

Dedham's Indigenous Histories

By Gail Coughlin

In 1636 the General Court of Massachusetts issued 200 miles of occupied land to the earliest English settlers of Dedham. The original footprint of Dedham rested on Massachusetts and Wampanoag territory. Dedham's town government also negotiated with and interacted with Indigenous peoples from all over Massachusetts as well as neighboring colonies. The Indigenous peoples that the early English settlers and government of Dedham encountered had lived on the land for thousands of years. Before the English settlers arrived in Dedham, the Indigenous peoples of what became Massachusetts had almost a century of experience with European traders. The Wampanoag dealt with a permanent English settlement starting in 1620. The relationship between Indigenous tribes was incredibly dynamic and complex. For thousands of years Indigenous Nations traded, fought, bargained, and inter-married with each other. The arrival of Europeans in North America throughout the 16th and 17th centuries only made these relationships more complex.

Despite traditional retellings of early American history, the Indigenous peoples living in the "New World" did not simply cease to exist after the arrival of the first European settlers or after the first Thanksgiving. As English settlers arrived in Dedham in 1635 and began to establish a government and community, their Indigenous neighbors tried to live as normally as possible despite this sudden intrusion. The body of water, now known as Wigwam Pond, adjoined a piece of land previously known as Wigwam Plain which acted as a homesite for the local Neponset (Massachusetts Nation) population before and after English settlement.(1) Although the permanence of this settlement was likely seasonal. Some of the earliest settlers built their houses close to Wigwam Pond. The Fairbanks House (1637), the only house remaining from this early settlement period, is separated from the pond by a fifteen-minute walk. Early settlers were also granted acres of swamp land.(2) The Neponset people and English settlers of Dedham did not have any violent conflicts as far as we know, and it is assumed that most day to day interactions were mundane. But it becomes apparent by analyzing records from the Massachusetts General Court from the late 17th century that the opinions of the English settlers of Dedham were quite discriminatory towards their Indigenous neighbors particularly during and after King Philip's war. The book *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* by Margaret Ellen Newell mentions a petition from the Dedham selectman to the Massachusetts General Court dated from 1676 complaining of the Native Americans' unwillingness to conform to English cultural traditions. The selectmen mentioned the habit for the Indigenous people to enter English homes unannounced and to not smile when passing people on the street. In 1681, another petition from the selectmen of Dedham requested that the

Native Americans and English settlers live separately from each other.(3) This petition was unsuccessful.

The original 200 miles was not only the scene of clashing cultures but also of distinct bodies of governments negotiating land claims and use. The main settlement of Dedham sat on territory ruled by Massachusetts sachem Chickatabut. Additionally, the town government had diplomatic interactions with Metacom (King Phillip) a Wompanoag sachem as well as Chauk a Pocumtuck sachem. These diplomatic relations can be analyzed most easily via Indian land deeds which, in a nutshell, are legal agreements between Native Americans and English settlers determining the ownership and use of parcels of land. Dedham's town government has at least seven Indian land deeds.(4) These deeds granted land right to the English settlers, and often time they preserved rights for the Indigenous people selling the land such as hunting, fishing and planting rights. In 1688, Charles Josias, son of Wampatuck (referred to as Josias Sagamore) and grandson of Chickatabut composed a confirmatory deed to ensure the English settlers of Dedham that the land granted to them by his grandfather was legally theirs. This deed officially ceded all Indigenous claims to the territory that is Dedham.(5) The government of Dedham also negotiated with the religious leader John Eliot, an English missionary and linguist He established a "praying town" for baptized Nipmuc and Massachusetts people on 2000 acres in the north-western corner of Dedham, in Natick. In exchange for these 2000 acres, Dedham received 8000 acres in what is now Deerfield. The English inhabitants of Dedham and the "Praying Indians" of Natick debated over territory and borders well into the 18th century.

Although the relationship between Dedham and their Massachusetts neighbors was peaceful, many Dedham residents fought against and with Indigenous peoples during the "Indian Wars" of the 17th century. Dedham also served as a gathering point for different militias during Boston's campaign against Ninigret (a Niantic sachem) in defense of the Long Island Indians in 1651-4. (6) The town served the same purpose during King Philip's war. Although no battles transpired in Dedham, the town's role cannot be understated. It was the backdrop of strategizing, planning and training. There is evidence to support that one of the end goals for the English settlers fighting in this war was to enslave the Indigenous populations that they fought against (and sometimes with). Dedham had a very small servant population that included Native American slaves. (7) The "praying Indians" of Natick (who remained neutral during the war) found themselves deported to Deer Island, without adequate provisions resulting in the deaths of approximately two-thirds of the prisoners, based on a false claim that they burnt down a building in Dedham.(8) King Philip's war was absolutely devastating for all sides involved, and Dedham was vital during the campaign.

Beyond the 17th century, the sources regarding Dedham's relationship with the Indigenous peoples of Massachusetts is lacking. Sarah David Quapish, the so called "last Indian" in Dedham, died in 1774. Significantly, she was the last person to be buried in the traditional burial site of Wigwam Hill.(9) The burial ground, which previously bordered Wigwam Pond, was leveled in the early 20th century and is now home to athletic fields and commercial shopping centers. But the death of Sarah David Quapish does not symbolize the end of an Indigenous presence in Dedham. There are still Indigenous peoples living in Dedham today and Indigenous communities throughout Massachusetts. While Dedham may have both literally and figuratively buried their Indigenous histories, the Native Americans of Massachusetts continue to express themselves in all aspects of American society and life. By ignoring the Indigenous histories of Dedham and its neighboring towns we not only compromise our understanding of the societies of the past but also the society that we live in today.

NOTES

1. Worthington, Erastus. *The History of Dedham: From the Beginning of Its Settlement, in September 1635, to May 1827.* Dedham, MA: Dutton and Wentworth, 1827., 121.
2. Hill, Don Gleason. *The Early Records of the Town of Dedham, Massachusetts. 1636-1659.* Vol. 3. Dedham, MA: Printed at Office of the Dedham Transcript, 1892., 4.
3. MASS RECS 5: 327-328.
4. Hurd, D. Hamilton. *History of Norfolk County, Massachusetts: With Biographical Sketches of Many of Its Pioneers and Prominent Men.* Norfolk County, MA: .J.W. Lewis and Company, 1884., 44.
5. *The Dedham Historical Register.* Vol. 9-10. Dedham Historical Society, 1898.,42-44.
6. MASS RECS 4 PT 1: 217.
7. Lockridge, Kenneth A. *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736.* New York: Norton, 1985., 72.
8. Bodge, George M. *Soldiers in King Philip's War. Containing Lists of the Soldiers of Massachusetts Colony, Who Served in the Indian War of 1675-1677. With Sketches of the Principal Officers, and Copies of Ancient Documents and Records Relating to the War.* 1841-1914., 350.
9. Mann, Herman. *Historical Annals of Dedham: From Its Settlement in 1635 to 1847.* Salem, MA: Higginson Book Company, 1999., 67.