



"I Heard That Word..."

A Closer Look at Indigenous Experiences in Early Newton & Natick

If you live in Newton today, you probably know that one of Newton's thirteen villages is called Nonantum and another is called Waban. You may have driven on Quinobequin Road, or passed by Eliot Church or the John Eliot Memorial, both near Newton Corner.

If you live in Natick, you surely know Speen Street and Eliot Street. And you have probably seen the image of an English preacher and a group of Native people, depicted both on Newton's city seal and on Natick's town seal.

These names and images are traces of events that took place on this land almost 400 years ago. This project tells about the experiences of some Native people who chose to convert to Christianity and live in colonial English settlements between 1646 and 1660. The locations of those settlements are now parts of Newton and Natick.

The history of the land we live on extends back much farther than the 1600s — and it continues up to the present. We are all making that history every day.

This project is informed by the writings (1646-1660) of John Eliot and other English missionaries, testimonies of Massachusetts and Nipmuc people who lived during this time, the work of contemporary historians, and the published words of Indigenous people today who have ancestral ties to this history.

Life on This Land Before 1646

A Long and Continuing Presence

Archaeological evidence and oral tradition tell us that people were living in the area around present-day Newton and Natick as many as 11,000 years ago. By the 1600s, many thousands of Native people lived along the coast of New England. Though they lived in different nations, bands, and villages, many spoke closely-linked Algonquian languages. They were the ancestors of the Massachusett, Nipmuc, and Wampanoag people who continue to live across New England and beyond.

Daily Life on This Land

Before colonization, Native people moved seasonally from the coast inland, and back again, to take advantage of natural resources. Most women stayed in villages to plant and harvest, gather berries and nuts, collect shellfish, prepare foods, and look after children. Men traveled for days at a time to hunt, fish, and trade with neighboring Indigenous nations and with Europeans who had set up trading outposts beginning in the 16th century.

“...And when the Two Legged arrived, they knew that All Are Related and had much to learn from all the Living Things around them. And so, our journey of Being Human is connected to all Life...”

Larry Spotted Crow Mann, Nipmuc Creation Story, Drumming and Dreaming, 2017

Women and men worked together to build temporary homes called wetus, which provided shelter for extended-family households. Children had responsibilities, too, such as keeping birds away from the planting fields.

Right: Recreation of a wetu at the Fruitlands Museum (Harvard, MA), on Nipmuc land. Image courtesy of Historic Newton.





Life on This Land Before 1646

A Long and Continuing Presence

Belonging

Families in Native villages believed they belonged to the land on which they built their homes. In turn, the crops that people harvested near their homes belonged to them. Land “ownership” shifted with each season as villagers moved to different sites. Every few years, whole villages moved to avoid soil exhaustion. Waterways such as the Quinobequin (renamed the Charles River by the English) provided villagers with fresh water, fish, and transportation.

Unlike the English, who named land after themselves, Native people took their names from the land. For example, the word Nipmuc means “fresh water.” In an Indigenous worldview, land and people are inseparable parts of a whole. As Elizabeth Solomon of the Massachusetts has said:

“We do not live in this place; we are of this place.”

Leadership

Leaders of Algonquian-speaking communities were called sachems. They relied on the counsel of respected advisors and regularly distributed gifts among their people. In return, their followers offered tributes such as freshly harvested vegetables. Sachems remained leaders only so long as their followers trusted their ability to guide and protect. The sons, and sometimes daughters, of sachems could inherit their leadership roles.

“Their sachems have not their men in such subjection, but that very frequently their men will leave them upon distaste or harsh dealing, and go and live under other sachems that can protect them.”

Daniel Gookin, Historical Collections, 1674

Where Are the Women in This Story?

Algonquian communities were matriarchal. However, English colonists displaced women from positions of responsibility and power. Oral tradition carries forward some stories of women’s leadership in their communities, but few written records from the 1600s document their lives.

Life on This Land Before 1646

A Long and Continuing Presence

Disease and Devastation

In 1616-1617, an unidentified plague devastated Native communities in eastern Massachusetts. In some areas, it killed up to 90% of the population. According to one estimate, there were 4,500 Massachusetts people in 1600. By 1631, just 750 Massachusetts people had survived. That number would drop further still with the arrival of a smallpox epidemic in 1633. The scale of loss for Native communities across the region was then — and is still — incomprehensible.

Yet, Native people did survive, and more: they established new villages, forged new alliances, and preserved and adapted traditions. Many found ways to establish local economic and political power and to work and live inter-dependently with the English people who began to colonize the Boston area in 1629 and soon outnumbered them. Some Native people leased pastureland to the colonists or allowed them to plant in exchange for shares of English crops. Others sold honey, maple syrup, and fish, or handmade objects such as baskets and brooms, to English families.

The English

More than 3,000 Puritan men, women, and children colonized Massachusetts Bay between 1630 and 1633. They encountered many fields and villages that had been abandoned during the epidemics that devastated Native communities. It seemed to the English that God had cleared the land for their arrival.

Cohannet Becomes Nonantum

Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Evangelist Mission

From its beginning in 1629, the Massachusetts Bay Colony had a mission to convert Native people to Christianity.



For England, Protestant missionary work was key to gaining imperial power over Spain, a Catholic country, in North America. The Bay Colony's seal (left, 1629) depicted an Indigenous man with a bow and arrow saying "Come Over and Help Us." The seal illustrates how the English viewed their purpose, as well as a deep-seated paternalism towards Native people.

By the mid-1640s, the Bay Colony lacked the funding to meet its mission. In fact, the Colony was in debt. After Puritan minister John Eliot was selected to lead a new missionary effort in 1646, fundraising became central to his work. In 1647, he wrote the first of many letters and reports that were circulated among potential funders in London. These writings, now called "The Eliot Tracts," help historians understand this time period.

Cohannet Becomes Nonantum

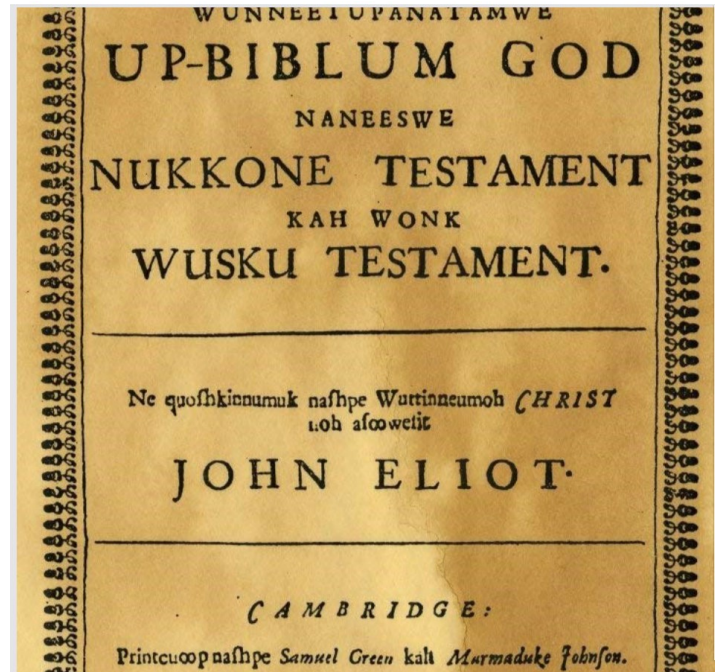
Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Evangelist Mission

John Eliot Learns Algonquian Languages

John Eliot had moved to the Massachusetts Bay Colony from England in 1631 at the age of 27. He became minister at a church in Roxbury, now named First Church. Sometime after 1634, he began learning Algonquian languages, such as Nipmuc and Massachusett. Eliot believed that learning Native languages was central to his missionary work and he studied with Indigenous linguists all his life.

One of Eliot's earliest language teachers was Cockenoe, a Montauk man who had been taken captive by the English during the Pequot War in 1636 and brought to Boston. After Cockenoe left the colony, Eliot began working closely with Job Nesuton, a Massachusett man who lived in Cohannet (now part of Newton). Nesuton and a Nipmuc man named James Printer later became key partners to Eliot in a decade-long project to translate the Bible into Algonquian languages.

Despite their contributions, the names of Cockenoe, Nesuton, and Printer do not appear on the Bible they worked to translate (right).



A First Meeting

By late summer 1646, Eliot felt he had learned enough from Cockenoe to conduct his first missionary outreach in an Algonquian language. At Dorchester Mill, Eliot delivered a sermon to Cutshamekin, chief sachem of the Massachusett in Neponset, and his followers. Though Eliot had some assistance from an unnamed interpreter, the meeting did not go well.

Eliot suspected that Cutshamekin had encouraged his followers to resist missionary efforts, and no second meeting was arranged. Instead, Eliot returned to his parish in Roxbury and planned a meeting with Waban, a Massachusett leader, and his followers at Cohannet — now the location of Newton Corner.

Cohannet Becomes Nonantum

Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Evangelist Mission

A Short-Term Solution

In November 1646, Eliot informed Waban and his people that the General Court had granted their request to establish a town. Eliot told them the town should have a new name. Instead of Cohannet, Eliot suggested “Noonatomen,” which signified rejoicing. As Eliot explained, it was the English who were rejoicing at Waban and his followers’ desire to “know God.”



What Eliot did not explain was that although the General Court had agreed to set aside money to purchase land for this community of Native people, it had not specified which land. Eliot had received no guarantee that the Court would purchase the same land Waban and his people knew as Cohannet. But he chose not to inform Waban that his people might soon have to leave their homeland.

Left: Today, land that Waban and his people called home is occupied in part by the Newton Commonwealth Golf Course. Image courtesy of Historic Newton.



Life in Nonantum

English Customs and Native Life

In Eliot's view, Native people could not convert to Christianity until they adopted English lifeways. Waban and several of his followers worked with Eliot to draw up ten laws for the newly renamed Nonantum. The new laws enforced customs that, to the English, signaled a respectable Christian life. They established fines for behaviors the English considered un-Christian, including idleness, pre-marital sex, and traditional styles of dress.

Soon, many of Waban's people were cutting their hair and dressing in the English fashion. They also began cultivating the land in Nonantum with tools they received from Eliot. To follow English expectations, they cleared fields for agriculture, fenced in cornfields, and built permanent, rather than seasonal, homes.

Nonantum residents continued to use their traditional skills, such as basket weaving and maple sugaring. They sold hand-made objects and surplus crops to the English. English missionary Thomas Shephard wrote in a fundraising pamphlet in 1648, "All winter they sell Brooms, Staves, Elepots, Baskets, Turkeys. In the Spring, cranberries, Fish, Strawberries; in the Summer Hurtleberries, Grapes, Fish: in the Autumn they sell Caneberries, Fish, Venison, &c."

The Conflicts of Conversion

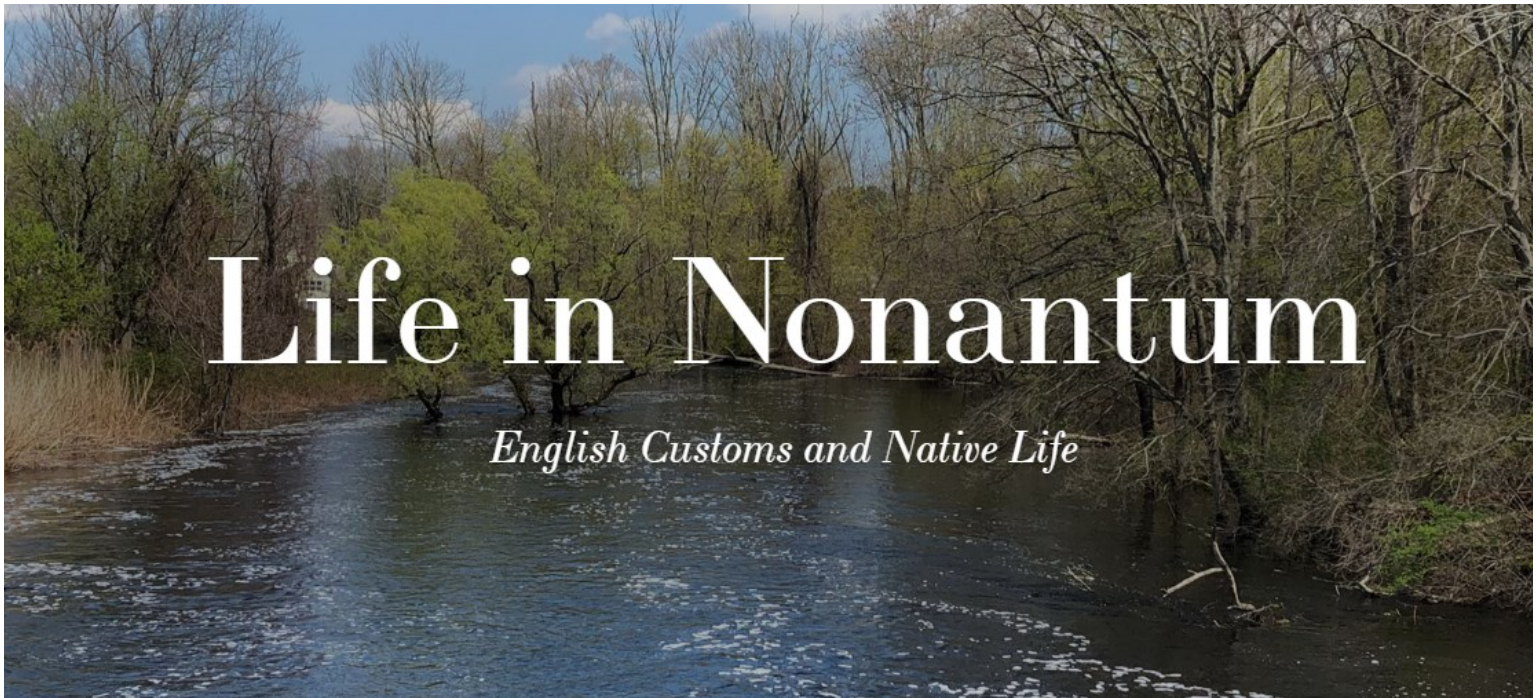
Waban and other residents of Nonantum were the first Native community in the Bay Colony to convert to Christianity. The decision to convert was a difficult one. Even Waban felt conflicted. He spent time visiting English people in their homes and asking questions about their faith. At first, he was not persuaded. As he later recalled,

"When the English taught me of God . . . I would go out of their doors, and [for] many years I knew nothing; when the English taught me I was angry with them."

The decision to convert was controversial. Many Indigenous people rejected Puritanism altogether and were hostile to those who accepted the new religion. They criticized Nonantum residents who cut their hair and dressed in the English fashion.

At the same time, the English often doubted Native converts' sincerity. A Massachusetts elder named Wampas, who attended all of Eliot's meetings at Waban's longhouse in 1646, later remembered:

"Because we pray to God other Indians abroad in the country hate us and oppose us, the English on the other side suspect us, and feare us to be still such as doe not pray at all."



Life in Nonantum

English Customs and Native Life

A desire to stay on their land, and the hope of securing safety from encroaching English people and hostile Native nations, such as the Mohawk, also convinced some Native people to accept the Puritan religion. A Nipmuc leader named John Speen testified in 1658 that he had converted “because I saw the English took much ground, and I thought if I prayed the English might not take away my ground.

“Sometime I thought if we did not pray, the English might kill us.”

Waban, quoted by John Eliot in A further Account of the progress of the Gospel, 1659

The Move to Natick in 1651

Looking West from Nonantum

Shortly after Nonantum was established in what is today Newton Corner, Eliot began planning to move Waban and his followers away to a more remote area. He believed that Native converts could better adopt English customs and follow English laws if they were isolated from their homelands, traditions, lifeways, and kinship networks. More distance from the English would also help prevent the conflicts that arose when English livestock trampled Indigenous people's crops.



The 17th-century settlement called Nonantum was not located in today's "Nonantum," one of Newton's thirteen villages, but near Newton Corner. In 1879, the Eliot Memorial (above) was erected there to commemorate the first meetings between Eliot and Waban. (Image: Newton Free Library, via Digital Commonwealth)

Waban and his followers did not welcome Eliot's vision at first, but the Bay Colony supported his plan. Removing Native people from their homelands served the Colony's desire to expand inland. Eliot and the Bay Colony quickly made plans to establish a new settlement ten miles to the west of Nonantum. The new settlement would be called Natick.

"I propounded unto them, that they should look out some fit place to begin a Towne, unto which they might resort, and there dwell together, enjoy Government, and be made ready and prepared to be a People among whom the Lord might delight to dwell and Rule."

John Eliot, *A Late and Further Manifestation*, 1655



The Move to Natick in 1651

Looking West from Nonantum

Establishing Natick

For generations, Nipmuc people had lived along the Quinobequin (now the Charles River) to the west of present-day Newton. In 1650, the Nipmuc leader Qualalanset, known to the English as John Speen, held the rights to land along the Quinobequin in present-day South Natick. Sometime before 1651, Speen signed over his land rights to Eliot in a public ceremony. Speen received an unknown sum and a guaranteed interest in the Quinobequin fish weirs.

In that same year, the Massachusetts General Court granted an overlapping 2,000 acres for the establishment of Natick. How could the English “grant” land they acknowledged had belonged to someone else? Some colonists wrestled with this paradox. Colonial magistrate Daniel Gookin and others defended the practice by explaining that the King of England gave them rights to the land because it was not yet settled and farmed in the English fashion.

The View from Nonantum

Many of Waban’s followers were not happy to learn that a “praying town” had been established for them at Natick. Eliot had led them to believe they could stay at Nonantum. Monequessun and Nishohkou, two men who later held leadership positions in Natick, both testified that their choice to convert to Christianity had been linked to a desire to stay on their land. Eliot remembered that “their minds were quite alienated from the place at Natick.”

The English recognized that the plan was unwelcome and may even have taken steps to prevent resistance. Nishohkou recalled a traumatic encounter when English soldiers arrived at Nonantum, on a sabbath day before the move, to collect their weapons.

“Then the Souldiers came upon us on the Sabbath-day, while we were at meeting, and took away our Guns . . . [T]hat night my heart was broken off, my heart said, God is not, the Sabbath is not, it is not the Lords Day, for were it so, the Souldiers would not have then come; then my heart cast off praying.”

Nishohkou, quoted by John Eliot in *A Further Account of the Progress of the Gospel*, 1660

But some at Nonantum went willingly to Natick. According to Eliot, a Massachusetts elder named Wampas gave a moving speech from his deathbed, encouraging Waban’s followers to go to Natick.

“I now shall die but Jesus Christ calleth you that live move to Naticke that there the lord might rule over you that you might make a church and have the ordinance of God among you. Believe in his word and do as he commandeth you.”

Wampas, quoted by John Eliot in *Strength Out of Weaknesse*, 1652

Waban’s feelings about the move were never recorded by the English.

Life in Early Natick

What Did Natick Look Like?

Once Native people began arriving in Natick, they quickly set to work building their new town.

South of the Quinobequin (now the Charles River), residents cultivated fields, planted orchards, and fenced pastures. On the north side, they laid out streets with lots for homes and built a large fort and a schoolhouse. They also built a stone and timber footbridge across the river. An English carpenter was hired for a day to guide construction of an English-style meeting-house.



Left: Stone walls, erected around 1651, still visible today at Pegan Hill in Natick. Image courtesy of Historic Newton.

In some ways, the town looked much like any other English settlement. However, Native residents chose to build traditional wetus and longhouses for their homes. These homes signaled that Natick would retain its Native identity, even as a Puritan “praying town.”

Farming in Early Natick

For many generations, Native people had farmed sustainably using traditional methods, such as seasonal migration and the burning of woodlands to enrich the soil. By contrast, English farmers lived in permanent dwellings, cleared and fenced fields, and raised livestock. Farming in this way signaled that the land had been “improved” according to English expectations.

English-style farming in Nonantum and in Natick reinforced new cultural norms, including year-round, permanent homes and English gender roles. It also depleted soil and reduced the numbers of deer and other game available for hunting. Puritans believed that Native people needed to cultivate land in the English fashion before they could convert to Christianity.

“But I declared unto them how necessary it was, that they should first be Civilized, by being brought from their scattered and wild courses of life, unto civill Co-habitation and Government, before they could, according to the will of God revealed in the Scriptures, be fit to be trusted with the sacred Ordinances of Jesus Christ, in Church-Communion.”

John Eliot, A Late and Further Manifestation, 1655

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Life in Early Natick

New Rules

Alongside the focus on farming, the English also enforced strict rules about residents' roles in the village. The laws and norms established at Nonantum now applied to Natick. They were often in conflict with Native traditions, including gender roles. Women remained indoors to card and spin wool, rear children, and cook. Planting and harvesting crops, and processing meat, traditionally done by women in Native communities, were now exclusively jobs for the men of Natick.

The Puritans believed English grooming habits would encourage Christian values of chastity, sobriety, and industry. New rules required men to cut their hair short and women to cover their hair. English clothing became common in the settlement, setting Christian converts apart from Native people who had chosen other paths.

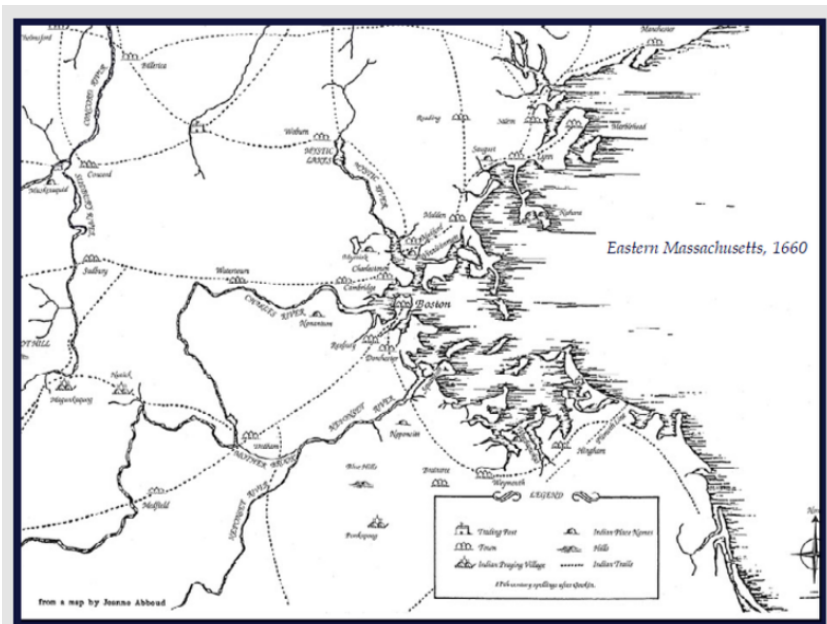
"I heard that Word, That it is a shame for a man to wear long hair, and that there was no such custom in the Churches: at first I thought I loved not long hair, but I did, and found it very hard to cut it off; and then I prayed God to pardon that sin also."

Monequasson, quoted by John Eliot in Tears of Repentance, 1653



Life in Early Natick

Still, the Natick settlement was not a natural blend of English and Native cultures, but rather a planned community that imposed the Puritan religion and English customs onto a Native population. Praying towns have been described as one of the more destructive policies of the British Empire. Yet, for the Native people who chose to live in them, praying towns offered some protection from hostile neighbors, access to land and other natural resources, and educational and economic opportunities.



Left: Map of "Praying Indian" towns and other geography of Eastern Massachusetts ca. 1660. Image adapted from a map by Jeanne Abboud.

By the outbreak of King Philip's War in 1675, fourteen praying towns had been established in New England. Natick was the first.



Survivance

All across North America, Native people faced unimaginable challenges as they sought to sustain their families and communities in a world dramatically altered by colonization. Many died of disease or were killed or sold into slavery by colonists. Others fought back. And many, like Waban and his followers, did not merely survive colonization, but invented new ways of living that reconciled harsh realities with long-cherished traditions and beliefs.

The history of Indigenous peoples includes countless examples of “survivance” — dynamic, creative ways of maintaining Native identity and culture despite colonial invasion.

Today, the legacy of survivance is carried forward by Indigenous communities across the Commonwealth and beyond.



Resources to Learn More

This online resource draws from the excellent research and valued insights of many scholars and speakers. To learn more...

Read:

Brooks, Lisa, *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War* (2018)

Clark, Michael P., ed., *The Eliot Tracts: With Letters from John Eliot to Thomas Thorowgood and Richard Baxter* (2003)

Cogley, Richard W., *John Eliot's Mission to the Indians before King Philip's War* (1999)

Cronon, William, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (2003)

DeLucia, Christine M., *Memory Lands: King Philip's War and the Place of Violence in the Northeast* (2018)

Drake, James D., *King Philip's War: Civil War in New England, 1675-76* (1999)

Lopezina, Drew, *Red Ink: Native Americans Picking Up the Pen in the Colonial Period* (2012)

Mandell, Daniel R., *Behind the Frontier: Indians in Eighteenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts* (1996)

Mann, Larry *Spotted Crow, Drumming and Dreaming* (2017)

Newell, Margaret Ellen, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (2016)

O'Brien, Jean M., *Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790* (1997)

Senier, Siobhan, ed., *Dawnland Voices: An Anthology of Indigenous Writing from New England* (2014)

Silverman, David, *This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving* (2019)



Resources to Learn More

This online resource draws from the excellent research and valued insights of many scholars and speakers. To learn more...

Watch:

The Land as a Living Witness with Lance Young: <https://youtu.be/P56wtiLb1to>

A Town Called 'Rejoycing' with Drew Lopenzina: <https://newtv.org/recent-video/78-historic-newton-presents/6615-newton-history-series-a-town-called-rejoicing>

Ecologies of Acknowledgment: <https://vimeo.com/354699007>

We Still Live Here: <https://www.makepeaceproductions.com/wampfilm.html>



Resources to Learn More

This online resource draws from the excellent research and valued insights of many scholars and speakers. To learn more...

If you would like to learn more about contemporary Indigenous communities in New England, here are a few places to start:

The Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag: <https://massachusetttribe.org/>

The Nipmuc Nation: <https://www.nipmucmuseum.org/>

The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe: <https://mashpeewampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/>

The Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head: <https://wampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/>

The Praying Indians of Natick and Ponkapoag: <https://natickprayingindians.org/index.html>

The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center: <http://www.pequotmuseum.org/default.aspx>

The Wabanaki Nations: <https://www.abbemuseum.org/about-the-wabanaki-nations>

Credits:

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Amplifier Project - [Elizabeth Solomon, Native Voices: The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum](#)