Indian Politics on Nantucket.

By Elizabeth A. Little.

According to the historian Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur in 1782 (1971:105), the establishment of a division line from north to south across Nantucket had ended an ancient warfare between the Indians of the eastern end of the island and those of the western end before the European settlement in 1659. On the basis of county records, account books, and the earliest recording of legends, I propose that this tradition did in fact represent Indian politics on Nantucket in the 17th century. From a study of deeds of the early period of recorded history after 1659, I have located a boundary between two groups of Indians at Madequecham Valley. Identification of this boundary allows a definition of the political attributes of these two historic groups of Indians.

In the opinion of some New England anthropologists, “tribal” is not a good description of the political organization found in southeastern New England at the time of contact (Salwen 1978:167-168; Dena F. Dincauze, personal communication). Therefore, I will avoid the word “tribe”, and attempt to define the two groups of Indians on Nantucket by the records available to us—legends, deeds, court records, and account books.

The following legends give interesting if puzzling evidence for the existence of two different Indian groups on Nantucket:

1) There are two origin myths for the peopling of the island. In one legend, Moshup discovered Nantucket from Cape Cod (Alden 1797), and in the other, Moshup created Nantucket for the people of Martha’s Vineyard (Jones 1830:325-330; Homtas 1829).

2) There is a story which describes a battle between the Nantucket Indians and Indians from Tuckernuck (Starbuck 1924:609-610).

3) According to another legend, recorded by Samuel Jenks in 1827, a western group, which he called the “Taumkhods” (tom-cods?), who subsisted mainly on shellfish, engaged in a battle with an eastern group, which he called the “Khauds” (cods?), who were fishermen and wild-fowl hunters, at a valley called “Mattekajahm” (Jenks 1827). Yet another legend accounted for the valley of “Matticut-Cham” as the place at which a giant fell in a battle of Good against Evil (Homtas 1829).

4) A popular Nantucket Indian legend tells of the marriage of an Indian maiden and a warrior, which ended the conflict between
two tribes on the island (Freeman 1807:35). In one version, Autopscot, sachem of the western tribe, married Wonoma, daughter of Sachem Wawinet of the eastern tribe (Starbuck 1924:611).

In this paper, I will seek historic evidence for some of these legends.

Massasoit, or his sons, Alexander and Philip, at Mount Hope, had land rights as far as the western part of Martha's Vineyard, had paid official visits to both Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, and were sought out for guidance by Wanachmamak and Nickanoose, sachem of the east end of Nantucket. The first mention of a sachem of Mount Hope on the islands occurred in 1647, when Massasoit paid a visit to Martha's Vineyard (Mayhew 1843b:117). Although Douglas-Lithgow claimed that Massasoit visited Nantucket (Gardner 1932), I can find no evidence other than the wooden bridge across Long Pond called Massasoit's Bridge. In 1662, the eldest son of Massasoit, Alexander (Wamsettan), sold part of western Martha's Vineyard to the English (MVD 3:12, 13), and, as we will see, Philip, the second son of Massasoit, came to Nantucket in 1665 (NCD 1b:6).

Wanachmamak and Nickanoose and their heirs firmly and usually independently ruled their well-defined neighbouring lands and people on the east end of Nantucket, with only an occasional minor dispute over who owned the land at the extreme northeast (NCD 2b:29; Starbuck 1924:129), until about 1744, when most of the sachem rights had been sold to the English (NCD 4:185; 5:10, 11, 49).

In 1664/5, however, a murder case proved too difficult to handle on the island, and Nickanoose went to Plymouth to consult with Philip:

This day we have certain newes that the Indians upon Nantucquet Isle, murdered and pillaged the saylers belonging to a bark wch was by storm driven upon it. (Jan 25, 1664/ at New York) (O'Callaghan 1855, 3:84.)

Nickanoose being accused of being privy to a Murder committed by Indians on Englishmen at Coatue and being in great fear he hired or otherwise got Quasauchwinit to go with him to Plymouth in the winter to ask council of Nickanoose's head Sachem. (NCD 2:6.)

Nickanoose was not incriminated in this episode, but some Indians were hanged on Nantucket in 1665 (Little 1976).

Another trip had taken place from Nantucket to Mount Hope before 1662 by Nickanoose's father and Wanachmamak to see Ussemequin (Massasoit), Philip's father, again about a murder (Little 1980:63; Salwen 1978:171). In addition, Ussemequin had at some early date established ownership rights for stranded whales at Nantucket (MVD 1:63).

The west end of Nantucket was sold to the English by Nickanoose and Wanachmamak, with subsequent repercussions which help clarify island politics. Sachem Nanahuma, who lived there, and Sachem Nickanoose sold the English their first land on Nantucket, the plains at the west end, in 1659 (NCD 1:5; 4:93). Within a year, Wanachmamak and Nickanoose, both now called "head sachems of Nantucket", deeded the English the west end of the island (NCD 1:3). About 10 years later, Wanachmamak, now "the chief and head sachem of Nantucket", signed a similar deed to the west end, to be sent to the governor of New York (N.Y. Deeds 3:54).

Wanachmamak's increasing status probably represented English politics—the need to find a king from whom to purchase land (Salwen 1978:168)—rather than Indian politics, since, according to court and deed records, not only did one west end Indian challenge
Wanachmamak’s and Nickanoose’s right to sell his ancestral land (Starbuck 1924:136), but a considerable number of Indians claimed ownership of lands at the west end. The sale of the west end displaced the following Indians from their lands: Pakepanessa, Conpokanet (George Nanahuma) (NCD 3:66), Harry the son of Wapscowet, Jonas, Kimmo, Tequamomemy, Mekowakin, John Hoyt (Wannaquin) (NCD 3:68; Macy 1792b), Obadiah (Obadiah Japhet) (NCD 6:112; Macy 1792b), Peteson (Matakekin), Jacob Pattenhonnet’s son, Mr. Harry, and Ahkieman (NCD 1:2). I have included Tuckernuck Island in the west end because of its similar history. Pakepanessa, who was a sachem of Martha’s Vineyard, (MVD 1:388; Mayhew 1834a:77), relinquished his right to a piece of land at the west end of Nantucket (NCD 1:5), and Francis, the Nauset sachem of Cape Cod, was called upon for advice in the sale of part of the west end (NCD 1:5). Some of the many western Indians named “Harry” may be the same person.

After some disputes, the western Indians were either paid by the English, or in the case of six men, given at least 20 acres of land elsewhere by Nickanoose and Wanachmamak, without requirements of tribute for one year, under pressure from the English (NCD 2b:7; MVD 1:6, 12). Tribute was not to be exacted again unless the sachems could produce evidence that at the time of the English arrival these displaced Indians had paid tribute. Clearly, some of the western Indians must have not to have paid tribute to the eastern sachems before 1660, which suggests a certain independence on the part of the Indians of the west end of the island.

After the turmoil of the original English purchases had quieted, there appear in the records two other sachems, Attapeat, who was succeeded by his son Musaquat by 1674 (NCD 2:8), and Spotso, whose sachemships lay midway between the west end and the east end. I consider Spotso in the next section.

According to legend, Attapeat was a sachem of the western group. He had several anomalous political attributes:

1) “Attapeot was call a grat waryor, and got his land by his bow” (Macy 1792b). No other Nantucket Indian is so described.
2) In 1665, which coincides curiously with the murder and hanging previously discussed, Philip (Metacom), sachem of Mount Hope, came to Nantucket, according to tradition to punish an Indian who had spoken the name of Philip’s dead father, Massasoit (Macy 1792a). Indeed, Philip did visit Nantucket in 1665, as we find in the town records of May 10 of that year:

At a public meeting of the town Attapehat signified the himself with all the Tomokommoth Indians doth subject to ye English government of Nantucket. Do owne themselves subject to King Chales the second, this was done in the presence of Metocum alias Philip Sachem of Mount Hope (NCD 1b:6).

Notice the silence of Nickanoose and Wanachmamak on this occasion. This was not a loyalty oath for Nantucket Indians, but only for Attapeat and his Tomokommoth Indians.

3) The question of the loyalty of the western Indians comes up again, this time at the beginning of King Philip’s War, after Musaquat had inherited the sachemship:

August. 5. 1675. Old marchant, Skyper, miaoakso, George hayes, Cross Harry, Peteson, Sapachasit, and moosahquat... did com to the Court, and did Disown Philip, and did freely subject themselves, to King Charles the Second. They also brought in som Armes, and left with the court as a Testimony of ther fidelity to the English... Skipper brought in one gun for himselfe and his s- Tho: Squatton one gun Cross harry one gun, Moosahqu-- one bow. (NCD 2b:3).

From other records, we know that all of these Indians, excepting Skyper, Squatton, and Sapachasit, whose names appear only here, had western Nantucket origins. Miaoakso probably was a minor sachem at Chappaquiddick (Mayhew 1843b:111), but he left his name on two ponds in Attapeat’s territory at Nantucket. Again I suggest that any question of loyalty to the English arose only for Indians of the west.

4) In June 1678 at a General Court, it was “Ordered, that Moosquitt shall have the like priviledge of government within his precincts as the other sachems have in theirs yet so far as to be subject to the English government” (MVD 1:63). By implication, the son of Attapeat had not had powers similar to those of the eastern sachems up to this time.

Most histories of Nantucket, even as early as 1752 (Starbuck 1924:163), mention only three early sachems of Nantucket—Wanachmamak, Nickanoose, and Attapeat. To a reader of the town records, however, Spotso soon becomes a familiar name. Spotso owned in his own right the land between Attapeat and Wanachmamak, and his first dispute with Wanachmamak over land (MVD 1:5-7) was settled by the English in 1668:

The line was determined between Wanachmamak and Spotso on the north side the spring at Shimo devides and on the south—at the South Sea one third y by measure from Napaneah [Nobadeer] —-e pond Seanakonkonit [Tom Nevers Fond ] is allowed to Spotso and twoo thirds east was allowed to Wanachmamak a strait line from mark to mark... (NCD 1b: 7, 8).
The location of these landmarks and the boundary can be established by later sale of these lands (NCD 3:50, 53). The line ran from Shimmo Spring (B1 in Fig. 1) to Madequecham Valley at the south shore.

Immediately after this dispute was settled, Spotso granted to the English the pastureage, mowing and timber on his land, "as soon as Wanachmamak pays him forty shillings" (NCD 1:8). Since Wanachmamak had previously sold the heritage rights of the whole island to the English, this political ploy illuminates Spotso's land rights. In addition, a deed of 1674 (NCD 2:8) records that Spotso was a partner in Attapeat's sachemship, which is good evidence that Spotso was a western sachem.

In another dispute, this time in 1678 between Mr. Harry and Wanachmamak, recorded Indian testimony (Little 1980:63, 64) discloses that Nickanoose's father and Wanachmamak had gone to Mount Hope to ask Massasoit to agree that land should be taken away from Spotso's father and Harry's father, after these two men had done "some murther". Further testimony considers whether Wanachmamak had given the land back to Spotso's father, or to the fathers of both Spotso and Harry. Harry's claim was rejected.

In Fig. 1, just to the east of Spotso's land and to the north of a line between B1 and B2, lie two parcels of land. The western parcel, Shawkemo, was the land contested by Harry and Wanachmamak (NCD 1b:7, 2:1, 2, 6). The parcel on the east was given to Thomas Mayhew by Wanachmamak and Nickanoose in 1659 (NPRC 1&2:114). Since Harry was probably a westerner, I propose that sometime before 1668 the boundary between the eastern and western Indians may have been as far east as a line between Stony Brook (B2 in Fig. 1) and Madequecham Valley at the south shore. This location for the boundary coincides with the prominent Madequecham Valley in the outwash plain, said to have been created by a giant's fall, and the location of a battle between easterners and westerners. The extension of this east/west boundary to the north-east of B2 seems reasonable (see the discussion of the use of shellfish), but present knowledge of boundaries in this region is not exact.

The Indian use of a dramatic landscape feature as a boundary occurs again and again on Nantucket. Other examples of boundaries are the north face of the moraine, a remarkably linear feature produced by the late Wisconsin ice; Hummock Pond, a nearly linear pond in a valley in the outwash plain; and a long stretch along the head of the outwash plain.

There is yet another coincidence in Spotso's life with a legend. Sachem Spotso, probably of the west, married Askammapoo, the daughter of Sachem Nickanoose of the northeast. Spotso lived between about 1686 and 1689 on 20 acres given him by Wanachmamak (his residence is marked by * on Fig. 1) (MVD 1:6; Mass. Sup. Ct. Jud. No. 2466; NPP 1:39), and the sons of Spotso and Askammapoo inherited both Spotso's and Nickanoose's sachemships (NCD 1:85-91, 2:37, 41, 77; 3:15-20, 39, 49, 50, 51; 4:13; MV2:209, 211).

In the 19th century retellings of the legend, the names of the two lovers appear as "Autopscot" and "Wonoma", the daughter of Waninnet, but this discrepancy may be explained as an English error. Zaccheus Macy (1792b), more than 100 years later, recalled that Waninnet was the father of Nickanoose, when exactly the reverse was true (Little 1981a), and that Spotso's land was part of Nickanoose's sachemship. The latter error, while illustrating the power of matriliney, leaves Attapeat as the only western sachem. Although boundary disputes took place in 1668 and 1678, the legendary battles suggest that similar disputes had occurred before 1659. However, opting for the simplest solution, I propose Spotso and Askammapoo as candidates for the east and west lovers of the legend.

I have documented historic reverberations of a prehistoric (before 1659) controversy, and have identified:

1) The two eastern sachems, Nickanoose and Wanachmamak, who were the two most powerful sachems on the island, acted cooperatively, and relied on Mount Hope for external affairs.

2) The western sachems or "gentlemen", including Attapeat, Spotso, and Harry, and their fathers, many of whom had records as warriors or murderers, and most of whom were of questionable loyalty to any political authority.

3) The boundary between the two groups, which began at the south at Madequecham Valley, and extended north to Shimmo Spring or to the headwaters of Stony Brook, during the mid-17th century.

**USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES**

Having identified two political groups and their boundary, we can look for differences between them in the use of certain natural resources, as suggested by Jenks (1827) in the Taumkhod legend. Indian use of stranded whales, although not mentioned in legends, is well documented in the Nantucket County Records (Little and Andrews 1982). Between 1668 and 1728, the Nantucket Indians claimed all the stranded whales on the island, but most drift or stranded whales appear to have washed up on the southwest shore, between Tuckernuck and Madequecham. Out of 29 recorded drift whalers (Table 1), 22 are identifiable as western Indians, who had
retained their rights to drift whales even after the west end was sold to the English (Little and Andrews 1982). The only identifiable eastern Indians among recorded drift whalers were Jeptha, his father Wanachmamak, and Nickanoose, all of whom may have owned drift whales ex officio. This evidence for a historic dichotomy between the easterners and the westerners in the availability and use of stranded whales is striking, and provided the impetus for this study.

The dominance of the western Indians in the use of shellfish, as reported by Jenks (1827), also finds support in the deed history. With the exception of a small amount of shellfish habitat belonging to Nickanoose, all the land bordering on shellfish habitat was among the first land which Wanachmamak and Nickanoose sold to the English, along with the west end. If the eastern Indians did not want their shellfish habitat, perhaps it had been dominated by the western Indians before 1659.

Fish and wildfowl of different kinds can be found both on the east and on the west of the island (Zube and Carlozzi 1967:31, 53; Andrews 1973; Crèvecoeur 1782 in Crosby 1946:53, 48), but Jenks (1827) reported that the Indians of the east were the fishermen and wildfowl hunters, not the Indians of the west. Historically the most famous place for fishing was the eastern shore (Crèvecoeur 1971:99), where Indians carried on commercial codfishing for the English (Little 1981b; Starbuck 1683-1766). Of 77 Indian codfishermen recorded in Starbuck’s Account Book, I can identify only 14 easterners and 7 westerners, which is meager information. However, since the easterners had the best codfishing shores, it would seem likely that they dominated the earliest commercial codfishing. In the case of wildfowl hunting, of 37 Indians who bought powder and shot and sold feathers to the English between 1683 and 1720 (Crosby 1946:135), I can identify 12 eastern Indians and only 2 western Indians. Here the account book data, rather than the distribution of wildfowl habitat, give some support to the legendary domination of wildfowl hunting by the eastern Indians.

Historical differences did exist between the Indians of the two ends of the island in the use of certain natural resources, as reported in legend. The eastern Indians, in so far as they can be identified, dominated colonial codfishing and wildfowl hunting. Colonial drift whales and shellfish before 1659 appear to have been controlled predominantly by the western Indians.

Since analysis of prehistoric Nantucket is just beginning, and history on the island started only in 1659, it would be premature to conclude that the origins of the two Indian groups we have identified lay in a time earlier than the 17th century, although both Crèvecoeur (1971:105) and Stockley (1965) have made this suggestion. With the available historic evidence, most of the legendary differences in resource utilization between the two groups of Indians may have been historic phenomena. It is in fact quite possible that the English settlers played a role in establishing the wildfowling and codfishing dichotomies.

The near monopoly by the westerners of drift whales and shellfish, however, may possibly contain a clue to the origin, before 1659, of the western group. Although Jenks stated that he chose the names Khaud and Taumkhod arbitrarily, these names have distinct seasonal implications. Codfishing and wildfowl hunting by the Khauds would have been primarily fall and spring occupations. The tomcod, a codlike fish, frequents an estuarine environment at the west end of the island in the winter, and right whales, which may have provided the bulk of the stranded whales, visited the southwestern shores of the island in winter (Little and Andrews 1982). Shellfish, with which the Taumkhods were associated, would have been one of the few foods available in winter. To speculate then: between 1630 and 1659, when there were both Dutch and English markets for whale products, could off-island Indians, from Martha’s Vineyard according to one historian (Freeman 1807:34), have come to western Nantucket in the winter to gather oil and baleen from stranded whales? Although no beaver or wampum trade has been recorded for Nantucket (Crèvecoeur 1971:106), the Dutch influence on western Nantucket Indian names—Duchman, Merchant, Skyper, Rubin, Hoyt—has long needed an explanation.

In conclusion, then, in the 17th century, according to legend and tradition, there were two groups of Indians on Nantucket, with different adaptations and often unfriendly relations. From town records and studies of the distribution and colonial use of certain natural resources, I have found a historic basis for these legends.

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The strong polarity between the eastern and western Indians in drift whaling and its potential relation to the “two tribes” story, became apparent during a study on drift whales (Little and Andrews 1982). I should like to credit James Deetz for his acuity in asking the
question: was the geographical distribution of drift whales related to the “two tribes”? This paper is an attempt to document my “yes!” of a year ago.

### TABLE 1. NANTUCKET INDIAN DRIFT WHALERS

**Western Indians:**
- Akeamough (Wakleaman) 1681 (NCD 2:38)
- Brittain, Henry (Harry) 1701 (NCD 3:23)
- Canpokenet (Georgia Nanahuma) 1673 (NCD 2b:2; 3:66; 4:62)
- Desire 1676 (NCD 2b:2)
- Duchman (Cecaehumma) 1712 (NCD 3:62, 68)
- Harry, Mr. 1676 (NCD 2b:8)
- Johnboy 1712 (NCD 3:68)
- Matakekin (tPeteison) 1696 (NCD 4:62, 87)
- Mooney (alias Pattacohonnet) 1712 (NCD 3:62)
- Musuquai 1673 (NCD 2b:2)
- Nehemiah 1712 (NCD 3:68)
- Obadiah 1673 (NCD 2b:2)
- Pattacohonnet before 1712 (NCD 3:62)
- Pattacohonnet's son, Jacob 1712 (NCD 2:38; 3:62)
- Paunes (Pawnes) 1712 (NCD 3:68)
- Quapotown 1691 (NCD 2:13; Starbuck 1683-1766:49)
- Scotsbonnet 1712 (NCD 3:62)
- Sowacha (Dick) 1712 (NCD 3:62)
- Spotso 1677 (NCD 2b:8)
- Wanaquin (John Hoyt) 1673 (NCD 2b:2; 3:68)
- Wapskowit 1673 (NCD 2b:2)
- Washaman 1673 (NCD 2b:2)

**Eastern Indians:**
- Jeptha (son of Wanachamak) 1681 (NCD 2b:29; 3:51)
- Wanachamak (Wequakesoo) 1673 (NCD 2b:2:2:35)
- Nickanoose 1677 (MVD 1:38)

**Indians of Unknown Affiliation:**
- Koskuhtukquaeinin 1728 (NCD 4:62)
- Peetotoquay 1686 (Starbuck 1683-1766)
- Wequash 1677 (Mass. Sup. Ct. Jud. no. 92741)
- Womhomimin 1673 (NCD 2b:2)

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