

A Rock of Remembrance

Rhode Island Historical Cemetery EX056, also known as the “Indian Rock Cemetery,” isn’t really a cemetery at all. There are no burials at the site, only a large engraved boulder in memory of Wawaloam and her husband Miantinomi, Narragansett Indians.



Sidney S. Rider, the Rhode Island bookseller and historian, collates most of the information known about Wawaloam. She was the daughter of Sequasson, a sachem living near a Connecticut river and an ally of Miantinomi. That would mean she was of the Nipmuc tribe whose territorial lands lay to the northwest of Narragansett lands. Two other bits of information suggest her origin. First, her name contains an L, a letter not found in the Narragansett language. Second, there is a location in formerly Nipmuc territory and presently the town of Glocester, Rhode Island that was called Wawalona by the Indians. The meaning of her name is uncertain, but Rider cites a “scholar learned in defining the meaning of Indian words” who speculates that it derives from the words *Wa-wa* (meaning “round about”) and *aloam* (meaning “he flies”). Together they are thought to describe the flight of a swallow as it flies over the fields.

The dates of Wawaloam’s birth and death are unknown. History records that in 1632 she and Miantinomi traveled to Boston and visited Governor John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Colony at his house (Winthrop’s History of New England, vol. 1). The last thing known of her is an affidavit she signed in June 1661 at her village of Aspanansuck (Exeter Hill on the Ten Rod Road). In this document she affirms that the lands of Misquamicut (present day Westerly) were taken from the Pequot tribe and given to Socho (Sassawwaw) for “service done for us” in battle before the English fought wars with the Pequots.

From that point Wawaloam disappears from written record, but not from local memory. Sidney Rider tells of visiting William M. Bailey in the late 19th century to whom he told the story of Wawaloam. Bailey’s farm was located along the New London Turnpike a few miles west of Aspanansuck and near what was for a time the Exeter town center. Bailey was moved to select a glacial erratic rock similar in size and shape to, in Rider’s words, a Narragansett “two fire” house. On the smooth flat face of this granite boulder Bailey had carved the words:

WAWALOAM

WIFE OF MIANTINOMI

1661

This Rock of Remembrance stands quietly in the forest more than a century after it was dedicated and some 400 years after Wawaloam lived here. More recently her memory has been perpetuated in the names of the nearby elementary school and a campground. And well she should be remembered as a significant person in the history of the area that became our town.



Sources:

Rider, S. 1904. *The lands of Rhode Island: as they were known to Caunonicus and Miantunnomu when Roger Williams came in 1636 : an Indian map of the principal locations known to the Nahigansets, and elaborate historical notes.* Published by the author, Providence, R.I. 334 pages.

Winthrop, J. *History of New England: 1630-1649 Volume 1.* Published in 1908 by Scribner, New York. 374 pages.

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