

## THE MASSACHUSETT TRIBE

The land upon Winchester residents now live was formerly the homeland of the Massachusett people, whom it is important to acknowledge.

Prior to the arrival of European settlers, the eastern United States was the home of indigenous peoples. Their ancestors arrived on the North American continent from Asia after the end of the last Ice Age over 11,000 years ago. Our knowledge of their settlements is based upon archeological evidence and studies of climate history, which trace the evolution of people and the landscape. They show that the area of New England was settled early and that settlement continued to expand. By 1,000 years ago, agriculture was introduced and maize became a staple part of their diets.<sup>1</sup>

A number of artifacts, including arrow heads and axe heads dating back over millennia, have been turned up in the Winchester area, and grinding rocks have been identified in the area.

James William Russell (1844-1925) who farmed in the southeast section of town and occasionally turned up native artifacts in the course of working the land, shared some of the items with Betty Bugbee Cusack, author of "Collector's Luck: Giant Steps into Prehistory."<sup>2</sup>



*Grinding rock photographed near the North Reservoir in the Middlesex Fells in 1947*

Archeological evidences of native settlements in Winchester are preserved in the collections of the Winchester Historical Society. These were found while European settlers were farming, confirming that the fertile lands were also used by indigenous peoples as settlement sites. Examples include a tomahawk head and a pestle.



*Head of a tomahawk found in Winchester by the Goddu family.  
Stone, 3.5 x 2.5 x 1.4 inches.  
Donated to the Winchester Historical Society by Hester Bradford Goddu in 1975.*



*Pestle found on the land of William Boynton in Winchester.  
Stone, 7 x 3.5 x 2.5 inches.  
Donated to the Winchester Historical Society by W. Boynton in 1883.*

By the seventeenth century, those living in New England belonged to a number of different tribes, which, whether allies or enemies, were all united through the Algonquin language. As the map below shows, the region was the home of a complex network of tribes. The area around Boston was occupied by the Massachusett, the Nipmuck to the west, and Wampanoag to the south. The Massachusett tribe, which gave its name to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, lived on land that stretched from about Scituate in the south to Cape Ann in the north and west to Concord.



*Indian Tribes (ca. 1636) by Roger Dowd, from The Pequots in Southern New England, 1995.*

Contact with Europeans began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when explorers, trappers, and traders arrived to discover and then exploit the resources of the North American continent. The fur trade disrupted the power structure of the tribes as traders formed alliances that magnified inter-tribal conflict, while the introduction of guns made battles more deadly. The greatest impact, however, came from the introduction of new diseases to “virgin soil.” These included chicken pox, whooping cough, cholera, diphtheria, scarlet fever, and other diseases common within European communities. Far worse were the great epidemics of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The first occurred in 1616-1619 and is conjectured to have been caused by bubonic plague, smallpox, hepatitis A, or leptospirosis; a second smallpox epidemic followed in 1633. Early explorers had described seeing large numbers of inhabitants, but by the time permanent colonists arrived, diseases had killed an estimated 80% of the native population.

The loss of so many people had wide-ranging effects. The Native people lacked the manpower to mount an effective defense against the increasing number of colonists. The European settlers arrived to find what they considered to be empty land, ready for their use. The wigwams,

intended to last twenty years and then to be moved and rebuilt, seemed impermanent compared to wood and stone houses. While the settlers recognized that the land belonged to the Native people and “purchased” the land, they felt they were better able to improve the landscape for farming and habitation. And indeed that God had ordained it. As John Smith wrote in his description of his travels to New England,

For there is vast land enough for all the people in England, Scotland, and Ireland; and it seems God hath provided this Country for our Nation, destroying the natives by the plague for they had three plagues in three years successively...<sup>3</sup>

*As quoted in the exhibit in the Pequot Museum & Research Center*

The record of the colonist’s purchase of land in what is now Winchester is a history that was repeated in most towns in Massachusetts.

## **FURTHER READING**

The following websites provide additional information about the native people in New England, both their history and present activities:

*Harvard University Native American Program* maintains a website, [www.hunap.harvard.edu](http://www.hunap.harvard.edu). Of particular interest is its Resources tab, which includes a list of websites on New England Native Americans. The home page features current events related to its programs.

*We Are the Massachusett: The Massachusett Tribe at Ponkapoag*, <http://massachusetttribe.org/>. Descendants of the Neponset band of the Massachusett tribe maintain the website, which provides information and offers opportunities to learn more.

*The Pequot Museum* in Mashantucket, Connecticut, provides an excellent overview of the history of Native people in southern New England. Since the Pequot tribe is also Algonquin, its life-size diorama of a Pequot Village in the 16<sup>th</sup> century gives an idea of what settlements in Winchester might have looked like. <http://www.pequotmuseum.org>

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<sup>1</sup> Dana F. Dincauze, "A Capsule Prehistory of Southern New England" in *The Pequots in Southern New England*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1990, pp. 19-32). An estimate of 2,000 years ago has also been made, at <https://nativeamericannetroots.net/diary/1209>.

<sup>2</sup> According to Cusack, Russell descendants took archaeologists from the Peabody Museum on a tour of the sites where family members found arrowheads by the Mystic Lakes. On May 15, 1968, Governor John A. Volpe, Sherman Russell, Cusack, and others visited the Mystic Lakes when the governor was photographed holding "chips from manufacture of Indian artifacts."

<sup>3</sup> Captaine John Smith, *Advertisements for the Inexperienced Planters of New England or Anywhere*. London, 1631.