

Understanding Hassanamesit

By Electa Kane Tritsch

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— Electa Kane Tritsch

How do you understand a piece of land? You walk it, explore it, watch and listen for its features and critters, its dead and growing things. Every month it changes, every year and decade. It reinvents itself through storm and fire, through slow accumulation and interminable erosion. More often than not, in Massachusetts, it is transformed by the hand of man and, since man understands the land differently from culture to culture and generation to generation, the transformations are different as well.

Hassanamesit Woods, a hillside forest in Grafton, is one of those rare places where cultures and generations both can be observed in the features that remain on the land. *Interpreting* the features, however, getting at the whys and hows of change, depends on a fragile accumulation of historical scraps of evidence, each one briefly illuminating a culture and generation that transformed Hassanamesit.

Underlying it all is the natural fabric. A drumlin-like hillside near the southern edge of glaciation, scoured by waxing and waning ice. There is granite bedrock beneath, and a long seam of sugary white quartz pushing up to the surface. There are a few knolls—rock outcrops where soil rarely collects. There are innumerable boulders and masses of smaller stones—glacial till that stayed when the ice left, making up most of the southeast sloping hillside.

Out of the hill of rocks, just below the ridge and again here and there downslope, emerge seeps of water. Some seeps are brooks in springtime. Some barely emerge at all from the gravel and thin soil, forming upland pockets of damp instead, where [ostrich ferns] and salamanders keep their feet wet. Eventually seeps trickle toward a stream, the stream toward Misco Brook, and on to the “Great River” of central Massachusetts — the Blackstone.

The Nipmuc, Fresh Water People, knew the Great River for centuries before English settlement began. They occupied areas along the upper tributaries and headwater ponds of major rivers that drain the interior highlands of Massachusetts, east of the Connecticut River valley. They were a semi-migratory people, moving frequently and usually occupying the most favorable location depending on their needs or the season of the year. Nipmuc territory was sparsely populated compared with the homelands of shore and river Indians, and the territory remains even today largely rural.

Among the band of Hassanamisco Nipmuc was a family who, in colonial times, would become identified with a matriarch named Sarah. Her Nipmuc name is unknown, but for five generations, from 1690 until 1870, a Sarah controlled the fortunes of one Nipmuc family and its home place in Hassanamesit Woods.

How did they understand this piece of land?

First Sarah

Sarah Robbins was almost a Natick Indian. Likely born in Natick, raised there and married to the son of a long-time Natick family. But Sarah knew the stories her mother told of a different place to the west a good two days' walk, along the road called the Bay Path, past the Wachusett pond and upward to the plateau of central Massachusetts. There, in your mind's eye, you see east and south all the way to the sea. In your mind's eye you wade - swim maybe - the Great River as it wanders through the marshes down to tumble at last into tidewater. There, along the Great River were the home lands of the Hassanamisco Nipmuc, where her mother's ancestors had governed and her father's ancestors had treated with John Eliot, English preacher of a new god. Eliot who, despite his prayerful efforts for the Nipmuc, could not forestall their destruction.

Sometime in the years after Metacomet's war — that Indian watershed that dispersed and forever redefined Native American existence in New England — Sarah was born. The Hassanamisco had been driven out of central Massachusetts, so Sarah's childhood must have been spent in one of two places: an English household where her mother was a servant, or among the remnant cluster of Nipmuc clansmen who were permitted to live in the Natick *plantation of confinement*, as it was called. Perhaps she saw Hassanamesit first with her mother, on a fall walk-about with Miscos and Abrahams and Printers — other families from that place — when they went to gather apples from their orchards abandoned in wartime. Twenty or more years had passed since the fighting and the trees, though untended, were at full growth. Hassanamesit was a good place for apples.

Or perhaps Sarah first saw Hassanamesit with Peter Muckamaug, her Natick husband, when they returned to live on the land of her ancestors after her mother died. The Nipmuc settlement of Hassanamesit was not a compact, easily defined village. Andrew Abraham lived by the Blackstone River, near the rapids where [alewives and eels were caught. Moses Printer lived upstream, on the rich floodplain. Widow Christian Misco and her son Joseph inhabited a gentle slope over the next hill, looking down on a stream named Misco Brook in later times. Sarah and Peter Muckamaug's wigwam faced the Miscos across the brook, while a few steps upslope took them to the hillcrest where they could see smoke from their river neighbors' hearths.

In 1727 the Governor's Council of Massachusetts Bay established a new town — Grafton — around the amorphous settlement of Hassanamesit. As one of the terms of purchasing title to the land, they granted proprietary shares to verifiable *Indian planters* shares equal in size to those of the Anglo settlers.

The Grafton land, hilly and well-watered, was evaluated for its quantity and quality. Each proprietor would have at least 40 acres as a home lot, to begin,

and a parcel of wet meadow to go with it, for hay. Sarah and Peter were assigned 106 acres of land as her birthright. She was the only woman among the handful of seven recognized Nipmuc proprietors. Indian lands were to be surveyed first, the acreage of each family to include their present homesteads with any buildings, fencing and orchards.

But Grafton's Anglo surveyors and Indian proprietors faced a major cross-cultural challenge, grounded in a basic philosophical difference between Indian and English perceptions of man's relationship to land. A Nipmuc might conceive his place of living as concentric circles of lessening association spreading out from his wigwam. Beyond the inner circle of daily use and family space was a broader ring of local homesteads and their landscape. Rays rippled outward to connect individual and clan with other camps or gathering places, where particular natural resources – a winter hunting ground perhaps – or tribal bonds made strong connections. At the periphery of a Nipmuc's land were buffer zones or sites to avoid, or to share, with neighboring bands or tribes. Lake Chabunagungamog was one of these. Boundaries, then, were amorphous zones between me-and-other, defined by significant natural features.

In contrast, the English *landowner* (a telling word choice) defined his world within a legislated landscape where inhabitants' rights were protected by carefully surveyed and solidly marked metes and bounds as a form of legal defense against trespass.

How, then do Anglo and Indian agree to define a 100-acre homestead? Where to draw lines in an unbounded landscape? The answers required four participants in the decision making process. An English commissioner and an English surveyor met to work out boundaries with each Nipmuc planter and a tribal elder as witness. The English would calculate acreage but it was up to the Nipmuc to define bounds, based on personal knowledge of the land and its traditional occupation.

Early May, 1728. Skunk cabbage grows in the Swago; blossoms on the feral apple trees go by. Passing warblers vie with nesting wrens for new-hatched insects, and the woodland floor is greening. Joseph Sherman and Jonas Houghton meet Peter and Sarah Muckamaug at their home place on the hill. Standing with them, the voice of tribal authority, is Ammi Printer.

We are here to lay out the boundaries of your homestead, the commissioner explains.

What is yours and what is not yours? The Anglos ask Peter, the male homeowner. Peter looks to his wife, the Nipmuc inheritor.

A hillside spring, she gestures north. We draw water from it but the spring is not ours.

The stream below, Peter offers. Misco and Muckamaug fish there together.

The place of white stone – Sarah looks southward. It is a gift from the earth to our people.

But are there places here that belong to your family only? the commissioner is careful to ask .

Sarah hesitates. Then she leads them to the upland swamp. She calls it Swago — or that’s what the Anglos hear. Many good plants grow in the Swago, she explains. Healing plants, strong plants.

The elder nods. She is a healer.

Last, the Indians lead their visitors to a soft rise of exposed bedrock, highest point on the hill’s east slope, that stands out from the landscape around it. This belongs to no family. They all nod. They do not say why.

Then English geometry was superimposed on the freeform landscape and a rectangle drawn around the Muckamaug wigwam: 100 rods east to west; 184 rods north to south. The rectangle neatly avoided a roadway along the crest of the hill, where level land called out for white man’s cultivation. But the western boundary of Peter and Sarah’s land was aligned with a set of significant natural

features. At the center of the line is the flat-topped rock outcrop. To the north along the line, a perennial seep breaks out of the earth and provides fresh water for people and animals. To the south, in an otherwise unprepossessing jumble of rock and wetland, a vein of quartz emerges from the ground and testifies to bird points and knives, grave goods and offerings from long ago. The surveyors measured good English distances, and though they had other owners in mind for most of the ridge, they made sure that a proper right-of-way was reserved between the ridge road and Peter and Sarah's lot.

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125 years pass, and three more Sarahs live in Hassanamesit Woods

Down back of the Jonathan Fisk farm was the last remaining parcel of Muckamaug property in Grafton: the homestead Third Sarah had kept when her brother Joseph Aaron sold his portion. By the mid-nineteenth century this parcel was owned by Sarah Mary Walker, although she and husband Gilbert lived in the city. They did return to Grafton from time to time though, becoming enfolded in a story of juxtaposed cultures and economies, and yet more ways of understanding Hassanamesit.

As a boy, Mr. Fiske lived on the farm, his storyteller wife recalled. The whole tribe of Indian descendants came, as he remembers, in two wagons to Keith Hill to pick berries, always asking leave to put up their teams.... Sarah Walker gave the children copper cents till, as David thinks, he was fifteen, when they stopped coming.

One glimpses a world turned upside down on this occasion when an urban Indian female distributes largesse to the children of rural Anglo farmers.

There is more to Ella Fiske's brief sketch than noblesse oblige, though. The David Fiske of her story was born in 1840, making him fifteen about 1855. In September of 1854 Sarah Walker signed her name to a deed conveying the last parcel of Muckamaug property – *twenty acres, more or less, of wood and pasture land* – to Jonathan Fisk, David's father.

The sketch comes into focus: every year, young David would stand on his doorstep on a particular hot midsummer day. The wagons would arrive, full of grown-ups and children (maybe a dog or two). Some, like Mr. and Mrs. Walker, would be dressed proper, all summer white and plaid taffeta, with spiffy city hats on. Some of the others would be excitingly strange, wearing layers, maybe, of old dark clothes and maybe a felt hat or two.

Was it Mrs. Walker who asked permission to put up the teams, or was that a man's thing to do, despite her owning the land? Either way, horses were unhitched, and hobbled out under the shade of the big oak tree. The wagons couldn't drive any farther, down the Indian right-of-way, since it was so overgrown. Then the crowd would set off on foot down the path, carrying big shallow baskets, and maybe lunch as well. David wanted to go along.

He found excuses, during the day, to look out the back kitchen window, or hunt for the cat behind the barn. There he could look downslope beyond the pasture and sometimes catch glimpses of figures moving slow through tangled berry canes, or sitting in the cooler wooded shade.

Late afternoon, or when thunderclouds built up in the west, they came back, emerging from the woods almost magically, except he'd heard the children's voices all along. The lunch was gone, the baskets full of gooseberries and huckleberries, with a few early blackberries topping the piles. As he did every year, Mr. Fisk tried to cajole Mr. Walker into getting his wife to sell. Mr. Walker chuckled and shook his head, and Mrs. Walker politely thanked Mr. Fisk, leaving

a dish of berries for his wife. Then the *whole tribe of Indian descendants* climbed back on their wagons and, with much jangle and dust rising, drove away for another year.

This annual clan reunion was the last documented Hassanamisco observance on Keith Hill. It brought together families and cultures in a shared seasonal activity as old as the tribe's presence in Hassanamesit, that reconnected the participants with an observance both practical and ritual that embodied the natural gifts of summer and the land.