

The Continuous Presence of Native People at Mashapaug Pond

Dr. William Simmons, Anthropology Professor at Brown University,

Transcribed from a talk given at The Tomaquag Indian Memorial Museum, 12/15/10

The Narragansett were the largest language group in Rhode Island and their boundary more or less coincided with the boundaries of Rhode Island. The Narragansett and the groups affiliated with the Narragansett lived in concentrations all over the state of Rhode Island. One of those places where they were very heavily concentrated was in that area that is now the west end of Providence, the West Elmwood district and the Arlington section of Cranston, Potters Avenue, that whole area. As you may know there is a series of ponds in that part of Providence. There's Spectacle Pond which is the pond you see when you look out the window of the Twin Oaks Restaurant. Not too far from there is another little pond called Tongue Pond which is the place where the Narragansett Brewery, like Gorham Manufacturing, dumped all of its manufacturing materials. And then there's the very large pond, the biggest of them all and that's Mashapaug which is bounded by Niantic Ave., Reservoir Ave., maybe Public Street and then the Cranston boundary to the north.

Interestingly there were two other ponds in that same area. If you know where Gilbert Stuart Middle School is, in back of that middle school there is a very large playground, baseball park and what now is called Bucklin Park. That was a pond, called Long Pond. It was filled in. In addition to Long Pond there was another one between Cranston Street and Webster Avenue by the railroad tracks. That area may look like it was an old sand and a gravel pit, great basin in the ground. It was at one point filled with water; that was known as Benedict Pond. And those five ponds basically were the area where large numbers of Narragansett-related groups had their summer and their winter residency.

And how long did they live there? Ah, its hard to say. But we know there have been people in the northeastern part of of the United States back about 15-17 thousand years. So we can assume that people were living in those parts of Rhode Island as

early as that. And I know for sure archeological pieces have been found. To my knowledge there has been no systematic archeology done on the Mashapaug Pond. I know from the point of view of finds that people have made, various artifacts that people have found over the years, that it is a pretty sure thing that Narragansetts were living there at the time of the Colonial Historical period. They had ancestors that were living three, four, five thousand years ago for sure. So it has been inhabited for a long long time.

When the English arrived in Providence and with Roger Williams in 1636 they had a conversation with the Narragansett sachems and the Narragansett sachems agreed to give the Roger Williams party a very large piece of land that extended from Neutaconkanut Hill to the west to Mashapaug Pond to the northwest, to above where the Pawtuxet section of Cranston is now and down to along Narragansett Bay and included that part which is now the east side of Providence, on the other side of the Providence River. That was the territory of the original town of Providence, the territory that was given to the English by the sachems, by Miantunnomi, Cannonicus and various others. And the earliest deeds that are involved in the transfer of that territory have the signatures of the sachems on them. You can see a copy of the deed for example, first Narragansett-Indian-signed deed document giving title to this land, or the usage of this land to Roger Williams signed with the mark of Cannonicus and the mark of Miantunnomi. And the English of course wrote it down in their own wording. They were very particular about these things. They had to keep written records among themselves. This is how they did it. (For facsimile of original deed see page 46).

It says:

The Narragansett on the 24th of the first month, commonly called March, second year of our plantation or planting in Providence memorandum that we, Cannonicus and Miantunnomi, the two chief sachems of the Narragansett having 2 years since sold onto Roger Williams the lands and meadows upon the two fresh rivers called Mooshasuck and Woonasquatucket do now by these present do now establish and confirm the bounds of those lands from the river and fields at Pawtucket the Great Hill of Neutaconkanut on the northwest and the town of Mashapaug on the west.

So the town of Mashapaug refers to the very large Indian community on Mashapaug that lived on that site in the early historic period.

Then came King Philip's War and one of the consequences of that war, that was a very large number of the Narragansett, particularly those living in southern Rhode Island were either killed or driven out of the area. Those who were captured at the end of the war, many of those were sent overseas to slavery or Bermuda and various other places. And many of them continued to live here. Part of the reason for that was the sachem Ninigret had been neutral during that war and therefore his lands and people weren't destroyed and the Narragansett and Niantic were very closely intermarried and interconnected and a lot of people of Narragansett background connected with the Ninigret side of the boundary managed to survive the war, but they weren't the only ones who survived it. One of the interesting things about Indian history in Rhode Island is that there were pockets of Narragansett people that survived all over Rhode Island for one reason or another that is not even very well known -- survived the war and were not exterminated or taken into captivity. One of those communities it turns out was that community at Mashapaug. My evidence for that is this:

There was an early English settler in the town of Providence called John Howland and he lived to be a very old man and he wrote his memoirs, the different things that he remembered. In his life and recollections he says the following:

The reference to the Indian tribes, the wrong impression seems to be received by many not fully conversant with the early history of New England that being that most if not all the Native Indians were exterminated or driven off to the western tribes in the war of 1675/76 whereas a great number of them never joined the hostile tribes and many others who remained neutral and joined the whites and fought on the side against their countrymen. The Sakonnet Tribe were generally allies of Colonel Church in opposition to Philip. Many of them continued to live in their own wigwams and others were hired and lived in the families of their white neighbors. So there were Sakonnets living in Little Compton, Rhode Island right up until this century and there are probably still other people of Sakonnet descent who may not live there any longer. Many of them continued to live in their own wigwams and others were hired and lived with the families of their white neighbors. There was a populous village of them near Mashapaug

Pond. This village had the first grant of land by Miantunnomi to Roger Williams formed to the western boundary, Providence Territory. The venerable Arthur Fenner, the grandfather of Governor James Fenner, governor of Rhode Island was born in Cranston in the year 1699, 23 years after the close of Philip's War. He has informed me that when (as) a young man traveling the road from his father's house to town (which is probably Plainfield Street to Westminster Street, that's my guess reconstructing his route) it was usual to meet or pass more Indians than white people along the way.

So that is interesting. Thus in the 1700's he's saying that in that area of Cranston between Mashapaug Pond and Cranston Street there were more Indians than whites living there at that time.

So, as far as I can tell history has been very quiet about who those people were, the generations that came and went. It is a very interesting question in fact as to how long that village community of Narragansett continued to persist. That is to say that historical records on this are pretty meager. We don't know a great deal about it.

Interestingly enough I recall, having lived in that area as a child that between the brewery, if you know that geography, between the Narragansett Brewery and Mashapaug Pond there was a very, very large neighborhood that was between Niantic Ave. and the pond. That neighborhood was made of largely one or two bedroom houses all mostly built by the owners, they weren't particularly elaborate houses. The streets were all paved and they were all one story or one and a half story houses with like a bedroom in the attic kind of a thing. But it was a very large community. Not knowing anything about the history of it or anything else but nevertheless to a child who simply grew up in that area and was familiar and curious about things and so forth a large number of people who lived over there were of dark colored skin, what was called in those days called colored people. And so since that's what was there I just took it as part of the way the world was, it was just part of Providence, which it was.

But then that whole community disappeared with route 10, all the urban renewal and the rest of that kind of stuff and is now an industrial zone. You see TV stations and

warehouses and God knows what. It's kind of a waste land of different types of industry. And you'd never know that anyone ever lived there or that there was this sort of village.

That the Narragansett lived there in the 20th century became clear to me in an interview with Harold and Laura Mars in the early 1980's. They had lived there for a time in the early 1940's and had this to say about it.

Harold: When we lived at Mashapug Pond there was another Indian family, down about a block, by the name of Elderkins. The Elderkins were direct descendants of the Seekonk Indians. The Seekonk Indians, of course, they lived in what is now the Wampanoag trail. It was at East Providence. There was the Weeden family who were Narragansett and a number of them are still surviving. Most of the Indian people, to my knowledge, that attended church, I've always heard them mention and use the name Pond Street Baptist Church.

Laura: The Born family; they were there too. And we was all in there together and then we were living there at that time in that same community. We moved from here during the time of the war when he (Harold) was working at Quonset Point so we went to Providence to live so to make it closer to his work place. The Born children's mother was Hattie Cheeks from the Lantern Hill Indians and she had married this man and she lived in that section. And the Cheeks were related to my mother.

Simmons: So you lived over in the Mashapug Pond area?

Laura: Yes we lived on what they call Tyler Street.

Harold: That was right off Calhoun Avenue and, in fact there's another Indian family, the Adams family. So the Adams family, the Born family, the Weeden family, the Marses lived in Mashapug Pond area.