The Quinnipiac Reservation: Land and Tribal Identity

By Richard G. Carlson

On the morning of April 25, 1638, a group of 500 English Puritans, immigrants to the southern coast of the region beginning to be called New England, gathered under an oak tree and heard their minister, the Reverend John Davenport, preach on the lessons to be learned from Mathew 4:1: “Then was Jesus led up from the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” The assemblage, which included merchant Theophilus Eaton, the new colony’s governor, must have listened attentively, for well they knew that temptation had brought them to this place – the temptation to do what none, in their eyes, had done before, create and maintain the ideal Christian community; and the temptation to erect a commercial empire based on the resources of the area. “Tempting” reports of a “fair river fit for the harboring of ships,” surrounded by “rich and goodly meadows,” had lured the Puritan merchants to the specific place where they stood that morning.

Not participating in that Sabbath service but undoubtedly aware of it were the people whose homeland – embracing a main village by the harbor and several others to the east, with usufruct rights to most of present-day New Haven County in Connecticut – the strangers sought to transform. But even if they had been present at the service and somehow understood the strangers’ words, these people known to history as the Quinnipiac, could hardly have foreseen the changes they would soon begin experiencing as a group and as individuals. They had encountered men from nearby Dutch and English colonies before, had been exposed to – and reduced in numbers by – the introduction of deadly European diseases, and had been marginally involved in the recent Puritan war against the Pequots. But they had never before had Europeans settle among them on their land. Soon the place around the harbor would cease being called “Quinnipiac”, a name, however translated, reflecting an ancient connection between a people and their land, and would instead be called “New Haven”, a name reflecting the imported hopes imposed on the land by foreigners. The actual, rather than symbolic, separation of Indians from their land took longer but was eventually effected.

Over a month before the sermon under the oak, Eaton wrote Massachusetts Bay leaders indicating his group’s intention to settle at Quinnipiac. Knowing that he lacked any English authority to occupy the region, he wrote, “We hope in mercy … for a speedy transacting of the parts about Quillypiak from the natives which *may pretend title thereunto*.” By employing that frequently used phrase, Eaton acknowledged the Indians’ natural right to occupy and use the land but conceded no tribal political sovereignty in the territory. Eaton’s contemplated purchase would be a simple economic transaction, not a political bargain between sovereign equals.

The first of numerous transactions alienating Indian land according to English law and custom occurred in late 1638. On November 24, Eaton, Davenport, and other planters met with Momauguin, identified by them as “the sole sachem of Quinopioke (who) hath absolute and independent power to give, alien, dispose or sell, all or any part of the lands in Quinopioske.” Alluding to presumed burdens suffered by the Quinnipiacs as tributaries of the Pequots, fears of Mohawk raiders from the west, and the recent dislocation occasioned by the Pequot War, the Puritans recorded that in return for English protection – and assorted coats and utensils – Momauguin and the other tribal or kin group leaders present (including Momauguin’s sister Shaumpishuh, sachem of Menunketuck) “jointly & freely gave & yielded up all yr right, title & interest to all ye land, rivers & ponds, trees with all ye libertyes & appurtenances belonging unto ye same in Quinopioke to ye utmost of their bounds East, West, North, South unto Theophilus Eaton … & others … & to the heires & assignes for ever.” Perhaps acknowledging traditional patterns of subsistence that included hunting and fishing as well as gardening, the Puritans allowed the Quinnipiac to hunt and fish on the ceded lands, with the understanding that these privileges would be regulated or revoked if they proved “inconvenient” or if the Indians were “disorderly.”

In an apparently unprecedented action, the colonists specifically reserved from the purchase a tract of land on the east side of the harbor “as might be sufficient” for the Indians, “but few in number, to plant in.” This parcel, originally covering some1200 acres, is often referred to as the first Indian reservation in what is now the United States. The English, whose own community tolerated no interference from outsiders (not even other Puritans!) indicated no desire to become involved in strictly tribal matters, clearly stating that if, for example, the Quinnipiacs warred with other Indians “they will manage their affayres by ymselves without expecting no ayd from the English.” Yet the treaty made it clear (at least to its Puritan authors) that the colony held ultimate control over the reservation. The English retained “full liberty” to cut timber and use the meadows within the tract. The tribe, probably numbering less than 200, was not “to admitt any other Indians amongst them” without English permission. And while no Puritan would be subject to Indian punishment, the Indians were expected to abide by Puritan codes of behavior. Quinnipiacs were not to “hanker about any of ye English houses at any time when the English use to meete about the publique worship of God; nor on ye Lords day henceforward bee seene within ye compasse of ye English town, beareing any burdens, or offering to truck with ye English for any commodity whatsoever.” Promising to uphold the articles of the treaty, the Indians also agreed to turn violators over to the English magistrates for “censure & punishment.”

Seasoned businessmen, tempted by profit and confronted by a small, militarily weak resident community of Indians, had concluded a very satisfactory business deal. Like other treaties transferring “title” of Indian lands, the Eaton treaty finalized in written form the absolute ownership of the territory it described as a commodity that could be bought, sold, or traded. The land the merchants acquired, never again to be used freely by the Quinnipiacs, would be developed according to English practice and needs and sold and resold for profit to town or individual. Moreover, control over the reservation was assured without the necessity for day-to-day administration. Having successfully concluded this treaty, the colonists obtained cessions of more Quinnipiac land from other village sachems, including Montowese (North Haven) and Shaumpishuh (Guilford).

The records of these councils exist only as written by and for the Englishmen, whose perspective was that they were giving the Indians, a subordinate group, certain rights and privileges in exchange for exclusive ownership of carefully defined parcels of land. It is safe to assume, however, that the Quinnipiacs entered into these agreements with greatly different ideas of what was being negotiated. While they may have interpreted English protection – even submission to specific laws regulating contact between the two groups – in the familiar terms of their previous tributary status to the Pequots, there is no suggestion in the treaties that the Indians believed they were relinquishing sovereignty over themselves. Indeed, as a sovereign people, they most likely understood that, in negotiating as equals and as the original occupants of the area, they were giving the English certain rights and privileges in the lands the two people now shared, most importantly the right to occupy and use the land in specific ways. The provision in the first treaty respecting English rights to resources within the Quinnipiac reservation appears to support this conclusion. For the Quinnipiacs, the treaties represented agreements to share uses of the land, not agreements for exclusive ownership of the land itself.

For most of the 17th century the Indian lands remained intact. In January 1639 the General Court of New Haven ordered no colonist purchase land from the Indians for their own personal use but only in the name of the town. After Connecticut absorbed New Haven Colony in 1662, the former’s laws regulated the alienation of Indian land on the shore of Long Island Sound. Even then, however, it was recognized (as in 1679) that “New Haven being bound in covenant to supply the Indians with planting lands when they need it, it is questionable how far liberty to purchase lands of them may consist with that engagement and unless with due caution, is to be considered.” Although small areas of the reservation were alienated before 1696 for specific purposes ( the erection of a stable and the building of a road, for example), it was not until after that year, when Connecticut officially granted the town of New Haven the right to sell the lands that had been reserved in 1638, that the integrity of the reservation was seriously threatened. Acting on the legal assumptions of the day that the Quinnipiacs, as tributaries of the Pequots, had not been the “true” or sole “owners” of the soil and that” rights of discovery” and subsequent settlement had given England and its colonies absolute sovereignty over the territory, New Haven leaders encountered no legal or moral dilemmas when they decided to allow the sale of Indian rights to reservation land. During the 18th century the “Indian lands” in New Haven (mostly of which lay in the parish of East Haven) steadily decreased in size, sometimes as a result of transfers of deeds, sometimes the result of unauthorized – and unpunished – encroachments by white neighbors. When the Indians made formal complaints about the loss of land, committees were named to investigate and “do whatever is needful to be doe in order to have justice done the Indians and the original agreement fulfilled.” Justice usually sided with the colonists, especially after common lands outside the reservation were occupied and the growing population of the town required new places for people to live.

As the lands were lost, so was the integrity of the tribe. During the seventeenth century the Quinnipiacs adhered as much as possible to traditional ways. They engaged in gardening, fishing, and hunting much as before the arrival of the English. The office of sachem remained intact and records indicate that on several occasions the Quinnipiacs participated in or hosted ceremonial gatherings that included Indians from other paces. (The Quinnipiacs were closely related to groups in central Connecticut.) Elders undoubtedly continued to pass on to new generations the cultural heritage of the tribe. With little oversight by New Haven leaders – except when allegations of criminal behavior against English residents were made or when, as in 1675, war with other tribes in the colony threatened the settlement – the Quinnipiacs were largely free to live as they pleased within the boundaries of the reservation.

Yet the reservation was an enclave surrounded by English settlements, and the Quinnipiac found themselves under pressure to modify older allegiances and practices. As early as 1657 the tribe petitioned the General Court to hire additional planting lands off the reservation. While they agreed tom most of the terms dictated by the Court, the Indians would not “kill their dogs, some of which have done much mischief already” and so were denied the request. Over time, however, and as their numbers, after first increasing, decreased as a result of deaths and the moving of individuals to other locales, the Quinnipiac did make changes in their way of life. Hunting and trapping, once subsistence activities, became commercial ventures as the Quinnipiac bartered furs for English trade goods, including tools, utensils, and clothing. Surviving records of land transactions indicate that the Indians on the reservation were adopting English concepts of exclusive personal rights to sections of land. Fences were erected and livestock acquired. Although the Quinnipiac were forced to conform to Puritan codes of behavior when off the reservation, they apparently did not accept Puritan theology, despite a concerted missionary effort in the mid-seventeenth century when the Reverend Abraham Pierson translated a catechism into their language. In other ways, however, they gradually joined in the life of the larger English community. Townsmen indentured Indian children to teach them trades and employed men and women as laborers or servants. Young men of the tribe, whose fathers and grandfathers had been viewed suspiciously during King Phillip’s War, joined their English neighbors as soldiers fighting for the interests of the English crown in the colonial wars of the early eighteenth century. But such participation in New Haven life did not mean that New Haveners accepted the Quinnipiacs as equals. Throughout the period the townspeople treated the Indians paternalistically and viewed their dwindling numbers with curiosity.

Around 1770 Charles, the last sachem of the Quinnipiacs, was found frozen to death near a spring one mile from the East Haven meetinghouse. By then, when practically all the reserved lands had passed from Indian hands, most surviving members of the tribe had left their traditional homes, often joining other Indian communities in the colony. In 1773 the Connecticut General Assembly authorized Samuel Adam, a Quinnipiac living in Farmington, Connecticut, among the Tunxis, to sell the last of the original “planting lands” in New Haven, “the money received by the sale of such land [to be] laid out in Farmington for the benefit of the tribe.” Quinnipiacs continued to live there and elsewhere in Connecticut but never again as a separate, sovereign tribe. For the Quinnipiacs, the disappearance of the land meant the disintegration of the group.

Interestingly, the deed alienating the last of their lands did not mention the Quinnipiacs by that name but referred to them as “the New Haven tribe of Indians.” Quinnipiac had become New Haven, just as Eaton and Davenport had envisaged in 1638. The land now belonged o the newcomers. Even so, their “heires” still call the “fair river” that first lured the foreigners *Quinnipiac*.

Richard G. Carlson

Rooted Like the Ash Trees; New England Indians and the Land

Eagle Wing Press Naugatuck, CT, 1987