



The True Meaning
of
Menotomy

1st revised edition

by Jim Porter

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The True Meaning of Menotomy by Jim Porter

We all know the Town of Arlington was once known as the Village of Menotomy. For more than one hundred years people have believed that, “Menotomy,” was an Algonquian word meaning, “swift, running water.” Unfortunately for more than one hundred years they’ve been wrong.

First we must examine the source of the misinformation. The earliest known reference of that meaning for Menotomy was found in the Arlington Historical Society archives by the tireless efforts of Museum Administrator Doreen F. Stevens. It is from an editorial in the *Arlington Advocate* dated June 13, 1903. It says, in part:

We met Dr. Edward Everett Hale at Lexington, Tuesday afternoon, when he asked if we knew what the word Menotomy, the original name of Arlington, meant. We did not. He tells us that he had been informed by some western Indians that the word means rapidly flowing water.

Dr. Hale’s mistake, of course, is obvious. We know today that the Massachuset who occupied present-day Arlington were of the Eastern Woodlands, and would have spoken an Algonquian language very different from any, “western Indians.”

Now, in his day, Dr. Hale was an important abolitionist, active in the Women’s Rights Movement, author of the short story *The Man Without A Country*, and boasted many other notable accomplishments. For those he should always be fondly remembered. However, it is important to remember that Dr. Hale’s error was born out of the kind of ignorance that flourished in the atmosphere of rampant racism that was so common during that bygone era. Thankfully, we no longer believe as a general consensus that all Indians are alike in language and culture. It is an indication of positive change and a sign of hope for a racially tolerant and diverse future.

Expert opinion

Dr. Frank Waabu O’Brien of the Aquidneck Indian Council in Newport, RI is one of the world’s foremost experts in the Eastern Algonquian languages. He has written books on the subject, worked as a linguist for an award-winning TV documentary about the Pequot War, and he is a member of the Abenaki Nation. When I asked his opinion of Dr. Hale’s translation he told me, “I don’t see any roots at all supporting swift, running water.”

He further stated that such errors in translation for Algonquian words are a common problem that plagues Indian place names all over Southern New England. It was popular in the 19th Century for historians to paint a romanticized picture of America’s First Nations. Amateur translators came out of the woodwork to affix poetic meanings to Indian words. Even today our society continues to propagate some of those falsehoods.

Does it fit anyway?

Upon closer inspection the translation, “swiftly flowing water,” makes little sense. The word Menotomy first referred to the river that is today called Alewife Brook. All sources indicate that the river flowed gently and the area was surrounded by meadows. The water wasn’t swiftly running at all. It was a lazy river.

There have been many reports throughout the years that Menotomy referred to what is today Mill Brook and those reports are also in error. It is true that during glacial times the water that flowed through our valley was a torrent. But in a land deed marked by Squaw Sachem in the 1630's Mill Brook was described then as, “the little runnet that cometh from Capt. Cook’s mills.” It was not Wenotomies River.

So we can safely conclude that the derivation of, “Menotomy,” has no connection whatsoever with swiftly flowing water. We clearly see the cause of the misinformation, and we have an authoritative opinion to back it up. It is time to amend the record, end the propagation of a myth, and let history finally reflect the truth.

Linguistic roots

From as early as 1637 historical records have indicated dozens of various spellings for the word, “Menotomy.” That is the strongest evidence that the word is indeed indigenous in derivation. The Algonquian languages were polysynthetic meaning a single word has many parts. One Algonquian word often carried the full meaning of an entire English phrase or sentence. The words had particularly complex structures. The early English settlers did their best to spell the words as they heard them creating the wide variety of spellings. Not only did pronunciations differ from person to person but how those pronunciations were heard and interpreted was also different.

The Massachuset language contained combinations of sounds that the English alphabet was inadequate to convey. The language contained surds, or unvoiced consonants, nasal vowels, and compound consonants for which there were no English equivalents. As a result there are always multiple Eastern Algonquian pronunciations possible for any given English vowel, and even several possible pronunciations of many consonant sounds.

We must also consider the indifference with which many of those early record-keepers might have regarded Indian words. They thought of the Indians as savages. Our Puritan fathers would often sell Indians into slavery as punishment for crimes or merely to pay off debt. In far too many cases Indians were kidnaped and sold into slavery. Indian slaves were often shipped to the West Indies where they lived their entire lives in servitude.

Therefore, when considering those early records, one must never forget that they were most likely written by the hand of a man who considered the Indian to be inferior – a wild beast that required taming. Such a man would show little respect for the language of what he perceived to be savages. Yet, today we have little choice but to look to that same careless hand for guidance in learning about the Massachuset language. It is the only surviving record.

The different spellings

The most glaring spelling difference in the word, “Menotomy,” gleaned from the earliest records, was in the first letter. In some documents the word begins with a, “W.” In other documents, it begins with an, “M.” It might simply be a difference in interpretation. The language would have been particularly foreign to the ears of the English. Today, from what we understand about the Algonquian languages of the Eastern Woodlands, we know that, “M,” was often perceived as a surd, or unvoiced consonant sound. “W,” and, “M,” were sometimes interchanged in the early English writings of Indian words.

However, there could be another explanation. The First Peoples simply did not name places in the same fashion as the Europeans. To the First Nation the world around them belonged to everyone, and rather than naming places they instead described them. Sometimes the descriptions were based on land features, other times they were based on the resources that could be found there. Still other times they might name a place based on how the area was important to them.

For example, their place names consisted of translations like, “at that place where we spear fish,” or, “at the big hill by the banks of the pond,” or, “where we ford at the wading place.” Because of the inherent phraseology, the word could be formed slightly differently and still retain the same meaning for Native speakers. But to the English ear, the same place name seemed to be pronounced differently at different times – even by the same Native speaker.

The language of our First Nation contained various sounds for which there was no equivalent in the English alphabet. Many of the early English writers created their own arbitrary methods for notating those unique sounds. In almost all cases no evidence was left behind of what method any of those writers used. The few records that do exist offer mere glimpses into the vast language of the Massachuset.

Add to that mix all of the various Eastern Algonquian dialects that existed in Southern New England at the time and you’ve got one big language stew. The languages of our Native Americans were as diverse as those of Europe. For example, the dialect of Tuscany differs from that of Sicily, but they are both Italian. Travel some distance and you’re soon in a different country where they speak a whole other language. It was much the same for our First Nations.

Is it land or is it water?

The next difficulty in deciphering the word from our earliest records is that sometimes the entry, “Menotomy,” referred to a land area. But most often, by far, it referred to present-day Alewife Brook. In the earliest land deed marked by Squaw Sachem herself the boundary is called, “Wenotomies Ryver.” However that, in itself, presents a bit of a problem.

Adding, “River,” as a second word was a distinctly English thing to do. The Native Americans would not have called it, “Wenotomies River.” If that was truly the name of the river then the phraseology within the single word, “Wenotomies,” would have imparted the meaning of a river implicitly. As we learned from Dr. Hale’s error no such Algonquian roots are found in the word.

It likely does not refer to water rapidly flowing or otherwise. So it's logical to conclude that Wenotomies might instead refer to the area through which the river flowed rather than the river itself.

Therefore, one must also consider that the, "S," on the end of Wenotomies could have been an English possessive. If one was referring in English to the river that flows through an area called, "Wenotomy," one might call it, "Wenotomy's River." English possessives or pluralizations can often be found on the ends of many Indian words. It was but one of the many ways the Algonquian languages were anglicized.

Despite all of the difficulties, however, we can still do our best to examine the linguistic roots of the word. We can compare it to other Eastern Algonquian words that have been translated and try to find some similarities with Menotomy.

Could it be fish?

There have been a couple of reports throughout the years that Menotomy might refer to the abundant alewife found in present-day Alewife Brook. The famed Maine folklorist Fannie Hardy Eckstrom wrote in her 1941 book *Indian Place Names of the Penobscot Valley and Maine Coast*:

The root MADAMES means alewives.

Most certainly, that root is strikingly similar to Menotomy. We know from early land deeds that Squaw Sachem reserved a fishing weir for her people just above the Mystic Lakes where the alewives would have been abundant each spring. Certainly no one can deny that, if it were true, the name change from Wenotomies River to Alewife Brook would have been a natural and logical progression. Even more interesting are the comparisons that can be made between, "madames," and the early land deeds which recorded the word with an, "S," such as, "Wenotomies," and, "Menotomies."

However, there are aspects of that translation that are problematic. First, we already know of various place names with roots referring to alewife. For example, along the Penobscot River in Maine you can visit a couple of places referred to as Mattamiscontis, which means, "a fishing place for alewives." But further south along the Merrimack River in Southern New Hampshire you'll find Amoskeag, which also means, "a fishing place for alewives." The difference is remarkable.

For comparison, though, I have found relevant place names a bit closer to home. There is Menameset in Hampshire County which means, "at the place where fish abound," and Menemesseck in Worcester County which means, "at the great fishing weir," or, "at the important fishing place." Disappointingly, none of those words share a striking linguistic similarity to Menotomy. They are close, but can we get closer?

Dr. O'Brien explains that the word for alewife in Massachusetts likely would've been, "aumaûog."

He also said that Penobscot and Massachuset were closely related, but still very different. Additionally, the noted professor John Charles Huden warns that to translate the word of one dialect or tribe by means of another is, “as risky as trying to use an Italian dictionary on French words.” Dr. O’Brien echoed that sentiment.

Perhaps Huden knew all along

There is a book I found in the Pequot Museum Research Library. It was commissioned by the Museum of the American Indian’s Heye Foundation and it was researched by a man named John Charles Huden. Printed in 1962, the name of the book is *Indian Place Names of New England*. Inside you will find an entry for, “Menotomy (sic) Rocks Park.”

Huden believed the park was named for a lesser Narragansett sachem that lived on Aquidneck Island, or present-day Newport, RI. His name was Wannamenotomy. You can find his name on the early land deeds from the sale of that island to the English.

According to Dr. O’Brien, his name means, “Good lookout hills.” It was said that from those hills he could watch Narragansett Bay, “where friends and foes may be coming in their canoes.” Today, those hills are a part of the Wanumetonomy Golf And Country Club.

But why a Narraganset sachem?

William Wood wrote in 1634 that the Narraganset language was quite similar to the Massachuset, and that both peoples could readily understand one another. In a conversation I had with Loren Spears of the Narragansett’s Tomaquag Indian Memorial Museum and Nuweetooun School in Exeter, RI, she confirms that such differences in dialect are still common today between tribes.

“Usually, only the ends of words are different,” she said. “For example, some of our words might end with, ‘oack,’ where in the Wampanoag language they might end with, ‘oag.’ Otherwise it is virtually the same language, and always has been.”

In the book *Understanding Algonquian Indian Words*, written by Dr. Frank O’Brien (Moondancer) and Julianne Jennings (Strong Woman) they also talk about the close relationship between the Narraganset and Massachuset languages. They do warn, however, that no two dialects are the same. But it seems safe to conclude that many words were interchangeable between those two tribes, and if not interchangeable then remarkably similar.

We also know that there was indeed many diplomatic relations between the Narraganset and Massachuset. We see various interactions throughout the primary sources between the two tribes. For example, we know Squaw Sachem’s son Wonohaquaham (named Sagamore John by the English) hosted the great Narragansett sachem Miantonimo upon his visit with the English.

Because of the strong evidence of such a close relationship between tribal federations it is not at all surprising to find a place name here in Arlington that has its roots in the Narraganset language. Furthermore, even if Menotomy was not directly named for a Narragansett sachem from

Aquidneck Island, the word certainly shares striking linguistic similarities. It is hard to argue with the fact that some of the same roots can be heard in both words.

Dr. Frank O'Brien helps clear it up

But I needed a better explanation. Something just didn't seem right. So I consulted with the Aquidneck Indian Council once again. Once again, the esteemed Dr. Frank Waabu O'Brien came to my assistance. First and foremost, he made it clear that he is not so well-acquainted with Massachusetts place names. He deferred to Huden's explanation but he offered the following clarification. He broke down the Sachem's name thusly:

Wanna (from Wunni) = Good

Mon (from Montop) = Top

Enen = Hill, Mountain

Tonomy (from Tommany) = Lookout, Observation Height

Because of the holophrastic nature of the Algonquian language, the Sachem's name could have been communicated in various ways. For example, in English we might say, "the hill that we use as a lookout," or, "the lookout place on the hill," or, "lookout hill," and they all mean exactly the same thing. The same is true of Algonquian descriptive appellations such as the Sachem's name Wannamenotomy. He could have been called, "Menotomy," or, "Monentommany," or, "Wannamonentommany," or even simply, "Tommany." In all of those forms, the translation of the Sachem's name would have remained the same and the Indians would have known exactly what the speaker was talking about.

Therefore we can conclude that a translation of, "Menotomy," in its simplest form, could very well mean, "lookout hill."

Does it make sense?

We know very little about the Massachuset who inhabited present-day Arlington. But we do know some. We know that hills were very important to them. We know that before his death in 1619 Nanepashemet was the Great Sachem of the Massachuset, and he built his homes and fortresses at the tops of hills in present-day Salem, Lynn, Marblehead, and Medford. We also know he was eventually killed at the top of what is today Rock Hill in Medford.

We know from an informative exhibit at the Pequot Museum that Algonquian tribes often clear-cut the peaks of hills to give them lookouts for defensive purposes. We know King Philip was eventually killed at the top of Montaup, or Mt. Hope, in Rhode Island. We learned earlier about one Narragansett Sachem on Aquidneck Island who was named for the very hills upon which he lived. We also know from the journals of the Puritan settlers that the Massachuset would set fires to clear the land which would presumably afford them long views.

When the first settlers arrived at Massachusetts Bay Nanepashemet's widow Squaw Sachem and her remaining people were going through very tumultuous times. They were in fear of attack by

the Tarratines, they were leery of the Narragansett, and they were wary of the English. We also know that early in the 1620's Squaw Sachem conducted raids on the Sachem of Shawmut (Boston) Obatinua, who had formed new alliances after Nanepashemet's death. Finally, we know that the land Squaw Sachem chose for herself and her people as their last home on this earth included Myopia Hill in Winchester on the present site of the Winchester Country Club.

There can be no doubt about the importance of hills to the first inhabitants of this land. Of course, hills were important strategically -- for defense. Where else would it have been safe to watch for the approach of the English? Where else might Massachusetts spies guarding the English settlements keep an eye out for King Philip's men? But it also seems to me that hills held a deeper meaning or significance to the Massachusetts -- a significance we are likely to never fully learn or understand. After all, the very name of their federation was, "Massachuset," which referred to the site of the present-day Blue Hills Reservation.

We can find other place names in Southern New England that are similar to Menotomy. We find Manaumet in Worcester County which is a Nipmuck word that has been translated as, "lookout place." We find Monomoy Island off Cape Cod -- a Wampanoag word translated as, "lookout place." There is the Wanumetonomy Golf And Country Club in Newport, RI which is named for the Narragansett sachem whose name means, "good lookout hills." Just over the border in Burrillville, RI we find a place called, "Matomy," a hill, and it is a Narragansett word meaning, "lookout place," or, "observation height." The pattern is hard to ignore. The linguistic similarities Menotomy appears to share with all of those place names is indeed compelling.

So if it is all about hills, Arlington certainly has them in abundance. Imagine Menotomy Fields and what kind of commanding views could be seen from Mt. Gilboa, or Turkey Hill, or Menotomy Rocks Park. The translation is quite plausible.

Still, I cannot escape the obvious reality that Huden's entry presents a spelling that I had not seen in any of the records. It is a spelling that not even *Menotomy Rocks Park: A Centennial History* author Don Mattheisen had ever heard before. The park was never called, "Menotonomy Rocks." The claim that the park was named for a lesser Narragansett Sachem is highly suspicious. Dr. O'Brien did tell me that Huden's book is not a bible. "It does contain known errors," he said.

But wait, there's more . . .

Trying to wrap my mind around all that I had learned so far I decided to review Huden's book once again to see if there was something I was missing. Sure enough in the very first chapter, in Professor Huden's very first guideline for translating Algonquian place names Huden instructs the reader to, "seek the original or earliest available spelling of the name."

As I mentioned the earliest known spelling of the word can be found on the land deed marked by Squaw Sachem. It reads, "Wenotomies." I wanted to see if I could find any other place names similar to Wenotomies. I flipped through Huden's book until I reached the, "W's." To my astonishment right there before my eyes was the entry, "Winotimies River, Middlesex County."

Huden wrote that Winotomies was a Natick word, which is a dialect of the Massachusetts language, and that it means, “single, deep place,” or, “solitary valley.” The only surviving son and daughter of Squaw Sachem both died at Natick. That was the site of the Praying Indian Village started by John Eliot where many of Squaw Sachem’s people were placed by the English. So the fact that it is listed as a Natick word isn’t surprising. We could be on to something. But does the translation make sense?

Is it a deep solitary valley?

Running along the northwest side of Pleasant St. (Rte. 60) is a high, rocky cliff. It is a fault line formed hundreds of millions of years ago. A number of water bodies formed at the base of that fault such as Fresh Pond, Spy Pond, Little Pond, and Claypit Pond. To the southeast and running parallel to the cliff is Wenotomies River or today Alewife Brook. It runs from Fresh Pond all the way to the Mystic River.

Now we know from Dr. Hale’s mistake that there are no roots supporting the translation of a river. The English added, “River,” to the place name. So we can presume that Wenotomies referred instead to the land area that surrounded the river. We have a pretty good idea that the area contained numerous meadows. Certainly the area is deep below the rocky overlook that looms on the other side of Spy Pond and other water bodies.

It is easy to imagine oneself in a dugout canoe drifting gently down that river with high cliffs visible on one side while floating through pristine meadows in a place called Wenotomies. It would have been a place of quiet reflection and relaxation deep below the impressive rocky cliffs that cast vast shadows each evening at sunset. It seems entirely plausible that the Indians might have indeed called it the, “deep, solitary place.”

Lookout place or deep valley, or both?

An earlier book than Huden’s, compiled by Douglas and Lithgow and printed in 1903, also contains two separate entries for our Menotomy. The book is called the *Dictionary of Indian Place Names in New England*. It appears to be the source of both Huden’s entries. Both Menotomy (sic) and Winotomies appear in the Douglas-Lithgow dictionary. No translations are given for either place name in that book, unlike Huden’s.

Has some sort of grievous error been made by Douglas and Lithgow? Was that error then repeated by Huden? Or did those men have it right and Menotomy is really two different place names melded together over time? It is certainly plausible that there was a high lookout place that was called Menotomy, and a deep valley called Wenotomies. That would perfectly describe the topography of the land. It would also explain why there seems to have been so much confusion in the records, whether it started with a, “W,” or an, “M,” and whether it ended with an, “S,” or a, “Y.”

In his book Huden acknowledges a man named Lawrence K. Gahan as his primary source for Massachusetts place names. If I was going to solve the mystery of Menotomy I had to locate Mr.

Gahan. An Internet search of his name brought up a bibliography entry for the Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society (MAS). He had written an article about translating Algonquian words back in 1959. So I was off to Middleboro, MA to visit the home of MAS, the Robbins Museum of Archaeology.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained

Before I visited the museum I corresponded via e-mail with MAS President Tonya Largy. She informed me that, sadly, Lawrence K. Gahan died many years ago. However, she said some of his notes survived and were in the possession of an MAS officer. My hopes were high.

My trip to Middleboro was delightful. The Robbins Museum collections were well worth the visit. The people working there are all wonderful. They happily showed me around the exhibits and their knowledge was vast. They were all too happy to share what they knew about Squaw Sachem and the Indians that inhabited our part of Massachusetts. The Society collections span 12,000 years and you can see thousands of artifacts from around the United States including important collections from right here in the Commonwealth.

Then I met a very pleasant fellow named Dr. Curtiss Hoffman. He told me a long, woeful tale about notes and trash collections and archives under floorboards and I'm not quite sure I completely followed the whole thing. But the gist of Dr. Hoffman's story was that most of the notes of Lawrence K. Gahan are gone. Whatever Mr. Gahan wrote down about the place name Menotomy has likely been lost forever. I had reached a dead end.

But before I left Middleboro that day I was given quite an education about the Eastern Algonquian peoples and the evidence they left behind. I drove back to Arlington with a particular appreciation for the work of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society. But the wise gentlemen I met there also left me with something else – a suggestion on where I should turn next. They recommended I contact Dr. Ives Goddard of the Smithsonian Institution. I thought it was a splendid idea.

Heading right for the top

Dr. Ives Goddard is the senior linguist at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology. He is the linguistic editor and technical editor of the Smithsonian's exhaustive series *Handbook of North American Indians*, and he is a specialist in Algonquian languages. If anyone could help us find the meaning of Menotomy it would be Dr. Goddard.

He began by bluntly stating that books such as John Charles Huden's were, "worthless." He explained, "They did not know Algonquian and merely made creative guesses on the basis of their limited vocabulary of word bits."

Dr. Goddard then informed me that there was no obvious meaning to the word Wenotomies. He went on to say that we simply do not have very much of the vocabulary of the kinds of words and

elements that were used in Southern New England place names. He explained that the problem is further exacerbated by the inadequacies and limitations of English notation in accurately representing Algonquian phonetics.

For centuries surviving Native Americans, out of self-preservation, kept much of their own knowledge of their language private. As a result of the oppression that forced Native American traditions, customs, and languages underground, great swaths of knowledge have been ripped from America's historical records. It is reprehensible, infuriating, and sad. It is truly a great loss to our country. As it turns out it is also a great loss to Arlington.

Dr. Goddard had confirmed what I had secretly feared all along – that we would never know the true meaning of Menotomy. The word bears too much English noise and represents a part of the vast amount of knowledge we are missing about the Massachuset language and dialect. It could very well be lost forever.

The saddest part of all

The saddest part of this entire tale is that we cannot visit a Massachuset Indian and ask him. We cannot hear the traditions of our Native Peoples, learn their stories, hear their histories, see their regalia, watch them dance, or hear them drum. The Massachuset is a tribal federation that has disappeared from the face of the earth. Their few surviving people were dissolved into other tribes, sold into slavery, or assimilated into colonial life.

Their descendants do live on, however. They live on as part of the Natick Praying Indians and as part of the Wampanoag Nation and Narragansett and Abenaki and Mi'Kmag and countless other tribes. Their descendants live on in Barbados and Jamaica and the Bahamas. They live on all over America and in Canada – and all over the world! Contrary to many 19th Century texts, the Indians of the Mystic Valley did not disappear. They can be found right here in our very communities.

While we may never truly know with certainty the meaning of the word Menotomy we owe it to the memory of that nearly forgotten people to carry on whatever can be learned about them. We owe it to this land's First Peoples to teach the truth about our history – that America didn't begin with the, "Shot heard 'round the world." We need to teach our children that there was an advanced civilization here before Verazanno and Columbus, before Winthrop and Bradford, before Hancock and Revere. The stories of the First Nations are as important, and as much a part of us, as any currently found in a U.S. History textbook.

It would be a great injustice indeed if we continued to perpetuate the myth that this land was somehow sold in friendship and peace to the English. While it is true that Squaw Sachem bequeathed some of our land to the infant son of Edward Gibbons, "for his many kindnesses," it would be nothing short of disingenuous to ignore the tremendous turmoil and devastation that Squaw Sachem and her people endured. It would be unfortunate if we neglected to mention, when recounting the history, that the land of the Massachuset was not really sold by choice out of peace and friendship but instead out of suffering, and by necessity, desperation, and survival.

It is remarkable that Squaw Sachem retained her title as, “Queene of Mistick,” until her death around 1650. It is a testament to her strength as a leader and to the respect with which everyone – Indian and English alike – regarded her. It is most notable that Squaw Sachem thrived as a female leader a full 200 years before the founding of the Women’s Rights Movement. Few male leaders could ever endure the hardships she faced. Squaw Sachem was a woman of tremendous strength and courage who helped her people persevere against all odds. She deserves to claim her rightful place as the first great female leader in the history of America.

In conclusion

Despite hours of research I still have more questions than I have answers. But that’s not to say that I failed. I learned so much more than I could ever have hoped. I immersed myself in the lives of those fascinating people. I felt, as much as anyone can with their imagination, all of the pain and sorrow as their heart-wrenching story slowly unfolded before me at various libraries around Southern New England. I still feel compelled to know more, and even more compelled to share what I have learned so far.

The tragic story of our First Nation needs to be told, and retold, and passed on so future generations will know the truth and learn from the past. It is a story as important to us as the Massachusetts Bay Colony or Plimoth Plantation or Lexington and Concord or Gettysburg or the Battle of the Bulge or Vietnam. It is like any other chapter in our history – it is a part of who we are. The direct results of their tragic history can still be seen in our communities today. It can be found on poverty-stricken reservations and in financially-struggling tribal nations. It echoes through the remnants of racism that still plagues our society. It is proven by a clear pattern of statistical evidence that some people are born with a distinct disadvantage in a country that promises equal opportunity for all.

The next time someone asks if you know what Menotomy means, tell them how important the hills of Arlington were to the great Queene of Mystick, the Squaw Sachem of the good people of the Massachuset. Tell them about the dugout canoes that drifted down the gentle river winding through pristine meadows in peaceful solitude near a place called Wenotomies. Tell them all about how our First Nation suffered and endured, persevered through unfathomable adversity, and then remind them that the story of the Massachuset are a part of who we are.

While there remains absolutely no doubt that the translation, “swiftly flowing water,” is in error and needs to be corrected, we do not have a translation to take its place. Symbolic of the sad story of this land’s First Nation itself, and also of the great mystery of Squaw Sachem’s true name, the translation of Menotomy has been lost – suppressed into oblivion. The language is extinct and incompletely known. It is likely the word will never be accurately translated with certainty.

Timeline of Squaw Sachem's Land

1575?-1585? – Nanapashemet and Squaw Sachem are born.

1590?-1607? – Nanapashemet becomes the great Chief Sachem of the Massachuset. He is the head of a federation that encompasses many tribes and villages and stretches roughly from the Charles River northward to New Hampshire, and from Boston Bay to the Connecticut River in the West.¹ At the height of his power Nanapashemet is able to summon 3,000 warriors.² His main residence is near present-day Salem. He has fortresses in Salem, Marblehead, Lynn, Medford, and probably elsewhere.³

1600?-1608? – Nanapashemet and Squaw Sachem are married and she gives birth to their first son Wonohaquaham, later known as Sagamore John.

1607 – Competition over fur-trading with French settlers in present-day Maine sparks the Tarratines War between the Tarratines (Mi'Kmag) and Penobscots.⁴

1609 – Squaw Sachem gives birth to Montowampate, later known as Sagamore James.⁵

1614? – Squaw Sachem gives birth to their only daughter Yawate, later known as Abigail.

1615 – Eight years after war breaks out the Penobscot Grand Sachem is killed along with his wife and children by the Tarratines. Nanepashamet sends a war party in defense of the Penobscot. His war party is successful killing many Tarratine warriors and they return home with several women and children taken as prisoners.⁶ The women are likely given as gifts to powerful sachems of neighboring tribes, quite possibly the Narragansett of present-day Rhode Island, as well as influential sub-sachems in Nanepashemet's domain.⁷

1615-1617 - The Tarratines strike back with fierce raiding parties and they decimate the coastal allies of the Massachuset, including the Wampanoag.⁸ All tribes in the area move inland, become unsettled and fearful, and move from place to place.⁹

Nanapashemet moves from his coastal home near Salem to what likely is his traditional winter hunting and fishing grounds along the Mystic River in present-day Medford. He constructs an elaborate palisade for himself on Rock Hill in Medford so that one must not only cross a bridge over a moat to get inside but also climb a ladder.¹⁰ He sends his wife and 4 children to an unknown tribe within his domain somewhere far inland.¹¹

1616 – Squaw Sachem gives birth to her youngest son Wenepoykin, later known as Sagamore George, George Rumney-Marsh, and No-Nose.¹² The birth likely takes place not long before Squaw Sachem goes into hiding.¹³

1617 - A devastating plague sweeps across Massachuset country and Nanapashemet loses 75%-95% of his people.¹⁴ But because he is so isolated inland inside his fortress he is spared from the disease.¹⁵ Also, because Squaw Sachem and her children are in hiding so far inland, it is likely that is why they are also spared from the disease.

1618 - Having escaped the pestilence of 1617 the Narragansett look to extend their power. Reduced in numbers the surviving tribes of the area put up no defense. Most tribes immediately submit in vassalage to the two Chief Sachems of the Narragansett, including Massasoit (who would later ally with the Pilgrims at Plymouth). The Narragansett reach the height of their power, able to summon some 30,000 warriors.¹⁶

1619 - The Tarratines finally find Nanapashemet and kill him in his palisade at Medford.¹⁷

1620 - Nanepashemet's wife returns with her four children. Since none of the boys are old enough to rule custom dictates that Nanepashemet's wife should take over as, "Squaw Sachem."¹⁸ Sadly, we do not know her true name and only know her by title. We know of several other, "Squaw Sachems," that existed all over Southern New England – Awasaunks, Weetamoo, etc. – so it is not a unique title.

1621 – Only four tribes remain loyal to Squaw Sachem and she conducts raids on former members of her husband's federation in an attempt to regain power.¹⁹ She inflicts fear upon Obatinua – the sachem of present-day Boston who has created a new alliance with the sachem of present-day Weymouth, Chikataubut. They call themselves the Massachuset.²⁰

Obatinua meets the Pilgrims. He tells them that although he lives in Massachuset territory he is loyal to Massasoit. He also tells them that Squaw Sachem is his enemy and that he best not linger in one place too long for fear of the Tarratines.²¹

Massasoit meets the Pilgrims at Plymouth. They sign a peace treaty and forge an alliance. Massasoit is said to have, "a potent adversary – the Narragansetts – that are at war with him."²²

Obatinua, Chikataubut, and 7 other sachems sign a treaty of amity with the Pilgrims for protection. They are reportedly fearful of Squaw Sachem.²³ It is likely the fear of Squaw Sachem, the Tarratines, the Narragansetts, as well as the devastating plagues that have reduced their numbers, that caused these sachems to ask for protection from the English.

1622-1623 – Squaw Sachem places her sons in power at each of the villages that remain loyal to her. Her domain stretches roughly from Charlestown, to Concord, to Marblehead. She continues raids on disloyal villages and tribes from her late husband’s former domain.²⁴

Sagamore George, aka Wenepoykin, the youngest, becomes sachem of Naumkeag at 8 years old. It is likely a family member helped him rule until he was old enough.²⁵

Sagamore James, aka Monowampate, becomes sachem of Saugus at 13 years old.²⁶

Sagamore John, aka Wonohaquaham, becomes sachem of Mishawum, or present-day Charlestown.²⁷

As is customary when a sachem dies, Squaw Sachem marries her husband’s Pauwau (Physician) named Webcowit.²⁸ The marriage appears only a formality, however, as Squaw Sachem seems to continue to retain her power. The exact date of their marriage is unknown.

1623 - Edward Gibbons migrates from England and lands in the Bay of Massachusetts on the ship of Captain Robert Gorges, who intends to settle just north of present-day Weymouth. After just a few months Gorges returns to England, but Gibbons stays.²⁹

1625 – Present-day Quincy is the site of Merry-Mount. It is a trading post owned by a man named Thomas Morton, a spot where much merry-making is taking place. They have beer, rum, and cider. They display their drums and guns. They even erect a may-pole and dance around singing a lewd song in one of the earliest known May Day celebrations in America.³⁰ Englishmen and Indian women are said to be, “dancing and frisking together,” and are described as, “madd Bachinalians.”³¹

Squaw Sachem, a regular visitor to Merry Mount, meets Edward Gibbons of Boston, a member of the trading post. They would be close friends for an unknown number of years. Squaw Sachem’s disposition mellows considerably, and she never again conducts raids.³²

1627 – Governor William Bradford of Plymouth Bay colony becomes angered at the, “great licenciousness,” of the goings-on at Merry Mount. He calls Morton the, “Lord of misrule over a school of atheism.” Bradford also feared Morton and his men were trading firearms to the Indians for furs.³³ Morton is eventually arrested, exiled to England, and Merry Mount is burned to the ground.³⁴

Wonohoquahan (Sagamore John) gives the English permission to settle on present-day Charlestown.³⁵ He is said to be, “of gentle and good disposition.”³⁶

1628 – As the settlement of Charlestown is being built, Squaw Sachem, her son Wonohaquaham (Sagamore John) and Webcowit come down from their home in the woods to view the work of the Englishmen. She gazes curiously upon each household implement, and they are fascinated by the tools and the buildings made of timbers.³⁷

1629 – An Indian village of wigwams exists on the north side of the North River, near the corner of present-day North and Osborne Streets in Salem. It is the only Indian settlement in original Salem that can be identified from early colonial records.³⁸ Squaw Sachem's son Wenepoykin (Sagamore George), is sachem of this territory at about 14-years-old.³⁹

During the organization of the Salem church in August, Edward Gibbons is called, “a gentleman of quality,” and, “he was no debauchee, but of a jocund temper, and one of the Merry Mount Society.” Gibbons repents and converts on the spot,⁴⁰ and from this point forward becomes a distinguished, important, and influential political and military leader – and businessman – in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

1630 – Edward Gibbons is admitted as inhabitant of Charlestown.⁴¹

Wonohaquaham (Sagamore John) and his brother Sagamore James (Montowampate) are said to command no more than 30 or 40 men.⁴²

1631 - Edward Gibbons marries a young woman named Margaret.⁴³ They would have five sons.⁴⁴ Margaret would survive him.⁴⁵

Late this year, Edward Gibbons is admitted to Boston Church.⁴⁶

1633 – A smallpox epidemic ravages all the tribes of Southern New England. Just as Squaw Sachem's people start to recover from the terrible plague of 1617, this epidemic decimates their numbers once again. Wonohaquaham (Sagamore John) and Sagamore James (Montowampate) both die from smallpox. Wenepoykin (Sagamore George) survives, but he is disfigured from the disease's terrible ulcers. He is called, “No-Nose,” by many from this point forward.⁴⁷

1637 – Squaw Sachem and Webcowit deed to Jotham Gibbons, (oldest son of Edward Gibbons, who was 3 years old at this time) upon her death all the land she reserved for herself. “This I do without seeking to of him or any of his; but I receiving many kindnesses of them, am willing to acknowledge their many kindnesses by this small gift to their son.”⁴⁸

Squaw Sachem and Webcowit receive 36 schillings from Edward Gibbons for, “the land between the Charlestowne and Wenotomies River.”⁴⁹

The Town of Charlestown reimburses Edward Gibbons 36 schillings, “which he paid to the Indians for the ground near Wenotomies.”⁵⁰

1639 – Squaw Sachem and Webcowit deed to the Town of Charlestown a large tract of land that includes part of present-day Arlington for the sum of 21 coats, 19 fathom of wampum, and 3 bushels of corn. She reserves a large parcel of land bordering the west side of the Mystic Lakes for her use until her death, and also for the use of the Indians for planting, hunting, and fishing, “while the Squaw liveth.”⁵¹

1640 – Squaw Sachem and Webcowit sign another deed confirming that the land west of the Mystic Lakes, reserved for herself until her death, is bequeathed to Jotham Gibbons, and it further explains that it is not part of the land deeded to the Town of Charlestown.⁵²

1643 – Edward Gibbons is by now an extremely successful entrepreneur and co-owner of several ships. His ships are hired to sail north to fight for Charles La Tour in the battle over Acadia. La Tour legally bonds Gibbons’ ships.⁵³

1644 – Squaw Sachem, along with four other sachems, signs a Treaty of Submission with the English, agreeing to place her land and her people under the jurisdiction of the government of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.⁵⁴

1645 – La Tour is defeated at Acadia and cannot pay the bond on Edward Gibbons’ ships. It ruins Edward Gibbons financially.⁵⁵ He sells off most of his vast land-holdings over the next several years.⁵⁶

1647 – Webcowit begins taking an active interest in the Englishmen’s efforts to Christianize his countrymen. He asks the Englishmen why they have been 27 years in his land and never taught them to know God before then. “Had you done it sooner,” he says, “we might have known much of God by this time, and much sin might have been prevented, but now some have grown old in sin.” The Englishmen answer by telling him, “You were not willing to hear until now, and God had not turned their hearts till then.”⁵⁷

1649 – Edward Gibbons is named Major-General of the Massachusetts Militia.⁵⁸

1650 – Although it isn’t known for certain, this appears to be the year Squaw Sachem dies. She is likely buried somewhere in present-day Medford, believed to be along the west side of Grove Street overlooking the Mystic Lakes.⁵⁹

Edward Gibbons, in financial straits, claims the land for his son Jotham, who at this time is living in Bermuda and is heavily in debt himself. A man named Capt. Samuel Scarlett purchases the mortgage.⁶⁰

1650? – 1675 – The remaining remnants of Squaw Sachem’s family and people are sent to the Praying Indian Village of Natick where they settle for many years.⁶¹

1654 – Major-General Edward Gibbons dies in December of this year.⁶²

1658 – Edward Gibbons' wife Margaret dies in September. Jotham Gibbons dies in December in Bermuda at 25 years of age.⁶³

Capt. Samuel Scarlett, who holds the mortgage on Jotham's land, becomes the rightful owner. He leases the land to a man named Thomas Gleason, who begins to inhabit the property.⁶⁴

1662 – A lawsuit filed on behalf of the citizens of Charlestown lays claim to Squaw Sachem's land, "at present possessed and improved by Thomas Gleason."⁶⁵

On behalf of Capt. Scarlett, who is likely out to sea, Thomas Gleason fights in court for the land.⁶⁶

1663 – It is late in this year that a judgment is finally made in the court case over Squaw Sachem's land, and it is favorable to Capt. Samuel Scarlett who retains ownership rights.⁶⁷

1665 – Capt. Scarlett evicts Thomas Gleason after a dispute over some felled trees.⁶⁸

1675 – Following an explosion aboard his ship, Captain Samuel Scarlett dies. He bequeaths Squaw Sachem's land to Love, the only daughter of Jotham Gibbons.⁶⁹

Angered by decades of losses in court over land claims all over his family's former domain, Wenepoykin (Sagamore George) joins with the Wampanoag in King Philip's War.⁷⁰

As King Philip's War heats up, Squaw Sachem's family is removed from Natick and interned on Deer Island. Conditions are so deplorable that only 40% survive the ordeal. Despite that two men from Squaw Sachem's family aid the English in King Philip's War acting as guides and spies. Their assistance helps to bring a quick end to the war.⁷¹

1676 – Wenepoykin (Sagamore George) is taken prisoner, sold into slavery, and shipped to Barbados.⁷²

1684 – Wenepoykin (Sagamore George) returns from Barbados and lives with a relative at the Praying Indian Village at Natick. He dies later this year with his sister Yawate (Abigail) by his side. Yawate (Abigail) would also die in that same wigwam at Natick within a couple of years.⁷³

1706 – Squaw Sachem's land is divided equally among Love Gibbons' children, who later sell their shares.⁷⁴

And with that the land that is today Arlington loses its connection with its former owner the Queene of Mistick, the Squaw Sachem of the Massachuset.

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