

# Explorations into the Indigenous History of Danvers Area

With Mary Ellen Lepionka



Our mission is to  
educate and preserve the  
rich heritage of Salem  
Village and Danvers

Below is further information based on the Q&A Session immediately following a live presentation by  
Mary Ellen Lepionka

in Tapley Memorial Hall, Danvers Massachusetts, July 20, 2022

which can be found on our YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAOqSvGg6hA1kyLx9pRitbQ>

## 1. On the authenticity of Mystery Hill

This site originally was an Indigenous ceremonial stone landscape. It has been difficult to authenticate and interpret today, because from colonial times to the present it has been repeatedly disturbed.

## 2. About Algonquian place names

Names such as Tomahawk St., Indian Hill, Sagamore Golf Course, Arrowhead Ln., Masconomet Park, and the like are ethnolinguistic clues to the locations of areas occupied by or significant to Indigenous peoples in the past. Such clues are essential because Coastal Massachusetts towns typically lack references to "Indians", in a process known as "Erasure."

In Gloucester town records, for example, only two references exist in minutes of selectmen's meetings. In 1682 the selectmen voted to ask the townspeople to distinguish between strange Indians (displaced persons following King Philip's War) and "the ones who live among us." In 1684 the selectmen voted to ask the townspeople to "refrain from vigilantism" against "the Indians who live among us." There is no other record of the lives of Indigenous people on Cape Ann or what happened to them.

The few Algonquian place names we still have survived in part because the colonists kept them for use in authenticating their deeds to Indian land.

## 3. How arrowheads are found

Artifacts often are found eroding out of the surface, on river banks or sand dunes, for example, or are brought up in plows or construction sites. Such finds have limited value for reconstructing the history of a place and a people because they are out of their cultural context. When a likely site is located because of the density of artifacts or historical reference, archaeological excavations are done scientifically in grids with each square taken out centimeter by centimeter and mapped at each stage. It's very detail-oriented work, and locating the sites is a real project.

Dave McKenna reports that most of the collections in Danvers come from farmers plowing their fields. For anyone interested, a real excavation will take place at the Rebecca Nurse House later in the fall of 2022 in connection with the Sails and Trails program. The public will be invited to observe and possibly participate in the dig.

#### **4. Rivalries among the Indians**

The Algonquians had traditional enmities and military alliances. For example, the Pawtucket had periodic warfare with their eastern enemies, the Tarrantines, and their western enemies, the Mohawks. Wars of vengeance, the practice of raiding, and the role of warriorhood were part of their culture. The idea that the Indigenous people were "peaceful" is as much a stereotype as the idea that they were "warlike".

They were people. Masconomet probably fielded disputes about which family got which part of the river as their subsistence resource area, just as colonists' earliest court cases involved boundary disputes and complaints about fences and trespasses.

#### **5. About shell heaps**

Shell middens are an important archaeological resource. They contain things other than the remains of meals, such as teeth, animal bones, and broken pots and tools. Garbage archaeology is a specialty. Even in historical archaeology, if you can locate a refuse pit, it's the first thing to excavate because of all the things you can learn about people from what they discard. Wheeler's Point in Gloucester and Little Neck in Ipswich are land masses created as shellheaps by Indigenous people.

Dave McKenna identified local shell middens in Danvers. According to the late local historian, Robert Osgood, when the area behind the Holten Richmond schools was filled and graded to create Plains Park, several large shell middens were covered with several feet of fill, so Early Americans were living and gathering shellfish in that area. It is not known to me if there was ever any excavation or study of those middens.

#### **6. About Penobscot visitors to Danvers**

After the Pawtucket diaspora, their traditional Tarrantine enemies, especially the Micmac, seasonally occupied some of their coastal sites, going dock to dock to sell baskets, brooms, and herbal remedies to the English. Penobscot also visited Cape Ann. They may have been descendants of the Pawtucket who lived on Cape Ann who had found refuge with their sometime former enemies in Maine and assimilated there.

A Penobscot party visiting Gloucester in 1860 helped to put out the great fire that burned much of the city that year. Most of the men were at sea fishing, and it was the women and the Indians who put out the fire. The Penobscot received praise for this, but a letter to the editor in the town paper later suggested that the Indians had started the fire so as to be seen helping to put it out, in order to be in the town's good graces. "Indian mischief" was a racist theme from colonial times.

Indigenous groups visiting traditional homelands and sacred sites in New England coastal towns was reported in the society pages of town newspapers until around 1830. President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act was passed that year. After 1860 some groups again made pilgrimages to traditional sites, unannounced, and they still do.

Dave McKenna spoke about the loss of language and culture following the diaspora. He referred to the translation of the Bible into Massachusset, which the Wampanoag have used to help reconstruct and revive their native language.

The Danvers Historical Society is eager to learn about, and preserve the stories of all the People who have called these hills and valleys home; not just those who came from the Old World over the past 400 years, but also the Naumkeag and Agawam Peoples and those who inhabited these lands for at least 10,000 years, whose names are lost to History, who cherished this land we call "Danvers", as much as we do. They are ALL an intregal part of our Story.

And they are still here, and are our neighbors, with their own story to tell us.

*~ Compiled by Mary Ellen Lepionka and David McKenna*