

What Happened to the Wangunks?

by Doris Sherrow, December 1999

The Wangunk were a strong, resourceful people. Last month's column showed their daily interaction with the early Portland community; this month we will look at the events which marked the early decades of their reservation in Portland.

In 1650, Connecticut's **Governor Haynes** issued a proclamation assuring the Wangunk that they would have the riverbend area of the Connecticut for a reservation. The General Assembly concurred in October, 1664: "Ahere was a parcel of land at Wonggum reserved for the posterity of Sowheage."

Englishmen began to settle Middletown in 1646. Before very long, they realized that they wanted the valuable riverbank and meadow on the other side of the "Great River." Around 1670, the Middletown **Town Votes Book** noted an offer to the Wangunk of other undivided lands "of equal value." But the Wangunk knew that there were no other lands of equal value: much of the undivided land consisted of Meshomasick Mountain, capable of growing little but rattlesnakes. They held their ground-quite literally!-and in 1673, the Middletown Proprietors granted to thirteen Wangunk Proprietors the land that Haynes had promised them, a small parcel on Indian Hill Avenue, and a larger parcel going from Gildersleeve back to the present day **Quarry Ridge Golf Course**.

In 1675, war broke out between the colonists in Massachusetts and the Wampanoag Indians under **King Philip**. The Narragansetts, traditional allies of the Wangunk, sided with Philip, but the Wangunk seem not to have wanted war. "The Wongham have showed willingness to dwell peaceably in our towns..." remarked the General Assembly. They were to "set their wigwams where the authority appoints...[to be under] English watch and ward [and] not to go forth without Lycense from the Authority ..." Furthermore, the Wangunk were to "engage in friendship [and] be enemies of our enemies." To this end, the civilized, God-fearing English offered them "two yards of cloth for every head of our enemies ... four yeards [sic] if alive."

The Wangunk must have been in Portland by this time, but several notations in the **1675-76 Colonial Records** show that no white men were in this area yet: all along the river from East Windsor down to Glastonbury, a house in each town on the east side was picked to be fortified, so that in the event of attack, settlers could retreat to it. This fortification may have involved a brick or stone lower story, or simply walls around the property. No house in "East Middletown" was so fortified, meaning that no English settlers were living in Portland until at least the 1680s.

Beginning in 1691, individual Wangunks began to sell parcels of land, usually no more than an acre, to the settlers. The earliest deeds were for meadow land, probably for farming, rather than houselots. In their deeds the Wangunk often explained their claim to the land, sometimes giving their ancestry in order to justify their ownership. **Towwehashque Sunck Squa**, for example, who sold that first piece of meadowland to John Clark in 1691, stated that she was the daughter of **Sowheage**, to whom Haynes had vouchsafed the reservation.

There is no indication in these deeds that the English were taking advantage of their native neighbors. Land prices ran about the same, and, except for the Indians' genealogy notes, which the English didn't usually include, there were no differences between the Indian-to-English deeds and the English-to-English deeds.

The degree of their input on their land sales becomes obvious in a 1717 deed for six acres sold to a prosperous Middletown mariner named **Giles Hall**. The lot was located at what is today the northeast corner of Main and Summer streets. The Wangunk included a right-of-way for the highway that would become Summer Street. In the deed, they described it as running from the brook which gurgles near Summer and Prospect streets, out toward Main Street, that is, from their vantage point inside the reservation, OUT toward the white man's main street! Had the words of this deed been put in their mouths by whites, the description of that road would have run from Main Street into the Wangunk territory.

There may have been unrest among the Wangunk. In 1726, several of the Wangunk filed with the town clerk a record of their descent from the Wangunk Proprietors of the 1673 deed. They were descended from **Wesumsha** and **Pewampskin**. One of the most common names in the

surviving Wangunk documents is "**Cuschoy**," used by itself, with Sr. and Jr., and with English names such as Moses, Tom, and Benjamin. The Cuschoy were descended from **Robin**, also called "**Doctor Robbin**." It seems as if the Cuschoy were overpowering the other descendants of the Proprietors, hence the nervous assertion of their inherited ownership by these several Wangunk.

Yet in many ways, the Wangunk participated in the life of the community. In the 1720S and 1730s, they assisted in laying out the eastern parts of Bartlett and William streets, and the section of High Street between them. They supplied the land, and in the case of part of High and William streets, they supplied one of the surveyors, Cuschoy.

Several of the deeds from various Wangunk tribe members refer to the buyer's occupation: Samuel Cotton, "Housewright," Francis Whitmore, "Taylor," and Ebenezer Prout, "physitian." This implies that the Wangunk were availing themselves of the services of these men.

It is hard to say what sort of problem it was to be a young, developing town with an Indian reservation smack dab in the middle of your territory. Last month's description of the Wangunk was intended to convey what appears to be a definite good-neighbor interaction between the two cultures. By the 1730s, there seem to have been forces which wanted the Wangunk Reservation out of the heart of Portland.