



# Searching for the Native American History of Orleans

## Part 1: Potanumicut

Pleasant Bay is the largest estuary on Cape Cod and was a core of Native American settlement with documented occupations dating back at least 9,000 years. Older artifact finds in Chatham indicate people have been living on the Lower Cape for at least 12,000 years. By 4,000 years ago, Pleasant Bay had become a central place within the ancestral Nauset/Monomoyick/Wampanoag homeland. This area was likely home to semi-permanent villages from about 3,000 years ago until after European Contact in the 1500s and 1600s.

The Orleans Historical Commission (OHC) and the Town of Orleans (Town) have an initiative to learn more about the Town's Native American and Contact Period history. The purpose is to develop a more complete and inclusive history of the land that became Orleans. This history can be learned through written documents, oral histories, and archaeology. Intended to be a multi-year effort, the Town plans to assess the historical context of several Town-owned properties through archaeological reconnaissance surveys that include comprehensive archival research and walkover inspections. The results will be presented through articles, lectures, and signage near locations of historical importance.

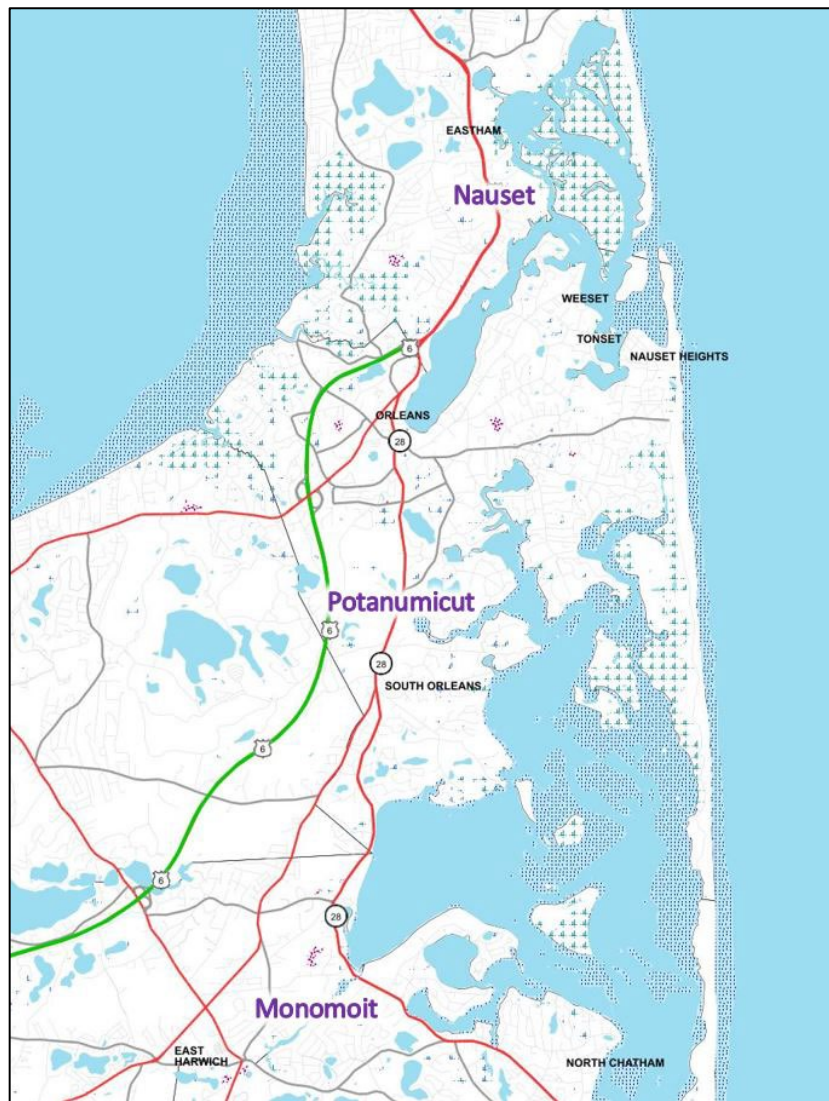
The OHC identified several areas in Orleans with the potential to contain historical or archaeological resources related to the Pre-European Contact and Contact Periods. The OHC chose the vicinity of Areys Pond in South Orleans as the first study area. This was the location of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Potanumicut Indian Village. To learn more about Potanumicut and potential archaeological and historical resources related to it, the Town, with a grant provided through the Community Preservation Act, retained archaeological consultant Daniel M. Zoto, M.A., RPA to conduct a reconnaissance survey of the Peck Property Conservation Area and a 1.0-mile study radius.

### *South Orleans Before Europeans*

Pre-Contact and historical period Native American sites were identified within the reconnaissance survey study radius and various places around the head of Pleasant Bay. These included shell middens, wigwam or wetu sites, boulder quarries, isolated artifact finds, and burials that date from the Late Archaic period (ca. 6,000 – 3,000 years ago) through the Woodland (3,000 – 500 years ago) and Contact (AD 1500 – 1620) periods. Many of the sites show evidence of multiple occupations spanning portions of all these periods. Collectively, they demonstrate a continuous use of the estuary by Native Peoples for at least the last 4,000 years. These shell middens, wigwam sites, and burials are indicative of permanent habitation of this area, albeit with short seasonal movements. In accordance with archaeological ethics and Massachusetts General Laws (MGL Ch.9 ss.26A), the locations of these sites will not be made public.

Shell middens are accumulations of marine shells from food or industrial waste that are common on coastal Woodland period Native American sites. They are significant archaeological resources with the potential to yield much information about Indigenous settlement patterns, diet, and culture history. On Cape Cod, most shell middens are comprised of subsistence refuse, often containing the bones of terrestrial mammals and fish, and other domestic refuse. It is also possible that some shell middens are primarily composed of fishing bait refuse as shellfish meat was used on hooks, in nets, and in fish baskets.

Around the world, shellfish consumption by hunter-gatherers has shown the ability to sustain ever-increasing human populations and allowed for sedentary settlements prior to the development of agriculture. In most cases, people did not become sedentary until they began planting their own food. However, Pre-agriculture sedentism existed on Cape Cod, largely due to shellfish consumption. Here, Middle Woodland period (2,000 – 1,000 years ago) or earlier groups were able to confine seasonal movements to small areas due to the rich resource bases provided by estuaries like Pleasant Bay and Nauset long before they adopted maize horticulture around 1,000 years ago.



*Map showing Potanumicut in relation to the Wampanoag villages of Nauset and Monomoiit.*

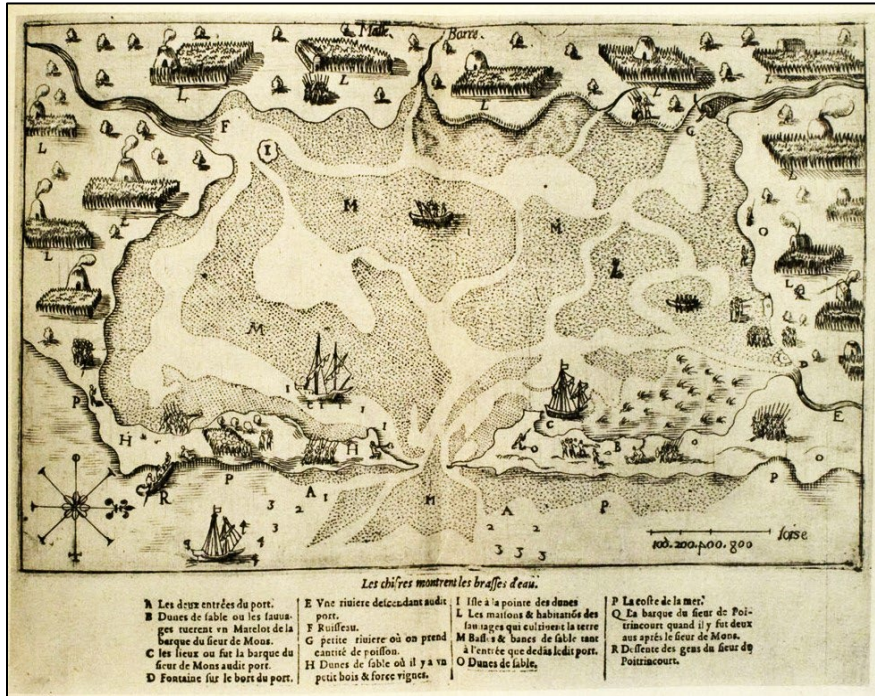
Estuarine-based sedentism was made possible by the highly productive, concentrated, and predictable natural resource bases of these estuaries which provided access to a diversity of habitats. In this situation, groups occupied more-or-less bounded estuarine zone for most of the year, moving seasonally between near-shore locations and the head of the estuary or nearby kettle ponds. These circumstances and resultant group territoriality allowed for some individuals to assert greater influence over decisions regarding resource allocation and management, eventually gaining leadership roles. The kin and lineage of such successful individuals gained social approval, increasing the likelihood that members of subsequent generations may play similar roles in the community, ultimately leading to the origins of the sachemships of Cape Cod that were later recorded by European explorers and colonists.

A sachemship is an on-going and organic social grouping created by the agency of community members and the strategies of the sachems or leaders. The sachem's ability to make decisions and implement

policies depended on public consent. A sachem typically had a council of principal men and sachem's decision was not binding without the consent of their advisors. The sachem allocated land rights, conducted diplomacy, dispensed justice, and maintained the right to "wreck goods" like beached whales. Community members supported the activities of the sachem only if they benefited either socially or materially from such support. The relationship was mutually dependent. Sachems sought consent of the public and the community sought material and social benefits from inclusion in the sachemship. These societies were largely organized by kinship, whereas the sachem was likely thought of as a superior kinsman and community members became linked to the sachem's lineage.

The sachemships of Cape Cod were part of a mosaic of communities with differing levels of social and political integration that was closely connected to the ecological, historical, and structural factors specific to each group and their place of residence. The Nauset may have been the largest and most powerful group on Cape Cod. As of 1620, the Nauset sachem, Aspinet, possibly ranked second in regional power to Massasoit, the leader of the Wampanoag Confederacy. It was estimated that the Nauset had a population of

around 1,200 prior to the European-introduced epidemics of 1616-1619. The Nauset population may have been reduced to about 500 by 1621, although it is unclear how accurate either estimate is. French explorer Samuel de Champlain's 1605 map of the Nauset estuary depicts a sedentary village of wetus and planting fields surrounding the harbor.



Samuel de Champlain's map of the Nauset village, July 1605.

Shellfish consumption played a vital role in Pre-Contact sedentism on Cape Cod, providing a base for the conditions that led to the sachemships discussed above. The resultant shell middens are highly visible and often attract artifact collectors. Many middens around the Pleasant Bay area have become substantially disturbed by amateur digging. This is unfortunate because the information contained in an archaeological site is lost when the context of a site is destroyed. Archaeological sites are a finite resource and warrant protection. No one is making 1,000-year-old ancestral Wampanoag sites, once they are gone, they are gone. Disturbing and

removing items from archaeological sites erases the physical attachment of Indigenous people and their ancestral lands, further perpetuating the colonization process.

Some of the shell middens near the Peck Property were dug into and excavated by avocational archaeologists and artifact collectors during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the items obtained from these sites are curated at local museums. Artifacts in these collections include stone projectile points and ceramic sherds mostly from the last 3,000 years, or what archaeologists call the Woodland period. The higher quantity of Middle Woodland and Late Woodland material indicates an increased population and denser, more sedentary occupation of this area over the last 2,000 years. A rolled copper bead in one of the collections may represent trade with Europeans in the 1500s or 1600s. Alternatively, the bead could demonstrate Pre-Contact use of natural copper, small lumps of which can be found in the Connecticut River valley and elsewhere in New England. Rolled beads made of native copper have been recovered from Early Woodland (3,000 – 2,000 years ago) contexts throughout the region.



Rolled copper bead from site 19-BN-214 in Orleans.

Most of the artifacts from these sites are made of local stones that were available around Pleasant Bay as beach cobbles or erratic boulders. Only certain types of stone have the correct hardness and fracture properties to be predictably shaped into tools. On Cape Cod these include felsic volcanics like rhyolite, minerals like quartz, and metamorphic rocks like quartzite. Weathered cobble surfaces on several pieces of stone debris in museum collections and seemingly toolstone-quality cobbles found in the study area indicate that raw materials needed to produce tools were available within the Wampanoag homeland at the head of Pleasant Bay. At least one large rhyolite boulder within the study radius was quarried by Native People for toolstone.



*Native American stone tools from Site 19-BN-214 in Orleans.*

The wigwam sites around Pleasant Bay are mostly related to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century homesteads of individual families that are known from the careful research of W. Sears Nickerson. Other artifact scatters likely represent Pre-Contact wigwam or habitation sites, most of which date to the Woodland period. Through deed and other research, Nickerson plotted the wigwams of some Potanumicut Natives including John Sipson, Tom Sipson, and Jeremiah Rafe Sr., as well as several Monomoyicks in Chatham. The distribution of these sites around Potanumicut appears to be like Samuel de Champlain's 1605 map of Nauset that shows a dispersed village of wigwams around the Nauset estuary that is not all that different than a present-day residential neighborhood.

The most prominent indication that Pleasant Bay was a central place in the Wampanoag homeland is Native cemeteries. The earliest of these cemeteries is the approximately 3,800-year-old Coburn site on Barley Neck. Coburn is a cremation cemetery that was discovered in a road cut and excavated by an amateur archaeologist in 1960. The site is part of a pattern of similar cremation cemetery sites across southern New England. The general small size of these cemeteries and the variety of grave goods found within them, suggests that they were made by communities with some a level of social stratification, where only a limited subset of the population could afford burial within them. The Coburn variety of Mansion Inn Blade is a specific type of biface that was named for the site.

Other cemeteries include the Potanumicut Indian Burial Ground associated with a historic circa 1691 Native meetinghouse north of Areys Pond, and individual burials that were inadvertently discovered during construction projects. One of these was an individual decorated with 75 long tubular copper beads discovered around 1916 near Namequoit Point. This highly decorated internment likely dates to the Contact Period and represents an individual of importance within the community. The burial was not associated with a cemetery and suggests that important individuals may have been buried separately from cemeteries. This fits an overall regional pattern, where some individuals were buried in marked and bounded cemeteries and others in isolated internments.

The documented use of the head of Pleasant Bay to inter the dead demonstrates the importance of this area as a homeland for the Wampanoag and their ancestors over at least the last 3,800 years. Generally, cemeteries served to mark ethnic or territorial boundaries and to signal the identity of social groups in relation to one another. They suggest a strong sense of homeland which should be expected of a non-nomadic, semi-sedentary population like that living around Pleasant Bay.

### *Native Americans in Orleans after European Contact*

What became Orleans was predominately purchased from the Monomoyick Sachem, Mattaquason, with the remainder of the land north of Pochet purchased from George, the Nauset sachem and successor to Aspinet. Pochet Island was excluded from the purchases, as was Nauset Heights, which was reserved for the Nauset to grow corn. The largest tract of land reserved for Native use extended between Areys Pond and Little Pleasant Bay, along the Namequoit River and south of Pilgrim Lake. This was called Potanumicut and became home to Christianized members of the Nauset and Monomoyick tribes, who appear to have coalesced in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Potanumicut functioned as a ministry and reservation, serving as a home for the remaining Native Americans in the Orleans area for approximately a century and a half from circa 1650 to 1800 AD. The Natives living on the reservation were sometimes referred to as the Potanumicut. The location of the village indicates that the head of the bay remained important to Native Peoples after the English settlement of Orleans beginning in 1644.

In 1672, the Reverend Samuel Treat was appointed as the first ordained minister of the Eastham parish that at the time included Orleans. Treat served as minister until his death in 1715, preaching to both English and Native congregations. He devised a written form of the Nauset language in which he translated the Confession of Faith and wrote sermons for Nauset preachers. In turn, Nauset schoolmasters taught Native children to read and write in their own language. Treat is said to have emersed himself into the lives of the Nauset, frequently visiting their wetus and participating in festivals and ceremonies.

Through Reverend Treat, Potanumicut became the center of Christian Indian activity and the seat of Native government on the Lower Cape. Treat wrote that he “instructed” the Nauset “once a week in his home in the concernments proper for their service and station. They have four distinct assemblies in four villages, belonging to one township (Eastham) in which they have four teachers of their own choice, who duly preach to them when I am not with them.” Native preachers served a variety of functions within their communities, acting as teachers, scribes, messengers, and community representatives. These men seem to have been permitted authority because of their knowledge and rhetorical skill, rather than their ability to directly communicate with spiritual beings like a traditional shaman. The willingness of the Native groups like the Nauset and Monomoyicks to convert to Christianity may have only been possible after Native populations had been diminished by disease and were becoming overwhelmed by the influx English settlers. In this light, some Natives may have viewed the religious power of their shamans as not equal to that of the English and were willing to adopt Christianity.

As of 1685, there were 264 Praying Indians at Potanumicut. In 1691, a Native meetinghouse was constructed near the head of Areys Pond, probably somewhere near the intersection of Route 28 and Monument Road. The petition to construct the meetinghouse was led by a Nauset named Lawrence, who desired the Nauset to have a place to worship and attend other public meetings. The meetinghouse had an associated burial ground, the graves of which were still visible until 1831 when they were plowed over.

By 1693, Reverend Treat reported 500 Christianized Indians in his district that encompassed the area from Harwich to Truro. Five years later it was documented that 22 families of Praying Indians were living at Potanumicut. The Nauset preacher was Thomas Coshuamag. After Reverend Treat’s death, it appears that worship was led solely by Native preachers for the next 15 years.



*Praying Indians at Mashpee witness the ordination of Richard Bourne, who along with John Cotton Jr. influenced Samuel Treat to preach to the Nauset. Cotton Jr. preached at Nauset in 1672 and 1678.*

In 1730, George Weekes of Dorchester began preaching to area Native Americans. Weekes was a lay preacher who relocated to Harwich and began preaching to the Sauquatucket in Brewster and to the Potanumicut at their meetinghouse near Areys Pond. By 1762, Potanumicut was led by Native preacher John Rafe (Ralph) who had a congregation of fifty-two. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some of the Natives at Potanumicut served on whaling crews and likely also fishing vessels. This included Jeremiah Rafe (Ralph) who lived south of the Namequoit River and was a member of the Sachem's Council and leader among the Praying Indians at Potanumicut. Other Potanumicut whalers include David Quanset, Jeremiah Rafe, Micah Rafe Sr., and John Sequatton.

Ezra Stiles recorded details of Potanumicut during several mid-18<sup>th</sup> century visits to the village. Stiles reported he was informed that around 1722 there were 140 Natives living at Potanumicut. In 1754, he reported 60 people at the village. In 1771, Stiles described Potanumicut as a small Native congregation with occasional preachers and no church, indicating that the Native meetinghouse constructed in 1691 was no longer in use. Stiles noted that Potanumicut was one of only seven Native churches and four occasional congregations remaining in New England. One hundred years prior there were more than 30 Christianized Native communities in the region.

In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the Natives at Potanumicut were wards of Harwich. Although the village, then known as the Potanumicut Reservation, was mostly in what became Orleans, with small portions in present day Harwich and Brewster. In 1772, those at Potanumicut became wards of Eastham. In 1790, there were enough Natives living at Potanumicut for Eastham to construct a new Native American meetinghouse in what became Orleans, possibly near the intersection of Portanumicut Road and Quanset Road. However, it appears that the Native population was significantly reduced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the Nauset and Monomoyicks may have relocated to Mashpee.

When Orleans separated from Eastham in 1797, the few remaining Natives became inhabitants of Orleans. By 1800, there were only seven Natives living at Potanumicut. One year later that number was reduced to five. In 1820, the Potanumicut Reservation lands were sold by representatives of Brewster, Harwich, and Orleans for \$300 to be split evenly between the towns. The funds were supposed to go towards the support of the remaining Natives. However, the sale funded dredging of an unsuccessful channel south of Strong Island and were used to construct Orleans's first town house in 1837. It is unclear what happened to the Natives that remained at Potanumicut. In 1863, the supposedly last recorded Native American to live in

Orleans, Dorcas Hammond, died at age 92. However, it is likely that people with Native American heritage have continued to live in the Orleans area through the present.

### ***Conclusion***

Overall, this study compiled and synthesized information about the Potanumicut Village Area and the Pre-Contact Native American habitation around the head of Pleasant Bay. It identified a strong Native American presence in the area that is evidenced by archaeological sites, written history, and numerous place names like Namequoit, Portanumicut, Quanset, and Kescayogansett that are still in use today. This is but one piece of a larger Native American history of Orleans. Future work will include additional comprehensive studies of historically important areas in town, engagement with descendent communities, and public outreach.

Archaeological and historical resources on public lands are protected by state and federal laws. Unmarked burials are protected on public and private property under the Massachusetts Unmarked Burial Law (MGL Chapter 7: Section 38A). If archaeological sites are discovered, it is recommended that they be reported to the OHC and the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

### ***Further Reading***

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