

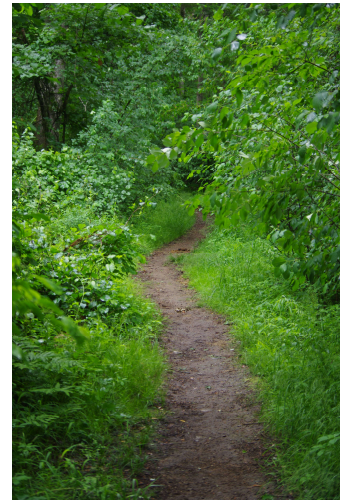
## The Grave of Masconomet June 21, 2022

Jane and I went to the annual conference of the Association of Gravestone Studies, held at Endicott College, Massachusetts. I presented a paper on Native American graves and grave markers. (It is available on Deep Blue, the University of Michigan virtual archive).

As long as we were there we thought we might try to find some Native American graves. Our friend Christina Bain, who lives in that area, was eager to go with us. She contacted Mary Ann Lepionka, the incredibly helpful resident expert on Native American graves. Mary Ann explained that there are no remaining Native American graveyards in New England. BUT, there is Masconomet's grave. Masconomet was the last Sagamore/Chief of the Agawams. He died in 1658. His tribe had been decimated by a pandemic (90% losses). Masconomet made his peace with the English settlers, converted to Christianity, and sold his remaining properties to them.

Well , let's let Mary Ann explain it:

“All or most of the known Indigenous burial grounds in Essex County were desecrated—dug up in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The grave goods have been in museums, and the skeletons sent to Harvard for forensic analysis. Since the passing of NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act), these are now being returned to the only federally recognized tribe in Massachusetts—the Wampanoag. They often reinter these relics in consecrated ground on Indigenous-owned land. These sites are not open to the public.



“Indigenous burial grounds traditionally were unmarked and the specific locations of graves kept secret to protect remains from sorcerers, enemies, and harmful spirits. Grave sites were and are deeply sacred to the people. Some still make pilgrimages to their ancestors’ burial sites if knowledge of them has been preserved. The treatment of burial grounds as tourist destinations would be deeply offensive to them.

“The 1661 Cemetery and Union Cemetery in Manchester were originally Indigenous burial grounds. All the towns with 17th century cemeteries or cemeteries referred to as “Ancient” or “Founders” burial grounds, such as the Abbott Street Burial Ground in Beverly and the Seaside Cemetery in Lanesville, have Indigenous people in them or on their margins, but they typically do not have stones and are not identified. Annisquam Heights had a burial ground, Morrill Point in Newbury, Maudsley State Park in Newburyport, and so on. Blank headstones on the fringes of colonists’ earliest graveyards may indicate Indigenous individuals who were given Christian burials, but there is no way to know.

“One exception is the burial place of the Agawam Sagamore Masconomet and his wife and other members of his family, who had converted to Christianity, at Sagamore Hill in South Hamilton. Both western and Indigenous traditions are observed at that site, which is on Greenbelt property and I believe can still be visited unofficially. It’s at 305 Sycamore St. and reached by foot. See

“Sagamore Hill Burial Ground” online. It was recently reconsecrated by Indigenous people who tend it.”

The three of us made a trek up the winding path leading to the site. It was dark and damp and had a very distinctive feel to it. When we got to the top of the hill, there was a naval solar observatory, a bit of a surprise. However, the gravesite was easy to find at that point.

When we walked inside of the enclosure, it was like going into a different world. It was maybe 150 or 200 feet across and was surrounded by heavy forest. There was almost, but not quite, a canopy of trees. It had a dark and mysterious feel, but not scary in any way. In fact, it felt very welcoming. It created a sense of quiet and respect. There was a tall tree in the middle of the enclosure with a large gravestone next to it. The photos don't capture the sense of a defined space.



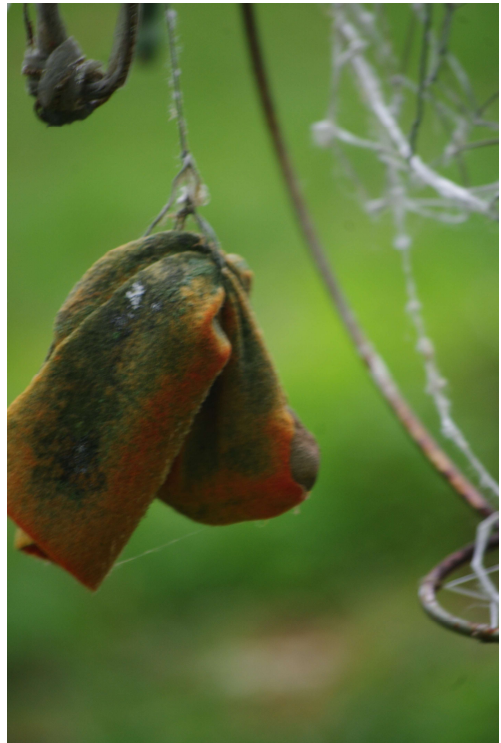
Masconomet and his wife are buried here, and maybe some other relatives. The site has gone through some history, which you can read on-line. In short, there was a stone installed in 1910, then the larger stone in 1971. In 1993, there was a Native American ceremony to consecrate it. A sign says that only objects consistent with tradition are allowed to be deposited: handmade items, for example. There are hundreds of items there – windcatchers, feathers, small baskets, small bottles, tom tom sticks, shells, bones, bracelets. There is a cord surrounding the tree and the stone. Perhaps to define it, or to protect it.

Thanks Christina for making this happen.











Jane and Christina