

In the Shadow of the Old Sagamore
are Reflections of Liberty

By

Todd Morgan Kelley

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The Mayflower Stopped Here First...

Essays on

Cape Cod's Importance in the Plimoth Colony

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This is a story about the First People and early settlers of Cape Cod and the origins of liberty. The sense of liberty was not a new concept to the American continent but was the essence and underpinning of culture across the land. Held in the land itself from hundreds of generations of cultural belonging. The first settlers that put down roots on Cape Cod learned directly through first hand interaction and agreement with the First People of the Narrow Land. It is this unbroken oral lineage itself, passed directly through subsequent generations, that is the origin and revelation of “American Liberty” and the thesis of this composition.

The darling passion of the American is Liberty and that in its fullest extent; nor is it the original natives only to whom this passion is confined; our colonists sent thither seem to have imbibed the same principles.¹

American liberty is revealed in the remarkable story of Mattaquason of Monomoyick and the pioneer William Nickerson. Yet, this is not so much a story about the pioneer (which I will leave for Nickerson family tradition to tell) as it is about the cultural authority that is embodied in Mattaquason himself and transformed through Nickerson and his descendants among other early Cape settlers and their descendants.

Such a perilous, far changing time it was when Samuel de Champlain found short lived safety at Seaquanset (Chatham) in 1606. Mattaquason was likely six years of age with his father either being Sachem or a Headman of the community. During the skirmish that broke out between the French and First People five Frenchmen were casualties with one surviving. From the native side we do not know how many casualties there were but of the supposed 300-400 warriors (more likely the number of people gathering from neighboring communities to see what was going on) the Sachem and Headmen would have been at the forefront of the conflict, not in the rear, and were possibly killed or maimed by cannon fire. The repercussions of this would have resonated throughout native communities up to the time the Mayflower nearly foundered off Chatham like the French fourteen years earlier.

With the French the Monomoyicks went out in their mishoons (canoes) to greet them and assist. With the Pilgrims they did not. The People would have been more guarded due to their previous experiences collectively, such as with Thomas Hunt (1614) kidnapping men from Patuxet (Plymouth) and Nauset, and especially the great plague (leptospirosis) of 1616, 1618 that swept through and decimated native communities along the eastern seaboard. In 1619 Thomas Dermer returned Tisquantum (Squanto) to New England only for Squanto to witness that most of his people had perished or abandoned his community of Patuxet. Dermer sailed on to Monomoyit Bay 2 looking to trade for food steads and nearly lost his life in the bargain with the locals, perhaps with young Mattaquasson himself. However, Dermer’s boldness prevailed him and he left with both native corn and all he had offered to the People for trade as well. By the first encounter skirmish the Peoples’ intent was harassing fire to intimidate Myles Standish to leave, and like the French, not come back. This is why there were no deaths. The warriors brought powerful medicine with their arrows tipped with “brass, harts’ horn, and eagles’ claw”³ however, the English gathered them up as treasures not having care to understand the deeper meaning of their tactic.

In 1621, when the troublesome Billington boy wandered out of Plymouth and somehow ended up at Nauset, he was safely returned to Edward Winslow by Aspinet of Nauset at the same first encounter location. It is likely that Mattaquason was the lone Monomoyick allowed onboard Winslow’s shallop as they await Aspinet and the English lad.⁴ In 1622 Tisquantum led William Bradford into the interior of Monomoyit Bay to barter for food steads and likely feasted in the company of Mattaquason near Askaonkton (the wading place) only to later mysteriously die during departure.

Mattaquason was not implicated in the Indian conspiracy of 1623 whose intent was to destroy the settlement of Plymouth before more settlers arrived. Leaders like Cuanacum of Manomet, Iyanough of Cummaquid and Aspinet of Nauset were implicated and had to disappear from visibility with the English. This would have compounded the already destabilizing effects the English were having on the structure and decorum of native communities. When the Sparrow Hawk carrying English emigrants had to be beached to keep from sinking in 1626 at Monomoyt Bay some of the locals came out in their canoes and could speak English and offered to send messengers to Plymouth. When Bradford got word he knew exactly where the ship lay due to being there four years prior with Tisquantum. This gesture would have bode well for Mattaquason emerging as tribal leader and friend to the Plymouth men.

In 1643 Thomas Prence headed up a company of Plymouth men intent to purchase a large tract of land known as the Nauset Purchase. Of the ancient Indians who had rights to do such Sagamore of Monomoyt Mattaquason leads the signatories. He is the only one identified as Sagamore and from this point on he has say over all land distribution from Bass River to Provincetown. By the next year, through indigenous custom, Mattaquason redistributes land at their Atacospa (South Orleans) to the collapsing remnants of the greater Nauset and Nobsusset (East Dennis) communities. This place was called Potanumicut which progressively became a native stronghold community later identified by settlers (and historians) as an independent tribe and reservation.

By 1640 English nonconformist William Nickerson and his family settled at Yarmouth along Weir Creek and Great Bass Pond.⁵ Social turmoil seemed to broil for the pioneer so by 1656 he made inroads into the frontierland of Monomoyck Country. Eldest son Nicholas chose to stay and settled further down Bass River naming Nickerson Cove south of what became Kelley's Bay. This is how Nickersons and Kelleys first align. By 1664 "the rest of the Nickerson clan had left Yarmouth for Monomoyck, now Chatham, where they could debate religious matters undisturbed."⁶ Fable has it if Mattaquason saw a bear in a dream Nickerson could not stay. If he saw a deer Nickerson could. Their agreement was set with the pioneer offering tribute to the community without any formal property deed until 1672. This would be indigenous custom of land ownership. To actively engage the land with permission from the community until such time one would move off the land to allow it to lay fallow and recover. When the formal deed was finally issued to appease the Plymouth proprietors Mattaquason set remaining land to his three daughters and only son John Quason Towsowet, last hereditary Monomoyck to be identified as Sachem. This would have been a most profound and stark time when both Mattaquason and his friend Nickerson would have known in their hearts that the only value of local Indians to the next generation of settlers was to appropriate their land and discard their culture. The Old Sagamore died by 1683 and it is through his relationship with the pioneer that the torch of American liberty was passed.

Descendant Joshua Atkins Nickerson^{2nd} describes the intuition of three centuries of unbroken oral passage.

To describe Cape Cod as I have seen it, I must tell you first about how it appeared to me as a child, through the eyes of "the old folks".⁷

I was fortunate to grow up in a time when local understanding meant everything. There was common knowledge about community and culture and its oral passage was openly shared. As a child one could not help but be absorbed by an intuitive sense of belonging to a greater cultural safety net. An old phrase, long since vanished that summed up belonging, simply posed the firm question "whose boy be you?"⁸

I would describe myself as a nonconforming, free-thinking patriot raised out of the Cradle of Liberty. I was born on Cape Cod and raised in the simple knowing that we have roots here. The Chatham I grew up at was rich with unbroken family lineages and alliances, however, I was of a different tribe. My ancestors David Ogillior "the Irishman" and Jane Powell's names first appeared in the historic record together under more sullen conditions.

At the 4 October 1655 session of the General Court, the Grand Jury presented Jane Powell, a servant of William Swift of Sandwich, for fornication. Her partner was David Ogillior, an Irishman and servant of Edward Sturgess. Upon examination, Powell admitted to the charge, but asserted

that she hoped to marry Ogillior in an effort to escape her servitude, which she went on to describe as hard, sad, miserable, and without proper clothing.”⁹

Apparently the Magistrate felt pity upon Jane and took no punitive action other than to encourage her to marry the “Irishman”. Family tradition of this record has been preserved through publications by Quaker Friends of Yarmouth Quaker Meeting.¹⁰ David’s story is a tale of personal motivation in the face of Oliver Cromwell’s War in Ireland and an ancient love found with young Welsh Quaker maiden Jane Powell. They likely met on the journey coming across the Atlantic together as strangers to become bond servants, yet the commonality of their plight and their shared Gaelic heritage must have bonded them together.

Nancy Thatcher Reid states in Dennis, Cape Cod;

Because of their prominence in Quaker affairs over the next years, perhaps this is an appropriate time to introduce the Kelley family. David O’Kelia, later Kelley, was from Ireland and came as a servant indentured to Edward Sturgis who was an early resident of Yarmouth. When his term of service was completed he married Jane Powell, also an indentured servant, who had come from Wales(?) and had served in the Swift family in Sandwich. About 1660 the young couple received a grant of land near the head of Bass River on the banks of what is today called Kelley’s Bay, where they raised a family and lived out their lives.¹¹

In my passage in John Whelan’s I Am of Cape Cod I take it further;

Jane was a nursing mother to the organization of Yarmouth Preparative Meeting under Sandwich Monthly Quaker Meeting. The Yarmouth Meeting has its origins with John Wing and John Dillingham at West Brewster. Quaker path ran from the Dillingham house to Bass River Village, and in the middle was the Kelley farm. That is where the first meeting house was built in 1714.

David and Jane are both buried in unmarked graves at the small Quaker cemetery that surrounded the Meeting House.¹²

Now to explain my previous statement; of being raised in the simple knowing that we have roots here.

Nearly all these old customs of speech and thought have passed away and are not recorded... It is there, I take it, that these more evanescent elements of our old Colonial life still left, must be explained and verified. There are at least two names still on this Cape, which illustrate a singular and sinister fact in English history; Higgins and Kelly, both Irish names. A law was passed in the first year of William and Mary (1688) by which the industries of Ireland were substantially wiped out. By consequence thousands of North of Ireland men emigrated to these colonies, Higgins and Kelley being two of them.¹³

To be sure, a second generation of Cape Cod born O’Gillior, O’Kelia, Kelley’s lived along the banks of Bass River at the time of William and Mary 1688. Daniel Webster defined Boston as the Cradle of Liberty and his description was not to say that this notion of liberty was not stirring in our sister colonies, but that the hotbed tension and conflict was at Boston and along the north and south shores with Cape Cod invariably being the “bared and bended arm” of it all.¹⁴

Though the Separatist Pilgrims were seeking to leave Dutch influence at Leyden with the aspiration to preserve their English culture and language, and set up their own church, they were still bound to their conceptions of property, money, capital and commodity which fostered class distinction and poverty. Poverty as a social and economic concept did not exist on the American continent prior to European contact and the abstract concept of accumulating wealth made little sense to the People and ultimately would have been perceived as lacking in charity with others and in regard for the natural world.

Growing up at Chatham we did not think of ourselves or others as being poor, just not having a lot of money. My mother would say that those were the best times, when they all had time for each other. Being rich in a community of elders with common ground social concern for the next generation of allied families. They “lived richly” wrote Thomas Morton referring to the First People.¹⁵ So did many old Cape Codders.

William Cronon interprets early nineteenth century writer Timothy Dwight’s conclusions

about Morton's further statements as follows;

Indian conceptions of property were central to Indian uses of the land, and Indians could not live as Indians had lived unless the land was owned as Indians had owned it. Conversely, the land could not long remain unchanged if it were owned in a different way.¹⁶

Today we can replace the term Indians with Cape Codders revealing contemporary social displacement and economic pressures that have irrevocably changed the way people treat land. Property values are not an intrinsic quality of land. The intangible culture of Cape Cod (then and now) cannot be bought, sold nor branded. However, it can be shared and passed on. Artificially inflated property values function to fabricate wealth and then extract it from the communities through appropriating both land and culture. The lasting impact of this business model is a vanishing next generation and a usurping "life without depth in a deep rooted place".¹⁷

The fundamental naivete (if I may say) of Cape Codders is their authenticity, about which seventeenth century Jesuit Pierre Baird, following Thomas Morton's lead, directly challenges European mindsets; for their days are all nothing but pastime. They are never in a hurry. Quite different from us, who can never do anything without hurry and worry; worry, I say, because our desire tyrannizes over us and banishes peace from our actions.¹⁸

Compare Henry David Thoreau's mid-nineteenth century impression of Cape Codders;

I was struck by the pleasant equality which reigned among the stage company, and their broad and invulnerable good humor. They were what is called free and easy, and met one another to advantage, as men who had learned at length how to live. They appeared to know each other when they were strangers, they were so simple and downright. They were well met, in an unusual sense, that is, they met as well as they could meet, and did not seem to be troubled with any impediment. They were not afraid nor ashamed of one another, but were contented to make just such a company as the ingredients allowed.¹⁹

It took just a century to span from the drawn and quartered fate of King Philip, Metacom, son of Ousamequin Massasoit, to the culmination of the American Revolution and the singular identity of American patriotism. Imagine putting your own life in peril standing for cultural liberty in the face of social injustice with many of your own people not having your back. Bearing the brunt of hatred and disdain in the most difficult of times.

Philip is reviled as a murderer and a traitor without considering he was a true born prince, gallantly fighting at the head of his subjects to avenge the wrongs to his family; to retrieve the tottering power of his line; and to deliver his native land from the oppression of usurping strangers".²⁰ He was a patriot attached to his native soil – a prince true to his subjects, and indignant of their wrongs – a soldier, daring in battle, firm in adversity, patient of fatigue, of hunger, or every variety of bodily suffering, and ready to perish in the cause he espoused. Proud of heart, and with an untamable love of natural liberty.²¹

It is in this untamable love of natural liberty that the American Dream can be found. Passed through generations of community simply living together upon the land. Sense of place memory is embodied in Cape Cod architecture itself. When houses were built to be homes naturally seasoned by a frugal and functional patina whose foundation goes back to the original wetus (houses) and wigwams of the People themselves. Thoreau observes;

Generally the old-fashioned and unpainted houses on the Cape looked more comfortable, as well as picturesque, than the modern and more pretending ones, which were less in harmony with the scenery, and less firmly planted.²²

W. Sears Nickerson (b.1881 d.1966) describes it through his own experience;

Our forefathers may not have studied landscape planning nor architectural design but they certainly had a God given knack for choosing beautiful sites for their homes and then fitting their simple Cape Cod houses into them as if they just naturally grew there.²³

This brings me to the concluding point I wish to make about the nature of Cape Cod people down east of Bass River;

The third, and perhaps most important, ingredient in the successful operation of the stations was the caliber of the people assigned to them. They were, with very few exceptions, native Cape Codders; 24 and their names in many cases are those of old Cape families.

Of the 104 surfmen on the thirteen outer Cape lifesaving stations in 1902, eight were named Eldredge. There were five named Kelley, four named Ellis, three each named Bloomer and Higgins;²⁵

The author of this account is Captain Charles B. Hathaway USCG and he goes on to mention numerous other old Cape names, but more importantly, he articulates a specific quality of Lower Cape people.

I have deliberately used end note quotes and commentary chronicling a theme that elucidates the deeper meanings held and passed on within local Cape culture. Be assured, however, that my life's endeavor has not been to study books and records as a historian and compile theories to philosophically align with and copy. Instead, this work has been discerned more holistically, through years of contemplation, reasoning, and personal perseverance. All this I know directly, simply from growing up on Cape Cod and so wanting to share how it appeared to me as a child, through the eyes of the old folks.

Notes

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- * There are various spellings of native names and place names due to phonetic translation to English and are not disqualifying.