



History of

Sagamore Masconomet

Kwai.

In the language of Masconomet, "kwai" is a friendly greeting.

During the time of Masconomet, the Indians on Cape Ann spoke a dialect of Abenaki.

Referring to the Abenaki language brings me to my first disagreement with what has been written about Masconomet.

He did not speak Algonquin. The word Algonquin is not an Indian word. It is French. French settlers probably were trying to pronounce *Al goo ma king*, the word used by the Indians and which meant "our allies."¹

Real Masconomet a Mystery

Scant information exists about the 17th century Indian and there are many questions about the information that remains.

There is no information about him, from the Indians of the area, for they didn't have a written language ... they used drawings or more exactly symbols to record information.

Their symbols, which represented ideas, places, events and emotions, varied in meaning from one tribe to another. Some symbols were specific to indi-

vidual families and were passed on from one generation to the next. Others symbols had a practical purpose, such as directions to a good hunting area or designating an area for a specific ceremony.

What information there is about the Indians comes from writings, drawings and maps of the early settlers and from later researchers of those early writers. However, the Europeans attempted to apply European sociological perspectives to the Indians of New England. The result: confusion abounds.

Much of the confusion about the Indians likely comes from the intermingling of those few Indians that survived a disease pandemic.

There no longer were clear lines of lineage ... no defined territories ... no distinct dialects ... these were small groups of people of many tribes, banding together to survive.

The Indians that the settlers met were the survivors of a population that once had been numerous. In the late 1500s, there may have been about 3,000 Indians, living in the northeast region. Overall, the Indian population in New England may have been as many as 100,000.² There actually could have been as many as 12,000 in Essex County.

However, the settlers were not the first people from across the great Atlantic Ocean to come here. There were European explorers visiting this area in the late 1500s.²

Their brief, scattered meetings with the Indians had a disastrous effect, in the form of three separate epidemics that swept across New England between 1614 and 1617.²

Prior to the coming of these European explorers, the Indians were a very healthy people. When they had health problems, they called upon men, called powah (*Anglicized to be powwows*). They set broken limbs, and developed a great "medical chest" of medicinal roots and herbs.

The powwows treated disease, as being caused by evil demons. The powwows were believed to be capable of battling the demons. They did this with mystical incantations and waving of scented smoke above and around the ill.

But, then came evil demons the pow-wows could not chase off. Many historical records say the Indians were killed by small pox. However, some believe that it was not just small pox, but also hepatitis.

Daniel Gookin, in his book published in 1674, said that he spoke with Indian survivors of the 1614 to 1620 epidemics, who said that the bodies of the dead were yellow.³ The Indians said it was madahôdo, the bad spirit. A later epidemic, in 1633, definitely was smallpox.²

Not only sickness killed off the Indians. During this period, rival northern tribes, mainly Tarrantine from Maine, seeing the local tribes diminishing in number, attacked the small and scattered camps of the Salem-Ipswich Cape Ann area.⁴

By the time colonists settled at Agawam (*that later became Ipswich*) in 1633, less than 50% of the local Indians remained.⁵

Agawam, or Augoan as pronounced by the Indians, was described in 1614 by Capt. John Smith as follows: "Here are many rising hills and on their tops and descents are many corn fields and delightful groves."⁶

History books tell us that Masconomet was the first Indian to greet the settlers coming to our area was Masconomet. In 1630, he and a few of his fellow Indians paddled out to the ship *Arabella*, moored in Manchester Harbor, to meet John Winthrop, who came to replace John Endicott as governor of the Bay Colony.⁸ (*However, recent research argues that it was Black Cove closer to Beverly Harbor.*)

Sir. Richard Saltonstall was on board the *Arabella*.⁸ Masconomet welcomed the settlers and stayed with them the whole day. Despite what a few historians have written, Masconomet could not speak English.

Was his real name Masconomet?

For the settlers, it was.

For his people, it was not. His birth name was Quonopkonat. His name following his marriage became Masquenomoit. English settlers unable to master the Indian language, called him Masconomet and Masconomo. Later, when baptized by the English, his Christian name was John, or Indian John.⁹

There are many views on what his name means. Some say Masconomet means "area of the great islands," an area where he possibly came from.⁹

When he married a woman from the Nipmuc of central Massachusetts, he received the honorary name Masquenomoit. The name means roughly, "He who overpowered a black bear." Perhaps signifying, while with the Nipmuc, he showed his bravery by killing a marauding bear.⁹

Masconomet and his wife had three children: a son Thomas Tyler, another son, whose name is unknown, and a daughter, Sarah. Later, Sarah became the mother of Joseph English and Samuel English. Masconomet also had a grandson named John Umpee and a granddaughter Betty Wouches.⁹

Was Masconomet a Sagamore?

The English settlers called Masconomet by the title Sagamore and believed this was the same as the title sachem, both of which they heard the Indians use when referring to their leaders.

Sachem was a title for tribal leaders. Masconomet wasn't a tribal leader. Masconomet was a leader of a band of extended families and, thus, was just a Sagamore. He succeeded his father as the leader of the band living among the Pawtucket. As such, Sagamore Masconomet was a subordinate to bigger leaders, namely sachem, who were the heads of Indian federations.

Federations were Indian tribes and families that united mainly in order to defend themselves against warring Indian bands and tribes. In the early 1600s, in what is now New England, there were four Indian federations:¹¹

Masachusett, of the greater Boston area.

Wampanoag of southern Massachusetts and Cape Cod;

Narragansett of Rhode Island, and;

Pennacook of northern Massachusetts up through Maine.

There once may have been as many as 12,000 Pennacook and 30 large villages. Pennacook comes from the Abenaki word "penakuk," meaning "at the bottom of the hill." They were also called Merrimac, from the name of the river along which most of their winter villages were located. The Nipmuc were mem-

bers of the Penacook federation. ¹²

The identifying emblem of the Penacook Federation was the pine tree, which was the name of one of the Federation's members, Quoneco, the Pine Tree People. ¹²

Isn't it ironic that the Indian pine tree symbol would later become a flag during the American Revolution. The green pine tree ... seen as a symbol of liberty ... was on a white flag that had the words, "An Appeal to Heaven." In 1652, the Colony issued the "Pine-Tree" shilling, which had the image of a pine tree.

Was Masconomet an Agawam?

Most people refer to Masconomet as being an Agawam. However, many Indian scholars now believe this is wrong. Agawam was a place, not a tribe.

Others believe Masconomet was a Pawtucket. However, Pawtucket was not a tribe or a nation. It too was a place and the name means "great falls." ¹⁰

The English settlers mistakenly used Indian names describing places to identify tribes, sub-tribes and families. Just as some settlers called themselves English, having coming from England.

The Indians did not identify themselves by the places where they lived. They identified themselves by family relationships and history. ⁹ They sometimes married people from other villages, and with this, changed their names.

In the broadest sense, Masconomet was of Abernaki descent, who lived among the Pawtucket.

Masconomet and his followers did not possess a specific territory. They only lived in camps in a specific territory, moving about with the seasons.

One of those camp was in Agawam. It means "area on the other side of the marsh; where "aga" was their word for *beyond or other side* and "wam" was their word for *marsh*. This translation counters an earlier understanding of Agawam as meaning "fish curing place," which in fact was done in this area. ¹³

Thus, before the English applied European identification concepts to the Native Americans, "Agawam" was never an Indian name for a tribe.

In the winter, Masconomet lived in Wamesit, which today is the Lowell area, and about 26 miles due west of Hamilton. Indian camps, in the winter, were inland, for protection from cold ocean winds. ⁹

In the summer, Masconomet lived in Agawam, and visited Pawtucket villages between Beverly/Middleton/ Danvers/Peabody and the Merrimack River (*Newbury, Newburyport*). His camp was between Labor-in-Vain and Chebacco creeks. ⁹

It likely took Masconomet about 3 days to move with his people from Wamesit to Agawam. Defined trails existed.

He also had a camp on Plum Island that served as a refuge, when Indian warrior bands invaded the area. ⁹

The Indians usually built their camps on the southern – warmer -- side of a hill, on a flat area, well above an adjoining body of water.

The Indians were well aware of the yearly seasons. Although they not have a 12-month Gregorian calendar, they did follow did follow a 260-day solar year and a 13-month lunar year. As children, they learned that a turtle's shell has 13 segments, one for each moon, and that, around the outer rim, are 28 small segments, coinciding with the 28 days, between each new moon.

The Indians reckoned their time by snows and moons. A snow was a winter; and thus, a man who had seen sixty snows, was sixty years old. A moon was a month; thus they had the harvest moon, the hunting moon, and the moon of flowers. A sleep was a night; and five sleeps were five days.



In the winter, Masconomet lived in Wamesit, today the Lowell area. Indian winter camps were inland, for protection from cold ocean winds. In the summer, Masconomet lived in Agawam. Map, Hausegenealogy.com

Did Masconomet Speak Algonquin?

There were many Indian dialects. Some so different, different villages could not understand them. Masconomet most likely spoke an Algonquin dialect of Central Abenaki.⁹

The Abenaki called themselves Alnanbal, meaning "men." The name originated from an Algonquin word meaning "people of the dawn" or "easterners."¹³

The dialect spoken among the tribes in the Cape Ann area was very difficult for the settlers to learn, because there were no written words and because of its peculiar pronunciation. It was, in general, euphonic, the words being constructed of short syllables, which usually terminated in a soft or vowel sound. Also, there was strong nasal pronunciation for many words.

About 150 of the Indian words still exist as part of the English language. Many of our towns have Algonquin names: Spokane (*children of the sun*), Willamette (*running water*), Sheboygan (*stream that comes from the ground*), and Calumet (*peace pipe*).

Moose, Woodchuck, Raccoon, Skunk, Squash, Pecan, Hickory, Potato, Chipmunk, Coyote, Succotash, Moccasin, Tomahawk, Hickory, Caucus, Powwow, Toboggan, and Massachusetts.

What Did Masconomet Look Like?

Considering how much Masconomet interacted with the English settlers, you might think there would have been some description of what he looked like. But, such is not the case.

In 2007, Alan Pearsall painted an Ipswich history mural that includes his depiction of Sagamore Masconomet. The sagamore is shown having a Mohawk-style haircut.

Pearsall's mural also, in error, shows the colonists to be about the same height as Masconomet. Many Indian men were 6 feet tall – thus, taller than the settlers. The Pennacook Sachem Passaconaway is said to have been about seven feet tall.⁵

They had strong arms and legs, long and slender hands, broad shoulders and small waists and feet. Their eyes were black, and they had excellent long-distance vision. Their black hair was long and straight, but none had a beard. They were born with skin somewhat light in color: in the open air and sunshine, their skin became tawny.

During warm month, their clothing was scanty. An Indian man only wore an animal skin wrapped around his waist and legs, tied with a snake's skin, at the waist.

In cold weather, they wore a bear or wolf skin thrown over the shoulders and moccasins, which reached above the ankle, and were made of moose hide, and they wore leather britches.

They were proud, which they manifested by wearing, in their ears, decorated ornaments, including stone and shell pendants. The ornaments had carvings of birds, animals and fish. Around their waists, they wore elaborate belts.

Imagine what Winthrop and his companions thought when they saw the Indians. They were giants ... almost naked ... dark skinned ... somber-faced ... and spoke an unknown language.

Was Masconomet a Warrior?

As frightening as the Indians may have looked to the first settlers, they were found to be very friendly. Many Puritans believed the Indians were descendants of the "Lost Tribes of Israel," who, according to the Old Testament, had been scattered, by GOD, and needed to be saved. This belief was a premise of the Massachusetts Bay Colony Charter, the seal of which shows an Indian saying, "Come over and help us."

The early years of the arrival of the settlers were very peaceful. There were not many Indians in our area. A settler in the Enon (*now Wenham*) wrote, "When we settled, the Indians never molested us. They showed themselves very glad of our company, and came and planted by us. Many times, they came to us for shelter, saying they were afraid of the Indians from the north. We sheltered them. We had their free leave to build and plant, where we had taken up lands."⁷

Without the help of the Indians, during the early years, many of the early settlers would have died, from starvation (*they had brought few provisions*), as well as from the harsh winters (*they did not have proper winter clothing*). The Indians showed the settlers which berries, nuts and other vegetation were safe to eat, and how to prepare animal skins, for making warm clothing.

The Indians instructed the settlers, in the planting of corn, teaching them to select the finest seed, to observe the best season, to plant in mounds, at a distance from each other, and to fertilize and cultivate their plantings with fish carcasses, clam shells, and horseshoe crab bodies.

They showed the settlers where it was best to hunt for animals, and how to trap them. They guided the newcomers to protected winter havens, and showed them their trails to fresh water.

Appreciation, by the colonists, of the Indians, their culture and knowledge took a great many years to develop. In his 1837 journal, two hundred years after the initial contact with the Indians, Salem-born writer Nathaniel Hawthorne lamented, "Our Indian races, having reared no monuments, like Greeks, Romans and Egyptians, when they have disappeared from earth, their history will appear a fable, and they misty phantoms."¹⁴

As Sagamore, he was not just a leader of the people, but also their trusted advisor and councilor. He was very kind and caring toward his tribal members.

Men and women came to council meetings. The Sagamore listened to all the people. Unlike the leaders of the settlers' that only listened to the freemen.

There was no right to rule. There was only status and authority, acquired both by inheritance and achievement. "Leadership" was by consensus, and each head of household decided who to follow and what was best for his family.

The right to lead descended from father to son. If there was no son, the widow squaw reigned: she was called squaw Sagamore. If there was no widow, the next of kin became the ruler. The importance and power of the Sagamore depended upon the number of his subjects.

The Algonquin had no written laws and nor any taxes. However, half of the possessions of the sagamore's subjects were at his disposal. The tribesmen were loyal, freely obeying and freely sharing.

Personal guilt is a Western concept. For the Indians, the kin group of the person committing an offense, was responsible for punishing their member, or a substitute, and making restitution.

Responsibility for "law and order" was collective. Banishment or enslavement were preferred over capital punishment. If death by hatchet or club was required, a family could choose a less important member to take the punishment.

The End of Masconomet

In March 1644, Masconomet, with four other sagamores, submitted to colonial rule. They agreed to be instructed in the knowledge and worship of GOD. ^{16,17}

In 1655, Masconomet was given 6 acres, where he lived with his wife. He died in 1658. ¹⁷ Where he is buried is part of his land. Later, his widow was buried there.

Masconomet was the last Sagamore to oversee Indians living in the Cape Ann area, plus Hamilton, Ipswich and Wenham. ¹⁵

Indian burials were preceded by a time of extreme grief, often lasting weeks. Annually, this mourning was repeated, by friends and relatives, who blackened their faces.

Here's how an Indian burial was described, in 1620, by an English settler: ¹⁸

The mourners sat around the body and loudly cried. Next, the body was put in a shallow grave, with the head to the west, and the lamentation resumed. The mourners put a mat, on which the deceased had died, over the grave, and put a dish, from which the deceased had eaten, on the mat.

Usually, the Indian graves were on the sides of hills. With the corpse, they buried their possessions.

Relatives blackened their faces, as a sign of mourning. An animal-skin coat, of the deceased, was hung on a nearby tree. No one ever touched the coat: it was allowed it to decay. There were no headstones.

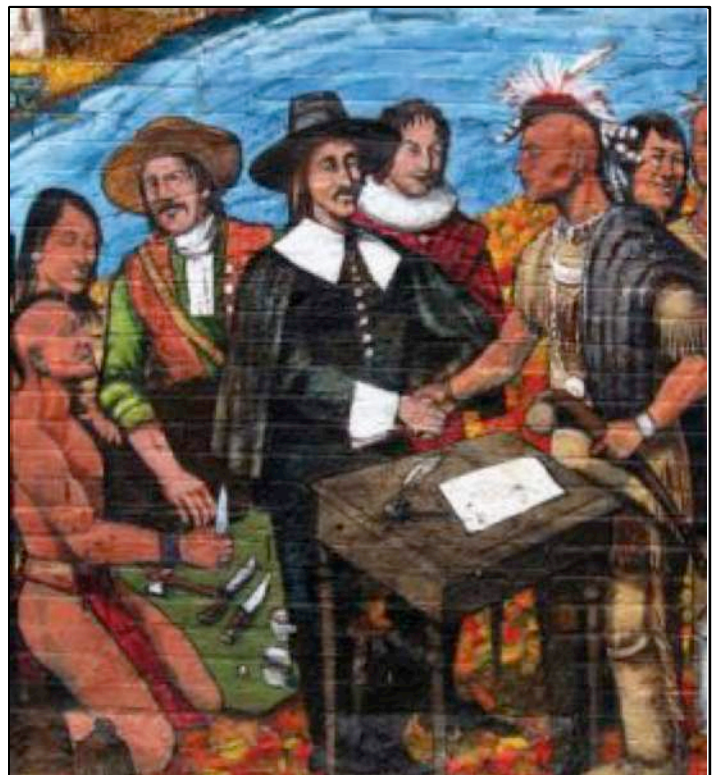
The Indians believed their spirit to be immortal.

When he died in 1658, he was poor and a ward of the state. He was buried on Sagamore Hill (*formerly Winthrop's Hill*), with his rifle, tomahawk and other implements. There was no stone marker. No Christian cross. ¹⁷

With his death, Masconomet's spirit, according to Native American belief, was free and he went to meet the Great Creator, Kichi Manido. ¹

However, in March of the following year, 1659, two young settler boys, dug up Masconomet's remains. One boy carried the Sagamore's skull, on a pole, as he ran about Ipswich. He was quickly caught and jailed. He was fined and made to rebury the skull and bones and cover the grave with a pile of stones. His accomplice helped in the reburial and both publicly acknowledged their crimes. ^{17, 25}

When his burial site was desecrated, Masconomet's spirit was called back to earth to look for the bones. Once found, the spirit would not rest until a proper ceremony was again performed.



In 2007, Alan Pearsall painted an Ipswich history mural that includes his depiction of Sagamore Masconomet having a Mohawk-style haircut.



In 1910, heirs of William H. Kinsman of Ipswich and John F. Patch LeBaron, also of Ipswich, placed a large boulder on the traditional site of Masconomet's grave. Photo, J. Hauck, 2015



In 1994, site was cleared of trash wood and growth; leveled, graded, and retaining walls built of fieldstone enclosing the entire area. Photo, J. Hauck, 2015



In 1910, heirs of William H. Kinsman of Ipswich and John F. Patch LeBaron, also of Ipswich, placed a large boulder on the traditional site of Masconomet's grave. Photo, J. Hauck, 2015



For the Native Americans, the landscape was a cathedral. It was like a sacred building to them ... the tall pines were their spires. Photo, J. Hauck, 2015



In 1993, Chief of the Ponkapoag People, OeeTash, consecrated Masconomet's grave site, restoring peace to his spirit disturbed by removal of his bones in 1659. Photo, J. Hauck, 2015

The family names of many of the original European settlers still exist in Hamilton. As for Indian names, we have but a couple: Sagamore and Chebacco

Not only are many of the names gone, but also so are the native people. The last record of Indians living in the area is that a few lived at Wigwam Hill, in Hamilton, in 1730.²³

Masconomet's spirit, according to Indian belief, began to wander the countryside following the desecration of his grave. He had to find his bones and his spirit could not rest until a proper reburial ceremony was performed. His bones were recovered and reburied. But, there was no proper tribal ceremony.

Masconomet's Gravesite

In 1910, the heirs of William H. Kinsman of Ipswich and John F. Patch LeBaron, also of Ipswich, placed a boulder on the traditional site of Masconomet's grave. It had the inscription: "Maskonominit, Sagamore of the Agawams. Died 1658"¹⁷

But, there was no proper tribal ceremony.

Over the years, many trips have been made back along the path to the site of Masconomet's grave.

In 1959, Hamilton's Historical Society made the Masconomet gravesite on Sagamore Hill more visible and open. But, there was no proper tribal ceremony.¹⁷

In 1968, Standish Bradford of Hamilton donated the area -- 4,121 sq. ft.—where Masconomet is buried to Hamilton. He also granted a right-of-way to the land. However, the town, for many years, could afford only very general oversight of the area by its Public Works Department.^{26, 27}

On November 26th, 1971, a Thanksgiving morning, 16 people gathered to memorialize Sagamore Masconomet, in a graveside service, held to honor the chief and his acceptance of Christianity — perhaps the first American Indian chief to do so, according to local authorities. But, there was no proper tribal ceremony.²⁸

In 1972, George Ricker of Hamilton donated a large memorial stone. But, there was no proper tribal ceremony.²⁹

In 1976, the Town Bicentennial Committee had funds for the observation of the National Bicentennial Year. Some of these funds were set aside for the improvement of the Masconomet gravesite. But, there was no proper tribal ceremony.³⁰

In 1994 The site was cleared of trash wood and growth; leveled, graded, and retaining walls built of fieldstone enclosing the entire site. On the site, a large boulder was set, bearing the message. "Traditional Grave Site, Indians of Agawam Masconomet, Sagamore of the Agawam, Died March 6, 1658." But, there was no proper tribal ceremony.³¹



When his burial site was desecrated, Masconomet's spirit was called back to earth to look for the bones. Once found, the spirit would not rest until a proper ceremony was again performed. Photo, J. Hauck, 2015

In 1993, the Chief of the Ponkapoag People, Oee-Tash, consecrated Masconomet's grave, restoring peace to his spirit.³²

Also on Nov. 6, 1993, a Christian burial service was held. Masconomet is said to have adopted Christianity as his religion in 1643. His grave was consecrated by the Rev. Fr. Louis Bourgeois of St. Paul's Catholic Church, Hamilton.³²

In 2006, Hamilton appropriated \$2,500 of its Community Preservation Fund to construct a plaque commemorating the burial site of Chief Masconomet. The plaque was placed at the gravesite in 2009.³⁴

In 2008, the Massachusetts Archeological Society sponsored a ceremony at Masconomet's gravesite to mark the 350th anniversary of the sagamore's death and to remind people of his life.³⁵

Sagamore Hill is the highest spot in Hamilton. Back when the colonists had cleared the countryside of trees for firewood, it was said that on a clear day, the burial site provided an impressive view of the Atlantic Ocean. That great view is no longer possible.

It's a great place to visit. But, not the easiest to find. To get there, go north on Bay Road; take a right onto Moulton Street; take a left on Sagamore Street; take the 3rd street on the right. It's a very steep hill. About a 1,000 ft., on the right, just before there is a steel link fence, you'll see the burial site.

A visit shouldn't take long ... but perhaps you might stay for a few moments of quiet thought ... look at the woods all around ... The landscape was their church, a cathedral. It was like a sacred building to them ... the tall pines were their spires.

References

For general reference, I'm thankful to:

Glenn Mairo of Boxford, a past President of the Mass. Archeological Society

Gordon Harris, chairman of the Ipswich Historical Commission.

Mary Ellen Lepionka of Gloucester, a researcher of the prehistory of Cape Ann and the Native Americans who lived here. She taught anthropology and history at several colleges, including Boston University.

She is a member of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society.

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