of some Wampanoag communities, including Patuxet (now Plymouth), had died. During that same period, Europeans had captured and enslaved members of the Wampanoag tribes, often selling them in the Caribbean and Europe.

According to "A History of Harwich" by Josiah Paine, the "sale" which appears to have transferred much of what is now Brewster (including the First Parish Meetinghouse property) to the English occurred in 1657. Having earlier secured the land between Bound Brook and the Saquatucket River in 1653, Governor William Bradford, Thomas Prence and their partners turned their attention to the "extinguishment of Indian title to the land lying eastward of Sauquatucket River on the Bay Side towards Manskaket". They negotiated with the sachems Wano and Sachemas, who were father and son, for a parcel stretching from Namskaket west to a short distance from a rivulet that issues from what is Cobbs Pond" in exchange for 58 pounds. Since indigenous people had no concept of land ownership, nor the selling of it, the Sachems likely considered this an honorarium to them for use of their tribal land, since at that time, they retained use of it as a well.

Wampanoags saw themselves as caretakers of their mother, Earth, who provided them with everything they needed: food, shelter, clothing, water, beauty. When foreigners arrived, there were many beautiful park areas as well as large gardens for food. They often used fire to aid the growth of trees and plants, and to keep down the possibility of forest fires.

As land transferred to descendants or other buyers, the Wampanoags' rights to land use were removed from the subsequent deeds. As more colonists arrived, they brought livestock, often causing damage to the land and requiring fencing. Persistent illegal and often violent encroachments

by colonists on Wampanoag lands, led to confrontations which usually resulted in loss of more land by native peoples.

Although the indigenous communities on Cape Cod did not join the Wampanoag people from other parts of the region who fought the English in Matacom's (King Philip's) War of 1675-76, oppressive laws that the colonists passed after winning the war applied to all Wampanoag people. These laws often served to expand the measures used to steal indigenous lands, including those on the Cape.

At one point, there were a number of small "reservations" for Wampanoags. As more and more settlers arrived, many surviving Wampanoags on the Cape moved to the largest native community at Mashpee, and many of the other indigenous villages ceased to exist.

Today, the bloodlines of those communities are carried on in the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, the Wampanoag Tribe of Aquinnah, and the Herring Pond Band of Wampanoag, who maintain a thriving presence in Southeastern Massachusetts. Wampanoag people have been working since 1993 to reclaim their language. Even though European colonists throughout North America used various methods, including violence, to obliterate indigenous languages, the Wampanoags have developed the highly successful Wompanaak Language Reclamation Project. The children and adults are regaining their language, which contains and expresses the beliefs, values and experience of their ancestors, and therefore enriching their cultural history.

Sources:

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