

Cultural Resources of the Narrow River

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**Adapted from the Introduction of Chapter 7, Cultural Resources,
in the Active Watershed Education (AWESome!) Curriculum**

Published in the Narragansett Bay Journal February 2012

Updated by Alison Kates and Veronica M. Berounsky May 2020

“Cultural resources are defined as the collective evidence of the past activities and accomplishments of people. Buildings, objects, features, locations, and structures with scientific, historic, and cultural value are all examples of cultural resources. Cultural resources are finite and non-renewable resources that once destroyed cannot be returned to their original state.” Cultural Resource Standards Handbook, New York State Archeological Council

Indigenous people first inhabited the Narrow River Watershed about 10,000 years ago, after the last glacier receded. The first documented European in Rhode Island was Giovanni de Verrazanno on a voyage that entered Narragansett Bay in 1524. At the time, the Narrow River watershed was inhabited by an estimated 100,000 people of the Narragansett and Niantic Tribes. Living in large, semi-permanent coastal villages, Indigenous people used the rich natural resources of the Narrow River estuary and its watershed for food and shelter. Clams, scallops, and oysters were harvested from the estuary; anadromous fish such as herring and shad were caught from streams during the spawning runs; and crops such as corn, squash, and beans were grown in the agricultural fields surrounding their villages. In addition to using the resources close to the estuary, the Narragansetts and Niantics also hunted game and gathered other food in the upland portions of the watershed. Besides their main villages, the Indigenous people occupied other settlements in the watershed on a seasonal basis. Hunting camps were maintained in the forest, while camps and gardens in the coastal plain were used in the summer. At the time of early European contact, the Narragansetts were the largest and most populous of the tribes in New England and were also reputed to be the best farmers. Narragansett settlements were largely in southern Rhode Island, including the present-day towns of North Kingstown, South Kingstown, and Narragansett. The Narrow River Watershed includes parts of all three of these towns.

European merchants began arriving in the Narrow River Watershed during the early seventeenth century. They traded with the Narragansetts, exchanging cloth and arms for fur. During the mid-seventeenth century, Jireh Bull built the first European trading post in the watershed on the east slope of Tower Hill, near the Pettaquamscutt River. Settlers soon began arriving, drawn by the watershed's bountiful natural resources. As colonists arrived, the concept of land ownership was introduced. Land that Indigenous people had lived on for generations was suddenly taxed and those who could not pay the taxes were forced to relinquish their land. In 1658, a group of European settlers 'bought' a large portion of the watershed from three Narragansett sachems. Considered the "Pettaquamscutt Purchase" by colonists, Narragansetts today consider the transaction theft. Treaty Rock Park off Route 1 in South Kingstown marks the site of this event. The rest of the watershed was 'purchased' from the Narragansetts in 1659. Some of the land had

already been cleared by the Narragansetts, and for a short time Europeans and the Native Americans lived side-by-side sharing the land and its resources. The Narragansetts helped the newcomers farm and shared their harvest. Also during this time, the Narragansetts showed the settlers the Coojoot Graphite Mine, on a ridge of land on the west bank of Narrow River in South Kingstown and adjacent to an orchard, which was named in the Pettaquamscutt Purchase deed. The graphite was used for foundry facings of sand casts.



A souvenir postcard of the Pettaquamscutt (Narrow) River from 1910.
Photo: Rhode Island Historical Society Postal History Collection

Within forty years of the first European settlement in Rhode Island, the population of the local Narragansett tribe declined. Disease and displacement decimated many Native American villages. The open fields attracted larger numbers of colonial settlers, who took advantage of tribal instability and gained control of the land. The few Narragansetts who survived disease and loss of territory and family continued to live in the area. Tension and conflict between the settlers and the Indigenous people escalated, due, in part, to the greed of a group of Massachusetts landowners who wanted to extend their holdings. "Rhode Island found itself victim of a war it neither instigated nor declared."¹ No one knows who actually started the war, but it gave the Massachusetts landowners an excuse to intensify aggression against the Narragansetts and Wampanoags. Jireh Bull's garrison house near the Pettaquamscutt River was attacked and burned in December 1675. Shortly after that, the first major fight of King Phillip's War took place in South Kingstown. Massachusetts forces marched to Canonchet's Fort, the Narragansetts' winter quarters in the Great Swamp. Hundreds of Indigenous people, mainly women, children, and the elderly,

¹ Schultz and Tougas. 1999. King Phillips War. page 4

were slaughtered when the colonials fought their way into the fort and then set fire to the buildings. Canonchet, the Narragansett sachem, escaped and joined forces with Metacomet, or King Philip, of the Wampanoags. In April 1676, Canonchet was captured and executed by Connecticut soldiers and their Pequot allies. The battles continued until August 1676 when Metacomet was killed. Canonchet is commemorated by a statue near the Narragansett Pier Post Office. Local tradition states that the grassy plain near the south end of Pettaquamscutt Cove was Canonchet's favorite campground. The Narrow River Land Trust's Garrison House Acres has a trail to Jireh Bull's property. A memorial to the Great Swamp Fight is located along Route 2 in South Kingstown.

With the end of King Philip's War, the settlers turned their energy to rebuilding their settlements and clearing the land. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, large rural estates were created in the watershed. An aristocratic society unique for New England, known as the "Narragansett Planters," evolved based on expansive landholdings. These landholdings entailed agriculture and the use of a large labor force, including tenants, hired hands, indentured servants, and American Indian and African slaves. South Kingstown had the highest number of slaves in the colony. The Narragansett Planters exported farm products such as horses (the Narragansett Pacer is a well-known breed that originated in Narragansett), cattle, cheese, and tobacco to places as far away as the Caribbean. For almost a century, the Narragansett Planters provided the base for the area's economy, peaking in the 1740's and 1750's. During this period one of the most important houses in the watershed, "The Glebe," was built near the North Kingstown- South Kingstown line.



The Glebe of St. Paul's Church in North Kingstown had many care takers over the years, but Rev. McSparren was perhaps the most well known. The site where Casey Farm now sits can be seen across the Narrow River behind the Glebe.

Photo: Pettaquamscutt Historical Society

Originally a farmhouse built in 1690, in 1732 the house became the rectory for the Rev. James MacSparran and his wife of St. Paul's Anglican Church in North Kingstown. There they farmed the 100 acres with slaves and hired servants and entertained guests such as Bishop Berkeley until Rev. MacSparren passed away in 1757. He was followed at the Glebe by Rev. Samuel Fayerweather and his family, then six more rectors, before the rectory moved to Wickford in about 1842. Eventually the Glebe fell into disrepair and was torn down in 1957, but the stone garden walls remain.

Estate subdivision, reduction of the West Indies trade, and a fluctuating currency in the American colonies brought an end to the Narragansett social and economic system just before the start of the American Revolution in 1776. Slavery also ceased, first voluntarily and then through legislation. During this period, smaller farms were created throughout much of the watershed, and agriculture remained the dominant economic activity well into the nineteenth century. Fishing was also an important economic activity in the Narrow River Watershed. Alewives, bass, smelt, white perch, oysters, clams, and scallops were exported to cities along the East Coast. In addition, muskrat, otter, mink, and other wildlife and waterfowl were hunted and trapped in local wetlands and sold at markets around New England.

Unlike many areas in Rhode Island, the Narrow River Watershed was not heavily industrialized during the Industrial Revolution because the watershed lacked streams large enough to generate power for large factories. But the main freshwater source, now-called Gilbert Stuart Stream, had enough flow to power a snuff mill and a grist mill. The Hammond Gristmill's granite millstone, dated 1757, was used to grind locally grown corn into cornmeal. A snuff mill, started in 1750 by Gilbert Stuart, was the first in the American colonies. It ground locally grown tobacco to snuff which was exported via Newport until the American Revolution hampered that trade.

The Stuart family is famous because of their son, also named Gilbert Stuart, who was born in a room above the snuff mill on December 3, 1755 and was baptized by the Rev. MacSparran at St. Paul's Church on April 11, 1756. This Gilbert Stuart became one of America's master portrait artists of the 18th century. He is best known for his "Athenaeum portrait" of George Washington, the image that is on the U.S. one dollar bill. But that is just one of over a thousand portraits he did, including six presidents, war heroes, statesmen, and men and women of high society.

In the 1800's shipbuilding was a major industry along the river. Nineteen vessels with centerboards (also called retractable keels) were built here by Capt. John Aldrich Saunders and his son John A. Saunders II between 1813 and 1854. They were used for trade up and down the Eastern Seaboard and as far south as the West Indies and the largest vessel (82 ft and 200 ton) was used for whaling off Japan. Eventually the Saunders family moved out of the watershed and settled in the village named after them, Saunderstown, and shipbuilding ended in the Narrow River.

There was one other attempt at industry in the watershed. Between 1894 and 1903, two separate mining companies attempted unsuccessfully to operate for profit the Coojoot Graphite Mine, even putting in a narrow gauge railway for transport. The mine and the foundations of related buildings are now preserved by the Narrow River Land Trust.

Agriculture and maritime pursuits remained important aspects of the watershed's economy, augmented by growing tourism. Portions of the Narrow River Watershed became a predominant summer resort during the 1900's. Attracted by the nearby fashionable resort, Narragansett Pier,

and by the lovely countryside, summer visitors began visiting the watershed. Soon, visitors began building second homes in the watershed. This area remained a popular seaside resort well into the early twentieth century, until the 1938 hurricane and other factors brought an end to the resort hotel era. The local economy slumped, and it wasn't until the post-war period in the 1950's that the economy began to improve.

Since the 1950's, the year-round population in the Narrow River Watershed has grown quickly. Improved roads and cars make it possible for residents to work in Providence yet live in the watershed. Summer houses have been converted into year-round homes. New roads and new neighborhoods have also been built, changing the face of the watershed permanently and bringing more water and pollutants into the river with each storm. Many homes formerly with septic systems now are on municipal sewers in an attempt to lessen the flow of bacteria and nutrients to the River but that also makes more lots buildable. The watershed is still predominately residential. Fortunately, large portions remain undeveloped and will be preserved and kept open to the public. These properties include: The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's John H. Chafee Wildlife Refuge on Pettaquamscutt Cove; The Narrow River Land Trust's Garrison House Acres adjacent to Middle Bridge; The R.I. Department of Environmental Management's former Girl Scouts of Rhode Island Camp Nokewa property on Carr Pond, and the King-Benson Preserve (the former Girl Scouts of Rhode Island Narrow River Camp and private parcels) on Upper Pond owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy and the Narrow River Land Trust.

Just as Indigenous people did, the present-day residents depend on the Narrow River estuary for a variety of uses. Sometimes these uses are in conflict with each other. As much of the area becomes more suburbanized, it is even more important "to work to preserve, protect, and restore the Narrow River (Pettaquamscutt Estuary) and watershed for all communities of life," which is the mission of the Narrow River Preservation Association. All residents and visitors need to find ways to use and enjoy the river and its watershed while respecting the rights of others and protecting its natural resources. That is the only way to protect the long-term health of the Narrow River Watershed and its residents and leave it in good condition for future generations.

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