

Dover steeped in Native-American history

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(Photo: Anthony P. Musso/For the Poughkeepsie Journal)

Long before white settlers arrived in Dutchess and surrounding counties, Native-American tribes thrived in the region. Just across the state line from today's Town of Dover, the Pequot Indians occupied land in Connecticut.

The four-year Pequot War — the first war associated with this nation's history — between the British and Native Americans began in 1634. Three years later, Sassacus, the grand Sachem of the eastern Connecticut Pequot tribe, led survivors across the state line into New York. Many of his tribe were killed or held captive, hundreds being sold into slavery in the West Indies.

Sassacus planned to lead survivors of the massacre to Albany with the hope that the Mohawk tribe there would assist them. While they traveled along the Housatonic River and then connected with Ten Mile River, they eventually stopped to rest at today's Dover Stone Church.

Not a church in the sense of a formal religious structure, it is rather a geological formation of metamorphic rock that boasts a natural entrance, which closely resembles a stained-glass window in a conventional house of worship; thus, the reason for its name. Located on the eastern side of West Mountain in Dover Plains, its somewhat hidden entrance, due to numerous trees and bushes that surround it, stimulated Sassacus to move his tribe to safety there inside a sizable grotto within it.

“The only logical conclusion seems to be that Sassacus knew about the Stone Church beforehand and was deliberately aiming for it as an ideal place to seek refuge and rest up a few days to make the journey north,” said Town of Dover co-historian Valerie LaRobardier.

“Sachem Gideon Mauwee was the great-grandson of Sassacus and oversaw a settlement in Dover Plains. His daughter Eunice brought the story of the Stone Church refuge to local historian and author Benson Lossing, who featured it in his book, “Dover Stone Church.”

Born in 1756, Eunice Mauwee was the Schaghticoke’s last elder and culture keeper, traveling up and down the valley, telling stories about her people and selling handmade white-ash baskets. Four years after sharing her stories with Lossing, she died at 104 years of age.

Remnants of the Pequot tribe became part of the Schaghticoke Nation along with members of the Pennacook, Narragansett, Wampanoag, Lenape and Mohawk scouts. The nation’s name means “the confluence of waters” or the place where one or more rivers join and blend into one. The tribe adopted the name Schaghticoke when it formed.

As for the exact location of where their settlement existed in Dover, although not officially documented, as early as 1800, just south of today’s Nellie Hill Preserve (on the east side of Route 22, a mile south of Route 343) a discovery of various Native-American artifacts was made.

From 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, June 4, the public is invited to attend the first of what will be an annual Intertribal Unity Gathering at Thomas J. Boice Park in Wingdale. Hosted by the Schaghticoke First Nations, attendees will experience Native-American entertainment, food and cultural exhibits.

Sachem Hawk Storm is a direct descendent of Massasoit, the Wampanoag who helped the Pilgrims when they first arrived in New England. He is also a descendent of Massasoit’s cousin, a line that LaRobardier shares.

“When we first started talking about this function we were planning on holding a small family gathering for our tribe, doing a sweat (also called a purification ceremony staged in a typically domed-shaped hut, made with natural materials and used for ceremonial steam baths and prayer) and having naming and coming-of-age ceremonies,” Hawk Storm said.

“We also wanted to have it in Dover, as our histories are intertwined. This area holds great significance for our tribe.”

As they discussed the function further, numerous tribes expressed interest in participating at the gathering. Tribes from six states, Canada, the Caribbean and New Zealand will be in attendance.

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