A Brief History of Native Americans in Essex, Connecticut

by Verena Harfst, Essex
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Special Thanks and an Appeal to the Community

This article contributes to an ongoing project of the Essex Historical Society (EHS) and the Essex Land Trust to celebrate the history of the Falls River in south central Connecticut. This modest but lovely watercourse connects the three communities comprising the Town of Essex, wending its way through Ivoryton, Centerbrook and Essex Village, where it flows into North Cove and ultimately the main channel of the Connecticut River a few miles above Long Island Sound. Coined “Follow the Falls”, the project is being conducted largely by volunteers devoted to their beautiful town and committed to helping the Essex Historical Society and the Essex Land Trust achieve their missions.

This article by a local resident focuses on the history of the Indigenous People of Essex. The article is based on interviews the author conducted with a number of archaeologists and historians as well as reviews of written materials readily accessible on the history of Native Americans in New England. While there has been ample evidence of thousands of years of Native American life along the shores of the lower Connecticut River Valley, including in close proximity to Essex, relatively little has thus far had been documented concerning these activities directly along the banks of the Falls River and the contiguous area that would become the Town of Essex.

In the course of this research project, we found reliable evidence of thousands of years of Native American presence in and around our town. Our special thanks go to Dr. Brian Jones, the Connecticut State Archeologist. At his recent visit to the Essex Historical Society, he carefully examined Native American artifacts “rediscovered” in the EHS collections. This article will also tell this exciting story.

While these recent findings are of great importance to understanding the most ancient part of our history, they represent but a first step in the account of a more complete and detailed knowledge of Native American life in our area. With the support of the Essex Historical Society, the author hopes that others with stories to tell, artifacts to show, or knowledge to share will step forward in the months and years to come, to enrich our understanding of this important but still under-told chapter of our common history. Anyone interested in contributing to this story and sharing it with a wider audience is enthusiastically encouraged to contact the Essex Historical Society (http://www.essexhistory.org/contact-us/) or the author directly at vharfst@yahoo.com.

In addition, the author wishes to extend her sincere thanks to the many people who generously shared their expertise, their perspectives, and their time with her: in particular, to Dr. John Pfeiffer, historian and archaeologist who spent many years excavating local Native American encampments and burial grounds, for sharing stories and insights with the author, identifying research materials, and reviewing an early draft of this article; to Dr. Lucianne Lavin, Director of Research and Collections at the Institute of American Indian Studies in Washington, CT, whose book on Connecticut’s Indigenous Peoples has provided a
splendid and much cited resource for the author, for patiently answering questions and also reviewing an earlier draft; to Dr. Katherine Hermes, Professor and Chair of the Department of History at Central Connecticut State University, for reviewing and contributing to her research; to Melissa Josefiak, Essex Historical Society Director, for her dedicated work and support in bringing the Native American artifacts in the EHS collection into the public eye; to Jesse Cohen, Manager of the Archaeology and Anthropology Collections at Wesleyan University, for opening Wesleyan’s Native American collections to the EHS Director and the author; to Jody Dole, professional photographer, for giving due prominence to some of the most spectacular Native American artifacts in EHS’s collection through his photographs; to Brenda Milkofsky, Founding Director of the Connecticut River Museum, for her inspirational leadership, research advice, and unrelenting encouragement of the author; to Sherry Clark, past President and generous benefactor of EHS for her encouragement and support of the project; and finally to Hank McInerney, President of the Essex Historical Society, and Fred Szufnarowsky, Project Leader for “Follow the Falls”, for their much appreciated green light for this research as part of the wider project.

Finally, the Essex Historical Society is very grateful to Episcopalian Bishop Kenneth H. Kinner for sending a substantial collection of Native American spearheads he had found in Ivoryton along the Falls River in 1959 to EHS in June of 2018. Bishop Kinner, long retired and now living in Wyoming, included a detailed and helpful account of the site and its conditions, enabling us to draw some conclusions as to the circumstances of Native American activity at this location in our town.

Verena Harfst
Essex, March 2019
Introduction

Southeastern New England looks back upon more than 15,000 years of human activity. For many centuries, the greater Essex area was in the heartland of a vibrant and complex Native American culture. But who were the people who lived here for thousands of years before the first Europeans arrived only some 400 years ago? What do we know about the living conditions, culture and way of life of these ancient people who hunted, fished, and lived in and around the area we now call our hometown of Essex?

When the Essex Historical Society started its research on the history of the Falls River that connects the three villages of Ivoryton, Centerbrook, and Essex Village, and asked the author of this article to look into the history of Native Americans along the Falls River, only little knowledge about this past was publicly available. Occasionally, the author was told that Native American artifacts, such as arrowheads, had at times been found by residents along the river. But whatever had been discovered had not been officially recorded. All tangible evidence seemed to have disappeared, possibly in private collections. A local archaeologist mentioned that decades ago during a dig for historic shipbuilding sites in Essex Village, he had accidentally come across a Native American gravesite on the site of the Dauntless shipyard as well as the foundations of a wigwam on the property of Lay House, now part of the Connecticut River Museum complex. However, published archaeological accounts of Native American life in Connecticut, while discussing archaeological sites in nearby places like Old Saybrook, Old Lyme, Hammonasset, or Haddam, did not mention Essex. Our town’s Native American history lay shrouded in darkness.

Native Americans left no written records. They embraced an oral tradition. In less than three hundred years after the first European contact, most of their villages, their ways of life, their languages and religion, their ancient subsistence base of hunting grounds, fishing sites and agricultural fields, had largely vanished, their people killed by epidemics and wars, displaced by European settlers, often assimilated into the now dominant Christian culture, and suppressed by a rule of law first implemented by England and then by the newly established United States. The accounts we have of these people from the records of early European settlers tell a largely one-sided story, one that viewed the natives as savages, judged their traditions through the prism and morals of a foreign culture. The Europeans struggled with language barriers and often told events from the perspective of armed conflict and uncompromising conquest, eager to justify the fate of these people as God’s divine will. Thus, putting together a more comprehensive and balanced historical account centuries later presents challenges and pitfalls.

The story that follows below is riddled with uncertainties and large historical gaps. It is but a first step in a long journey into our past.
The Paleo-Indian Period

Much of the earliest human history in North America still remains obscure today. What we know about the earliest indigenous people stems from archaeological research which indicates that by the time of the last Ice Age or Pleistocene Era some 15,000 years ago, and possibly as much as 20,000 years ago, Paleo-Indian hunters and gatherers had arrived in the Northwest of North America from Mongolia. When they had begun their initial migration, much of the water on earth had been bound in enormous glaciers. As a result, sea levels had dropped over 400 feet below their present day level. A land bridge had emerged between Alaska and Eastern Russia, and it is believed that Paleo-Indian hunters crossed there in pursuit of abundant herds of wooly mammoths and other large animals. Still other groups of human migrants may have arrived along the coastlines of the Americas from Southeast Asia or Polynesia by boat.

Over some 4,000 to 5,000 years, Paleo-Indians had made their way from Alaska east across the North American continent along an ice-free corridor that was located in today’s Yukon and Mackenzie River valleys. By the time these earliest people reached the East Coast of what is now the United States, the glaciers that had covered Connecticut had largely melted, although they still covered much of Northern New England. As a result, sea levels were still much lower than they are today. Much of Long Island Sound was a glacial melt water lake connected to the mainland. The Atlantic Ocean had not yet broken through the large stone barrier we now call Long Island, a terminal moraine left by the retreating glacier.

The last Ice Age spanned from about 26,000 years ago to about 15,500 years ago. Some 17,000 years ago, the northern parts of Connecticut were still covered in ice, and the continental shelf was exposed some 135 miles further into the sea. At the end of the Ice Age, the New England climate was arid and much colder than it is today. The land was covered by a treeless tundra, as the short growing seasons only allowed small shrubs, grasses, mosses, and lichens to survive. As the climate warmed, evergreen trees like spruce and pine began to appear some 14,000 years ago. This flora supported large animals such as mastodons, saber-tooth cats, giant ground sloths, giant beavers, and Native American horses. However, about 10,000 years ago these animals had died out. Although the ultimate cause for their disappearance remains unclear, climate change and the accompanying change of the flora probably were important factors.

The earliest humans who arrived in New England may still have encountered animals of the Ice Age, although no traces of their consumption by humans have been found. The oldest settlement of Paleo-Indians discovered in Connecticut is the Templeton site in Washington, CT. It is carbon dated at around 12,000 B.P.. The abbreviation “B.P.” stands for “Before the Present”. This dating method is preferred by archaeologists and based on carbon analysis not synchronized with our calendar years. The method takes 1950 A.D. as the base year, thus the year 500 BP would correspond roughly to the year 1450 A.D.
Five other Paleo-Indian settlement sites have also been excavated in Connecticut. The closest one to Essex is Baldwin Ridge in Groton on the Thames River. In addition, a Paleo-Indian spear was found during dredging some 900 feet off Hammonasset Beach near Madison.

Paleo-Indians lived in small family groups and moved frequently from camp to camp. The temporary settlements were typically located inland on the dry ground of hills or rises that probably served as overlooks of water sources. It is believed that river valleys, such as the Connecticut River Valley, and coastal areas, were still mostly uninhabitable at this time, as no marshes with their abundant fauna had yet formed, and violent waters rushed down to the rapidly rising sea. With sea levels much lower, any settlements along the Connecticut coast that might have existed would now be covered by the Atlantic Ocean. Paleo-Indians who settled in the wider Essex area were thus not coastal Indians, but lived further inland.

By 8,000 B.P., the climate in Connecticut had warmed further, and oak trees had begun to replace the conifer-hardwood forest. Paleo-Indians were now hunting caribou, white-tailed deer, black bear, elk, smaller mammals, and birds for food, clothing, and the manufacture of certain tools. People also ate plant food, such as cattail, water plantain, hazelnuts, groundnuts, Indian cucumber and watercress.

In more than 50 additional locations in Connecticut, artifacts have been found that give us a glimpse of the tools and weapons used by Paleo-Indians. Their tools, such as knives, scrapers, and hammerstones, were made of stone, wood, antler, and bone. Hunting was done with wooden spears topped with fluted spear points mostly made of chert and quartz. For thousands of years, such spears were attached to an “atlatl”, a device made of a wooden stick with a stone weight attached at the end. It greatly increased the range over which a spear could be thrown with great force. In the acidic soils of New England, most of these devices other than those made from stone and hardy minerals decayed and vanished over time.

The Archaic Period

The Paleo-Indian Period in the Northeast lasted from 12,500 B.P. – 9,000 B.P. It was followed by the Archaic Period (9,000-3,000 B.P.). Over this time span of 6,000 years, Connecticut experienced several dramatic climate changes. These ranged from over 1,000 years of a small new Ice Age to a 1,100 year period with average July temperatures possibly as much as 8 percent higher than today’s but with colder winters, to a 2,000 year period marked by a hot and arid climate when many inland wetlands and smaller rivers dried up. These enormous environmental changes must have presented formidable challenges to Connecticut’s indigenous people.

It is not known whether the Archaic people were the descendants of the Paleo-Indians or simply arrived later. There is no evidence that any new migrants
arrived from Asia. In any event, there must have been quite a number of indigenous people living in Connecticut at this point. A map of archaeological sites in the state from this period shows that these sites clustered along the major river valleys and the coastline, and were also scattered across the inland landscapes. One of the oldest human settlements found in Connecticut from the early Archaic Period is located across the river from Essex in East Haddam. Charcoal remains from a hearth with hazelnut and walnut shells at the Dill Farm site suggest that this spot was used as a temporary camp at about 8560 B.P or some 9,500 years ago. Some of the stone tools found there were made from exotic, non-local materials. This suggests that these people either traded with other groups or had come from far-away places.

Not far from Essex, two early archaic spearheads were found in Old Saybrook when a marsh was dredged. There is evidence of many more such sites from Old Saybrook to Hammonasset Park spreading from the Paleo-Indian Period through the entire Archaic Period and on to the subsequent Woodland Period. As noted earlier, these sites must have been located further inland at the time of their occupancy, while many others closer to the sea would have become submerged by the rising sea levels.

There is also ample evidence that, to a surprising degree, the archaic communities in Connecticut were culturally diverse. Their social organization may also have varied, from small family bands to larger, more formally organized communities. For example, the Sandy Hill site on the Mashantucket Pequot Reservation in Ledyard, CT was probably occupied for over 500 years. The stone tools and food resources that were found there differed from those used at the Dill Farm site. The occupants maintained over a dozen semi-buried pithouses for the preservation of food. They also decorated some of their tools with paint. However, as in later millennia, decorated tools and artifacts were no art objects. Until the arrival of the Europeans, indigenous people did not create objects for the sake of art, since art as a means in itself was an unknown concept. Instead, decorated and adorned objects conveyed sacred or ritual significance.

During the Archaic Period, native people took up fishing for saltwater and freshwater fish. Saltwater fishing included barracuda and shark, indicating that these earliest fishermen were already highly skilled at sea. Dugout canoes were used for transport and fishing in Long Island Sound and on the rivers. Fish weirs made of brush and stone were first used along the shoreline of the Connecticut River during this period. Shell middens found along the New England coast are evidence of shellfish collection.

The shape of hunting projectiles changed noticeably from the Paleo Indian to the Archaic Period, as it did again in subsequent historical periods. This fact greatly helps archaeologists to identify the age of a projectile point. The style during the Archaic Period is known as the Neville and Stark points. Meat and fish were roasted in pits, on stone platform hearths or in earthen ovens, and they were also dried for storage. Nuts and seeds were ground and baked. As
clay pottery had not yet been introduced, soups and stews were cooked in skin bags into which hot stones were thrown.xvi

Communities are believed to have made the seasonal rounds. They occupied settlements along the coast during certain periods in spring, summer, and fall. In winter, they moved further inland to seek protection from cold winds. As nourishing plant and animal food was generally abundant, the population during the Late Archaic Period (6,000-3,000 years ago) grew rapidly in Connecticut and beyond.

We know that in the Late Archaic Period two distinct people lived in Connecticut, the Laurentian and the Narrow Point people. The Laurentian culture, named after the St. Laurence River in Canada, originated in parts of Ontario, in southern Québec, and in northern New England, while the Narrow Point culture had its center south of Connecticut along the southern Atlantic coast.xvii It is not certain, however, when these people migrated into Connecticut or whether perhaps they had evolved from the Middle Archaic population. It is also unknown how these two groups interacted with each other.

For Essex, the Laurentian people are of particular interest, as they tended to settle near the coast and along the lower river valleys, while Narrow Point people preferred upland and inland wetlands sites. Several Laurentian sites in Old Lyme have been excavated.xviii The largest, the so-called Bliss Howard site which dates to about 4600 B.P., was a base-camp. It was occupied for most of the year, if not year-round, by a band of several families.xix The remains of a large oblong house measuring 33 ft long and 16 ft. wide indicate that extended families lived here together. They fished, hunted, and gathered plants. The variety of lithic tools suggests that they maintained trade with groups further away. One such trade route was along the Connecticut coast. It is believed that this path now is Route 1, the Boston Post Road.

Two more Laurentian sites have been discovered and professionally examined in Old Lyme, the Ames Rock Shelter, a rock overhang believed to have been used by hunting parties as a temporary shelter, and the nearby Arbucci site, an open-air camp used by families for various seasonal purposes.xx While all of these sites were found on the eastern shores of the Connecticut River, one Laurentian site was also identified in Old Saybrook, the Gladeview site.xxi

The Bliss Howard site provides considerable insight into the belief system of Laurentian people. It contains the oldest graves found in Connecticut. They date back to 4775 to 4545 B.P. The site encompasses a large cemetery with 21 cremation burials. In a first phase after death, a corpse was allowed to decay in a temporary grave. About seven years later, the bones were excavated, burnt during elaborate ceremonies, and then reburied in oval pits along with red ochre colored stylized ornaments and deliberately shattered tools that would accompany the dead on their final journey into the spirit world. Broken tools meant that the spirits of these items had been released and could now be used by the deceased in their afterlife. It may have been believed that the dead would
pursue the same activities they had during their lifetimes, but without the hardship of life on earth.xxii

Another important ancient burial site near Essex is the Griffin site near the mouth of the Connecticut River in Old Lyme. The site is a bit younger, dating back to the Terminal Archaic Period, but burial rites in evidence there still resembled those of the Laurentian people.xxiii By that time, highly productive salt marshes had formed along the Connecticut coast complemented by brackish and fresh-water marshes along the Lower Connecticut River valley. As they do today, these marshes supported an extremely rich fauna of fish, crustaceans, and birds.

A large shell heap found in Old Lyme evidences how highly productive this environment was for fishing, including shellfish. Located at the junction of the Connecticut and Blackhall Rivers and Long Island Sound, it was a remarkable site: “The shell midden extended at least 800 feet along the coast, and ranged in overall width from eight to over 100 feet. The shell remains were mainly oyster but also included quahog, or hardshell clam, and scallop. It contained Terminal Archaic, Middle Woodland and Late Woodland stone artifacts and pottery, as well as bone and antler tools and over 3,000 faunal remains. The tools included bone awls (punches), weaving shuttles/needles, bone and antler points, an antler punch or miniature pestle, an incised bird bone whistle, antler flaker, antler tine tips, an incised flat bone and an incised bone dagger.”xxiv

The land was covered with mixed forests of oak and hickory that provided rich nut harvests. Terminal Archaic people used open-air camps during the summer months to avail themselves of these resources. One such seasonal camp was located on the so-called Murdoch site immediately across from Great Meadow in Essex where Ely’s Ferry landing and a hotel were built during Colonial times.xxv A number of quartz stemmed and triangular projectile points used in spears were found there.xxvi

The Terminal Archaic Period is associated with the Broad Spear artifact tradition, evidence of which was mostly found along riverbanks and coastlines. Broad Spear point types are bifacially flaked stone cuttings and piercing tools less than 1 cm thick.xxvii A map charting more than twenty Archaic sites along the Lower Connecticut River gives evidence of the intense human activity of these Broad Spear people, especially on the east side of the river, ranging from semi-permanent settlements to temporary shelters to sites used for short-term activities.xxviii

The first discovery and active use of soapstone for tools by indigenous people in this period is believed to have lead to a cultural revolution as it furthered the transition from nomadic to more sedentary ways of life and the beginning of organized trade between tribes.xxx Many soapstone bowls and mortars were carved out of quarries in various parts of Connecticut. Clay pottery was also making an entry. Some of the oldest known clay pot remains in Connecticut were found alongside soapstone bowls near the shores of the Lieutenant River in Old Lyme. This site dates back to the late Archaic Period to 2,740 B.P.xxx
The Woodland Period

Some 3,000 to 2,500 years ago, a new era began in New England known as the Woodland Period. Its emergence was gradual, without sudden cultural disruptions. It ended with European contact.

The Woodland Period is characterized by three major new inventions that had profound implications for the culture, social organization, and belief systems of the ancient societies. The first innovation was the widespread use of clay pottery and the smoking of pipes. Next came the use of bow and arrow for hunting. The third, most profound innovation was the introduction of agriculture in the Late Woodland Period about 1,500 years ago.

The new era started with yet another Little Ice Age. Its first victims were the Broad Spear people who had relied heavily on nuts for their subsistence. With the climate becoming cold and wet, oaks and hickory trees were displaced by spruce and fir. The failing fall crops of nuts also reduced the animal population that relied on this harvest, such as turkey, squirrels, and deer. We know this because soapstone pots that had been used to grind nuts disappear from archaeological sites of the Early Woodland Period. A population more able to adapt to this harsh climate were the Narrow Point people who previously had resided mostly further inland. They now also moved into the river valleys and coastal areas of Connecticut. Two sites in Old Lyme (Brodeur Point and Great Island) and one in Lyme (Cooper site) testify to their presence near Essex during this period.

By the Early Woodland Period, the Connecticut River and Long Island Sound had become major trading routes, with dug-out canoes going up and down the eastern seaboard, and also travelling up river further inland. The river did not constitute a boundary, but rather served as an artery of communal life and trade. New kinds of projectile points found in Connecticut from that era and named after the shape of their bases Fulton Turkey Tail Points, provide evidence that trade connections between the Connecticut coastal people existed with people from the Southeast and Midwest of the North American Continent.

By the Middle Woodland Period, the climate in New England had once again warmed and then stabilized, and food became abundant. The number of human settlements along the rivers increased, and they were occupied for longer periods of time during the spring and summer months. As regards Essex, the nearest settlement found from this period is the Hamburg Cove site opposite Great Meadow, dating back some 1,500 years. Excavations uncovered a large seasonal settlement where people lived in bark-covered wetu, better known as wigwams, and ate deer, turtle and small mammals.

For several hundred years during the Late Woodland Period, the climate warmed by an annual average of about 1°C, causing southern tree species such as sourwood and black walnut to flourish in southern New England. But then the climate cooled once again. Archaeological research suggests that these
climate changes forced the indigenous people to adjust their lifestyles frequently and sometimes radically to assure survival. While agriculture had taken root in Connecticut during the warm period, it was largely abandoned with cooling temperatures. However, in the Connecticut River Valley below present-day Hartford and along the shores of Long Island Sound, it appears that agriculture was practiced continually.

An important settlement near Essex dating from the Late Woodland Period was discovered on Griswold Point in Old Lyme. The site contains the foundations of several dwellings. One of these structures measured 13 by 17 feet. A single family would have lived in such a structure. On occasion, wetus were even larger to accommodate several families. The dwellings were made of flexible young tree poles that were bent and tied together, then covered with elm or oak bark in winter and reed grass in the summer. Wetus had a hole in the roof to ventilate smoke from the interior hearth. The people slept on mats or low platforms covered with fur.

Model of an Algonquian village with dugout canoe at the Institute of American Indian Studies, Washington, CT. Photo courtesy of IAIS.

Algonquians Settle Connecticut

Based on the study of modern Algonquian languages, we believe that Algonquian was spoken in Connecticut starting some 3,000 years ago. It remains uncertain if, at that time, Algonquian speaking people came down from the Great Lakes region where Proto-Algonquian had been spoken. Whether or not migration was involved, the Algonquian spoken in Connecticut developed independently from Proto-Algonquian. To this day, we all use some Algonquian words, for example, hickory, hominy, moccasin, moose, papoose, powwow, sachem, squash, squaw, succotash, tomahawk, totem, wigwam, and woodchuck. In fact, the name of the State of Connecticut is an anglicized version of an Algonquian name meaning “long tidal river.”
The Algonquian communities in New England and their languages developed separately, but it is believed that the various communities thought of themselves as sharing a common culture. The tribes traded with each other and intermarried. Armed conflict occurred between them from time to time, but is believed to have been the exception.

We cannot say with certainty whether the term “tribe”, a 19th century European anthropological concept, properly describes these groups. Native American society was rooted in a hierarchy, starting with loosely organized small “bands” consisting of a few families, proceeding to more structured “tribes” with a common identity but only temporary leadership, and ending with larger and more centralized communities known as “chiefdoms” which might have had more than 100,000 members. What we know for certain, however, is that the Europeans who had formed nation states considered themselves as having the most sophisticated and thus “superior” social organization.

John Pfeiffer warns that this classification was used to characterize Native Americans as “inferior” to Europeans in their human development. He also points out: “What was probably witnessed in Southern New England and Southeastern Connecticut in particular were a series of aligned villages that were socially connected and interrelated covering a spatial range from at least central Rhode Island to central coastal Connecticut. All of these villages combined would have probably constituted a Tribal or possibly a Chiefdom level organized society.” Tribal alliances were lead by a great chief, called great sachem, who presided over them, and sub-sachems for the smaller communities. The extent of this social organization across New England during the Woodland Period remains uncertain, however.

The Algonquian speaking Native American communities along the Connecticut River and further up and down the shoreline included the Nihantic, the Mohegan-Pequot, the Hammonasset, and the Wangunk.

The group that settled between the Thames River and the mouth of the Connecticut River, mostly around Niantic Bay and the Niantic River, but also in parts of modern East Lyme and Waterford, were the Western Nihantic (also spelled Niantic). In the language of these people, Nihantic means “people who live here”, or people at “the point of land on a tidal river”. As the translation implies, the name may have been more associated with one of their places of residence rather than with the people themselves. But the Europeans used the word to name the group. Little is known about the Nihantic language, however, because it died out in the 19th century.

Another group of Nihantic lived further to the east in what today is Rhode Island. It is generally believed that before European arrival the Mohegan/Pequot had conquered a part of Nihantic territory and driven a wedge into Nihantic tribal land, thereby dividing the tribe into the Eastern and the
The Pequot whose origin remains uncertain were known for their great ferocity in war. Their population base ran along the Thames River at today's New London and Groton. The proposition that the Pequot originated in upper New York State and conquered southeast Connecticut around 1600 is not generally accepted today. Instead, it appears more likely that the Pequot, whose language resembled that of the Nihantic, lived in this area contemporaneously with other Algonquian tribes, but due to their fiercer disposition had subjugated their neighbors over time.

The third tribe relevant for Essex were the Wangunk. They were a river tribe based in what is today Middlesex County in central Connecticut. Their ancient lands ranged from Cromwell to Durham, Haddam, Middletown, and Wethersfield in the west of the Connecticut River, and East Hampton, Glastonbury, and Portland to the east of the river. Depending on seasonal necessities, they would have expanded their activities beyond those territories, conceivably all the way to Essex, and they traded with indigenous coastal communities for marine shellfish.

Determining what tribe lived in the Essex area during the Late Woodland Period just before European contact presents a challenge, however. As one historian describes it: "I am not sure how much of Essex was Nihantic/Niantic and how much was Wangunk. It can be hard to sort out. (...) The only people along the Connecticut River from Hartford to Middletown and even down to Saybrook were Wangunk. (...) The Wangunk were closely related to the Nihantic/Niantic."

All early maps of Native American settlements were drawn by Europeans. They had a difficult time understanding the socio-political structure and tribal relations of the Native Americans they were encountering. Some old maps indicate that the Western Nihantic settled both sides of the Connecticut River, including the area of Essex, while the Wangunks lived further north along the river. Other documents mention that the Hammonasset had settled in the coastal area from Clinton to Saybrook and may thus have spread out at least at times all the way to Essex.

An undated area map in Wikipedia shows Western Niantic territory remaining east of Old Lyme, and not reaching the eastern shores of the Connecticut River, while ascribing the Lower Connecticut River Valley on both sides of the river exclusively to the Mattabesic and the Quinnipiac. The Mattabesic were part of the Wangunk. In turn, the name Quinnipiac is the English translation of the Eansketambawg or "original people". These people shared a common Algonquian dialect and had settled the Northeastern United States and Eastern Canada. They consisted of different groups, among them the Wangunk, the Nihantic, and the Hammonasset. In their entirety, these people are sometimes also referred to as the Dawnlanders. It may well be that different groups inhabited Essex during the Woodland Period and into the period of European contact. They all would have qualified as Dawnlanders.
Thousands of Years of Native American Presence in Essex

As mentioned above in the Introduction, when the research project “Follow the Falls” initiated by the Essex Historical Society first began in 2016, very little information was publicly available about the history of Native Americans in Essex. It appears that two cardboard boxes with Native American artifacts in the collections of EHS had not been given much attention since they had been donated to EHS years ago, and next to nothing was known about the age of these artifacts. However, when Connecticut State Archeologist Dr. Brian Jones visited EHS in November 2018 and carefully examined each of these items, our perception changed fundamentally. We now know that we have evidence of Native American presence in our town dating back all the way to the early Archaic Period some 9,000 years ago, and possibly even up to 11,000 years ago to the Paleo-Indian Period.

The first box of artifacts examined by Dr. Jones was given to EHS in 1964 by Charles N. Doane, Jr. and Robert Doane. It contains a total of 65 artifacts, among them 42 projectile points. The only information that came with these items was that they had been found by Charles N. Doane, Sr. in different areas of Essex (the “Doane collection”). In 2013, Donald Pratt donated the second box with 19 Native American artifacts to EHS. He reported that these pieces had been found by his father, Milton Montrose Pratt, in the 1890s north of New City Street in Essex Village along North Cove (the “Pratt collection”).

The third donation of Native American artifacts came to EHS in the early summer of 2018. A package was sent from Wyoming by now retired Bishop Kenneth H. Kinner. It contained 23 Native American artifacts, mostly quartz projectile points, as well as a few scrapers and other small biface tools (the “Kinner collection”). In his accompanying report, Bishop Kinner writes that he found these artifacts in 1959 while working as Vicar of the Episcopal Congregations in Westbrook and Ivoryton. He notes that he found most of these items near the back wall of a rock overhang near the Falls River in Ivoryton. The overhang was 3 ½ to 4 feet deep with headroom ranging from 4 to 4 ½ feet. Outside, Bishop Kinner excavated what appeared to be multiple firepits along with fire-cracked stones. As he found only very few quartz chips and flakes, he concluded that the projectile points had not been manufactured on site.

When Dr. Jones examined the artifacts from the Kinner collection, he found that most of the projectile points date back to the late Archaic Period, some 4,000 to 5,000 years ago. While all points from this period are made from quartz, a local material, their styles differ. Some could be identified as so-called Brewerton Eared points, others as Lamoka points, yet others as Squibnocket Stemmed points, and yet others in the Narrow-stemmed tradition, the latter being a generic term. As all these projectile points predate the invention of bow and arrow, they were not arrowheads, but rather dart points thrown with the help of an atlatl, the ancient spear-thrower tool.
A few other quartz points in the Kinner collection can be traced back to the Early Woodland Period some 2,000 years ago, while a so-called Normanskill biface was made of chert and is associated with the Middle Woodland Period, some 1,000 years ago. Chert, also called flint stone, is not local to Connecticut, but can be found in eastern New York State in the area around Albany. The fact that such tools were used by Native Americans in our area is an indication that they traded with other groups all the way to New York State.

Based on the artifacts identified and the site description provided by Bishop Kinner, Dr. Jones concluded that the rock shelter on the Falls River in Ivoryton had been in use as a hunting camp for about 1,000 years from roughly 5,000 to 4,000 years ago. He also concluded that the small number of later tools suggests temporary use of the hunting camp between 2,000 and 1,000 years ago.

Turning to the Pratt collection from the area north of New City Street in Essex Village along North Cove, most of its projectile points are mounted onto two sheets of cardboard. A close examination of these points by Dr. Jones revealed that the two displays cover several thousand years of Native American hunting activities in Essex.

The majority of these points are deemed to be some 3,500 to 2,000 years old. This places them in the Terminal Archaic Period. Others can be dated to the Late Woodland Period, making them 500 to 1,700 years old. Some of them were made from local soap stone and quartz, while a considerable number were chiseled from chert, and therefore probably came all the way from eastern New York State.

One of the oldest projectile points in this collection is also one of the most inconspicuous: Mounted on the horizontal cardboard on the right, it is the second one from the left in the last row, a small, almost black point made of chert. Dr. Jones places this one in the Early Archaic Period, meaning the little piece is up to 9,000 years old. According to Dr. Jones, such early stem points are a fairly uncommon find in Connecticut.
Yet this small chert point is not the oldest one in the EHS collection. One projectile point stands out from the rest: It is a Fluted Point with beveled edges, possibly a so-called Dalton Point, from the Late Paleo-Indian Period. This makes it 10,000 to 11,000 years old.

Since we know next to nothing about where exactly this projectile point was found and how it made its way into the Pratt collection, we cannot be absolutely sure of its use during the Paleo-Indian Period in our town. On the other hand, we may well have here before us the oldest evidence of Native American life in Essex as yet.

But the EHS collections do not only hold ancient Native American hunting tools. It also contains an impressive number of tools used in everyday life, such as axes, knives, scrapers, as well as adzes and gauges for woodworking. There are
also a few shards of pots, and a pestle fragment. These artifacts, some of which are shown below, come from both the Pratt and the Doane collections.

Shards of a soapstone vessel dated to the Late Archaic Period some 3000 years ago (left), and a linear dented starpin clay vessel from the Late Woodland Period some 500-1,000 years ago. Photos courtesy of Jody Dole.

The soapstone fragments above left may even originate from a local quarry. 19th century official records mention a Native American soapstone quarry located in Centerbrook:

“Robert’s Hill is situated about one-third of a mile north of the Congregational church in Centerbrook. In its side, and on the old Eli Denison place, there is a quarry of steatite or soapstone, which was also sometimes called cottonstone. This lies about one half a mile northward from the railroad station, on the road to Meadow Woods, and near the present residence of Richard Denison. The existence of this bed of stone was known to the Indians. They used the material in making pots and mortars, some of which have been found in their graves, and about the fields in the vicinity.”

Other pieces from the collection feature dramatic shapes:

From left to right: A full-grooved pecked and polished axe from the Late Archaic Period; a basalt adze from the Late to Terminal Archaic Period; a 7” long basalt three-quarter grooved axe, probably Terminal Archaic Period some 3,500 years ago. Photos courtesy of Jody Dole.

As all these artifacts evidence, our present-day town of Essex appears to have witnessed a continues presence of Native Americans for at least 9,000 but possibly even 11,000 years.
As our research continues, we may find more and more precise evidence of these ancient communities yet. Archaeologist and local historian Dr. John Pfeiffer reports that two significant sites of human activity from the Early Woodland Period were found in Essex in the late 1980s. One site with the foundation of a dwelling was located on what is now the lawn of Lay House at the bottom of Main Street in Essex Village. The other, a burial site, was found nearby on the grounds of the Dauntless Shipyard. These findings were incidental to archaeological excavations that concentrated on the wharfs built during Colonial times. No systematic archaeological excavations appear to have been carried out with respect to Native American life in Essex.

Beers History of Middlesex County, published in 1884, has this to say about Native Americans in our area:

“By the treaty with Mr. Winthrop and his associates in 1636, or about that time, the Indians gave to the English their right to the river and the bordering lands. A considerable Aboriginal settlement is supposed to have existed at Ayres Point and along the shore from there to Potapaug Point. On the point nearly half a mile below the present village site, where an Indian burying ground lay, remains have been found in a sitting posture, and Indian arrows, pestles, axes, and other implements have been found upon a sandy plain lying back from Ayers’ Point, together with other indications of Indian occupancy.”

While the English who settled Saybrook first used the name Petipaug Quarters, also spelled Potapaug, to describe a large area that included Essex, Deep River, and Chester, the Algonquian word Petipaug originally meant a point of land and “denotes a bay or cove that has a narrow inlet from a river or the sea, literally a ‘jutting’ of the water inland.” Thus, the name Petipaug may well have referred to the point of land on which Essex Village stands today.

As Beers’ description suggests, a Native American settlement would have stretched from Ayers’ Point all the way to today’s Essex Village. Beers History makes no mention, however, of who these native people were, when they lived here, whether the settlements had been seasonal or more permanent, and the reasons for their abandonment.

Native American Life in the Essex Area Shortly Before European Arrival

As a working hypothesis, it seems reasonable to assume that shortly before European contact in the Late Woodland Period, Western Nihantic were living in the Essex area, at least seasonally. But even if these communities were part of the Wangunk, or the Hammonasst, their customs, language, and socio-political structure would have been very similar to those of the Nihantic.

One of the ways archeologists determine that a new people arrived in an area during a certain historical period is evidence of changed burial practices. Such practices point to the deeply rooted belief system of a people. While novel technologies and techniques are incorporated into existing cultures with relative ease, belief systems typically change only forcibly. Thus, we know
that the Algonquians arrived in southeast New England around 3,000 years ago, because gravesites from this time forward are radically different from the earlier ones found from the Archaic Period.

A Western Nihantic burial site with 13 graves at Black Point in Old Lyme was excavated by John Pfeiffer and others in the 1980s. The site indicates that the Nihantic buried their dead as they had lived, i.e. their intact bodies were interred in a flexed position, their heads facing southwest.\textsuperscript{lxv} This was in contrast to the past practice, no longer observed, of preliminary burials followed by later cremation. As in the past, however, the dead were given artifacts that would help them in their after-life, for example weapons and tools in the case of men, necklaces, pots and baskets for women, toys for children. But these items were no longer broken, as it was not the spirit but the entire body and its accompanying artifacts that were expected to enter the next world.\textsuperscript{lxvi}

These native people were deeply spiritual. Spirits resided in all plants and animals, and even in inert objects, such as stones. As all creatures were connected, they needed to be treated with respect. The Great Spirit was benign and awaited people after their death, while Hobomuk, the evil spirit, needed to be appeased in order to promote harmony and balance among all creatures. With dances and rituals overseen by “medicine men”, thanks were given and evil spirits placated.\textsuperscript{lxvii} Medicine men would also heal the sick with rituals and medication, but their expertise in this respect was by no means exclusive. Native people held a vast knowledge about the healing properties of plants and the efficacy of their application to various illnesses. This knowledge was most widespread among women. They would have known, for example, that the inner bark of the young twigs of the common willow (Salix) can be employed as a pain killer as it contains salicin, a primitive form of aspirin, and that the leaves of the common plantain work as an astringent, helping wounds to close.\textsuperscript{lxviii}

During the Early Woodland Period, pipe smoking became an important part of social gatherings, medical procedures and probably also burial practices. Tobacco was considered a holy plant, and its smoke was believed to expel bad spirits and foster positive thinking and friendship.\textsuperscript{lxix} The long-stemmed shapes of tobacco pipes found in Southern New England, called calumets, are associated with the Adena and Hopewellian cultures of the Midwest.\textsuperscript{lxx}

Social organization during the Woodland Period was flexible. Villages were relocated when local resources became scarce. Interaction was complex and organized principally around villages. Leadership was exercised by the sachem, but his role was not equivalent to a European monarch.\textsuperscript{lxxi} The sachem had to prove himself. In daily life, he had to display wisdom, and in war, he needed to show courage. He led by example and personal generosity, and not by authority claimed from a higher power. Decisions were first deliberated in a council of important men. Elders, both men and women with particular knowledge and wisdom, could participate as well. If members of a group did not like their sachem or his decisions, they could leave and join another village, in effect “voting with their feet”.\textsuperscript{lxxii}
On occasion, women became sachems. Their role in society was considerably stronger and far more independent than that of contemporary white women, as the maternal line determined the social status of the Native American family. Indigenous women could inherit, and hold and sell land titles when this European concept was introduced into the New World. They could divorce their husbands, and keep the children.

Food was plentiful and varied. The men did the hunting and fishing, and the women were responsible for preparing the food. White-tailed deer, rabbits, squirrels, partridges, pigeons, quail, and ducks featured prominently in the diet. Starting at around 600 A.D., bow and arrow were introduced in Connecticut, probably through contacts with Mid-Atlantic people. As a hunting weapon, the bow and arrow was superior in terms of power and precision to the spear and atlatl.

Fishing was equally important to the Nihantic and their neighbors. Sturgeon, salmon, bass and trout were caught with nets and fishhooks, and shad, alewives and eels moving upriver in spring to spawn were trapped in weirs. Shellfish were collected along the shoreline and stripped of their shells at large shell middens, then taken back to the base camps for preparation. Women gathered nuts, berries, roots and other parts of edible plants. Bulrush, cattail, wild rice, and water lilies growing on Great Meadow would have been prized food supplies for the Nihantic. For example, the roots of cattail are "stringy, but contain a potatoe-like starch. The centers of young stalks are like asparagus, the older ones tougher, like celery. In early summer, the plant produces an edible pollen on the spikes. Somewhere between the stalks and the roots, crunchy little salad stalks grow."

Maize, or rather its wild grass predecessor, teosinte, had been grown by indigenous peoples in Mexico for nine thousand years. But only during the Late Woodland Period some 1,000 years ago, did maize finally arrive in Connecticut. It was introduced via the traditional trade routes from the Great Lakes and the Midwest. Maize kernels were found in the Essex area dating back to 1,000-1,200 A.D.

While men cleared the soil, tilling and agriculture was generally women’s work. They raised the “Three Sisters”, corn, beans, and squash, and also pumpkins, and watermelons. Men tended tobacco, perhaps due to its “spiritual” dimension. Native peoples had no iron plows or other metal tools. They used shells attached to a wooden handle and wooden hoes to till the soil. With no animals large enough to help, and no wheels to transport the crops, these were arduous chores.

The widespread use of clay pottery marks one of the most significant developments of the Woodland Period. Native Americans did not know the potter’s wheel. Instead, they sculpted a pot by adding layers of coiled clay on top of each other. The sides of pots were then made smooth with a layer of additional clay and often adorned with geometrical patterns. Archaeologists speak of the Windsor pottery style. These pots were most prolific along the
north shore of Long Island Sound all the way from the mouth of the Connecticut River to the present-day Connecticut–Rhode Island border.\textsuperscript{lx}

Birch bark was used to produce elaborate baskets. Clothes were made of animal skin, such as deer, elk, or moose and embroidered with shells, moosehair, and porcupine quills. For personal adornment, wampum belts, bracelets and headbands, brass and copper ornaments and certain kinds of featherwork were also worn, and paint and tattoos were applied on the skin.

The forests that covered Connecticut were kept open and airy, as fires were set to the underbrush twice each year to prevent impenetrable thickets and encourage the growth of berries, such as blueberries and cranberries that flourish in these conditions.\textsuperscript{lxxxii} As a result, upon the Europeans’ arrival, much of New England forests resembled park-like settings rather than a wilderness.

The Native American communities maintained single-file footpaths all across the region. One such path ran between present-day Saybrook and Hartford along the Connecticut River and passed over the Essex hill known as the Pratt Smithy. This footpath was later used by the colonists and became known as the Country Road.\textsuperscript{lxxxiii} Similarly, River Road in Essex was likely a part of this Indian path system, as was Route 154 that connects Essex with Middletown and Hartford.\textsuperscript{lxxxiv} These paths are further evidence of Native American settlements in and around Essex.

In the summer, communities would move to temporary quarters on the ocean to better fish and gather shellfish. The base camps along the Connecticut River were used from spring to fall, often shared by larger communities. In winter, people would split up into smaller groups to seek shelter from the winter cold in the forests further inland.\textsuperscript{lxxxv}

The diet of these coastal and river people was very healthful. Early European travelers were astonished by how tall, healthy, lean and physically fit Native
Americans were, especially compared to Europeans. Indigenous people also compared favorably with Europeans in terms of their personal hygiene. As a result, their life span on average considerably exceeded that of Europeans. All this changed dramatically, however, with the arrival of the Europeans.

**Arrival of the Dutch and the English**

The earliest written European account that we have about the Native Americans along the New England shores dates back to 1524. Giovanni da Verrazano, a Portuguese explorer sailing for the king of France, described his observations and encounters in a letter dated July 8, 1524 to Francis I, King of France. He was much impressed by the kindness, generosity, and physical attractiveness of the people he met.

These accounts were of the Narragansett in Massachusetts, but given that they, too, belonged to the Algonquian tribes of New England, Verrazano's description of the native population, of its appearance and demeanor, might well not have been much different had he laid anchor near the mouth of the Connecticut River and encountered the Nihantic.

The first European explorer to sail up the Connecticut River in 1614 on the vessel Onrust was the Dutch explorer Adrian Block. He had set sail from present-day New York. In his logbook, he described what he saw along the Connecticut River. He called it the Fresh River:

"This river is shallow at its mouth, and lies between two courses, north by east and west by north; but according to conjecture, its general direction is from the north-northwest. In some places it is very shallow, so that at about fifteen leagues up the river [45 miles, Hartford] there is not much more than five feet of water. There are few inhabitants near the mouth of the river, but at a distance of fifteen leagues [above Middletown] they become very numerous: their nation is called Sequins. From this place the river stretches ten leagues, mostly northerly, and is very crooked ...(sic) and is impossible to sail through all of them with a head wind. The depth of water varies from eight to twelve feet and is sometimes four or five fathoms [24 to 30] feet." From this place the river stretches ten leagues, mostly northerly, and is very crooked ...(sic) and is impossible to sail through all of them with a head wind. The depth of water varies from eight to twelve feet and is sometimes four or five fathoms [24 to 30] feet.

Block's voyage took place ninety years after that of Verrazano. How does the description of a sparse population at the mouth of the Connecticut River square with earlier accounts according to which sixteenth century New England housed 100,000 people or more, most of them living along the shorelines in bigger settlements? In Connecticut, estimates of the native population around 1600 vary widely, from 13,500 Pequot/Mohegan living west of the Connecticut River along with 25,000 other Native Americans, and about 6,500 Native Americans east of the river. According to Beer's History of Middlesex County, the total number of Native Americans in all of Connecticut at the time of first contact was estimated at around 16,000.
Two explanations of the disparate reports and estimates come to mind. Adrian Block explored the Connecticut River sometime in the spring of 1614. Perhaps the riverine Native Americans had not yet returned to the shoreline from their winter quarters. Another, more sinister explanation would be that their number had been drastically decimated since the time of first European contact due to epidemics. Native Americans had no natural defenses against European diseases such as measles, small pox, or typhoid. All along the Eastern Seaboard they had been trading with Europeans, but their medicine was useless to treat the afflictions that these contacts brought.

The Europeans saw this loss of human life as a divine foreordination. When the Pilgrims landed with the Mayflower in Plymouth in 1620, the great epidemic of 1616-1619 had killed thousands of Native Americans in that area alone, leaving the land devoid of human life and ripe for the Pilgrims' taking. The patent of King James claiming New England for the English Crown and granting Englishmen the right to settle these lands, considered the death of the native population a divinely ordained fate. King James I had left no doubt what was to happen to those natives in New England who were spared death from the epidemics: They were to be converted to Christianity, or killed.

It is estimated that following European contact, the Native American population in New England was decimated by 95 to 98 percent. In 1634, four Dutch traders spent the winter among some 1,000 Native Americans up the Connecticut River. Another epidemic broke out, and a mere 50 members of the group survived that season. By the following summer, the epidemic had spread throughout Connecticut.

Initially, the Dutch had come not as settlers, but as traders. They exported beaver pelts from the New World back to Europe where the furs were used in very expensive and prestigious clothing. Previously, furs had been imported exclusively from Russia, but trade with the native people in North America broke the Russian monopoly and promised enormous profits. The Europeans offered in exchange metal knives and tools, such as axes and hoes, iron pots and kettles, glass beads, and duffle cloth. These items were in high demand, as Native American stone tools and clay pots were hard to produce and did not last nearly as long as metal tools and iron kettles.

After Adrian Block, the next reported Dutchman to arrive at the Connecticut River was Hans Eencluys, an employee of the Dutch West India Company. He landed at the mouth of the river in 1632. His mission was to secure trade in beaver pelts for the company. He purchased a point of land from the natives and there erected the arms of the States General of the New Netherlands, the Dutch 17th century colony that extended from the Delmarva Peninsula to parts of Cape Cod, with its center in what today are wide parts of New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Connecticut, with small outposts in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island.

Eencluys called the spot he purchased Kievet's Hook, a reference to the cry of the small shorebird the Dutch call kiewet, the English plover. Kievet's Hook was to become Old Saybrook.

As beavers gradually became rare in southeast New England due to over-hunting, European traders began to turn to tribes further inland to satisfy their
demand. They found that in exchange, they could offer highly valued wampum, delicately carved small shell beads carved out of clam and conch shells. These beads had been produced by the coastal people along Long Island Sound since the Early Woodland Period. Wampum was used to decorate clothes and belts, but it had also assumed a highly significant spiritual and ceremonial value because it had been exchanged among indigenous communities as tokens of goodwill, and of peace and friendship for a long time before European contact. Thus developed a trade triangle: The coastal Native Americans of Connecticut produced wampum and traded it for Dutch goods, the Dutch in turn used the wampum to pay Native Americans in the remote interior for their pelts:

“Production was concentrated among the Narragansett, Niantic, Montauk, Shinnecock, and Corchaug tribes. The work of crafting the beads was done in the winter. (...) When Europeans introduced the metal drill, production increased exponentially.”

**Conflict and Defeat**

As Lavin explains, at this juncture, native communities in Southeastern New England were severely crippled and vulnerable, as many of their leaders, elders, medicine experts, warriors and women of child-bearing age had already perished from the epidemics. The relative ease with which the Europeans were able to establish their dominance in the following decades must therefore be understood against this background. The indigenous population was simply no longer adequately equipped to defend itself against the ever-increasing numbers and rapidly growing land demands of the European newcomers.

Longstanding feuds and rivalries among Native American groups in New England also greatly contributed to their ultimate demise. Not only did wars break out between them, but some indigenous groups joined the Europeans in their wars against other tribes, thus weakening the indigenous population even further. One such source of internal strife was the fur trade. It led to antagonism among native communities as different villages were vying for advantage. The Pequot, the already dominant tribe in the area, forced other groups, including the Nihantic, to sell their furs to them so that the Pequot could act as the middlemen and monopolize trade with the Europeans.

In 1633, the Dutch purchased land in an area that now belongs to Hartford in order to erect a trading post there. DeForest reports that this sale was conducted with the Pequot, even though the Wangunk inhabited this area. The Pequot considered themselves the owners of all the land along the Connecticut River. However, the purchase deal also stipulated, that all tribes in the area were to be free to sell their pelts directly to the Dutch. Knapp surmises that the Pequot were deceived about the content of this treaty, and when they learned that rival tribes were trading directly with the Dutch, they killed some of their members at the trading post. This in turn incensed the Dutch, and a war broke out between them and the Pequot.

Meanwhile, the English at Plymouth had learned of the profitability of the Dutch fur trade on Connecticut shores and wanted their share of it. At the invitation of
some river communities who sought English protection against the Pequot, Plymouth colony dispatched John Holmes, who promptly bought land from these communities north of Hartford in Windsor. His goal was to establish an English trading post in competition with the Dutch and at a point higher upriver where the English could block access of Native American fur traders to the Dutch settlement.

As De Forest describes, by 1634, the Pequot found themselves in a difficult situation. They had lost many people from small-pox, were denied income from the fur trade at Hartford because of the war with the Dutch, had ceded control over the tribal communities along the river who were now trading directly with the Dutch, and were under attack by the Narragansett in the north. To make matters worse, one of the Pequot sub-sachems, Uncas, was in open rebellion against the Pequot grand sachem, Sassacus. Eventually, Uncas and his followers broke away from the Pequot tribe and built their own community. They called themselves Mohegan. In this situation, Sassacus decided to seek the goodwill and support of the English and enter into a league with them in order to participate in their trade. Pequot ambassadors were dispatched to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in October of that year to propose a deal with the English.

In November 1634, a treaty was signed between the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Pequot with very advantageous conditions for the colonists. Its most pertinent clause as far as the Essex area is concerned stipulated that the English were to have as much land in Connecticut as they needed, provided they would build settlements, and that the Pequot would assist them in those efforts in any way feasible.

In 1635, the English began to build Fort Saybrook. It appears that they would have done so irrespective of the treaty between the Bay Colony and the Pequot because at this very moment “certain Englishmen in Europe took action and exercised land rights previously granted by the King to Lord Say and Sele, Lord Brook, and certain of their associates. They had appointed John Winthrop, Jr., son of Massachusetts Governor Winthrop, to act in their interest as governor of these lands. Arriving at Boston from England with funds and key personnel to establish a fort at today’s Old Saybrook for control of the Connecticut River, the younger Winthrop took prompt action.” Initially, Saybrook was only to be a stronghold, staffed with a commander, Captain Lion Gardiner, and twelve soldiers trained in the European wars, and two women. The purpose of the fort was to protect a few tiny English settlements that had been established further up the river, and also to break Dutch control over the river once and for all, thereby enforcing England’s claim over the territory.

The territory of Saybrook Colony comprised not just what is today’s Old Saybrook, but extended upriver past Essex and Deep River all the way to what is Chester today.

It appears that the Pequot at first believed Fort Saybrook was to be a trading post much like the kind the Dutch had set up previously. When the Pequot became suspicious, their inquiries with the fort’s commander lead nowhere. Eventually, deadly hostilities between the Pequot and the English broke out, leading to the Pequot War of 1636–1637. The result was the virtual annihilation.
of the Pequot people. A Colonial army set out from Fort Saybrook and utterly
destroyed the largest Pequot village at Mystic, killing an estimated 400-700
people, many of them women and children.\textsuperscript{cv}

The Colonial forces were aided by the Mohegan under Uncas, and also by the
Narragansett. Of the Pequot who escaped the Mystic massacre, several hundred
more were killed in subsequent squirmishes following their relentless pursuit
by the English and their native allies. The rest were captured and sold off as
slaves in the Bahamas and the West Indies, or given as subjects to allied tribess.

The Western Nihantic remained neutral. A map dated 1625, reproduced by
Lavin, shows the areas of settlement of the Nihantic and the Pequot at this
time.\textsuperscript{cvi} Another group of Nihantic who lived further east in what today is
Rhode Island are known as the Eastern Nihantic. They offered refuge to some
50 Pequot just before the war broke out. Pfeiffer reports: "This act infuriated
the English and the Colonial Assembly weighed a heavy fine upon the Nehantic".\textsuperscript{cvii}

Little seems to have been written about the subsequent fate of the Nihantic.
According to some accounts, only about 100 Western Nihantic survived the
Pequot War. Many of these survivors were subjected to the control of the
Mohegan as a reward for their support of the English.\textsuperscript{cviii}

In addition to the English, a great victor of the Pequot War was Uncas, the
sachem of the Mohegan. His followers became the largest and most influential
surviving Native American group in southern Connecticut and for several
decades assumed an important political role as the closest allies of the English
colonists. In 1638, Connecticut signed a tripartite treaty with the Mohegan and
the Narragansett. In this so-called Hartford Treaty, the Colony "attempted to
establish the English on the Connecticut River as the new Sachems of the region
who would mediate native disputes".\textsuperscript{cx} The Native Americans agreed that they
would never lay claim to any of the conquered Pequot territory, as the colonists
demanded those lands for themselves. In return, the treaty assigned Pequot
captives to the Mohegan and Narragansett.\textsuperscript{cx} However, Uncas, with the silent
consent of the Connecticut authorities, later obtained possession of
considerable Pequot territory. According to Mary Soulsby, those lands were
located in New London county and the southern parts of Windham and Tolland
counties.\textsuperscript{cxi} The territory under Uncas' control included the Nihantic who lived
along the shores of the Lower Connecticut River, including in the area of today's
Essex.

According to local lore, Attawanhood (1630-1676), one of Uncas' sons, known to
the English as Chief Joshua after his conversion to Christianity, served as a guide
to William Hide and William Pratt of Saybrook Fort in the summer of 1647. As
the story goes, the three men were inspecting Petipaug Quarter, which was then
still part of Saybrook. Chief Joshua showed the two colonists a little hill in Essex
from which they could oversee the lay of the land, and in particular Great
Meadow which they referred to as "Eight Mile Meadow".\textsuperscript{cxii} Soon thereafter, the
first settlers moved from Saybrook Fort to Petipaug.

In the year of the Hartford Treaty, John Winthrop of Fort Saybrook, the son of
the governor, petitioned the general court of Connecticut, claiming title to all the
lands that had belonged to the defeated Nihantic, including the entire territory
Winthrop argued that he had partly purchased this land before the Pequot War at the price of a few English coats and had partly been given the land as a present by a Nihantic sachem with the name of Sashions. His claim was denied, and the Connecticut Colony requested the territory for itself by right of conquest. The court reasoned that there was insufficient proof of Winthrop’s purchase as no written records existed, that the borders of the territory were too vaguely defined, and that no claim to title of the land had been made before the war started. As this episode suggests, by the 1640s, battles over land claims in Connecticut in general, and right down to the mouth of the Connecticut River, were waging bitterly.

The political influence and status of the Mohegan in Connecticut proved to be short-lived. Its end came with the last and decisive war between the English in New England and Native Americans in the so-called King Philips War (1675–76). Several New England tribes, including the Wampanuag, Narragansett, Nipmuck, and Pocumtuck, revolted against the ever increasing colonial oppression. The war decimated the native population to such an extent that they no longer wielded any power to resist the advances of the English settlers and the taking of their homelands in Connecticut and elsewhere in the region. Surviving Narragansett sought refuge with the Eastern Nihantic. They outnumbered their hosts to such an extent that the entire group subsequently became known as the Narragansett, and references to a separate group called Nihantic ceased.

The Fate of the Nihantic

The population of Nehantic villages prior to European contact is difficult to establish, but estimates put their number at over 5,000 and possibly considerably more. By the 1620s, their population had already decreased to an estimated 250. By 1761, Ezra Stiles, an 18th century minister, educator, and president of Yale College, estimated that only 85 Nihantic were still alive.

In the 1850s, William DeForest, writing about the history of Native Americans in Connecticut, did not have much information about the Nihantic. His account located them near the mouth of the Connecticut River and eastwards along the seashore to the Niantic River. He reported: “They seem to have been not inconsiderable in numbers, but they are still retaining an existence; yet they never furnished any noted characters, never performed any remarkable exploit...” Jane T. Smith, whose 1894 manuscript account of the “Last of the Nehantics” was first published by the East Lyme Historical Society in 1912 and reprinted in 2011, offers a slightly different interpretation of why no names of great Nihantic warriors had been passed down over the centuries: “That the Nantics had been more peacable than some of the other tribes is proven by the fact that the name of no great sachem has come down to the present time”. Smith praises the Nihantic, who by then had long disappeared as a community in Connecticut, for their “unswerving friendship and fidelity to the neighboring pale faces”.

By 1871, the Connecticut Government declared the Nehantic extinct, and their 300-acre reservation on the Black Point peninsula of East Lyme was auctioned.
Despite Connecticut’s promise to respect the tribe’s burial grounds, those grounds were also sold and desecrated in 1886.\textsuperscript{cxxii}

Thus, we must assume that the Nihantic suffered the same fate as other indigenous peoples of Connecticut. Lavin gives a harrowing account of that history. Indigenous people were driven from their land by force or by laws and treaties the contents and consequences of which they did not fully understand or were misrepresented to them. They were denied sovereignty and subjected to English rule of law the meaning of which, and punishment for infractions, they did not comprehend. They were deprived of their livelihoods by the land claims of the settlers whose free-ranging cattle and swine destroyed their fields and whose fences marked unfamiliar property rights. They were denied access to their ancient hunting and fishing grounds and were prohibited by state law from practicing their beliefs and traditions. They were sold into slavery abroad and to settlers in Connecticut who branded their shoulders with hot irons. They were indentured to the whites for many years, often already as small children. And they were forced to retreat to ever-diminishing reservations as those lands were subsequently sold off by their white “overseers”.\textsuperscript{cxxiii}

Place names are the most familiar historical references to the Native Americans who once lived so numerously in our area. Prominent among these is the name Joshua, the Chief of the Mohegans. Born Attanawood and named Joshua after his conversion to Christianity, he and his people lived in the area of Joshuatown near Eight Mile Island, now a part of Lyme.\textsuperscript{cxxiv} As he was considered a friend of the English, he is remembered to this day by several landmarks, roads, rivers, creeks and coves in the area. The 60 foot high outcropping a short distance north of Essex across the river known as Joshua’s Rock bears his name. According to local lore, the sachem would sit serenely on the top of the cliff watching with pride as his people fished below.\textsuperscript{cxxv}

![Joshua's Rock on the Connecticut River near Hamburg Cove](image)

At the end of his life, Chief Joshua seems to have given up hope that his people would be able to hold on to much of their ancient lands. According to the
Hebron Historical Society, in February 1676, three months before his death, he signed over large tracts of his tribal lands to the colonists. His “Last Will and Testament” is quoted as having begun: “I Joshua Sachim Son of Uncau Sachim Living nigh Eightmile Island on the River of Connecticut and within Bounds of Lyme being Sick of Body but of good and perfect memory and not knowing how soon I may depart this Life...” Another paragraph of the will grants 3,000 acres each to Francis Busnell son, Edward Shipman son, and John Westall. The text that follows describes the land to be sold in extremely complicated ways with reference to place names that the English were unfamiliar with. But in the end, the Connecticut government, examining the terms of the will, concluded that Joshua had ceded all of the land that today comprises the town of Hebron to a group of men later referred to as the “Saybrook Legatees”, namely John Talcott, John Pratt, John Chapman, Abrahm Post, and Edward Shipman. However, even this land title is said to have been contested. As Pfeiffer reports, two competing land documents relating to Lyme exist, and one local family uses Joshua, another family a Nehantic Sannup document for their legal claims.

In the 1970s, the plight of Chief Joshua and his people inspired the country singer Larry Kaplan, an Essex resident, to write and sing a ballad about Joshua’s Rock. It’s touching lyrics and mournful song are published on the internet. In 1894, Jane T. Smith described the plight of a few Nihantic remaining in the Lyme area in the early 19th century. Her booklet is a poignant account of the fate of some of the last recognized survivors of the Nihantic on the mouth of the Connecticut River. According to her account, by 1693 the Nihantic began to lease reservation lands to white settlers, a move that precipitated further encroachment on Indian lands. When the Nihantic brought their grievances to the Connecticut General Assembly in 1728, the response was the appointment of consecutive overseers of the reservation at Black Point. These overseers did not act as public trustees, however. How they understood their task is suggested by the fact that they and their descendants treated all records of their actions as their personal property and refused public access, even decades later. Native Americans held no title to their reservation land, as this belonged to the State of Connecticut. Land sales were executed by the overseers, and without the legally required consent of the Connecticut Government. Members of the tribe who had relocated outside the reservation were deemed as having given up all claims to its revenues, tribal membership, and legal protection.

Meanwhile, Nihantic on the reservation survived by making their traditional birch bark baskets and selling them to farmers nearby. Men were able to make their livelihood as sailors and farm hands, women worked as household cleaners, while children were often given to the colonists for many years of servitude in order to settle debts and in exchange for learning English and white culture. A significant number of Nehantic men joined an Indian battalion in the Revolutionary Army where many of them lost their lives, not least because they were so successful as scouts and in surprise attacks that the British troops singled them out as targets.

With the number of tribal members severely diminished after the epidemics, the Pequot War and King Phillip’s War, Nihantic life was severely impoverished and
devoid of much of its ancient subsistence strategies. In the 1780s, a sizeable number of Nihantic followed the Mohican preacher Samson Occum and together with members of other tribes fled Connecticut for Brothertown in New York State to find refuge there and to found a new and Christian Indian existence. This, too, was not to last. Fifty years later they were driven out of Brothertown and ended up in Wisconsin.

Even against these odds, the personal histories of the remaining early 19th-century Nihantic in Connecticut attest to their courageous efforts to defend their traditional culture and to preserve at least some of their ancient ways. Smith reports that a sizeable number of Nihantic on the Black Point reservation resisted being Christianized. Some of them maintained the annual rhythm of living on the seaside in summers, and retreating to traditional wigwams in inland forests during winters. However, their impoverished conditions caused many of them to die of consumption at an early age.

One of those Nihantic still accustomed to roaming the woods freely as a child was Mercy Anne Nonesuch, married Mathews. She had been born in a forest wigwam in 1822. When her Nihantic tribe was declared extinct in 1871, she was asked to have her photograph taken, and at first refused. When it was explained to her that fifty or a hundred years later her image would be remembered as the last of the Nihantic tribe, her reaction was reported as follows: "When told that it [her photograph] would be deposited in the Connecticut Historical Society at Hartford, that her tribe and name might never be forgotten, a flush colored her cheeks, tears started to her eyes, a peculiar far-away expression suddenly suffused her whole face and with a pathetic tone she exclaimed, ‘oh, I am so glad if someone wants to remember us.’"

**Postscript**

While intact Nihantic tribal communities were effectively obliterated, population demographics are another matter, and the Nihantic legacy lives on. Some descendants of the Nihantic survived and over the generations have carried on the lineage, albeit typically in mixed marriages. In this sense, as Lavin argues in great detail, the disappearance of Native Americans from southern New England is a myth, an invention that served the political goals and conveniences of its new inhabitants all too well. Indeed, as Lavin’s account testifies, the story of the indigenous population in our area from its earliest times until the present day is one of remarkable continuity, survival, and adaptability. Today, thousands of Native Americans, originating both from Nihantic and other groups, live in Connecticut.

In 1998, people of about 35 Connecticut families that claim to be descendants of the Nehantic incorporated as a non-profit association with the name “Nehantic Tribe and Nation” and petitioned the Federal Government for recognition as a tribe. According to the New York Times, their spokesperson, Jerry A. Walden of Chester, said that the petition “is about reclaiming, getting recognition for our heritage.” To date, only two Connecticut tribes, the Mohegan and the Mashantucket Pequot, have received federal recognition.

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c DeForest 1851, 71.
ci Knapp, 1985, 81.
cii DeForest 1851, 80; Knapp 1985, 87.
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civ Knapp 1985, 91.
cv Lavin 2013, 327.
cvi Lavin 2013, 307-308.
cvii Pfeiffer, unpublished manuscript.
cix Mashantucket Pequot Museum, Battlefields of the Pequot War, Pequot War Timeline; published at http://pequotwar.org/about/timeline.
cx Knapp 1985, 61.
cxiv See. e.g., ConnecticutHistory.org, America’s Most Devastating Conflict: King Philip’s War, accessible at https://connecticuthistory.org/american-most-devastating-conflict-king-philips-war/.
cxvi Pfeiffer, unpublished manuscript.
cxvii Salwen 1978, 189.
cxix DeForest 1851, 57.
xx Smith 1912 und 2011, 5.
xxi Ibid, 38.
xxiii Lavin 2013, 335-347, 351-353.
xxiv Clarification is needed whether the Eight Mile Island is today’s Brockway Island, or, as Bayles claims, Nott Island; see Bayles 1884, 331.
xxvii Pfeiffer, personal communication.
xxviii https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=std6KhKuAh0:

"Americans who farmed that soil before the first white man,
Who lived in peace and never claimed a bounty for their land
They watched their river turn to red at the hands of greedy men,"
Who drove the Pequot from their homes and drowned the Mohegan.  
She washed away the memories of every native child they killed 
Then swept the blood from Deerfield’s soil where bones are lying still.”

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cxxxvi Ibid, 362.
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