

Pre-colonial History of the Wangunk

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I have been tasked to discuss the pre-colonial Wangunk community. The term “pre-colonial” is a most appropriate replacement for the more commonly used term “prehistoric”. Almost every indigenous person I know dislikes the word “prehistoric”, as it implies that there was no history prior to the advent of Europeans with their written language. That, of course, is untrue, because Native American New Englanders have a very deep history that was chronicled in their oral traditions. This deep history also has been confirmed by archaeological investigations.

In Connecticut, the earliest known archaeology site is the Paleo-Indian Templeton site, located in Washington, CT and radiocarbon-dated to 10,200 years ago. Its signature artifact is a fluted stone spear point (Moeller 1980; Lavin 2013). Archaeological surveys have uncovered hundreds of Native American sites in Connecticut. Many of them were located in the Connecticut River Valley, which was the center of the Wangunk homelands (Office of State Archaeology ND).

Over a dozen Paleo-Indian fluted points have been recovered from sites within these Wangunk homelands (Bouchard 2014). Additionally, radiocarbon dates from other sites indicate that the homelands were continuously occupied from the earliest known, Paleo-Indian period to the final Woodland period, the last cultural period before European contact (e.g., see Lavin 2013). Post-colonial Wangunk communities are frequently mentioned in the Public Records of Connecticut and various town records, as well as other European documents.

The point I am making here is that the Wangunk tribe held claim to a huge swath of territory, and that territory was occupied by a substantial indigenous population continuously from Paleo-Indian times well into the contact period. By the time of European settlement in 1633, over a dozen Wangunk villages were known to be located along the river: Poquonnoc (present Windsor Locks); Suckiog (present Hartford); Matianuck and Mattacomacok (present Windsor); Pyquag (present Wethersfield); Nayaug and Naubuc (present Glastonbury); Wangunk (present Portland); Mattabesek (Middletown); Coginchaug (present Durham); Cockaponset (present Haddam); Cossonacock (present Haddam/Lyme area); south to Pattyquonk & Machemoodus (East Haddam) (Ives 2001, 2004; Yale Indian Papers 2015).

The Morgan Site in Rocky Hill, Connecticut

One of the most important archaeological sites I ever investigated – and one of the most important archaeological sites in Connecticut history -- is a late pre-colonial Wangunk village known as the Morgan site (Lavin 2013). It was located on the floodplain of the Connecticut River in Rocky Hill. Morgan was occupied repeatedly by a Wangunk community from AD 1065

to AD 1365. It yielded thousands of artifacts and dietary remains that gave one a fascinating window into what Wangunk village life was like before the arrival of Europeans.

The chipped, ground, and rough stone artifacts represented a wide variety of tool types used in a number of economic activities. Many activities were gender-related. For example, the recovery of axes, adzes, drills and some scrapers reflected men's woodworking activities. Triangular stone arrow tips indicated male hunting and late stage biface manufacture. The stone hoes, pestles, and choppers signified women's horticultural and food processing activities. A shallow mortar was used by women to crush stone temper for pottery manufacture, a major site activity. Over 13,700 clay fragments represented a minimum of 144 cooking pots and 49 smoking pipes.

Hundreds of postmolds, some forming curvilinear patterns, represented round or oval pole frame houses. A large carbonized elm bark slab suggested they were covered with bark. Some post molds straddled or lined firepits; the posts they represented were likely used to hold wooden racks for cooking or drying foods. Storage pits and refuse pits showed how the occupants preserved some of their food and maintenance staples, and how they kept the village clean.

The remains of meals -- bones, nuts, seeds, and other plant parts -- show the Wangunk had a broad spectrum economy. They hunted, fished, gathered and grew a wide range of foodstuffs. Plant remains included butternut or black walnuts; hickory nuts; chestnuts; beech nuts; sedge; yellow nutsedge; cattail roots; wild rice; water plantain; common plantain; chenopodium; ground nuts; wild iris tuber; rush and bulrush tubers; Jerusalem artichoke tubers; Indian cucumber; water lily; arrowhead root; mulberry, blueberry; raspberry; huckleberry; bedstraw; knotweed; sorrel; bur-reed; pondweed; redmaids; mustard; grasses, and medicinal plants such as mints and club moss [bladder and kidney disorders as a diuretic]. They also grew maize. Kernels were frequently recovered throughout the excavations. The earliest radiocarbon date for the site was derived from a carbonized maize kernel -- 1065 AD. This is also one of the earliest dates for maize horticulture in New England.

Faunal remains included those of white tailed deer; wildcat; rabbit, dog, bird, turtle, yellow perch; freshwater mussel, saltwater quahog & soft-shell clam. This list is interesting not only for the variety of animals consumed but also because the marine shellfish indicate communication and exchange with indigenous coastal communities. Additionally, yellow perch is a local river fish. The absence of anadromous fish remains is telling. Anadromous fish live in salt water but come into fresh water to lay their eggs. And they come in droves. The Pilgrims described these spring fish runs as being so thick one could cross the river on the backs of the fish. They were a major staple for the so-called starvation period in early spring. The fact that there are no anadromous fish remains at Morgan is one indicator that the Wangunk had two semi-annual villages, a summer-fall village and a winter-spring village where anadromous fish were consumed if not also caught. The fact that the Morgan site locality is flooded by the Connecticut River during late winter-early spring lends support to this theory. European chroniclers noted that the Wangunks' neighbors, the Podunks, as well as the Mohican, Weantinock and Schaghticoke tribes in northwestern CT all had dual village settlement systems (Binzen 1997, 2009; Crone-Morange and Lavin 2004).

Around each village was a myriad of smaller settlements where community members would venture to collect foods and perform other tasks. These included: hunting lookouts, hunting kill sites, trap line sites, women's nut collecting camps, women's plant and tuber collecting camps, children's berry collecting camps, maple sugaring camps, camps for collecting canoe and basket

wood, tool stone quarries, workshops for reducing the toolstone to more efficient preforms, fishing camps, burying grounds, sacred loci for puberty ceremonies, vision quests, and other spiritual ceremonies. These camps would have been connected by paths to the village, and each village would have been connected to other villages by pathways as well (e.g. see Spiess and Griswold 1930; Colley ND).

Pre-colonial Wangunk Society: Complex, Sophisticated and Powerful

Archaeological findings demonstrate that pre-Colonial Wangunk technology, economy and settlement systems were complex (e.g., McBride 1984; Lavin 2013). So were their socio-political systems. Insight into pre-colonial Wangunk politics is provided by early Dutch and English documents that demonstrated a strong central Wangunk government residing in the grand sachem Sowheag and his sons and other kin, who were sachems of the various Wangunk villages (Yale Indian Papers Project, accessed 2015). Wangunk land transactions demonstrate other social complexities (Ives 2001, 2004 -- but I don't want to steal the fire of panelist Dr. Tim Ives). Pre-colonial Wangunk military might is indicated by the tribe's willingness to confront the powerful and fearsome Pequots in their drive to control the incipient fur trade in the lower Connecticut Valley at the beginning of the 17th century. Dutch records show that the two tribes fought three major battles (Yale Indian Papers Project, *op. cit.*).

Wangunk cultural sophistication is demonstrated through their artwork and spiritual symbols. I have seen several beautifully carved stone animal effigy smoking pipes and tools, a carved and polished amphibian figurine, and carved and polished pendants that were recovered from sites within Wangunk homelands (presently located in Connecticut museums/archives and private collections). Wangunk cooking pots are often embellished with incised or impressed designs representing the spirits of the four directions (or six directions – north, south, east, west of the middle world or earth, the underworld and upper world) and linear rows of impressed dots representing the Trail of Life or Beautiful Path (See Lavin 2013 for examples).

In essence, Morgan and other Wangunk sites as well as the earliest European literature in the area demonstrate that the pre-colonial Wangunk were not a simple, primitive people. Rather, they were an economically successful, complex, sophisticated society with an extensive knowledge of their physical and social environments. European settlement and the subsequent introduction of European diseases; destruction of indigenous economies due to land losses, European farming techniques and industry; loss of Wangunk males recruited to serve in Anglo-American wars; and the ensuing impoverishment and discrimination brought an end to Wangunk political power and economic success. Yet the continuous presence of Wangunk descendants within their ancient homelands to this very day is a testament to the endurance of Wangunk community life.

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