

Newton: Land of the Massachusett

The keynote speakers at the annual meeting were two distinguished representatives of the Massachusett Tribe at Ponkapoag: Sagamore Faries Gray and Tribal Elder Elizabeth Solomon.

Gray explained that his title of Sagamore can be translated as “war chief”, but that he is also one of the tribe’s historians. His primary responsibility today is protecting the tribe’s traditional lands, which range from the North to South Shores and inland around greater Boston. This is extremely challenging, as the past 400 years of history have systematically deprived the Massachusett of their former rights in these lands and their resources.



Sagamore Faries Gray

Gray explained that indigenous people in coastal New England had interacted extensively with European explorers and traders for a century or more before European colonization began. The early explorers described the Massachusett lands as a “paradise,” with “vast” planting fields, lush orchards, abundant fish and game, and trees big enough to be turned into

mishoons, dugout canoes that could hold up to 100 people. The Massachusett moved seasonally to manage all these resources sustainably, living inland in winter and along the coast in the summer. In the spring, as they moved from their winter sites toward their coastal planting fields and shellfish beds, they built weirs along the waterways to catch migrating herring and other fish.

In contrast to the French, who were mostly interested in trading for furs in areas well north of what became Boston, the English were interested in the land around what is now Massachusetts Bay, with a devastating impact on the Massachusett themselves. By the time of the English landing in 1620 at what is now Plymouth, almost 90% of the indigenous population had died from introduced European diseases. In the succeeding decades, the English pursued control of the land ever more aggressively, including in the area controlled by the Massachusett Sachem Chickataubut, which included the land that became Newton. By the 1640s, the English had excluded the Massachusett from all their traditional summer coastal resources. By the late 1600s, the Massachusett no longer had access to even their traditional inland winter resources. Most had been forcibly relocated to



new “praying towns” recognized by the colonial governments, where indigenous languages and spiritual practices were forbidden. The original Massachusett residents of what is now Newton were “removed” to Natick.

Solomon focused on the different “ways of being in the world” of indigenous people and of Europeans, whose culture has become dominant in much of the world, and the implications of those differences for relationships between nature and people. She explained that

a fundamental separation between people and nature is basic to the European worldview — people are *outside* of nature, whether they want to own and exploit nature or want instead to protect nature. During the question-and-answer period,



Tribal Elder Elizabeth Solomon

Gray shared a recent experience illustrating this separation: during the Covid pandemic, he hoped to gather and share traditional medicinal plants with people, at no charge. But he could not access these plants easily because they were growing in a publicly owned conservation area.

In contrast, Solomon described the indigenous worldview of people as living in a reciprocal relationship *with* nature. Rather than force people to choose between exploiting and saving nature, this way of being allows for people to sustain themselves in ways that help all of nature sustain itself. Even the European concept of “stewardship” often sees nature as static spaces, set aside for human recreation and protected from the larger changes happening in the world around them. An indigenous approach might instead see conservation as creating and sustaining “a right relationship with the land” *throughout* larger, regional landscapes. ♦

☞ Alice Ingerson, Vice-President, Newton Conservators

For additional references for this article, see the Newton Conservators’ website under the article entitled *Newton: Land of the Massachusett*. Additional Resources listed below: Massachusett Tribe at Ponkapoag, <https://massachusetttribe.org/> Newton’s Indigenous Peoples Day organizing committee, <http://www.indigenouspeoplesdayma.org/newton/> Historic Newton/Natick Historical Society online exhibit, “I Heard That Word...” A Closer Look at Indigenous Experiences in Early Newton & Natick, linked to www.newtonma.gov/OnlineExhibits