



Mayflower

ATLANTIC CROSSINGS

ENGLAND ~ BERMUUDA ~ JAMESTOWN ~ ENGLAND ~ PLYMOUTH



Sea Venture

From Plymouth to Pokonoket by Judith Brister and Susan Abanor

In the spring of 1621, Pilgrims Stephen Hopkins and Edward Winslow were sent out on an official mission by Governor Bradford which entailed a two-day trek from Plymouth to the Pokonoket village of the Great Sachem, or Massasoit, of the Wampanoag Confederacy. The village was likely located in what is now Warren, Rhode Island, some 40-50 miles from Plymouth.

The path from Plymouth to the site of the Pokonoket village traverses the existing towns of Carver, Middleboro, Taunton, Dighton, Somerset and Swansea, in Massachusetts, and Barrington and Warren, Rhode Island. Today, except for a small patch, the ancient Native American path has been covered by paved roads that wind through these towns and outlying areas. In 1621, the region was unknown territory for the Pilgrims, whose explorations until then had been limited to Plymouth and Cape Cod.

The mission of Hopkins and Winslow was carried out shortly after the negotia-

tion of a peace accord with Massasoit during his March 22, 1621 visit to Plymouth. Known by the Pilgrims as simply Massasoit (which was really his title; he had other names among his people, including Ousamequin), this leader presided over the Pokanokets, the headship tribe of the various tribes that constituted the Wampanoag nation. When the *Mayflower* arrived, the Wampanoags had been devastated by two recent outbreaks of smallpox brought by pre-Pilgrim Europeans, and despite misgivings and some internal dissension, they concluded that an alliance with the Pilgrims would make them less



"Gifts for Massasoit, Spring, 1621." Oil on Canvas 30"x 40" by Ruth Major, Alden, Mullens, Howland and Tilley descendant.



vulnerable to possible threats from the strong Narragansett tribe to the West, which had been unaffected by smallpox epidemics. Under the original March 22 accord, the two parties agreed to abstain from mutual aggression, to deliver offenders, and to assist each other if either were unjustly attacked.

The Hopkins/Winslow mission was a follow-up to this initial accord. Winslow's account of the mission, "A Jour-

ney to Pokonoket the Habitation of the Great King Massasoit," was published in London in 1622. The term "Pokonoket," also called "Sowams," referred to a district including several villages and unoccupied land, now the Rhode Island towns of Warren, Bristol, Barrington and East Providence, and Swansea, Seekonk and Rehoboth in Massachusetts.

According to Winslow, an important purpose of their assignment was strategic, as it would allow them to "...

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see their [the Pokonokets'] strength, discover the country...". On the diplomatic side, Governor Bradford charged them with giving Massasoit a lace-trimmed red coat, "...in witness of the love and good will the English bear unto him." Another gift to Massasoit was a copper chain, which they requested be carried by any of his people he authorized to visit Plymouth, thus stemming the stream of Native Americans who came to Plymouth expecting hospitality from the food-strapped Colony. Next, they invited Massasoit to bring them skins for trading. They then offered restitution for the buried corn they had taken on "Corn Hill" in Truro shortly after their arrival on the *Mayflower*. Finally, they asked Massasoit for some corn seed, "...that we might make trial which best agreed with the soil where we live..."

While the diplomatic achievements of this mission were quite significant, so too were the many carefully described discoveries Hopkins and Winslow made about the land and its peoples during their journey.

Winslow states that he and Hopkins departed "...the tenth of June at nine o'clock." Archaeologist Maurice Robbins, in his 1984, "The Path to Pokonoket: Winslow and Hopkins Visit the Great Chief" (containing background, maps and modern-day directions and a critical reading of the Winslow account), points out that this date might have been an error made by an English printer. Robbins suggests that the English printer would have used the Gregorian calendar, in which March was the first month, to interpret what may have been Winslow's original statement of "...we set forth on the tenth day of the fourth month...". As an ardent Separatist, Winslow may have rejected the Gregorian calendar due to its Roman origin, and been using the calendar in which April would have been the fourth month. Moreover, according to Robbins, June 10 in 1621 would have fallen on a Sunday, and it was forbidden for Pilgrims to start a journey on the Sabbath, except in cases of dire emergency (the

Plymouth Court eventually passed a law to this effect).

Another reason for thinking the trip took place in April was the mention of shad roe at the crossing of Nemasket river, at about three o'clock, six hours into their journey on the first day, in the exist-

ing town of Middleboro. At this "Wading Place", now marked with a plaque, Winslow notes, "...the inhabitants entertained us with great joy...[giving them] the spawn of shads, which they then got in great abundance." According to a number of sources, Massachusetts alewives spawn in late March to mid-May, when the temperature reaches about 51 degrees, rather than in June (although blueback herring

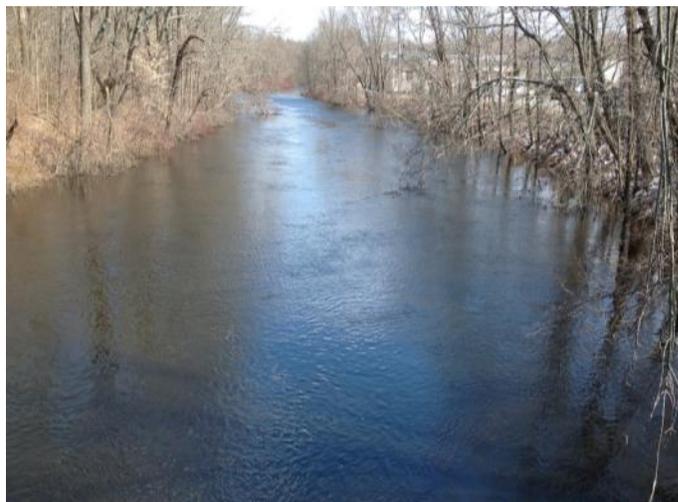


Photo by Susan Abanor

Taunton River at "Sqawbetty"

do spawn later – April through June – when the water reaches about 57 degrees).

Finally, given the starvation the Pilgrims suffered during their first winter, Robbins suggests, they would have been more likely to have requested corn seed to plant in April rather than in June, when the corn should have been already "in leaf."

The village by the wading place over the Nemasket River which the two Englishmen and their guide Squanto ("Tisquantum") reached in the afternoon of the first day was full of local inhabitants, who entertained the men:

...with joy, in the best manner they could, giving us a kind of bread called by them mazium,, and the spawn of shads, which then they got in abundance, in so much as they gave us spoons to eat them, with these they boiled musty acorns, but of the shads we ate heartily.

The Nemasket locals then requested that Hopkins and Winslow shoot crows that were threatening their corn, and the Englishmen obligingly killed "...some fourscore" for them. After this, Squanto urged them to proceed another eight miles towards their destination, as otherwise they would not reach the Pokonoket village by the end of the second day.

Robbins believes the party slept in the open fields at "Sqawbetty," near a second wading place, this time over the Taunton River, at the spot in East Taunton where a bridge carries South Street East over the river today. There is some disagreement about this, as Middleboro historian Thomas Weston, writing in 1906, insists they were taken by Squanto to a site called Fort Hill in North Middleboro, also eight miles from the Nemasket village and wading place.

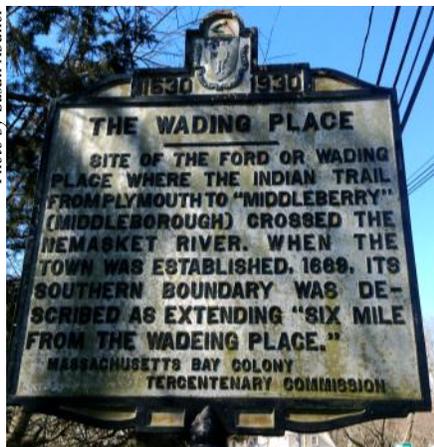
Wherever they slept, they arrived there "...at sun setting..." and encountered:

...many of the Nemascheuks (they so calling the men of Nemasket) fishing upon a weir which they had made on a river which belongeth to them, where they caught abundance of bass. They welcomed us also, gave us of their fish, and we them of our victuals, not doubting we should have enough where we came....

Winslow's next passages allude to the ravages of the recent epidemic:

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Photo by Susan Abanor



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...The head of the river [Lake Nippenicket] is reported to be not far from the place of our abode; upon it are, and have been many towns, it being a good length. The ground is very good on both sides, it being for the most part cleared; thousands of men have lived here, which died in a great plague not long since; and a pity it was and is to see, so many goodly fields, and so well seated, without men to dress and manure the same...

When the Plymouth party set out the following morning, they were accompanied by "some six savages." After following the Taunton River for six miles, they came to another wading spot, where they had to "...put off our breeches...". Winslow recalls the courage of two old men on the other side of the river, the sole survivors in their village, who upon seeing the group of strange men approaching them,

...ran very swiftly and low in the grass to meet us at the bank, where with shrill voices and great courage standing charged upon us with their bows, they demanded what we were, supposing us to be enemies, and thinking to take advantage of us in the water; but seeing we were friends, they welcomed us with such food as they had, and we bestowed a small bracelet of beads upon them..."

The second day was "...very hot for travel..." but luckily the countryside was "...so well watered, that a man could scarce be dry, but he should have a spring at hand to cool his thirst, besides small rivers in abundance...". The six "savages" accompanying Hopkins and Winslow helpfully carried them across "...any small brook where no bridge was..."

Winslow observed that most of the river shores had once been inhabited and the ground had been cleared:

There is much good timber both oak, walnut-tree, fir, beechen, and exceeding great chestnut trees. The country, in respect of the lying of it, is both champanie and hilly, like many places in England. In some places it is very rocky both above ground and in it; and though the country be wild and overgrown with woods, yet the trees stand not thick, but a man may well ride a horse amongst them.

As they neared the Pokonoket village, they met:

...another man with two other women, which had been at rendezvous by the salt water, and their baskets full of roasted crab fishes, and other dried shell fish, of which they gave us, and we ate and drank with them; and gave each of the women a string of beads, and departed...



This terrain on Cummings Road in Swansea, Massachusetts, may not have changed much since Hopkins' and Winslow's 1621 walk.

After reaching "...a town of Massasoit's where we ate oysters and other fish..." Hopkins and Winslow proceeded to Pokonoket, but "Massasoit was not at home." He was sent for, and when he arrived, Hopkins and Winslow were invited into his house, where they very successfully discharged their diplomatic duties, as described above.

Winslow's account of the memorable night they spent at Massasoit's house is familiar to most schoolchildren. Their business done, the men from these two vastly different cultures sat around smoking tobacco and talking more generally about England, the King (Massasoit marveled that "he should live without a wife") and other topics. "Late it grew, but victuals he offered none, for indeed he had not any, being so newly home." So, on empty stomachs, Hopkins and Winslow "...desired to go to rest":

...he [Massasoit] laid us on the bed with himself and wife, they at one end and we at the other, it being only planks laid a foot from the ground, and a thin mat upon them. Two more of his chief men for want of room pressed by and upon us, so that we were worse weary of our lodging than of our journey...

Later in his narrative, Winslow recalls that due to "...the savages barbarous singing (for they sing themselves to sleep), lice and fleas within doors and mosquitoes without, we could hardly sleep all the time of our being there..."

Luckily for the hungry Pilgrims, the next day Massasoit "brought two fishes he had shot, they are like Bream, but three times so big, and better meat..." which fed some forty people. The following morning at sunrise Hopkins and Winslow started out on their journey home, this time with a new guide, Tokamahamon, replacing Squanto (who was retained by Massasoit "to send from place to place to procure truck for us..."). They spent the first night at the "weir where we lay before..." After a plentiful supper of fish, they fell asleep – only to be awakened at two in the morning by:

...a great storm of wind, rain, lightning and thunder, in such a violent manner, that we could not keep our fire; and had not the savages roasted fish while we were asleep, we had set forth fasting; for the rain continued with great violence, even the whole day through, till we came within two miles of home.

Stephen Hopkins and Edward Winslow finally made it back to Plymouth, "...wet, weary and surbated [foresore]." With some challenges, the peace accord they helped cement during this well-documented visit lasted for about 55 years, and has been credited with saving the Colony from extinction. 

Many thanks are due to staff at the Library of General Society of Mayflower Descendants in Plymouth, Robbins Museum of Archaeology in Middleboro, Massachusetts and at the Plimoth Plantation, as well as to Patricia Read, Vice-President of the Massasoit Historical Association in Warren, Rhode Island for their helpful guidance and inputs to this article.

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