

# What Happened to the Wangunks?

(Part 2)

by Doris Sherrow, December 1999

**The Wangunk Indians and early settlers of Portland** seem to have gotten along quite well. **James Stancliff** hired a brave named **Sacient** to deliver gravestones. The tribe welcomed **Giles Hall, Job Bates, Richard Strickland**, and others onto their land as fellow farmers and hunters. **Cuschoy** helped two local officials lay out part of High Street. So what happened to induce the Wangunk to leave Portland?

From all appearances, there were two main factors. First, younger Wangunks began to move out of the area, to places where other tribes were gathering, as the English presence increased in the land. Second, various officials seem to have begun a subtle pressure on the Indians to leave the area, at least in part to further the development—by the English—of their towns.

The first official foray into the reservation came from the Congregational Church, when they bought land for their new minister, **Moses Bartlett**, in 1731. They chose 40 acres of the Wangunk reservation bounded by what are now Bartlett, High, and William streets. It seems curious that no English settler had land to sell to the new minister, that 40 acres of Wangunk land had to be taken.

Nor did Bartlett build his house on the south side of the lot, near the church. He built on the north side, on Bartlett Street opposite Prospect, facing part of the reservation.

In the 1740s, the church decided it had outgrown its building. The siting of the meeting house was traditionally a controversial issue in early towns: both civil and ecclesiastical meetings were held there, and the men who lived closer would have more power in the town's affairs. Portland seems to have had an ongoing controversy between settlers in what is now Middle Haddam and those along Main Street and up the Glastonbury Turnpike.

The standard solution to a siting-the-meeting-house dispute was to have a committee from the General Assembly, ostensibly disinterested parties, to determine a fair location. The committee which came to Portland in the late 1740s found the fairest location to be squarely in the middle of the Wangunk reservation, on what is now the northeast corner of Bartlett and Prospect streets, opposite Rev. Bartlett's house.

Why there? It was hardly the geographical center between Middle Haddam and Main Street. Could the General Assembly have been pursuing a policy of easing the Indians off land which they felt could be more productively occupied by English settlers? A couple years later, they voted to reserve 500 pounds for use by any Indians who would migrate to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where many had gathered.

Despite whatever pressure might have been rising, the Wangunk retained their mettle. The church hoped to buy three acres. The buyers were instructed to get three acres if the price was 15 pounds per acre, otherwise to buy one acre. The Wangunk held out for 18 pounds, and the settlers bought a single acre.

A few short months later, **James Sasepequen** sold a fellow tribesman one acre, similar in every respect to the church acre, for 15 pounds: was this coincidence or was he sending a message to the increasingly avaricious settlers?

In 1756 the settlers petitioned the General Assembly for permission to buy the rest of the Wangunks' land. These are the reasons they gave: the spot for the meeting house had been picked by the General Assembly (which was true) —"we was obliged to build there," they wailed—and now no inhabitants could settle nearby because it was Indian land.

Furthermore, it would be good land for tilling, "yet it bares no charge to Society, Town, or Colony, therefore great damage to us all but especially to us who want to have our charge eased." In other words, it was generating no tax money, and the townsmen wanted it to generate tax money so that their own taxes could be lowered.

The English said further that the "Indian owners are dispersed—few live on said land; those that do ... are all together unable to support themselves & are daley supported by some of our inhabitants." Cuschoy, the sachem, was allegedly lame and unable to work. Cuschoy, for his part, explained that there were no more than 12 or 13 descendants besides himself, and that they were dispersed and would be difficult to locate.

A committee from the General Assembly came to Portland to investigate. They found that no Indians were being "daley supported" by any English, a fact which town poor records from the period confirm. They did, however, vote to allow the settlers to buy the Wangunk land in 1765. The 12 to 13 descendants that Cuschoy had claimed would be hard to locate mushroomed into approximately 30, who somehow found their way back to Middletown to sign the deed for the property.

From these deeds, it appears as if the Wangunk community had been slowly migrating away, to Farmington, to Stockbridge, and west. The signatures on the deeds suggest that the young people had left the area—there were more couples and minors from outlying areas—leaving the old people, like Cuschoy and his wife, in Portland. Compare this to 20th-century city dynamics, where families matured in the city in the early 20th century, then moved to the suburbs, leaving their elderly parents behind in the old neighborhood.