

Who Were The Wangunk?

by Doris Sherrow, November 1999

The land where you live was probably farmed or fished or hunted by the Wangunk Indians three hundred years ago.

The picture of the **Wangunk** that emerges from the scraps of historical sources shows a strong, enterprising people, fully the intellectual equal of the invading English. Probably they lived much like the **Mashantucket Pequot Museum's Pequot Village**, in harmony with nature, constructively occupied with the many tasks necessary to their survival. They fished when the fish ran, hunted when the deer came, and harvested plants for myriad uses as food, medicine, clothing, or artifacts.

By the later 1600s, they were using the English calendar, and often signing deeds with an initial or symbol. At least three could write their names. In addition, their deeds are genuinely chatty with historical and genealogical detail: "I have been Lawfully Seized thereof Ever Since ye old Indian warr..." "until it comes to the Indian Corner tree by the Meeting House..." "from said Robbins it descended to my grandmother who was sd Robbins daughter and from her to my uncle James ..."

Their reservation consisted of two pieces. The smaller piece was about 30 acres, flanking Indian Hill Avenue, and running down to the Connecticut River. The larger piece, about 250 acres, ran east from the rear property lines of the houses along Main Street between Summer and William streets, as far as where Center Cemetery is now. **Tom Robbin**, a Wangunk, described the two pieces in 1741 as "Indian land in the Woods" and "Indian Hill by the River." On the northwest side of the Indian Hill piece was the "Hot House Lot." The "Hot House" was a hollow on the bank of the Connecticut River, near the end of Indian Hill Avenue. It would have been covered by animal skins, then heated by stones from the fire, in sauna fashion, perhaps for the cure of various diseases, perhaps for ritual, or even simple enjoyment. After sweating a while, the Indian would rush into the cold waters of the Connecticut to drive away the evil spirits, or maybe just to cool off.

Indian Hill was also a burial ground. As late as the 1870s, a tombstone stood there which read, "Here lies the body of John Onekous who died August the 30th 1722, aged 26 years." Skeletons were discovered there throughout the 1800s. One house, built in the mid-1800s, did not have a cellar for a century, because the builder encountered so many bones! A less-superstitious 20th century owner finally dug out the cellar and reinterred the bones elsewhere.

In 1728, Bartlett Street was extended east into the Wangunk reservation. The customary way to lay out a highway was to appoint a team of three farmers familiar with both surveying and with the land. The team of surveyors for this project were **William Cornwell**, who lived in the meadow on Glastonbury Turnpike, Nathaniel Savage who lived in a house which stood at or near 609 Main Street, and "**Cuschoy** in behalf of ye other Indians." The fact that an official from the Wangunks would be included strongly suggests that the Wangunks were considered quite capable by their neighbors.

They were probably involved in many community activities. A diary entry from 1702 notes an Indian named Sicient delivering a tombstone for Rebecca Minor to her family in Stonington-Portland's stone carver **James Stanclift** had hired him for that job.

More tales of the Wangunks come from the story of **Rev. Richard Treat**, who attempted to establish a school for Indian children in 1734. He got a dozen or so pupils in the four months of the school's existence, stopping after that time for lack of money or help. Deploring their ignorance of Scripture, Christian morality, and the English language, he noted with chagrin that he had to "appeal to their principles of morality and natural religion" in order to win his arguments. He failed to see the cultural strength implicit in that statement-obviously they had a system of morality which could be used to explain Judaeo-Christian principles!

Probably the Indians tolerated Treat and his stories as they would a child. On one occasion, as he was telling them of resurrection, one savage pointed jestingly to a dead pig waiting by the fire to be roasted, and inquired if it would rise from the dead. After much debate, Treat finally felt that he had verbally vanquished the Indian.

The summer after the attempted school, a tribal leader died, and there was a loud funeral

ceremony for several days which Treat felt it was his duty to stop. He interfered persistently but the Indians fended him off until they had finished the ceremony. Then he was allowed to preach for a while and they went quietly home, leaving Treat thinking that he had shown them the error of their ways.

In 1747, a **Job Bates** and his new wife, **Faith**, moved to Portland from Ware, Massachusetts. Bates was a blacksmith, which made him useful to the boat building industry on Indian Hill, but also probably intrigued the Indians, as well. The white man's metal objects were among his nicest attributes! From all appearances, the Wangunks allowed Bates to take up residence on the northwest corner of Main Street and Indian Hill Avenue. Eventually he came to own a still and a "cyder press," which also no doubt served to endear him to the Wangunks. When the English petitioned finally in the late 1750s to buy the reservation, Bates added his own line: "through mistake I have set my house on it." This 1 ½ story Cape Cod style "mistake" was over a decade old by that time.

Ebenezer White, who lived at 582 Main Street, charged **Benoni Brown** for 36 feet of board in April of 1755. Brown had used it to build coffins for three members of the Wangunk tribe, all of whom were still quite alive! **Tom Cuschoy**, his wife, and fellow tribesman **Jo Simon** apparently purchased the great wooden boxes which the whites were so anxious to use for burials. It wasn't a bad idea, to provide a little wooden house for the body on its long trip, and they probably made handy storage chests in the meantime!

In 1765, the Wangunk sold what remained of their reservation. Only a few older members of the tribe were still living in Portland. The younger people had gone off to Farmington, to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, or even further west. But the tribe members visited town yearly until the 1830s, gathering at the home of **Old Betty**, probably on Penny Corner Road.