

**MOSWETUSET OR MASSACHUSETTS HUMMOCK**

BY

**James R. Cameron, Historian**

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## MOSWETUSET OR MASSACHUSETTS HUMMOCK

By James R. Cameron

A small hillock rises from the salt marsh which separates Quincy Bay from the Neponset River. Moswetuset or Massachusetts Hummock was the seat of Chicatabot, sachem or sagamore of the Massachusetts Indians, at the time of the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It is the only important relic of the Indians from whom the Commonwealth derived its name. Moswetuset retains its original form and character, appearing today much as it did when Captain John Smith visited New England in 1614 or when Miles Standish came to Squantum in 1621. It is still bounded by the sea from which the Indians secured food and the marshes that were its protection. It is close to the Massachusetts Fields, the Indian planting grounds. From the time of the earliest visitors and settlers from Great Britain to the present, this site has been recognized for its unique historical importance. Moswetuset Hummock is one of the oldest recognized historical sites in the nation as well as in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Though the Commonwealth secured title to this property in 1930 from the Harold T. Dennisons,<sup>1</sup> Moswetuset Hummock has remained primarily a place of local historical interest. The purpose of this article is to marshal evidence for the historic significance of this hummock and to recall the recognition which it has received from historians during the

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Dr. Cameron is professor of history and head of the History Department of Eastern Nazarene College.

past three and a half centuries. It is my hope that Moswetuset Hummock might receive the wider recognition which it deserves, and thus be spared from either destruction or desecration as well as serve its potential historical and educational role in the future.

Captain John Smith was the first writer to use the title Massachusetts in reference to a part of the area which now bears that name. Six years before the Pilgrims came to Plymouth, Smith sailed along the New England Coast. He made a map of the land and wrote a Description of New England which was first published in 1616. In the first edition, he used Indian place names which in later editions were replaced by English names. "Massachuset" and "Massachewset" are variant spellings of the word used by Smith to describe the land. He added a final s to the word to designate the people. This word was used to indicate three specific places; a river, a mount and a high mountain. The river was renamed the Charles in honor of his prince. Although it can not be established conclusively, it has always been understood that "Massachusetts Mount" was his designation for Moswetuset Hummock and the "high mountain of Massachusit" referred to Big Blue in the Blue Hills of Milton.<sup>2</sup>

The Massachusetts Indians lived along the coast in the area between Cape Ann and Scituate. Their territory extended about as far inland as Worcester. "Massachusetts Bay" was first used to describe what is now Quincy Bay; only later was all of Boston Harbor included. At an even later date the term was used to encompass the body of water to which it is now applied.<sup>3</sup> The number of the Massachusetts Indians at the beginning of the seventeenth century has been variously estimated at between three and fifteen thousand.<sup>4</sup> At about this time, the great sagamore of the

Massachusetts had the land along the coast south of the Neponset River cleared of trees. This clearing has been known ever since as the Massachusetts Fields. The sagamore held his councils at Moswetuset Hummock.

In the years between the visit of Captain Smith and the coming of settlers to Plymouth and to Wessagusset a great plague devastated the Indians. In the years 1616 and 1617 an unknown disease carried off as many as ninety-five percent of the Massachusetts Indians. This outbreak did not seem to have affected other New England Indians. Charles Francis Adams has argued that the plague was neither smallpox nor yellow fever. Cotton Mather interpreted this catastrophe as the judgment of God upon the Indians because of their blasphemy.<sup>5</sup> Chicatabot buried his mother, a victim of the plague, at Passonagusset which was near the later Merry Mount and fled from the area. By the time that Miles Standish visited Massachusetts Bay in 1621, there were probably fewer than five hundred Indians remaining and most of these did not live near the shore. Thomas Morton visited the lands of the Massachusetts Indians in the summer of 1622. He found only one Indian to describe what had happened. The plague had struck with such fury that the dead lay unburied in their houses where the living had left them and run away.

And the bones and skulls upon the severall places of their habitations made such a spectacle after my coming into those partes, that, as I travailed in that Forrest nere the Massachussets, it seemed to mee a new found Golgatha.<sup>6</sup>

Morton went on to comment that it was the custom of the Indians to carefully and ceremonially bury their dead.

Linguists have tried to determine what the word Massachusetts may have meant to the Indians. Daniel Neal, writing in 1720, stated

that Massachusetts gets its name from Moswetuset which in the Indian language meant hill in the shape of an arrow head.<sup>7</sup> In the Algonquin language Massachusetts means great hill or peoples of the great hill. It has also been claimed on etymological grounds that Moswetuset meant "site of the great house" or "site of the great chief's house."<sup>8</sup> Most authorities have attributed the name of this group of Indians to their occupation of the area which included the Blue Hills rather than to the fact that their sachem held council at Moswetuset Hummock. It is also true, however, that through the years the hummock was usually referred to as Massachusetts Hill, Rock, or Hummock, rather than as Moswetuset.

Chicatabot was sachem of the Massachusetts Indians from the time of the arrival of the first English settlers until his death in 1633. During the last years of his life, he lived on the Neponset River. On a map drawn by William Wood and published in London in 1634, "Chicatabot Sagamor" is indicated by three triangles located at the beginning of the neck of land that connects the peninsula now called Squantum with the mainland. Wood's symbols are located on the south side of the "Neponsett River" at precisely the point where Wollaston Bay reaches its farthest inlet at Moswetuset Hummock. This is the earliest exact reference to this historic site.<sup>9</sup>

In the Dorchester Town Records, there is a crude map stated to have been made not later than 1637 which shows "the meddows beyond the Naponset river and how y<sup>t</sup> is allotted out." The map is now faded beyond ability to read even with the most advanced techniques of infrared photography. A copy of this map was printed in 1883 on which Moswetusets is labeled as "matachusets Rock." H. Hobart Holly has traced the title



to this property from the Dorchester Town Records of March 1634/5 to the present time. With variations of title, its identity has been maintained in the land records for about three and a half centuries. The land record is one of the most conclusive arguments for the historical significance of this particular piece of land.<sup>10</sup>

The other important argument for the preservation of Moswetuset Hummock as an historic site is the fact that scholars have recognized it as such in every age. I have already referred to Captain John Smith and William Wood who both noted Moswetuset Hummock early in the seventeenth century. John Winthrop records in his Journal several visits from Chicatabot, "sagamore of the Naponsett," and it is from Winthrop that we learn that Chicatabot died from smallpox.<sup>11</sup> In March, 1631, Thomas Dudley, Deputy Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, wrote a letter to "The Lady Bridget, Countess of Lincoln" in which he related, "Upon the river of Naponset, near to the Massachusetts fields, dwelleth Chicatabott, who hath between fifty and sixty subjects."<sup>12</sup>

Fifty years later William Hubbard wrote a General History of New England from the Discovery to 1680. This work was recognized and rewarded by the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Used in manuscript form by both Thomas Hutchinson and Cotton Mather, this work was not published until the early nineteenth century. Hubbard tells of the general rendezvous of all the Massachusetts Indians at the seat of the great sagamore.<sup>13</sup> Although Hubbard did not name Moswetuset Hummock, that was the seat of the sachem and the nearby Massachusetts Fields was the cleared area where large Indian gatherings were held.

Cotton Mather in his Magnalia Christi moralizes on the plague that

destroy the Massachusetts Indians, but adds nothing to the origins of the name of the Commonwealth. Daniel Neal wrote in 1720:

The Sachem or Segamore, who governed the Indians in this Part of the Country, when the English came first hither, had his seat on a small Hill or Upland, containing perhaps an acre and a half about two Leagues to the Southward of Boston, fronting Mount Bay, and back'd with a large Tract of Salt Meadow; which Hill or Hummoth is now in Possession of Capt. John Billings....<sup>14</sup>

Harvard's great librarian of the nineteenth century, Justin Winsor, has called Thomas Hutchinson's work the first general history of Massachusetts Bay, John Stetson Barry's the second, and John Gorham Palfrey's the best.<sup>15</sup> All three of these writers maintain the significance of Moswetuset Hummock. Since none adds a new dimension to our understanding, let us read Hutchinson's affirmation:

The tradition is, that this sachem had his principal seat upon a small hill on rising upland, in the midst of a body of saltmarsh in the Township of Dorchester, near to a place called Squantum, and it is known by the name of Massachusetts hill, or Mount Massachusetts to this day.<sup>16</sup>

After an exhaustive search of the sources which treat this subject, I found none that challenged the historical significance of Moswetuset Hummock for the history of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Beyond a point, mere number of authorities adds little to the weight of an argument. Let me conclude this list, by citing three scholars from the nineteenth century: Samuel G. Drake, Justin Winsor, and Charles Francis Adams. Drake quotes Wood and Josselyn to support his statement that the Massachusetts Indians lived on Massachusetts Fields along Quincy Bay before the great plague.<sup>17</sup> After explaining the restricted application of the term Massachusetts Bay in the early seventeenth century, Winsor went on to explain that the word Massachusetts was originally borrowed "from a

hillock on the shore" and was later applied by Captain John Smith to the Blue Hills.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most authoritative writer upon this subject was a man whose family lived for many generations within walking distance of Moswetuset Hummock. Charles Francis Adams wrote about his town, his state and even on national topics. It was Adams who told us that it was neither yellow fever nor smallpox which "swept the islands in the harbor wholly clear of inhabitants, and drove the sachem, Chicatabot from his plantation...." It was Adams who informs us that it was Chickatabot who had the trees cleared from the Massachusetts Fields before the time of the great pestilence.<sup>19</sup> It is to Charles Francis Adams that most twentieth century historians have turned for an authoritative account of the details related to these events.

Although the evidence does not warrant the claim that Massachusetts owes its name to Moswetuset or Massachusetts Hummock, such an assertion may in fact be true. The linguistic evidence, which is not conclusive, would indicate that the name of the Massachusetts Indians originated from their occupation of territory which included the Blue Hills. There is little doubt that Moswetuset Hummock was the seat of the great sachem of the Massachusetts Indians and remains today as the only important relic of those Indians. Land records from the times of the earliest settlers have clearly described and identified this site. Historians of all ages have accepted the evidence for ascribing special historical significance to this spot. We have the opportunity to safeguard from encroachment an historic site which after three centuries of protection by private citizens is now entrusted to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to preserve in trust for future generations.



ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Norfolk Deed 1899 - 412, July 22, 1930.
- <sup>2</sup>Justin Winsor, Narrative and Critical History of America, 8 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1884 - 89), vol. III, p. 342, n.2.
- <sup>3</sup>Justin Winsor, The Memorial History of Boston, 4 vols. (Boston: James R. Osgood & Company, 1881), vol. II. p. 37.
- <sup>4</sup>Charles Francis Adams, Three Episodes of Massachusetts History, 2 vols. (rev. ed.; Boston & New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1903), vol. I, passim. Daniel Gookin, "Historical Collections of the Indians of New England," Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Series I (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1806), vol. I, p. 148.
- <sup>5</sup>Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana or The Ecclesiastical History of New England, 2 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), vol. I, p. 51.
- <sup>6</sup>Thomas Morton, The New England Canaan, Intro. and Notes by Charles Francis Adams, Jr. (Boston: Prince Society, 1883), pp. 132f.
- <sup>7</sup>Daniel Neal, The History of New England, 2 vols. (London: 1720), vol. II, p. 580.
- <sup>8</sup>George Q. Hill, "What Does Moswetuset Mean?", paper presented before the Quincy Historical Society, October 27, 1961.
- <sup>9</sup>New England's Prospect.
- <sup>10</sup>See appendix for record of possession.
- <sup>11</sup>James Kendall Hosmer (ed.), Winthrop's Journal: History of New England, 1630 - 1649, 2 vols., Original Narratives of Early American History, ed. by J. Franklin Jameson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), vol. I, pp. 59, 62, 111.
- <sup>12</sup>Alexander Young, Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay from 1623 to 1636 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1846), pp. 303 - 341.
- <sup>13</sup>(Cambridge: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1815), p. 32.
- <sup>14</sup>Neal, loc. cit.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Hutchinson, The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay, ed. by Lawrence Shaw Mayo, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936). John Stetson Barry, The History of Massachusetts, 3 vols. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1855 - 57). John Gorham Palfrey, History of New England During the Stuart Dynasty, 5 vols. (New York: A.M.S. Press, 1966).

<sup>16</sup>Hutchinson, op. cit., vol. I, p. 387, n.

<sup>17</sup>Samuel G. Drake, The History and Antiquities of Boston (Boston: Luther Stevens, 1856), p. 44.

<sup>18</sup>Winsor, The Memorial History of Boston, loc. cit.

<sup>19</sup>Adams, loc. cit. Adams has also given a full account in his introduction to the Prince Society's edition of Morton's The New English Canaan.