

SLIDE ONE

Hello Everyone. The Norwell Historical Society has been asked to present a monthly “History Moment” to the Board of Selectmen and the residents that watch your meetings. As Teddy Roosevelt said, “The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future.” So I hope you think of these moments not only as educational, but as useful for future work you might do and also as a way of expressing gratitude to those people who went before us and made this town what it is today. I promise to keep each of these History Moments brief, and there will always be a link to the presentations on our Norwell Historical Society website.

When I was on the Historical Commission in 2007, we produced a booklet that was mailed to all residents that listed all of the historic homes in town. That booklet began with a brief history of Norwell—the same history I’ve told (and other members of the Historical Society have told) for as long as I can remember. It begins “In 1634, Cornet Robert and Honor Stetson came up the North River from Scituate Harbor and settled in what it today Norwell...”.

A few months ago I read an article on a common phenomenon with historic storytelling. It’s called “Firsting and Lasting,” and I realized that our Historical Society was very guilty of it. The basic premise is that historians often overlook the earliest origins of a location (typically the Native Americans), and historians sometimes also write off part of the ending as well. Essentially, there was a lot going on in this area before the Stetsons arrived in Church Hill. And the natives who inhabited our town aren’t completely “gone” from the narrative today.

So tonight I’m going to quickly give you a history of Norwell—pre-colonization.

SLIDE TWO – THE AGE OF THE GLACIER

75-11,000 years ago, Norwell (and much of northern America) was covered by the Wisconsin Glacier. Sea levels were much lower than they are today, so when the (up to one mile thick!) glacier melted, our current coastline was formed. No humans lived in the areas where the glacier was.

SLIDE THREE – THE AGE OF THE GLACIER

During this glacial period, humans migrated from northern Asia across the ice on what is referred to today as “The Bering Bridge”... into Alaska and western Canada.

SLIDE FOUR – POST GLACIER

When the glacier receded and melted, it created the landscape that we know today, including such unique features as Black Pond Bog off of Mount Blue (shown in the upper photo)—which is a glacial kettle hole; the North River (shown in the lower photo); and the rock-strewn hilltops throughout town—like the one where I live on Otis Hill!

SLIDE FIVE – POST-GLACIER & FIRST PEOPLES

It was at this time that the area became habitable for humans and people migrated south and east.

SLIDE SIX – NATIVE PEOPLE IN SOUTHERN NEW ENGLAND

Around 10,000 years ago, the first humans moved into New England. I find this map fascinating to look at—native tribal names that we all know. I’m originally from central Connecticut and the Tunxis name was everywhere! You can see that the South Shore and Norwell, in particular, lay on the line between the Massachusett tribe and the Wompanoag tribe. These tribes spoke the same dialect and were mostly friendly with one another.

SLIDE SEVEN – NATIVE PEOPLE ON THE SOUTH SHORE

Around 1617, there was a major outbreak of disease that originated from very early (pre-Pilgrim) explorers. The epidemic decimated an estimated 90% of the native population—including the tribes that inhabited this area. It is often referred to as a “plague” or “Indian Fever,” but today many epidemiologists think it was actually leptospirosis. This is a bacterial infection that comes from drinking water contaminated by animal feces—in this case from rats who traveled to this area on European explorers’ ships.

When the Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth in 1620, they moved into a recently-abandoned Indian village known as Patuxet. In fact, when French explorer Samuel deChamplain drew a map of Plymouth harbor in 1605, he noted native homes surrounded by fields of corn. But by 1620, the population was largely gone and there were few Wampanoags left in the Plymouth area.

SLIDE EIGHT – NATIVE PEOPLE ON THE SOUTH SHORE

There were a number of native settlements in this area—particularly around the North River, in Plymouth, and around the ponds in Pembroke. Those settlements have familiar names to us: Assinippi (which means “rocky water”), Mattakeeset (along the North River), Patuxet (in today’s Plymouth), and Satuit (which meant “Cold Brook” and was later adopted by English settlers as the name for this area). The Massachusetts and Wampanoag who lived here grew crops (corn, beans, and squashes), foraged, hunted, and fished. Herring was a prized catch—it was used to fertilize crops, used as bait to catch larger fish, and it was smoked and preserved, and eaten. We’re all familiar with First, Second, and Third Herring Brooks in this area—herring was very plentiful in these waters!

SLIDE NINE – NATIVE PEOPLE ON THE SOUTH SHORE

The North River and native footpaths were the only efficient means of travel throughout the area and many of these routes are still used today. For example, their main footpath from the ocean to Assinippi is today's Main Street, and the easiest location where the natives crossed the North River is now the location of the Route 3A bridge.

SLIDE TEN – NATIVE PEOPLE IN NORWELL'S HISTORY

There are few references in history books to the native people who pre-dated European settlers and rare mentions of later natives who stayed in the area. Historian Samuel Deane mentions "Comsitt, a bright and enterprising man, who enlisted into the Revolutionary army and lost his life." There are numerous mentions throughout Norwell's history of Simon, an Indian, who lived off of Bowker Street—after which Simon's Hill is named. And Lucy Stewart (incorrectly noted by Historian Joseph Merritt in the photo here as "Last of the Native Indians") had a fascinating life. She was known as "a decided character" and the Historical Society has a link to her story on our website at the "Learn More" tab.

SLIDE ELEVEN - EVIDENCE OF NATIVE PEOPLE TODAY

There is evidence of pre-colonization native people throughout Norwell. Many of the artifacts that the Society has on display were collected in town, and my own son found the spearhead shown here when our 1970s house was getting a new septic system. You don't need to own an antique home to find an artifact in your backyard!

This is a brief overview of the very earliest history of what is today called "Norwell"—a look at the first inhabitants. These native Indians are not gone. There are still descendants living on the South Shore today and known as

[Mattakeesett Tribe of the Massachusetts Indian Nation](#), the [Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag](#), and the [Mashpee Wompanoag Tribe](#). There are links to their websites on the Norwell Historical Society website:

www.NorwellHistoricalSociety.org.

If you'd like me to come back next month, I'd be happy to give you a brief "History Moment" on the Stetsons—the first European settlers in what is today Norwell.

Thank you.