THE NIPMUC
FIRST PEOPLE OF BOYLSTON

PART ONE
THE PRE-COLONIAL YEARS
By Gordon Hastings

On a hot and humid August afternoon in the 1940s it would be a common occurrence for the Hastings to park the family Chevy at the foot of Rocky Pond Road. We would gather our picnic lunch and trudge the mile plus muddy path around the western perimeter of Rocky Pond to arrive at the ponds northern tip at what we called "the beach." No sand there, just matted grass worn in places to bare earth. However, even a child could not miss the two relics of the Ice Age, the BIG ROCK and the LITTLE ROCK. One is a towering boulder edging out from the shoreline, the other emerging from the water a hundred feet from shore. The BIG ROCK became a diving tower, the LITTLE ROCK a destination for those learning to swim. A collection of giant boulders lay just inland from the shore. A walk in this place evoked a spiritual feeling of important events that had occurred here long ago.

Indigenous People of the Northeastern Woodlands

Let us peel back the pages of history to the Indigenous people of the Northeastern Woodlands. They were the Nipmuc *"People of the fresh water."* The Nipmuc territory was called Nippenet meaning the freshwater pond place. The tribe spoke Loup, an Eastern Algonquin language. They had lived on the lands that Boylston residents now call home for thousands of years long before white men had ever set foot on the North American Continent.

The Nipmuc people were led by various sachems rather than a single individual. The Nipmuc lived in small, decentralized autonomous villages across central Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Individual sachems led specific bands rather than the entire nation under one central chief.[1]

PAYNE HENRIES
Chaubunagungamaug Nipmuc
Born 21 August 1863- Died 28 September 1936

The Nipmuc were the dominant tribe throughout Central Massachusetts and had a deep relationship with the South Nashua River, forests and lands throughout the area. It is not difficult to imagine Nipmuc children climbing the BIG ROCK and jumping into the cool waters of Rocky Pond. The Nipmuc were not nomadic as the Native Americans of the plains. They thrived through hunting, fishing, planting and harvesting. They were stewards of the land and forests.

Archeological Evidence

In all likelihood a large Nipmuc village was located at Rocky Pond as indicated by archeological evidence found in the area. A plot of land known as the Indian Corn Field was identified in a survey as 200 acers lying to the north of Rocky Pond.[2] Centuries later Leonard Stark who lived on his farm on Green Street not far from Rocky Pond plowed up a stone axe head in almost perfect condition.[3] An Indian clay pipe was unearthed by George Flagg on the farm first settled by the Flagg's in 1725.[4]

To this day, Nipmuc presence can be seen throughout Boylston. Just off Green Street there exists an Indian Corn Mill. It is hollowed out of a flat rock in a circular form to a depth of up to a foot and was used with a stone pestle as a mortar to pound corn into a course meal.[5] This author also recalls from his youth a similar Indian Grist Mill on an old trail beginning at a sharp curve on Cross street linking with Linden Street. This mill, located less than a quarter mile from Cross Street is also in the immediate vicinity of the aforementioned Indian Corn Field.

> *"It is well known that the Indians were accustomed to assemble in the spring of the year for a general pow-wow, to which they came from all directions, and the Indians in this vicinity often held these gatherings on Ball Hill and around Rocky Pond. This may account for the Indian relics and ceremonial stones found there…It seems plausible and likely that at some early period, there was a regular Nipmuc settlement or village on that section of Ball Hill".*[6]

TOBACCO
Presented to Fred Brown of Rocky Pond Road by Nipmuc Chief
BHSM COLLECTIONS

In the same area there is a large flat stone with a wide hole roughly drilled through it, lying on a platform built up of rough stones two to three feet high and situated upon a ledge. This is known as "*Indian Stone and Rock*", used by the Native Americans for special ceremonies.[7]

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[1] Pritzker, B.M. A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture and Peoples. Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press.
[2] Boylston Historical Series, Bruce Filgate, (2012) "History of Boylston 1641-1742, A Critical Edition of the Papers of George L. Wright" by William O. Dupuis, B.A., M.A., p.35
[3] Ibid, p.34
[4] Ibid, p. 35
[5] Ibid, p. 34
[6] Ibid, p. 35
[7] Ibid, p. 34

White Men's Arrival -The Great Migration

The Nipmuc first known interaction with white men likely occurred in the early 1600s when trappers were known to have come into New England looking for bever pelts, fox and mink. Others hugged the coastline for Massachusetts's famous Cod. Interaction did not accelerate until 1630-1634 during the Great Migration from England led by King George's appointed governor, John Winthrop. Hundreds of colonists arrived by ships such as the Elizabeth and the Arabella which carried Winthrop and his family. Great Migration ships disembarked families that a century later would become the founders of Boylston, Lancaster, Shrewsbury and other nearby towns. The future Boylston colonists included the Bennett, Keys, Hastings, Flagg, Andrews and Brigham ancestors. Many of them first settled in Watertown, which at that time remained a wilderness as did all of the current Town of Boylston and Central Massachusetts.

MAP OF TRIBAL TERRITORIES
Map by the Smithsonian Institute
Hassanamisco Indian Museum Collection

Tribal Territories of Southern New England

The first half of the 17th Century was a peaceful time in a bucolic landscape in what was to become Boylston 150 years into the future. There was very little intertribal rivalry among the Nipmuc and their neighbors the Wampanoag (Plymouth), Massachusett (Boston), Narragansett, (Rhode Island) and the Pequot Mohegan, (Connecticut.).

The first recorded contact with Europeans was in 1630 when the Nipmuc Acquitamaug took maize to the starving colonists of Boston.[8]

HISTORICAL MARKER
Brigham Hill Road
Erected by Massachusetts Bay Colony-Tercentenary Commission

Like the story of all Native Americans, the world of the Nipmuc would change dramatically and the area that would become Boylston would change in lock step. Violence was on the horizon that would have lasting impact on these wilderness settlements.

Later the Nipmuc had further exposure to the White Men. In 1631 Christian Missionary John Eliot arrived in Boston and learned the *Native American Massachusett Language* which was widely understood among the Indian population. He published a bible translated into *Massachusett Language* and set out to establish "Praying Towns". Several were located in Central Massachusetts including at Lancaster! One of those praying towns the *Hassanamisco Nipmuc Band* was in what is now Grafton, Massachusetts. The *Hassanamisco Band* has been recognized by the Massachusetts State Government and many of its descendants currently reside on a 4.5acre reservation in Grafton.[9]

HASSANMISCO NIPMUC NATION POWWOW-2016
Worcester Telegram & Gazette, July 26, 2024, p D7

Coming Soon
PART TWO
THE FIRST "MANIFEST DESTINY"
AND
BOYLSTON AND KING PHILLIPS WAR

[8] Lanard, E.D. History of Windham County, Connecticut 1600-1760. Harvard University Press
[9] Hassanamisco Nipmuc Band, Hassanamesit Reservation, 80 Brigham Hill Road, Grafton, Massachusetts

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