Indian Place Names at Nantucket.

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Introduction

Ives Goddard (1977a:157) has written that, “the careful documentation of the earliest spellings of the names (is) an indispensable prerequisite to place name analysis”. In the list of Nantucket Indian place names presented in this paper, I have corrected a number of mistakes, misspellings, and typographical errors found in previous published transcriptions of the original manuscripts. In addition, I have documented variations on place names, some of which can be related to linguistic, cultural, or geographic phenomena. Finally, I generate some hypothetical place name meanings, and show how these may be tested.

Background

Gordon Day (1977, 1981) was fortunate to find living informants for place name meanings on Lake Champlain, but as far as I know, there are no living speakers of Massachusetts, familiar with our places, who could translate Nantucket place names. Using Trumbull’s *Natick Dictionary* (1903), Roger William’s *Key into the Language of America* (1936), and Josiah Cotton’s *Vocabulary of the Massachusetts (or Natick) Indian Language* (1830), one can try to match Massachusetts words with parts of place names. Although this activity has been called “Sunday-supplement linguistics” by Goddard, it does generate alternative hypotheses.
In 1910, Henry Barnard Worth of Nantucket, using original documents, his knowledge of Nantucket places, and the works of Dr. W.W. Tooker and Dr. Trumbull, produced a list of Nantucket Indian place names with possible meanings (Worth 1910). His translations range from reasonable to impossible, as he admitted. Since Douglas-Lithgow (1909, 1914:26-33), Huden (1962), and Green and Sachse (1983), generally included Worth's meanings for Nantucket names, the works of all five authors contain many untested and unproven hypotheses for Nantucket place name meanings.

However generated, hypothetical translations must be tested locally before they can be considered possible. For example, the hypothetical translation, Rattlesnake Hill for Sesachacha (Worth 1910:295), as well as the early English place names, Rattlesnack Banck or the Snake Place for Shouahkemmuck (see list), have been suspect because we have no independent evidence that there ever were rattlesnakes on Nantucket (Worth 1910:295). However, in 1976 Lazell (1976:207) found a remarkably high density of king or milk snakes, about 6000 per square mile, on the east half of the island. If these large, diamond patterned snakes, with the ability to make a rattling noise by shaking their tails, were here in the 17th century, rattlesnake place names on the island could be appropriate. Dated archaeological finds of snake vertebrae could further test this interesting ecological and linguistic issue.

In order to translate a place name, you need an Indian version of the name as well as knowledge of the local environment. Nantucket Indian place names, recorded from 1659 on, are found in bound manuscript volumes at the Nantucket Registry of Deeds in the handwriting of the Registrar of Deeds or the proprietors' recorder. Not only are the ancient documents blotched and worn, and the handwriting archaic and faded, but the sounds being recorded were undoubtedly not the same sounds that were found in the English of the time. In addition, the sounds of English in the 17th century were not the same as they are today. And it is quite likely that the original recording process itself introduced copying errors, such as repetition, omission, and mis-spelling.

Methodology

Nantucket deeds, probate records, court records, and Proprietors' Records have been searched for Indian place names and variations in the 17th and 18th centuries, and, when possible, compared with the same names as they are today on United States Geological Survey maps. I have tried to find and date any significant changes that may have taken place but I do not claim to have exhausted the sources or the subject.

There were some bilingual Englishmen: Peter Folger, his son, Eleazer, and grandson, Eleazer; Thomas Mayhew Jr., his son Matthew, and grandson, Experience; and William Worth, who recorded deeds and court records for Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard Islands (which shared a court until 1695) in the 17th and 18th centuries. These men translated documents written in Massachusetts, and sometimes gave place name meanings in English. In addition to these sources, I include the place name spellings and meanings given by Zaccheus Macy in 1792 (Macy 1792), because he was born on Nantucket in 1713 and could be expected to have had some knowledge of the Indian place names.

Worth and Ewer (1869) have ten place names which I have not documented (Bogue, Canopache, Cotackta, Herrecater Swamp, Nashawomank, Peedee, Pochick, Pocoy, Quanata, and Tawnatpeinse), and I have 17 names which Worth did not include. Altogether we have 86 Indian place names. I have omitted in this report English-place names, such as Long Pond, names which include Indian or pidgin English words but have an English construction, such as Sachem Spring and Wigwam Ponds, and the following, all of which contain historic Indian personal names: Abram's Point, Pimney's Point, Tom Never's Head, Gibb's Pond, Hummock Pond, Nanahuma's Neck, Pattaconet's Island, Myoakeses Pond, Spotso Country, Tashme's Island, and Towpausher's Swamp.

Analysis

Although worn and otherwise showing their 300 year age, the
documents at the Registry of Deeds are legible, and constitute a treasure chest of data on place names and geography. Eighty-six recorded Indian place names on an island of 130 square kilometers is a density of 0.7 names per square kilometer. By comparison, the whole of Connecticut has a density of 0.04 recorded Indian place names per square kilometer and the inland town of Lincoln, Massachusetts, with 39 square kilometers, has no recorded Indian place names. The presence of more English recorders and/or more Indians on the coast than inland could account for the higher density of recorded Indian place names on the coast than inland.

Indian place names have always been important to the people of Nantucket, and 31 names from this list are well known and used to locate areas precisely today. Fifty-five place names on the list are no longer in common use, although new land owners occasionally, after a deed search, give their property an ancient name. Fourteen of the place names from deeds originally written by the Nantucket Indians themselves (Little 1980, 1981a), such as Nannuhtukquesut Wesachimmussud, and Pukquotanus-sut, were probably never used by the English.

Linguistic Variations

One of the uses to which a list of early Indian place names at Nantucket can be put is to establish or confirm the distribution of phonological or morphological isoglosses in New England. For example, early observers such as Roger Williams (1936) and William Wood (1865), noted that certain geographically distributed dialects used r, y, l, or n for the same Proto-Algonquian sound. In some regions of southern New England, the distribution of these sounds has been confirmed, with evidence of mixing and of change with time (Goddard 1977a). As expected from place names, Nantucket's dialect of Massachusetts is an n dialect, with no l and only four examples of r, some of which may have been English introductions, as in the change from Tuckanuck to Tuckernuck (see list).

For locative endings of place names, Bragdon (1981:22) has pointed out that -ut, -it, or -et were more common on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket than the form -uk or -ik. The Nantucket place names listed here show a 3:1 ratio of t to k endings. The t endings both outlast and supersede the k endings with the exception of Tuckernuck which in 1661 briefly had the alias, Tuckanuckett, but is today the only surviving place name ending with -uck.

Changes

Place names and their variations or changes can be sensitive indicators of cultural and environmental phenomena. Since 1659, an obvious change in Nantucket Indian place names has been in length. Some names lost their final consonants early. Examples are: Coweightuet to Cowatu by 1663, Pukquotanussut to Pookquottanussuh by 1696, and Shouahkemmuck to Showakem-moe by 1684. As Pakummoquo (1662) became Pocomock (1688), and Wonnashquoom (1668) became Squam (1691), dropping of prefixes and suffixes, primarily by the English, appears to have been routine. Indeed, the process continues. Today, two names, Sesachacha and Siasconset, are written forms only. They are pronounced as if written Sacacha and Sconset. These changes not only make the names easier to speak and write, but also help distinguish the tourists from the natives.

Changes in place names can reflect differences between the Indian view of the landscape and the English view. Consider the place names, Monomoy, Shimmo, Shawkemo, Masquetuck (Quaise), as used in colonial times and today referring to necks, or small peninsulas. Originally, Shimmo was the name of a spring, and Monomoy, Shouahkemmuck, and Masquetuck were names for creeks. That is, the Indians had names for the bodies of water rather than the adjacent land. The English settlers, most of whom had grazing animals, needed names for the easily fenced necks of land, and appear to have borrowed them from the adjacent bodies of water.

Place names also change because of geographical changes. Consider the creation and naming of Esther Island and Whale
Island. Esther was the name of the 1961 hurricane which created the island by severing Smith Point from Nantucket, and a whale stranded on a new shoal in 1975 provided a name for the growing and presently vegetated islet at the site of Smith Point (personal communication from J.C. Andrews). In a similar manner, Muskeget Island seems to have replaced Sturgeon Island.

**Meanings**

The published translations of many Nantucket place names leave a great deal to be desired. Seldom have alternative translations been suggested, nor have many hypothetical Indian place name meanings been tested. I have found two examples for which a process of generating alternative meanings has produced testable results. Consider the Poot Ponds, heretofore translated as Whale Ponds (Starbuck 1924:611, 651), which are two glacial kettle ponds some distance from the sea, and which do not resemble whales. *Pootop* meant ‘whale’ at Nantucket, from the root meaning *pootau*, ‘he blows’ (Trumbull 1903:227), just as Spouter means ‘whale’. A translation for Poot Ponds would, therefore, be Blower Ponds, which could mean Whale Ponds or Blow Hole Ponds. As a test of the new hypothesis, we may compare the ponds and a right whale’s blow holes from the air. The resemblance of the two ponds to a baleen (right) whale’s blow holes (a sperm whale only has one blow hole), is remarkable. This coincidence is no proof of the derivation of the name. However, it does suggest an interesting process for name formation.

A similar procedure can be applied to Coatue, for which the standard translation is ‘at the (white) pine woods’ (Worth 1910:291). The chief problem with this meaning is that pines, especially white pines, because of the deleterious effect of salt spray, do not find Nantucket, and especially Coatue, a congenial habitat. Although red cedar grows at Coatue, pines do not, and we have no evidence that they ever did in numbers sufficient to establish the place name. However, *cowau*, or *koua*, the root for the name of the pine tree, means ‘it is sharp pointed’ (Trumbull 1903:41). Is it possible, as Elizabeth Gosnall speculated in 1983, that the six sharp cuspate points of land at Coatue suggested this name? An alternative sharp point is that found on the native prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia compressa*) which grows there. These hypotheses could be tested by comparing the geographical distribution of the 38 place names in New England containing *cowau* (Huden 1962), with the distribution of evergreens, cactus, and sharp points of land. This project will take some time, but I already have found that Cotuit, on Cape Cod, and Koesek, now Vernon, Vt. (Huden 1962), and Cohasset, Mass., center about bold and dramatic points of land.

**Summary**

To summarize, I have briefly touched on the background and methodology used to assemble an accurate early list of Nantucket Indian place names and their variations with time. Such a list of local place names can make a contribution to regional studies of linguistic variation. Many kinds of changes in place names are illustrated, some of which reflect environmental or cultural changes. Examples show how geographically testable alternative meanings may be generated by the process of looking at the meaning of the roots.

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APPENDIX

List Of Nantucket Indian Place Names, with Sources and Dates.


Ahapahconset NCD (1690) 2:53. Near Squam Pond.

Apagununnohkit DCD (1668) 7:44. Unidentified locality, northeast of Quaise.

Aquidnese, ‘a neck of land’ NCD (1687) 3:110; Aquitnesso NCD (1711) 3:57; Aquinet, ‘between Monomoy and Shimmo’ NCD (1726) 4:45. Probably today’s Pimney’s Point. A point or peninsula at Nantucket in the 17th century was a neck. See Aquidnet Point.

Aquidnet Point NCD (1722) 4:13. Today’s Quidnet. Subject to shoreline erosion, this is a small neck similar to Aquidnese. Both were intensively used by prehistoric inhabitants, and both are candidates for Wammasquid, one of the three Christian Indian meeting places in 1674 (Gookin 1970:104). See also Wahquoinoy.

Aqunaonagquessit, or ‘the hole where a Stone stands’, translated by Experience Mayhew before 1745 DCD (1668) 7:44. Unknown location northeast of Quaise.

Bocochego NCD (1765) 7:76. A tract laid out in 1744 (Worth 1910:291) and once containing the mouths of several streams, between Broad St., Main St., Federal St., and the harbor. Worth (1910:291) suggests an Indian origin, but Obed Macy (unpub. mss., in Starbuck 1924:650) states that the name came from a Dutch ship cast away on Nantucket. The name appears Spanish, and may derive from Boca Ciega ‘blind mouth’, a frequent Spanish name for a body of water with a hidden entrance.

Cappattudacona NCD (1711) 3:47. Near Sankaty Head.

Cappammet Harbour NCD (1667) 1:11; Cappammet Harbour NCD (1672) 1b:21. Today’s Capaum Pond was a harbour until

Catchcassok NCD (1667) 1:14; Kachkesset NCD (1687) 6:4. A place near the Swain house lots on the southwest side of Hummock Pond (Starbuck 1924:56).

Chapanacoy NCD (1669) 1:21. Salt marsh, unknown location near Shawkemo or Shimmo.

Chappapemeset NCD (1691) 3:53; Chappaponiss NCD (1762) 6:335. Chapapamiss Valley NPR (1762) 1:104. An Indian-English boundary, at the east edge of Tom Nevers Head and at the west edge of ‘a great valley called Pasocha’ NCD 3:53.

Coboahcommoh NCD (1692) 2:69. At the southeast of Hummock Pond (probably), which, like many of the ponds near the shores, has been periodically opened to the sea for fishing purposes for an unknown time in the past. The longshore currents soon form a beach across the pond mouth and close it up again. This site may have been one of the early along-shore whaling stations (Little 1981b). Compare Cuppammet Harbour.

Coyeama NCD (1687) 3:110. A valley near Shimmo Spring and Aquidnese.


Coscaty NPR (1778) 1:148. Woods and meadow at “Causkata” (Macy 1792), which is a broad place with woods, pond, and meadow on Coatue. Today called Coskata.

Cowigzueter NCD (1660) 1:7; Cowatu NCD (1663) 1b:3; Coatue NCD (1674) 4:90; Coatuet, ‘a neck’ NCD (1684) 3:73; Coetuit NCD (1687) 3:110. This name originally applied to both the present Coatue, “Little Coatue”, and Great Point, “the Long Point, or Nauma” (Macy 1792; NCD (1660) 6:1; NCD 3:73). Coatue today, with two syllables, has no white pine, but it supports both red cedar and Opuntia compressa (native prickly pear cactus). Its most unique attributes are six regular, sharp pointed, cuspate spits which project into the harbor.

Cuppammet Harbour NCD (1667) 1:11; Cuppame Harbour NCD (1672) 1b:21. Today’s Capaum Pond was a harbour until
a storm about 1717 deposited a sand beach across its entrance (Worth 1910:80). It may have been closed at times before the arrival of Europeans.

Hashkinnitchaohket DCD (1668) 7:44. Unknown location near Quaise.

Kestokas Field NCD (1715) 3:91. Unknown location in Polpis area.

Machupunes NCD (1742) 5:23. Unknown location on the South Shore.

Mana NCD (1691) 3:50; Monah NCD (1695) 3:49; Manna NCD (1678) 2:1,2. Approximately 20 acres at an unknown location near the present airport. One of the earliest Indian documents refers to a “great hunting meeting at Manna” (NCD:2:1,2).

Manois NCD (1702) 3:42. Unknown location just south of Coatue.

Mardapoquehy, “The swampy slow or run near the highway at Mascotuck” NCD (1691) 3:53. See Maskatuk Creek.

Mashaam NCD (1670) 3:39. 100 acres at the “going on to Coatue one the south side of the meadows or creek” (NCD 3:39). Coskata, probably.

Mashquapamtit DCD (1668) 7:44. Unknown location northeast of Quaise.

Masquapock NCD (1687) 3:110. The run or creek, with a pond and fresh marsh, that was crossed by a cart path going from Pocomo to Coatue. The water running out of this creek can have a red color, probably due to iron.

Masquetuck NCD (1667) 1b:7; Mashquitoohk DCD (1668) 7:44; Mascotuck, “Mr. Thomas Mayhew’s Neck” NCD (1674) 3:65; Masquetuck Neck NCD (1702) 3:61. “The read land” (Macy 1792); Quaise, today (see Quaus). Reed or red are both geographically applicable to this place (see Masquapock).

Maskatuk Creek NCD (1669) 1:21; Stony Brook NCD (1678) 2:35; Read River DCD (1668) 7:44, translated from Mashqu-
deer today, a wetland and valley on the south shore.

Naretoqueso NCD (1692) 2:70. The creek mouth near the northwest end of Squam Pond.


Noape, “the Vineyard” (Macy 1792).

Nopque, “a landing place” (Macy 1792), Smith Point (Worth 1910:294). The southwest point of Nantucket, nearest Martha’s Vineyard.

Oggawame, “where the church meets” [1674] (Gookin 1970: 104); Ockawaw NCD (1778) 9:362. An unlocated historic Indian settlement, “the headquarters of old Waunuchmamuck’s territory” (Macy 1792), somewhere east of Gibbs Pond.

Ongquahqam, “a flaggy marsh” NCD (1669) 1:21. Unlocated place west of Masquatuck.

Pakpannogkahkunnut NCD (1676) 3:41. Near Squam Pond.

Pakummohquoh NCD (1662) 4:89; Paquomoqut Neck NCD (1667) 1b:6; Pocomock NCD (1688) 3:55; Pokomo NCD (1729) 4:67. This neck, today called Pocomo, was bounded by “the river” on the north, by Masquapock, Squam Swamp, and “the creek at Poatpes” (NCD 3:73).

Pasocha “a great valley” NCD (1691) 3:53. East of Tom Nevers Head.

Petenahpah, the “next great crek above Ashimo” NCD (1669) 1:21. The creek just east of Abram’s Point.

Poatpes NCD (1684) 3:73; “Podpis” (Macy 1792). Today’s Polpis.

Poot Ponds NPR (1676) 1:114. Today’s Pout Ponds. There is a legend in which a whale appeared successively in each Pond before escaping to the sea (Starbuck 1924:611).

Pquaopuachus NCD (1686) 3:112. Islands of upland surround-
ed by wetlands in the swamp near Gibbs Pond.

Pukquotanussut, or Pookquotanussuh NCD (1696) 4:62. Land gift to Matakekin and George Huma from Nickanoose near Squam Pond.

Quaquakunnuttum Mukutaut NCD (1690) 2:9. Unlocated region near Squam Pond.

Quaquat NPR (1773) 1:128, region north of Siasconset Pasture.

Quaus NCD (1702) 3:61; Quaise NCD (1708) 3:8; Quais NCD (1708) 3:12. See Masquetuck. Today’s Quaise.

Quonsue NCD (1721) 3:136. “Qunsue Meador” (Macy 1792). Near the present Consue Spring.

Sanckatanck, near “the place called the blew cleft” NCD (1691) 3:52. “Naphcheco”, or “round the (Sankata) head”, according to Macy (1792). Today’s Sankaty Head.

Seanakonkonit (“the pond”) NCD (1668) 1b:7, 8. Probably Tom Nevers Pond.

Shimmo (“The Spring at”) NCD (1668) 1b:7, 8; Shemo NCD (1687) 3:110; Ashimo (“A Spring called”) NCD (1683) 3:54. A creek and region west of the creek are today known as Shimmo. Ditching has obscured the original location of the spring (J.C. Andrews, personal communication, 1980).

Shuakimmo Creek NCD (1674) 3:67; Shouahkmkmuck NCD (1678) 2:1, 2; Showakenmoe, “The Snake Place” NCD (1684) 3:73. At the head of Shuakimmo Creek was “Read Spring” (NCD 3:67), under “Rattelsnack Banck” (NCD 2:35) (see Stewakininkers). “Showaucamor” meant ‘the Midel field of Land’, according to Macy (1792). Today Shawkemo Creek is called Folger’s Creek, and Shawkemo is the name of a region west of the creek.

Sisackachat NCD (1682) 2:10; Sasagacha NCD (1745) 5:84. “Sasachacor” and “Sussachacor” (Macy 1792) are mis-spellings. Originally the name referred to an area with cod-fishing stages
south of a pond, but today it names the pond, Sesachacha Pond or 'Sachacha Pond (the first 'ch' is pronounced ƙ).

Siasconset NCD (1691) 3:52. Today's Siasconset. The first Sis- may have been a copying error. This village of ancient fish or whale houses is commonly known today as 'Sconset.

Squatesit, one of three places where the Indians met to worship in 1674 (Gookin 1970:104). Possibly it was near Maskatuk Creek, where Spotso had a "meeting house" in 1686 (Mass. Sup. Ct. Jud. no.2466).

Stewakininkers NCD (1678) 2:28; Rattlesnake Hill or Bank NCD (1677, 1678) 2:28, 35. The site is the junction of several Indian-English boundary lines at the head of Shuakimmo Creek.

Tawtemeo, "the hummuck pond" (Macy 1792), a boundary. See Acamy.

Toochahy (?) NPR (1775) 1:135; Toupchwe Pond, at the South Shore (Macy 1792). Original is neither early nor legible.

Tuckanuck, Tuckanuckett N.Y. Deeds (1661) 3:53. Early maps show it called Petockenock [1630, 1650] (Worth 1910:297; Fite and Freeman 1967:146). Today er replaces the α, and it's called Tuckernuck, which Macy (1792) said meant "a loaf of brad".

Tuppockommack NCD (1678) 2:1,2. Unknown location south of Shimmo.

Wahquatnoy NCD (1690) 1:30; Wahquotnoy NCD (1711) 3:47. Unknown location near Sesachacha Pond. Obed Macy (in Starbuck 1924:650) called it a neck. It is along the beach, somewhere between today's Quidnet and the Sankaty Beach Club.

Wonnasquid. One of three places where the Indians met to worship in 1674 (Gookin 1970:104). See 'Aquidnet Point'.

Wonnacomet NCD (1664) 1:5; Wonnaconset NCD (1667) 1:11. Land just west of Wesco, along the north shore.

Waquittaquaug NCD (1660) 2:8, (1664) 1:5; Waqutuquab NCD (1660) 6:1. The Head of Hummuck Pond, today, which was a bound mark for the purchase of the west end of the island from the Indians.

Wassomuhkattog NCD (1676) 3:41; Wassommukkuttuk, "That little swamp and river" NCD (1690) 2:9, near Squam Pond.

Wataquete NCD (1687) 3:110. From the mouth of the creek on the north of Pocomo (Masquapock), about 16 acres of "swamp", "run", "spring", "slow", "marsh" and "meadow".

Wesachimmussud NCD (1710) 3:24. Unknown location at Squam or Polpis.

Wesquo NCD (1664) 1:5; Wesquo Pond NCD (1667) 1:19; The White Rock NCD (1711) 3:34. The present town near Lily Pond. Macy (1792) translated "Wesko" as, 'at the white ston'.

Wewedan Pond NCD (1695) 3:49. Today's Weweeder Ponds, at the South Shore. Macy (1792) translated "Wewedor" as 'a pare of horns'.

Wonnashquoom DCD (1668) 7:44; Wunnasquam NCD (1686) 1b:55; Wunisquam Pond NCD (1690) 2:70; Squam Pond NCD (1691) 2:59; Squam NCD (1704) 3:2. Today's Squam Pond was larger in the past (J.C. Andrews, personal communication). Wunnasquam was Sachem Nickanoose's headquarters, possibly encompassing as large an area as Squam includes today.

Wonnahktih NCD (1690) 1:30. Unknown location near Sesachacha.

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