

The Monomoyicks

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

Before the first explorers visited what is now known as Chatham, the area was for centuries the home of the Monomoyick tribe. Because they lived primarily on fish and shellfish, their settlements were near the coves and harbors, such as Stage Harbor and Ryders Cove. They had a plentiful supply of shellfish, including oysters, clams, and quahogs, the latter being an Indian word meaning “shut tight.” To capture fish they set up traps made of stakes driven into the sand with brush connected to them to create the equivalent of nets. The weir traps still very much in use were developed from such traps. On the shore they built racks for drying and smoking their catch by keeping fires burning under them. Because they also were hunters, they used the racks to smoke their game, such as deer meat and that of other animals, including muskrats, woodchucks, rabbits, or similar small creatures.

The fish and meat were supplemented by vegetables that they grew in gardens, using wooden spades to turn the soil, which they fertilized with unwanted dead fish. Among their more valuable crops were corn, beans, pumpkins and squashes, as those could be dried and kept during the winter. Their corn was stored in animal skins and buried in long trenches and dug up as needed during the winter. It was trenches of this sort that the Pilgrims discovered in what is now Truro. While the Pilgrims may have considered their find as a gift of god, the Native Americans must have been dismayed by this thievery.

Although their settlements often were near the ocean, they moved from time to time, depending on whatever area was best for farming or hunting. For shelter they made conical-shaped huts from saplings, covered with bark, corn husks, grass, or animal skins. In spite of a small hole in the top, the huts must have been smoke-filled most of the time. They made beds from grass, reeds, or other soft material that they covered with animal skins. Early explorers report that these huts were thick with fleas and often infested with mosquitoes and gnats.

When Champlain was exploring the coast of Cape Cod and sailed past the area we now know as Chatham, he noticed many small fires on the shore and launched a small boat to investigate but found the surf too difficult to navigate. The Monomoyicks, however, seeing them turn back, launched one of their mishoons made from a hollowed out cedar tree heavy enough to navigate through the waves. They rowed out to Champlain’s ship, singing and showing their pleasure at seeing the strange vessel. Through sign language they indicated that there was a safe harbor nearby and returned to shore. With this information Champlain found his way to what is now Stage Harbor. What he saw around him was a landscape that was hilly and wooded but with spaces that had been cleared by the natives for growing corn, beans, and other vegetables. The trees were mostly oaks and cedars, and the wild areas were covered with wild grapes and beach plums. Champlain reports that there were 500 or 600 “savages” wearing loin cloths made of deer or seal skins, with hair that was carefully combed and adorned with feathers. Although not great hunters but primarily tillers of the soil, they were armed with clubs and bows and arrows. He accuses them of being “great thieves,” but they may have felt free to take whatever they found around them because they had no sense of ownership of property.

The Monomoyicks were very friendly and soon engaged in trade, with Champlain obtaining bracelets of shells, bows and arrows, tobacco, corn, beans, and raisins, as well as fresh fish and game. Before long they began to gather in great numbers, possibly out of curiosity, but the Frenchmen became nervous and decided to make a show of power by brandishing swords and shooting at nearby trees with their muskets. But the effect may have been to

make the natives nervous and suspicious, for they took down their wigwams and sent the women and children inland, as if preparing for battle.

Most of Champlain's crew boarded their ship, but five stayed on shore to bake bread. Seeing this small group still on shore, the natives fired their arrows at them, wounding some and killing one or two others. A group of soldiers then came ashore to help their comrades and to bury those that had died, erecting a cross over the grave. After they had returned to their ship, the Indians came back to the shore, pulled up the cross and dug up the bodies. Enraged, the French discharged their cannon and fired their rifles, possibly killing some of the natives.

This unfortunate encounter soured relations between the natives and the Europeans so that what might have been a friendly and profitable exchange between them ended up making for hostility in future meetings.

Information from the Atwood House Museum archives was used in this story.



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