

The Horn Heap

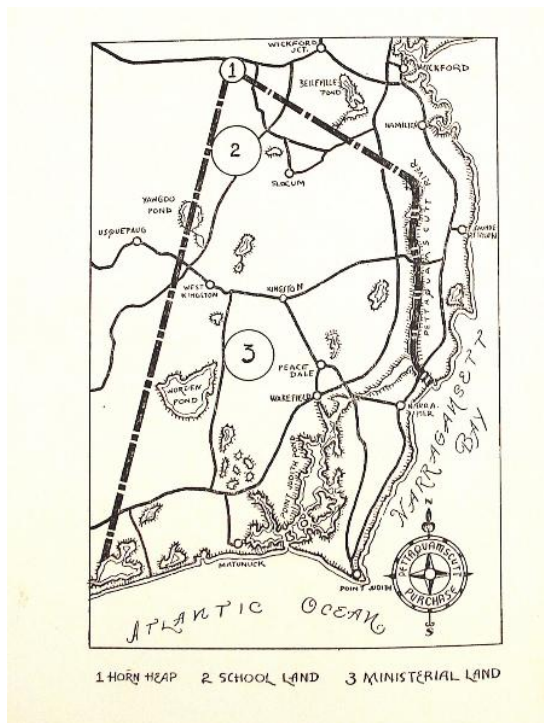
Among the landmarks of Exeter, there's a nearly forgotten one with a strange alliterative name. It's called the "Horn Heap" and its story goes back to the very earliest days of the Rhode Island colony.



When the first permanent European settlers entered into the region, their concept of land ownership differed from that of the indigenous people. Although both groups recognized boundaries and rights to use the resources they found, the English brought with them the legal paraphernalia of written agreements, authorizations, partnerships and companies, all ideas that had been part of long practice in Europe. When the colonists purchased land from the local sachems they recorded information about the transactions in deeds and documents, some of which still exist. Every deed spelled out the boundaries and markers of the tract in question. Rivers, ponds, hills, shorelines, trails, rocks, stone walls, and trees all served the purpose. Deeds also specified compass bearings, specific length of lines, and enclosed acreage. One early transaction in the

Rhode Island colony is known as the Pettaquamscutt Purchase. Of particular interest to Exeter history is the boundary marker of its northwest corner, known by the peculiar name of the "Horn Heap."

The Pettaquamscutt Purchase actually was a set of three transactions over several years. Elisha R. Potter, Jr. records the first acquisition in his 1836 book, *The Early History of Narragansett*, occurring on Jan. 20, 1657 when "Quassaquanch, Kachanaquant, and Quequaquenuet, chief sachems of Narraganset, for 16 pounds and other reasons mentioned in the deed" sell to five partners – John Porter, Samuel Wilson, Thomas Mumford, Samuel Wilbore (from Portsmouth, RI) and John Hull (of Boston, and the mint master of Massachusetts) –



“all the land and whole hill called Pettequamscut, bounded on the south and south-west side of the rock with Ninegret’s land, on the east with a river, northerly bounded two miles beyond the great rock in Pettequamscut, westerly bounded by a running brook or river beyond the meadow, together with all manner of mines.” A few days later, on Jan 29, 1657, Kachanaquant agreed to convey to the partners another tract for 135 pounds bounded by a point two miles north of Pettequamscut Rock running to the head of the great river 40 rod, turning north and north-west by a river called Monassachuet for ten miles, and from turning southwest ten or twelve miles, forming a square tract. The transaction was witnessed and recorded on June 24, 1660. Lastly, on February 25, 1661 the partners obtained a final deed from Kachanaquant that expanded the full tract to twelve square miles in what are now the towns of Narragansett, North Kingstown, South Kingstown, and Exeter. Cole’s History of Rhode Island (1889) marvels at the Purchase of 64,000 acres of land valuable for tillage, grazing, and timber for such a “paltry sum” of money.

The original partners eventually added two more men to their company, first William Brenton – two-time governor of the colony (1660-62 and 1666-1669), and then on April 17, 1669, Benedict Arnold – four-time governor (1657-60, 1662-66, 1669-72, and 1677-78) and ancestor of the Revolutionary War figure of the same name. Their inclusion in the company required payment to the other partners one seventh of the original cost of the purchases and the promise to pay *“one seventh part of all disbursements relating to the said lands, both past and to come.”* Their status and influence no doubt added political weight in disputes over land purchases because another company with ties to the Massachusetts colony was seeking land in the same area.

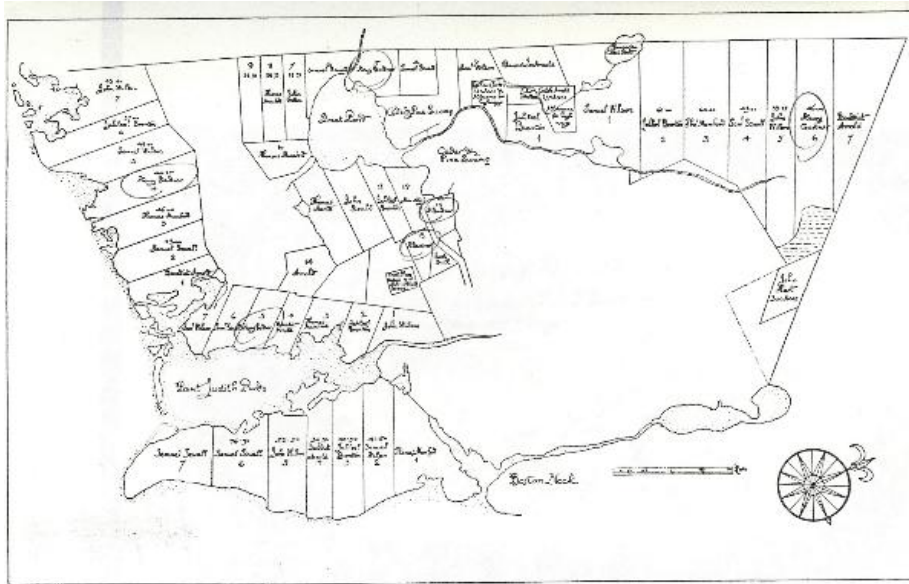
Major Humphrey Atherton of Dorchester in the Massachusetts colony led that other syndicate of speculators. Atherton first had visited the Rhode Island colony in 1647 to collect on a mortgage payment of 2,000 fathoms (12,000 feet) of wampum-peage (still legal tender at that time) the Indians had agreed to pay for injuries to English settlers under a treaty with the Bay Colony. When they did not pay the full amount on time, Atherton seized a sachem named Pessicus (brother of Miantonomi and nephew of Canonicus), assaulted him, and threatened his life. Despite a claim that the treaty had been forced on them unfairly, the outstanding amount soon was collected and turned over. Seeing opportunity a few years later, Atherton made purchases from the Narragansetts in violation of colony law and over the objections of Roger Williams. Two acquisitions occurred in the summer of 1659 -- one was a tract of land in Quidnessett (now North Kingstown north of Wickford) and another at Boston Neck (now part of North Kingstown and Narragansett lying between Narrow River and Narragansett Bay). Counter claims over the whole territory of southern Rhode Island by Massachusetts and Connecticut further complicated the situation. The Royal Charter of 1663 settled the dispute over boundaries of the colonies and cancelled the Atherton deeds.

Elisha Potter relates some controversy regarding the northern boundary of the Purchase quite a bit later. In 1727 the Town Council of North Kingstown appointed a surveyor *“to find the north-west corner of the Pettaquamscutt purchase, to run the line and open the highway that was laid out upon the line by a jury.”* A year later the surveyors, William Hall and Nathan Pearce, reported that when they ran the six mile line at the required angle from the mill-pond at the head of the Narrow River, their course ended *“forty rods and a half to the northward of a heap of stones that is in Joseph Reynolds’ pasture, deceased, and formerly called horn heap.”* When they ran the line from the heap of stones back to the starting point, they were off a bit as well, but they set boundary markers at several places along the line. An objection to the survey was recorded in 1728 at the Secretary’s Office of the State Assembly by Spencer Reynolds and company. They complained that the line had been established for about forty years and variation in compass readings of 3 to 9 percent made the new measurements suspect. In reality, the recent survey was quite accurate. A variation of forty rods and a half (668.25 feet) converts to only about one degree of inaccuracy in the compass bearing.



Filed along with Reynolds’ complaint was the June 1728 deposition of Lodowick Updike describing his personal observation of the original survey by John Gore. It stated that they *“began from a maple tree at the head of what was then (1728) Elisha Cole’s mill-pond, which tree stood on the south-west side of a river running into said pond – thence to the upland some distance north of a rock on said upland, and so on six miles where they put a pile of stones, and one of the company happening to find a pair of buck’s horns put them on top of the pile.”* Potter then adds that *“from this latter circumstance that the monument erected at the north-west corner of the purchase has been generally known by the name of the Hornheap.”*





This is a true copy of the Draught of Pettaquamscutt Purchase which was delivered to me by Richard Ward, Recorder & was taken & compared this 21st Day of April 1724. Attested per John Mumford Surveyor. True Copy of the Draught of Pettaquamscutt Purchase as on file in the Case Joseph Torrey vs George Mumford tried in the Superior Court in March 1733. Taken by Martin Cler.

Sometime after their acquisition, the seven Pettaquamscutt Partners devised a plan for distributing the land. Over several years they surveyed the land, partitioned it into several tracts, and subdivided these into sections. The tract anchored by the Horn Heap marker was split seven ways and ownership of particular

segments was determined by lot. At a meeting on April 8, 1692 the partners agreed *“that for each division there should be seven papers numbered, rold up, and put into a hat, shook, and a youth to give a lott to and in behalf of each proprietor, and each to have that lott in the several divisions as agrees with the number in their lot given them.”* The northernmost division, with the Horn Heap, fell to Benedict Arnold. After his death in 1678, his Pettaquamscutt land passed to his sons Benedict, Josiah, and Oliver. Subsequently, the parcel was broken up into smaller plots resold and passed down through generations. Rhode Island historian Sidney Rider noted in 1904 that there were *“three different deeds from the Indians of this purchase, 1657-1659-1661, but this bound does not appear in either Deed. The writer after much research has failed to locate it, and hence has not placed it upon the map [in his book]. It is here noted because of the frequency of its mention in the later English conveyances.”*

Despite Rider’s failure to find it, knowledge of the Horn Heap’s location did not completely disappear. In 1932 the State erected a sign at or very close to the site to commemorate its historical significance. Forty years later several parcels of land were united into the Exeter Country Club and the warranty deed filed in town land records refers to one tract as the Horn Heap Farm. Today the marker lies to the east of Purgatory Road on the golf course between the seventh and eighth fairways. The pile of stones and the antlers are gone but carved into the rock are the words HORN HEAP. Golfers intent on their games may fail to notice it, but if they do they might pause a moment to consider how this land has come down through time to its present use and the significance of this small rock in our history.



© Copyright 2016 by Gary Boden and the Exeter Historical Association

Acknowledgements:

The University of Rhode Island Library Special Collections provided access to some of the historical sources used in this article. Jo Ann Butler is thanked for a copy of the 1724 map of the Pettaquamscutt Purchase subdivision found in R.I. Land Evidences Atlas Vol. 1, held by the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Sources of information:

Bicknell, T. W. 1920. *The History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*. New York: The American Historical Society, Inc.

Cole, J.R. 1889. *History of Washington and Kent Counties, Rhode Island*. New York: W. W. Preston & Co.

Google maps aerial imagery.

Huling, M. E. K. 1936. *The Story of Pettaquamscutt*. Providence: Reynolds Press.

Potter, Jr., E. R. 1836. *The Early History of Narragansett*. Published by the Rhode Island Historical Society. Online at <https://archive.org/details/earlyhistoryofna00pott>

Rhode Island Historical Society. R.I. Land Evidences Vol. 1. Page 6.

Rider, S. 1904. *The Lands of Rhode Island as They Were Known to Caunonicus and Miantunnomu When Roger Williams Came in 1636*. Self-published, Providence, R.I.