

Montauks' Long March: To Wisconsin and Back?

By Red Thunder Cloud

In 1910 State Supreme Court Justice Abel S. Blackmar declared to a packed courtroom in Riverhead that "The Montauk tribe of Indians is now extinct!"

No clearer lie could have been given to the judge's verdict: More than 75 members of the tribe were in the courtroom that infamous day. The Fowler, Pharaoh, Butler, Consor, Wright, Waters and Cuffee families, all Montauketts (the correct name of the tribe), were shocked. Aside from the loss of their land, the decision was a slap in the face that the Montauketts have had to live with to this day.

The tribe had Brooklynite Arthur Benson to blame for its trouble. Benson, a well-to-do 19th-Century land speculator, saw in the Montauketts' 9,200 acres a vision of yet more wealth for himself. In 1879 he got into the good graces of the few members of the tribe left there and persuaded them to sign away their rights to the land. Benson in turn sold the land for a whopping \$650,000. In exchange the Montauketts were promised an annual stipend of \$80 per person.

Benson moved them to East Hampton, whose stores and conveniences had been accessible from Montauk in winter only after hours of walking. They were duped into believing that they could return to their traditional fishing places in Montauk in the spring. When they did, they were arrested for trespassing. Subsequently, they brought the suit that was not completed until 1910.

Only a handful of Long Islanders can claim Montauk Indian ancestry. But the tribe once played a leading role in local history, and some of the Wisconsin descendants may return to stake out another claim on the East End.



turned and found that his lesser sachem had agreed to the plot without consulting him, he immediately sent word to Gardiner. The white man alerted the settlers in East Hampton and the plot on Long Island was thwarted. Myantonome was livid when he learned of the deception, and thus began the long war between the two tribes. It continued even after Myantonome's death and was taken up by the succeeding Narragansett sachem Ninigret.

Gardiner was destined to get his reward later. One night in 1653, Wyandanch's daughter, Heather Flower, as the English called her, was to be married to a young chief of the Pequots. Gardiner, who had been invited as a guest of honor, did not show. Suddenly the shrill war whoop of the Narragansetts sounded and from the woods they emerged, slew the bridegroom, bound the father to a tree and kidnapped his daughter and 14 of the bridesmaids and returned to Rhode Island.

Poniute tried to convince Wyandanch that Gardiner had been in the plot. But that gentleman convinced his friend Wyandanch that his canoe somehow had been mysteriously hidden so that he had no way to leave the island to attend the nuptials. To further prove his concern, Gardiner began negotiations to have Wyandanch's daughter returned. Only after six years of negotiations was Heather Flower returned to Long Island. The Montaukett sachem was so grateful that he conveyed to Gardiner that land that now comprises Smithtown.

New York 1/14/79

again. In 1922, a delegation went to Washington to prove that the tribe still existed. In that group were Queen Maria, Pocahontas Pharaoh, George Fowler, Marguerite Fowler, Samuel Powhatan Pharaoh, Charles Fowler and John Henry Fowler. John Henry Fowler was known as the Jim Thorpe of Long Island because of his athletic feats on various East Hampton High School teams. But politics being the same then as politics now, with the power brokers holding the trump cards, the Indians had no chance whatsoever to gain the ears of the bureaucrats at the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

The great land grab at Montauk was another example of the white man's power and influence. Plans for the area's economic development were on the drawing board and the trusting Montauketts who paid their own way to Washington were actually defeated before they left East Hampton.

The rich land that once comprised the Montaukett reservation is now occupied by whites. Some of them become aware of the land's history only when real estate agents insist that they purchase land insurance since the land can always be claimed by Montauks. This revelation always has a startling effect upon them.

As one who lectures often at Long Island schools, I am aware that most students and teachers

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Vincent and Hannah Joseph, of Shelter Island, in a 1913 photo

know nothing of the Montaukett Indians. Their social studies books fail to mention the Montauketts and even the classroom attempts to acquaint students with Long Island Indian history are superficial. A brief recapitulation of Montaukett history, in however short a space, is at least better than none at all.

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In the days before the white man, the Montauketts were the strongest tribe on Long Island, rulers of a loose confederation of several tribes. Mongetucksee, the seven-foot giant who with his men built what was the forerunner of the Shinnecock Canal, had four sons. Three ruled East End tribes. Pegaticut ruled the Manhansetts on Shelter Island; Momoweta led the Corchaugs near Greenport; and Wyandanch, under his father's guidance, held sway over the parent tribe, the Montauketts. The fourth son, Nowodonah, was 18 years old and an avid hunter and fisherman.

While hunting one day with a companion, he was kidnapped by the Shinnecocks. A friend who had escaped into the bushes took word

to his father. The fire signals went out and 300 Montaukett warriors were on their way to the Shinnecock village. The Shinnecocks, aware of their coming, had retreated into a fort that they had erected at the eastern end of Great South Bay. The Montauketts stormed the fort, decisively defeated the enemy, regained the lost son and immediately made a decision that would determine future Long Island Indian policy. Wyandanch appointed Nowodonah to become the sachem of the Shinnecocks. And that's how that tribe became part of the Montaukett confederacy.

As powerful as the Montauketts were, they were still subject to frequent raids from the Narragansetts in what is now Rhode Island. Wyandanch gained a valuable white ally in 1639 when Lion Gardiner came over from Connecticut to receive a land grant from the king of England. He renamed his island fiefdom Gardiners Island. Apart from their personal admiration for each other, their relationship was firmly grounded in a mutual distrust of the Narragansetts.

Their friendship was put to a test in 1643 when Myantonome of the Narragansetts urged the Montauketts to help organize a confederacy to drive the whites out of New England and Long Island. When he came to parley, Wyandanch was away on a fishing trip. Poniute, the anti-English war sagamore of the Montauketts, agreed to join the conspiracy. When Wyandanch re-

ketts began to look and sound more like the English colonists. They dressed in a mixture of Indian and English clothing and many were speaking English by the middle of the 18th Century. Their conversion to Christianity began in 1748, when a Mohegan Indian minister named Samson Occum came to the Montauketts from Connecticut to instruct them in the faith and to teach them to read and write in English. His language and that of the Montauks were similar so they could converse without difficulty in an Indian tongue when necessary.

Occum brought the Montauketts not only literacy and a religion. He eventually was to lead them to a new home in upstate New York. In the meantime, he fell in love with and married a Montaukett girl named Mary Fowler. Since she was a sister of tribal leader David Fowler, the marriage could not help but cement Occum's leadership role in the tribe. Gradually he came to believe that the Montauketts could preserve their tribal integrity only if they moved from Long Island.

According to the standard history of the Montauketts for the period, "Samson Occum and the Christian Indians of New England," Occum and other tribal leaders believed that intermarriage with runaway black slaves was compromising the culture and racial purity of neighboring tribes. How could the Montauketts avoid this fate?

After councils with the six tribes of Connecticut, Rhode Island and Martha's Vineyard, most of the Montauketts decided to join them in a move to land that the Oneida tribe had given them in what is now Deansville, New York, near Utica. They called their settlement Brothertown—a union of Montau-

—Continued on Page 8

1979.6.5. (1)