

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF OLD YARMOUTH

THE INDIANS OF YARMOUTH



BY
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“On this slope lie buried the last native Indians of Yarmouth.”

(Editor’s note – 300 years ago this month, Yarmouth’s proprietors voted to establish Indian lands in what is now South Yarmouth.)

Indian legend tells us that of a great battle fought long ago by Indians of different tribes. It took place on the shores of Bass River among the hollows. Much later, In 1605, Champlain the French explorer, sailed our New England coast and entered Nauset Harbor in the present town of Orleans. He remained long enough to familiarize himself with the Native American customs, methods by which they constructed their wigwams and about cultivation. What he reported would apply to those living in Yarmouth at that time.

The Pilgrims came to Cummiquid in July of 1621 to trade good will with the Indians for return of a lost boy who had strayed off from Plymouth Plantation five days earlier. After the boy was returned, trade relations were established with Sachem Iyanough and his tribe. It could be called the beginning of maritime commerce between Cape Cod and the mainland.

Picture in your mind the southern section of Bass River. The Pawkunnawkuts, a branch of the Wampanoag Indians believed to be several hundred strong, lived on both sides of the river. We do not know the full meaning of the name, only that the “t” signified “dwelling near water.” In the summer months they lived along the shores of Bass River, in cooler weather moving inland to the woods near Long Pond. There were fresh water ponds, woodlands and planting fields. Their dwellings called ‘wetus’ were constructed of bent branches covered with a rush matting equipped with holes and doorways. Game and wild birds were plentiful as were shellfish and fish caught in traps and weirs. They hunted along Parker’s neck to Parker’s River and beyond to Great Island.

The Hokanums settled in the north east section of town part of which still bears their name. The Cummaquids settled in the western section. The area bordering Nantucket Sound to the south was known as 'South Seas.' The whole of Yarmouth was called Mattacheese, which in the native tongue means "old lands by the border of water." They had held these territories since ancient times. The Wampanoag taught the settlers what they knew of the land and how to live off of it.

The first temporary homes built by English settlers were wigwams which they copied from the local Wampanoags. Early relations between European settlers and the Native Americans were friendly. However, hostilities erupted off-Cape in 1643 and local towns were advised to build a "place of defense" in case of an Indian attack. Although Yarmouth built a fort on Fort Hill, next to the first meeting house in what is now the middle of the Ancient Cemetery, no records of unfriendly acts exist.

Lands set off in 1713/4 for the Native Americans contained about 160 acres. This was an area decided upon for their use in an agreement drawn up by a committee chosen by the Yarmouth Town proprietors. It consisted of Colonel Thatcher, John Hallet, Elisha Hall, John Hall and the clerk Samuel Sturgis. At that time there was plenty of room for both settlers and Native Americans to live amicably. This area included from Long Pond to Bass River and from the Old Yarmouth Road (Station Avenue) to the lands formerly owned by Joseph Chase.

It was voted that the committee "shall have the power to lay out a certain tract as they shall see fit and convenient for the Indians to live upon and for planting and firewood. They would have no power to sell or dispose of said lands or timber, wood of fencing, stuff that grows there on or receive any other town's Indians or any other persons whatsoever, either English or Indians."

In 1753 John Kelly moved a structure called the "Crooked House" up river to 188 Old Main Street, near land which had been set aside by the proprietors as part of the Indian Reservation. It later became known as the "Sears Homestead." It was

here that his wife Elizabeth (Pollard) Kelley nursed suffering Indians with small-pox. It became known as the first Indian hospital.

In 1798 Rev. Timothy Alden wrote that in the memory of some Native Americans, there were almost as many of them as there were white men. As late as 1779, there was in 'Indian Town' a small cluster of wigwams, about one mile from the mouth of Bass River, in the south-eastern part of the town. It was inhabited by the remains of the Pawkunnawkut Indians.

Their chief had small-pox; five of them survived and eleven died. "In 1797, there was left standing only one wigwam. It was located on the Old Owl Club property and occupied by a negro, Cato Judah and his wife Lucy, a full blooded Indian squaw. A little southwest of Indian Town once stood an ancient Indian meeting house. There is probably the remains of a fresh water spring that they used to quench their thirst when congregating for religious purposes.

The first census, which was taken in 1765, listed 1,740 individuals living in Yarmouth. It is estimated that about 600 of those were Native Americans. During the mid-18th century some went to war, never to return; by 1763 most of the remaining died of smallpox. In records from the town of Yarmouth a 'vote was taken that the charge made by Native Americans having small-pox be paid out of the town treasury and that all of their effects be sold to pay this charge.' The land they formerly owned would be sold or leased. In 1790 there was also a vote to empower the selectman to sell the land and reserve one piece for Thomas Greenough, a survivor.

Some of the Native Americans of South Yarmouth were first buried on land later owned by Robert Homer. When it was proposed to be used for salt works, it so grieved Cato Judah and his wife Lucy, occupants of that last wigwam, they had the bodies disinterred and buried near Long Pond, thought to be old hunting grounds. It was an ideal spot for the last resting place of the members of a tribe that once held possession of all these lands.

Daniel Wing was instrumental in memorializing the first Indian inhabitants here by purchasing the strip of land on the eastern slope of Long Pond and on it made a pile of boulders. He and Dr. Azariah Eldridge had this inscription carved: "On this slope lie buried the last native Indians of Yarmouth." It may be seen today on Indian Memorial Drive.

Mary Dunn was a Cape Cod native born in Yarmouth on July 6, 1778, not an escaped slave. She was the daughter of Boston Boston, Lucy's second husband, according to town records. Boston was a common name among blacks, including a famous Nantucket whaling Captain Absolom Boston.

If Wing is correct, both the identification of Mary Dunn as black and the assertion by others that Mary was an Indian are incorrect. She must have been of mixed race, half black and half Indian.

The Negro identified by Freeman as living in the wigwam with Lucy was not Boston Boston, who must have died soon after Mary's birth. Town records show Lucy marrying another black man, Cato Judah on April 16, 1786.

Another very interesting story began in 1638 when the ship CONFIDENCE of London set sail for America carrying a 20 year old Romany Gypsy named Augustine Be-Acre, later known as Austin Barse. He was a Continental Gypsy of the Romany tribe who migrated to England. Gypsy's were persecuted there for any minor infraction and deported to the Colonies. He was the only prisoner allotted to Barnstable. No Puritan girl would marry a Gypsy. Austin married Mary, the Mattachee Indian daughter of John Hyanno who was the son of Sachem Iyannough the Indian that had befriended the Pilgrims.

It is said that she was a lovely flaming red haired Mattachee Princess. Her people believed that white men had landed many years before and intermarried with them which indicated Viking decent and why they were called Wampanoags, which means 'White Indian.'

Austin and Mary came to live in Barnstable. He became a church member in 1643, a Freeman, Grand Juror, then a surveyor of highways. He was in the militia under Miles Standish. They had eleven children. He owned two thatch islands that were still known as Bears' Islands in the 1880s.

Indian villages could be found throughout the Cape. A narrow footpath, the picking of berries or the hunt for fish and game to sustain life in the settlement did not disturb, but blended into the natural scene.

They were a people of sharing both land and food. The necessity of feeding the entire village every day, the keeping of tools, weapons, bows and arrows, fish nets from fiber and fishhook from bone was a full time job. Women cared for the children, cooked, gathered firewood and cleaned and prepared game brought in from the hunt. One of the most valued traits of these nomadic people was that they always kept their word!