

## Margaret's Rock



I've been walking past this rock since 1998. It is located on the edge of Chace Farm, in Warren RI. I moved to the edge of the farm in June of 2013, and I now walk or snowshoe past it nearly every day, in every kind of weather. Known as Margaret's Rock, the V in the photo faces south. The wings of the V, their orientation, and the subtle overhang make the shelter nearly impervious to weather: there is always a bare, dry patch deep in the angle. A week before this picture was taken, we had a blizzard that dumped 20 inches of wind-driven snow, with 3-4 foot drifting. I took this picture on

February 2, 2015, during a winter storm – six inches of fresh snow had fallen in the previous six hours, and fog was forming as air temperatures rose before plunging sharply. The deep angle was dry and out of the wind. When the sun is out in the winter, it shines directly into the V, capturing any heat that is offered. In the summer, it is shaded by trees and almost always cooled by the prevailing southwest breeze.

These physical characteristics matter because this is the place where Massasoit (a sachem, or leader) and Margaret (her "Christian" name; I want to know the name her family gave her) of the Pokanoket band of the Wampanoag tribe, cared for Roger Williams from January to March of 1636. Williams had been banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, partly for his theological views, and mostly because he continued to "agitate" these views despite formal warnings. He had an emergent

illness – which turned into pneumonia. Sick, he fled in January, just ahead of capture, leaving behind a wife and three children. He headed for Massasoit, trusting, from their earlier meetings, that he would be received with hospitality.

379 years later, I walk by this place every day in all weather. On days like today, when it is cold and damp and snowing and sleeting, I pause and imagine living in this cleft, or in a nearby wigwam, in mid-winter, with the fevers and infirmities of pneumonia.

I imagine the generosity of spirit and the skill of Massasoit (father of Metacomet, who was later called King Philip by English colonists and made famous in King Philip's War) and Margaret, who tended to Williams and nursed him back to health. While the names Massasoit and Margaret are spoken in the stories, my guess is that a village literally took turns nursing Williams. I try to populate what I see in my mind's eye: How many people would be on this site at any one time? How many wigwams? Would there be pallets for sleeping? A fire? Stored food? What would people wear, or not wear? I look at my cozy, breathable and waterproof boots, and wonder how differently I'd have been shod.

I wonder what Williams made of the hospitality he received – how thankful or humbled or entitled he felt. I wonder if he contemplated death or expected to live. I wonder how ordinary or extraordinary his presence seemed to his hosts: if they debated offering their care, or if it was simply what was done. I wonder how much this ill person taxed their communal supplies – if it was a big deal, a risk, or if they lived with enough surplus and abundance that they just made a little extra room, hardly noticing.

Over the years, I've come to imagine that the rock shelter would have been enhanced with an expansive lean-to, and that a well-placed fire would heat the rock and keep things fairly cozy. Geese and ducks winter in the area, and I imagine rabbits and deer were as abundant then as they are now. The spot is close to the Kickemuit River and not too far from Narragansett Bay, both rich in fish and shellfish all year round. The surrounding woods are full of edible plants, including mushrooms and berries and cattails. The Wampanoag farmed the "three sisters" of corn, beans and squash. A mix of white pine, beech, locust, oak, ash and black walnut trees would have offered abundant fuel, then as now.

Margaret's Rock is near the southwest edge of the traditional Pokanoket lands. I love the possibility it represents to us in the present, of knowing this land so intimately that we would live in it comfortably throughout the year, get food, retreat, play, wonder. I've heard stories of nearby spots: a rock for weighty political deliberations; a large erratic rock on a knoll where Wampanoag women went to give birth; a low ledge used for grinding corn, where you can see the grooves worn in by centuries of use. Serpentine ribs of glacial rock define the landscape, and the landscape makes a people and a history.

A stagecoach road passed near Margaret's Rock during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. You can still see the overgrown ruts in the woods. Stonewalls break up all the remaining pastures, and run for miles through the woods – neat angles imposed by English farmers who settled in. More recently, I have learned that the Wampanoag likely built many of the walls as a way to prevent English pigs and cows from damaging their forests and gardens and meadows. I have worked building stonewalls and have some appreciation for how much labor this represents. I am humbled and stunned and awed by what these walls represent: imagine expecting to be somewhere long enough that this much labor seems like a good idea.

While it is estimated that the Pokanoket inhabited this land for 10,000 years or so, the land that includes Margaret's Rock has had only three owners of European ancestry since the British king made it a grant in 1696: the Mason family moved onto the land in the 1680s, a boon of King Philip's War, and built many of those walls over many generations. They sold to the Chace family in 1946. The Chace family land-trusted the property in the late 1970s, then closed down their dairy in 1991, continuing to grow vegetables and hay through the present. In 2000, they sold the northern half of the farm to a local doctor, Charlie McCoy, who now "owns" Margaret's Rock.

My house sits on 1.75 acres, straddling the boundaries between Chace and McCoy land, Rhode Island and Massachusetts, perhaps half a mile from Margaret's Rock.

I wonder how seamless this handoff across cultures was, and about the violence it hides from view: Margaret's Rock was where the Pokanoket chose to take Williams and care for him. There were no stonewalls. Sixty years later an English family started building stonewalls. How did this change what the land meant, how it felt and evolved in itself over time?

I've heard stories that the Masons had a good relationship with the Pokanokets. Between the 1620s and 1696, the Pokanoket were decimated by chicken pox and small pox, and by war. I have read that in the aftermath of King Philip's War, the survivors either moved to what is now southern Maine and lived with the Penobscot, or were taken and sold into slavery in the Caribbean. The few tribal members who remained, or visited, continued to use the land, to travel through it, to give birth on it through the years. When did this end? How easy or fraught was this relationship? I have heard that Margaret's Rock was originally known as Wigwam Hill, and that its name was changed to recognize the last member of the Pokanoket to inhabit the place.

Some of what happened in those sixty years between 1636 and 1696 (also the year the first documented slave ship landed, in Newport, Rhode Island) was that Williams founded Providence, RI, and there was a war, King Philip's war. Metacomet (called King Philip by the English in an attempt to reframe tribal politics in their own image) became the primary leader of the Pokanoket and Wampanoag in 1662. English encroachments on Wampanoag land were resulting in more and more

friction, and Metacomet started pushing back. He was deliberately humiliated by English authorities and forced to sign a treaty taking all guns from his people. In 1675 the English hanged three tribal members for the murder of a Christianized Wampanoag, despite inconclusive evidence (some of it pointing to an English settler). This brought the conflict to a head, and Metacomet attacked the English settlers. By the end of the war, in 1678, the Wampanoag and the Narragansets, who lived to the south and west, had been beaten into submission, their histories and cultures profoundly disrupted and redirected. A surprising number were sold into slavery, helping to establish Rhode Island's role in the "triangle trade" of rum, sugar and slaves. It became easier for English colonists to claim ownership of tribal lands.

The Pokanoket are one of five bands of the Wampanoag. The word "Wampanoag," not really used by the tribes themselves, translates roughly as "people of the early light," because they inhabited the eastern shore where daylight broke earliest each day. The Wampanoag were and are actually a confederation of tribes, and the tribe on this land called (and their descendants call) themselves Pokanoket. The confederation inhabited lands in what are now Rhode Island, and much of southeastern Massachusetts, including Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard. I imagine how the world and relationships with the English looked to Massasoit and Margaret in 1636; and how differently the Wampanoag looked at themselves and their place in the world just forty years later. For the next 253 years, the survivors were forbidden, by law, from speaking their native language or identifying themselves by their tribal names.

It is perhaps my too-focused and too-loosened imagination, but I do believe that I can feel this history and the people involved when I walk past Margaret's Rock and through the land surrounding it. Records suggest that the Pokanoket had a burial ground 240 paces to the west of the rock. Two hundred-forty paces bring you to a substantial settling of earth in the woods that also suggest this. I think the energy of Pokanoket ancestors – their light, their spirits, their ghosts, their auras – are often present, though I don't know what to call them and don't understand it. Sometimes they are more present than others; sometimes I watch from a distance, and see through to a man with long, black hair, a vest and a flat-brim hat tending a small fire. Once in a great while he steps down to the path I am on. And yet other times, nearby, a young, pregnant woman in a deerskin dress presses her energy – positive energy, warm and just a reminder that I am not so alone – against my back and arms. I don't think of this energy as spirit ghosts, but as the energy of people's living selves so connected to a place that they have become a permanent part of it.

Six months after I moved to the farm, my mother died at my parents' home in Florida. January 7, 2014. I was heading out my front door for a walk, and looked across the overgrown field in the direction of Margaret's Rock. A red-tailed hawk circled, landed atop a telephone pole, and gazed directly at me. It screeched, twice. My cell phone rang seconds later, and it was my dad, telling me that my mother had just died. For the next six months I walked almost daily past Margaret's Rock, grieving my mother's death – finding that the compassion and care and sense of

place it represented was comforting. If I was open to it, the energy that was always there made itself more present, more visible. It didn't tell me anything, just located me and my mom's death in a long, long unwinding of time and life and death and life.

It is my belief that some places are sacred not because they are blessed or made sacred through ritual, but because they allow us to connect to them, to anchor ourselves to the earth, and rediscover over and over again that we humans, as a species, are part of a larger organism, that we are from here, from this place and not some other. The modern, western articulation of this concept is Gaia – the earth as a single living organism. My experience suggests it is more complicated than this concept allows, but it begins to get at it. I've come to recognize Margaret's Rock as one of these places, to feel more real myself because it is part of my life, and I a part of its existence.

Keith Morton  
February 2, 2015

### *Some notes on Margaret's Rock*

From Roger Williams Family Association (<http://www.rogerwilliams.org/program-2013-2014.htm>)

Margaret was a Wampanoag Indian Medicine Woman who helped Roger return to good health, along with the help of Massasoit, during Roger's banishment from Massachusetts Bay Colony in that very cold winter of 1636. Our RWFA Bulletin of June 1953 states: "He was sick and exhausted and an Indian Squaw, later identified as Margaret, took care of him until he could resume his journey." This location, known as Roger Williams Cave, was detailed in a 1940's Providence Journal article by famed historian J. Earl Clauson, as well as other historians that have passed this knowledge down through the ages. It is the only abode that exists today in the Providence area whose walls Roger actually touched. Let us pay homage to this temporary and first home in the wilderness for Roger during his 14 weeks after banishment.

From Virginia Baker's 1904 *The History of the Town of Warren in the War of the Revolution*, [https://archive.org/stream/massasoitstownso00bake/massasoitstownso00bake\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/massasoitstownso00bake/massasoitstownso00bake_djvu.txt), p37:  
I think Margaret's Rock was also known as Wigwam Hill.

"The locality of the place [where corn was ground by the Pokanoket in large quantities] was so plainly stated that Mr. Loring had no difficulty in finding it. It is at the place called King's Rocks" in Warren, near the Swansea line about two miles from the village. On the west side of the mass of rocks is a nearly level smooth surface of rock about twenty-five feet by eight feet in width. In this level place are three regular, narrow, straight depressions. They appear evidently to have been worn into the rock by some forcible attrition, and are, in fact, just such hollows as might be made by the cause assigned.

"These worn places have heretofore attracted notice and speculation, but the true cause of their existence has not before been known by late generations, and the idea of

a national grinding mill, or of pulverizing corn by a rolling stone in connection with Indian history will probably be new to every one.

"As confirmatory of the locality, Mr. Loring says the picture has upon it another hill of somewhat peculiar appearance (a large rock upon the summit) situated about a mile east of the grinding place, named, he thinks Wigwam Hill.\* Leading from this hill towards the setting sun are two hundred and forty human steps, the line of steps terminating in three skulls which denotes a burial place. Mr. Loring visited the hill (now called Margaret's Hill from the last Indian woman who resided there) and pacing off 240 steps west came to an Indian cemetery, which he verified by digging, and finding human remains.

\* This hill is on the farm of Mr. Edward Mason, Birch Swamp Road, Warren."

From New England Explorers (<http://www.rogerwilliams.org/program-2013-2014.htm>)

In October 1635, Roger Williams was tried by the General Court of Massachusetts and convicted of sedition and heresy. They felt that he was spreading "diverse, new, and dangerous opinions" and banished him from the state. His actual banishment was delayed due to the fact that he was ill, and winter was near. He was allowed the delay provided he ceased his agitation. Roger Williams did not cease, so in January 1636 the sheriff came to arrest him only to find he already had slipped away three days before, during a blizzard. He made the difficult journey of 105 miles from Salem to the head of Narragansett Bay during difficult winter weather. According to tradition, Roger Williams was very ill, and the local Wampanoags offered him shelter. They took him to the winter camp of their chief sachem, Massasoit. Here at what is now known as Margret's Cave, Massasoit and another Indian known as Margaret cared for him for three month and nursed him back to health.

From RI Footprints (<http://rifootprints.com>)

During this time while Williams felt he was at "... the mercy of an howling Wildernesse in Frost and Snow", he received an unsympathetic letter from John Cotton in Boston:

"I speake not these things (the God of truth is my witness) to adde affliction to your affliction, but (if it were the holy will of God) to move you to a more serious sight of your sin...it pleased him to stop your mouth by a suddaine disease, and to threaten to take your breath from you[iii]".

Cotton would receive no answer from Williams, but the banished minister recovered by spring, no doubt greatly helped by the Indian medicine woman's treatment.

Long known to locals familiar with Swansea lore, the first expansive article concerning the rock and its history was written by historian J. Earl Clauson for the Providence Journal in the 1940's who identified the rock formation as "Roger Williams' Cave".

From ManyHoops.com ( <http://www.manyhoops.com/histotric-photographs.html>)

**Name:**

Wampanoag (pronounced wam-puh-NO-ag), properly spelled Wopânâak, which means People of the First Light. The Wampanoag have also been called Massasoit, Philip's Indians, and Pokanet (from the name of their principal village.) Note: the Pokanoket reject the translation of "first light", noting that "first" belongs to the Creator; they translate it as "early light."

**Location:**

At the time of European contact the Wampanoag occupied 67 villages that covered the entire area along the east coast as far as Wessagusset (known as Weymouth today), all of what is now Cape Cod and the islands of Nantucket and Noepe (now known as Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard), and southeast as far as Pokanocket (now called Bristol and Warren, Rhode Island).

**Population:**

In the 1600's there were an estimated 40,000 Wampanoag. Today, there are several primary groups making up the majority population - Mashpee, Aquinnah (Gay Head), Chappaquiddick, Nantucket, Nauset, Patuxet, Pokanoket, Pocasset, Herring Pond, Assonet, Seekonk and approximately 50 more groups. Recently, it was discovered that there are Wampanoag people living in the Caribbean islands. These people are descendants of the Native Wampanoag people who were sold into slavery after King Philip's War.

**Origins:**

Ancestors of the Wampanoag had occupied the territory where the Pilgrims first encountered them for approximately 12,000 to 15,000 years.

**A map of the Wampanoag confederation:**



(from website of the Pokanoket Tribe,  
<http://pokanoket.us/graphics/tribalareasin1620.jpg>)