

FINDINGS FOR GRANNIS ISLAND
Selections from research compiled by Jeanne Van Orman

INTRODUCTION

For students today, the importance of Grannis Island lies in the Native American settlement type which we can reasonably attribute to the Island and its adjacent area. That settlement was focused on its particular ecosystem: the estuary and accompanying tidal marsh. (Note that I have omitted footnotes but I do credit findings and concepts to the appropriate sources. While I take responsibility for the concept of connecting the estuary as a focus for settlement and the Quinnipiac Indians, scholars of Southern New England Indians laid the groundwork for this connection.)

It was “the unique characteristics of the estuarine environment ... (that) provided the resources for an equally unique human adaptation,” according to Kathleen Bragdon (see *Native People of Southern New England 1500-1650*). Bragdon argues that this unique human adaptation included “stable social groupings numbering probably no more than two hundred people (which) occupied more or less bounded estuarine zones for most or all of the year... *Such regionally based sedentism had not a single bounded village or series of individual “homesteads” as its focus, but the estuary itself...*” (Emphasis supplied) Sedentism is a term applied to the transition from nomadic to permanent, year round settlement. While Bragdon was not familiar with Grannis Island specifically, there is nothing in the considerable research on the Island and the Quinnipiac to contradict her thesis on this unique estuarine settlement type. Much of that research supports her contention.

For teaching and inspiring children about the merits of the Quinnipiac and other

Southern New England tribes, I can think of no better example than the beneficial interrelationship between the culture and economy of the Quinnipiac and the estuary, an ecosystem typical of the Southern New England coast. The focus of this project should match the focus of its first inhabitants: the estuarine ecosystem. The project should elucidate how the Quinnipiac lived, traveled, organized themselves and depended on this uniquely rich food supply.

Why should the Quinnipiac settlement matter to today's students? It is first a settlement type uniquely adapted to the estuary and tidal marsh, an ecosystem severely compromised both in New Haven and elsewhere in the U.S. Second, the adaptation by the Quinnipiac at Grannis Island (and by other Native Peoples on similar sites in Southern New England) represents a kind of ancient wisdom. Today we need this kind of wisdom, one which embodies a specific relationship to the land; a relationship radically different from today's paradigm. As Wade Davis argues, climate change "has come about because of the consequences of a particular world view." Davis adds that to "deny or exclude from the calculus of governance and economy the costs of violating the biological support systems of life is the logic of delusion." In order to inspire our students and future citizens to understand alternative ways of relating to the land, we need to provide them with models and if we find those models in our own city - all the better.

Finally, how this project is conceived matters not just pedagogically but also in terms of the breath and depth of support it can inspire. When the Trust considers potential supporters, it is possible that foundations and government agencies whose mandate relates to the environment as well as to Native American culture would take an interest in the project. For example, The *National Geographic* has a lesson plan (for grades 9-12): "Estuaries: Finding the Balance"

The plan notes that large metropolitan areas such as Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Seattle and New Orleans all have an estuary in their midst. Assuming copyright permission, the Trust might consider using elements of this lesson plan together with facts about the Quinnipiac Indians and Grannis Island.

FINDINGS

The Quinnipiac in New Haven

Ben Breton, in his paper on the Quinnipiac describes in great detail the history of the Quinnipiac post-contact (basing his account of the monograph by John Menta and other sources). Given the focus I recommend for this project - the relationship between the ecosystem and Quinnipiac culture – my summary will not deal with post-contact Quinnipiac (except to note the history behind the current status of the Quinnipiac).

According to Breton, the word Quinnipiac means “Long Water Land”, a place name that attached to the people who lived there. At the time the English arrived in New Haven (1638, the Dutch had preceded them but not to settle), the number of indigenous people is estimated to have been between 250 and 460. Their territory included approximately 300 square miles including today’s towns of New Haven, Cheshire, Prospect, Wallingford, and Meriden plus several outlying towns.

Like most Connecticut Algonquian tribes, the Quinnipiac lived in wigwams. Like that of the other tribes, their society was matriarchal. According to Breton, their sites of occupation on the coast were most likely seasonal as they migrated inland over the winter to hunt for food, secure fuel, and there they lived in longhouses. For

transportation, they used an intricate system of single-file footpaths and waterways (seaworthy dugout canoes).

Hunting and fishing consumed much of the men's time. They hunted upland for white-tailed deer, bear, beaver, otter, wolves and moose, sometimes birds as well. To fish they trapped fish in weirs (fish traps composed of rows of sticks driven into the river bottom).

With the advent of the Dutch (1622), the Quinnipiac began using metal tools to make more wampum, which they traded with other tribes for beaver pelts and deer skins and meat, thus creating an incentive for more powerful tribes such as the Pequot to exploit them. Prior to 1637, the Pequot was the most powerful tribe in Connecticut, and before the Pequot war (1636-1637) they controlled as much as one-half of Connecticut.

According to Breton, "In Native American cosmology, it was essential to respect natural phenomenon, and many places and topographical formations were considered to be sacred". Spirits were thought to inhabit most natural objects and phenomena. Sleeping Giant (the mountainous formation in Hamden) and Thanksgiving Rock on Woodward Avenue are such examples.

By 1756 there were fewer than 100 Quinnipiac left in New Haven. In 1770, the remaining Quinnipiac emigrated to Farmington, Connecticut - funding their move by selling off their last 30 acres in New Haven. As they were absorbed by the Tunxis tribe in Farmington, the Quinnipiac ceased to exist as an autonomous tribe. Breton concludes by stating that the Quinnipiac "have not existed as a distinct tribal entity since the late

18th century”; and adds that “it is unlikely that those who claim to be the descendants of the Quinnipiac will gain federal recognition as a tribe”.

The Quinnipiac on Grannis Island

In his definitive study of the Quinnipiac (“The Quinnipiac: Culture and Politics”, *Yale University Publications in Anthropology* #86, John Menta describes how from 1947-1949, the New Haven chapter of the, John Menta tells us that “From 1947 to 1949, the New Haven chapter (of the Archaeological Society of Connecticut) ... excavated at Grannis Island” followed by a preliminary report by Howard Sargent. Menta (whose book was published posthumously) states that the evidence found at “both Pine Orchard Swamp (another excavation site) and Grannis Island shows the importance of meat and shellfish in the diet of the Quinnipiac. The documentary evidence also verifies how vital hunting and fishing were to the food economy of the Quinnipiac. Menta adds that the “discovery of several historic artifacts, such as copper or brass arrow points and clay pots, indicated that the Quinnipiac camped on Grannis Island during the Historic period. Menta comments on the wide variety of animal bones uncovered:

Rabbit, squirrel, meadow mouse, muskrat, mink, raccoon, dog, bearded seal, seal, deer and pig. Bird bones were from cormorant, bald eagle, blue-winged teal, duck and chicken. Shellfish remains consisted of oysters, scallops, mussels, clams and snails.

Menta goes on to say that “the mild coastal climate of the New Haven area and the

relatively easy access to the shore would have enabled the Quinnipiac to exploit the resources of the Long Island Sound all year long.” Menta also emphasizes the importance of fish in native diets as an essential source of protein year round.

Although there is considerable disagreement among scholars as to when and to what extent the Native Peoples began growing crops, by the time the English settled permanently in Connecticut (1633-34), “the indigenous peoples were growing crops in substantial quantities.”

Thus the research on Grannis Island and the scholarship on Native People of Southern New England suggest it was Grannis Island’s location that determined the Indians’ use of the land. This location on the Quinnipiac River benefits from the fact that the estuary bathes its contiguous tidal marshes so that together, estuary and marsh comprise a “highly integrated ecological unit – the tidal marsh-estuarine ecosystem.” (Bragdon) Thus these habitats were of “great importance to Native subsistence and diet, including the water column itself, the strand flat , tidal rivers, and salt marsh.” (Ibid)

Menta tells us that the Greater New Haven Archaeological Society “has uncovered five or six Indian dog burial sites at Grannis Island. He adds that “because the dogs were discovered lying on their sides in a ceremonial posture without any marks to indicate that they had been butchered for food, Connecticut State Archaeologist Nicholas F. Bellantoni...theorized that dogs may have been used by the Quinnipiac or their ancestors for religious or ceremonial purposes.” Menta explains that in other areas of New England during the Contact period dogs were used in rituals by the shamans, or powwows.”

For water travel, the principal route for the Quinnipiac was the Quinnipiac River. Menta says that “along the banks of the Quinnipiac River the tribesmen would hunt and fish, stopping

to camp along the way at such places like Pemmican or Grannis Island. ... They also “canoed to the islands off the coast of their territory, where they maintained valuable fishing stations.”

The Significance of Grannis Island

Among scholars it seems well established that in Menta’s words, “the New England Algonquian, unlike the buffalo-hunting western Plains Indians, were not nomads but seasonal migrants who lived in semi-permanent villages. To cope with the changing seasons, the Algonquian moved their villages from habitat to habitat” and these migration patterns “were most prevalent during the prehistoric era. In effect, they located wherever the food supply was best. However, after the arrival of the English in 1638, the seasonal movements of the Quinnipiac became increasingly restricted over time.

While local scholars such as Menta do not evidence familiarity with Bragdon’s thesis about the estuarine focused settlement pattern, nonetheless there is nothing in the study of either Grannis Island or the Quinnipiac to contradict her argument (and judging from her references to other scholars of Southern New England Indians) much agreement for case for the estuary as a determinant locational factor for Southern New England Indians.

If the New Haven Land Trust wishes to provide students with an alternative way of relating to the land, then Grannis Island as an example of a distinctive settlement characteristic of Southern New England could be inspiring indeed! The Island can be understood not simply as an optimum location for food supply but also in terms of land tenure patterns among the

Quinnipiac. In addition consider that Menta states that the “religious beliefs of the New England Algonquian “were a product of an entirely different consciousness than that of the European.”

He adds that:

In the Indian cosmology, it was essential to recognize and show respect for all Entities in the universe... things – animals, trees, rocks and natural phenomena – living beings who possessed supernatural power.

Menta adds that “rituals of thanksgiving were performed daily”. Because there seems to sufficient evidence for some understanding of the Quinnipiac’s belief system and we know that cosmology is a factor driving behavior, I suggest that the curriculum on Grannis Island and the Quinnipiac include their cosmology.

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