

NATIVE AMERICANS IN MASSACHUSETTS: NEW HOMECOMINGS AND ONGOING DISPLACEMENTS

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What is now the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, was, is and always will be Indian Country. The names used for the inhabitants and settlements of this land have changed over the last 10,000 years, but thousands of Indigenous Peoples from the Massachusett, Nipmuc and Wampanoag tribes historically resided in the areas on which this section focuses: the town of Aquinnah on Martha's Vineyard (what Natives call Noepe) and the Greater Boston region (**Figure 4.1**).

For these people, catastrophic population loss followed sustained contact with Europeans due to disease, enslavement and warfare, but nevertheless Native Peoples are still very much present in Massachusetts. The trends of loss and survival would continue, although punctuated by periods of stabilization, throughout much of the 17th century. The 18th century brought new challenges as the ongoing entanglement of Natives in European, and later American, military conflicts and physically dangerous employment (like

FIGURE 4.1

Several distinct Native Peoples inhabited what is now Massachusetts and points south.

Tribal territories of Southern New England. Around 1600.



Author: Nikater, adapted to English by Hydrargyrum.

Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tribal_Territories_Southern_New_England.png#/media/File:Tribal_Territories_Southern_New_England.png

whaling) led to chronically disproportionate loss of life, particularly of Native men (Figure 4.2). The 19th century saw efforts by the Commonwealth to politically dismantle Native communities (whether categorized as Plantations or Districts), leading to yet another outmigration of Native residents of places like Aquinnah.

As in other sections of this report, the examination of the region's Native American demography will take a deeper look at two specific sites. Because of the small numbers of the local Native population, however, we use a slightly different approach to selecting geographies for the two case studies in this section. For the community outside of Boston, we look at Aquinnah. While it's technically outside of Greater Boston, it represents the Massachusetts town with the highest concentration of Native residents and offers an important glimpse into the impact of tribal federal recognition. As for Boston, rather than focus on one neighborhood, we discuss the city as a whole since it functions as an urban Indian center within the larger region that is home to a diverse Native community.

For those unfamiliar with ongoing trends in Indian Country demographics, a look at the most commonly used Census data for the Massachusetts Native population may be deceiving. As in other states across the country, the longstanding practice of counting only those who select American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) as their sole identification, and disregarding those who select AI/AN along with one or more other Census race categories, has led to a systemic undercounting of their actual numbers in the population.

While this discrepancy applies to those of any race who check more than one box, its relevance for local Native Peoples goes back centuries, to a time when the numbers of Native men were constantly diminished due to death in colonial wars, dangerous jobs tied to whaling and diseases imported from the Old World. This made families with Native mothers and non-Native, often African American, fathers a common occurrence. Two famous examples from Massachusetts history are Crispus Attucks, widely considered to be the first American killed in the American Revolution, and sea captain and abolitionist leader Paul Cuffee, for whom a Boston school is named. Both of these men had Native American mothers and fathers of African descent.

FIGURE 4.2
Catastrophic population loss followed sustained contact with Europeans.

Population totals and mortality for selected Southern New England tribes.
 Before and after contact with European settlers.

Tribe	Population before or around contact	Population after contact	Mortality Rate
Massachuset/Wampanaog/Narraganset*	44,000	6,400	86%
Pocumtuck/Nipmuck*	18,400	920	95%
Mahican*	6,400	500	92%
Martha's Vineyard**	3,000 (in 1642)	800 (in 1720)	74%
		313 (in 1764)	90%

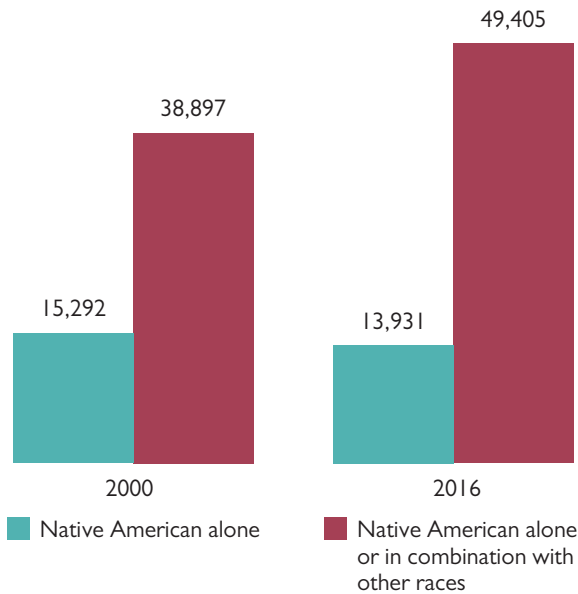
* Snow and Lanphear (1988: 24)

** Campisi (1991: 75)

FIGURE 4.3

Counting only people who select “Native American” alone dramatically understates the true number of people with Native American ancestry.

Number of people who select only Native American and number who select N.A. in combination with another Census race category. Massachusetts.



Source: U. S. Census 2000, 2012–2016 American Community Survey.

That reality echoes today in Massachusetts, where a growing number of people choose to self-identify as Native American combined with another racial or ethnic category, following national trends (Nagel, 1997: 951–953). The implications are significant. Census data for Native Americans in the state show a population of 13,931 in 2016 (Figure 4.3). But when we add those who identify with more than one racial category, this total increases more than threefold to 49,405. This phenomenon has implications for counting Native populations in both Aquinnah and Boston. In 2016, 39.9 percent of Aquinnah residents checked only one box. Boston also saw an increase in the self-identified American Indian population when the count included those who checked more than one

category. In terms of the percentage of the population of the city of Boston, the Native American population has essentially remained the same at 0.9 percent of the city’s population since 2000. This is a marked difference from Aquinnah, where Native residents make up a sizable percentage of the population. Still, the Boston number is not insignificant, as it’s almost twice as large as the share of Native Americans in the state as a whole, which is about 0.5 percent (2010 census).

Despite Boston’s passing a law in 1675 excluding Indians, the city was by no means devoid of Native presence over past centuries. Native Peoples from surrounding colonies and states made frequent trips to the city, sometimes resulting in extended stays. The city’s status as a destination for Indians from a variety of tribes continues to this day, resulting in a small but diverse Native population. In fact, there are just as many, or possibly more, Native Peoples in Boston who hail from outside the region as there are Natives descended from local tribes (Granberry, 2006: 66). The largest of these outside groups consists of Mi’kmaq and other First Peoples from the Maritimes of Canada, whose longstanding presence leads some to consider Boston their home almost as much as the Maritimes (Guillemin, 1975: 18, 57, 581; Granberry). Indeed, Boston’s urban Indian population is continually evolving, as new indigenous groups, such as the Maya from Guatemala’s highlands, settle in this and other urban areas of the Commonwealth (Capetillo-Ponce and Abreu, 2010: 63). (See the Latinos in Greater Boston section, page 49, for more on the Guatemalan community in Waltham.)

FIGURE 4.4
Native Americans in Massachusetts are of diverse tribal affiliations.

Selected tribal affiliation of Native Americans in Massachusetts, alone or in combination with any other race.

	2000	2010	2016
American Indian or Alaska Native totals	38,897	51,707	49,405
Cherokee	4,037	4,539	7,049
Wampanoag	2,121	*1,953	**2,727
South American Indian	-	1,747	2,601
Blackfeet	1,521	1,645	2,275
Micmac	1,468	*2,028	**2,265
Iroquois	1,464	1,441	1,976
Mexican American Indian	-	1,580	1,044
Nipmuc	-	*871	644
Central American Indian	-	967	604
Canadian and French American Indian	-	458	362
Spanish American Indian	-	459	112
Aquinnah Wampanoag	343	-	-

* ACS 2006-2010 5-year estimates ** ACS 2011-2015 5-year estimates
 Sources: 2000 and 2010 data are from the decennial census; 2016 data: ACS 2012-2016 5-year estimates.

Aquinnah: An Incomplete Journey Home

While the history of the Wampanoag on Martha's Vineyard goes back millennia, the earliest population estimate dates back to 1642, when calculations derived from early English accounts, Native oral traditions and archaeological assessments place the Native population at around 3,000 (*Campisi, 1991: 75*). At earlier points the Wampanoag population on Martha's Vineyard was almost certainly much higher, as a virgin soil epidemic that occurred between 1616 and 1619 likely killed many residents several decades prior (*Bragdon, 1996: 26*). By 1764, ongoing decline had diminished the population

by about 90 percent, down to 313 individuals (*Campisi, 1991: 75*).

What would become the Praying Town and later Indian District of Aquinnah was already the site of a longstanding sachemdom, the term for the most basic unit of governance in the region. Its identification as a Praying Town was established when local Wampanoag leaders allowed missionary efforts in their territory as a way to protect their land from the depredations of other English colonists. In return for the transition to a Praying Town, the Massachusetts General Court recognized a high degree of self-governance by the Wampanoag. Although continually faced with population and land loss, tribe members remained the vast majority of Aquinnah's residents in 1859, with 194 of 204 residents described as "Natives" (*Earle, 1861: 30*).

Along with the rest of the Native population of Massachusetts, the Wampanoag of Aquinnah faced a new set of challenges with the passage of the Indian Enfranchisement and Allotment Act in 1869. This legislation built upon the Earle Report, the last comprehensive survey of the Native population in the state, published in 1861. While viewed by the legislature as an act of emancipation because it extended citizenship to members of all the tribes residing in the state and voting rights to Native men, the Act had some severe negative consequences for Native peoples. Native women, who could vote in many of the Indian districts or towns, were disenfranchised by the legislation (*Plane and Button, 1993: 605*). After something of an equilibrium had been reached following the American Revolution, the Act set in motion another rapid round of Native land loss, usually due to taxation or liens. The impact on the Indian Town of Aquinnah included a drop in population as Native residents who lost land migrated to the mainland, including Boston, the urban areas of Fall River and New Bedford—where many Natives were already involved in the whaling industry—and other Native communities (*Shoemaker, 2014: 102; Earle, 1861: 31, xvii*). The Act also separated the town of Aquinnah and the Aquinnah

Wampanoag Tribe, which until then had functioned as a single entity. In spite of this new legal dichotomy, the Wampanoag population would continue to play a dominant role in town politics until becoming the numeric minority in the 1970s.

TRIBAL GOVERNMENT AND TOWN: TWO SPACES FOR WAMPANOAG INFLUENCE AND SOVEREIGNTY

The Town of Aquinnah's American Indian population decline, which started with the Enfranchisement and Allotment Act, would not begin to reverse itself until 1987, with the success of the Wampanoag's protracted efforts to become a federally recognized tribe. With federal recognition, the tribe was able to reassert a limited degree of sovereignty over its territory, reacquiring portions of its homelands and placing them in trust, which protected them from town and state taxation. Federal recognition unequivocally reestablished Aquinnah Wampanoag jurisdiction over trust lands in the town, and it reestablished a body that solely represented their interests and rights in dealing with federal, state and town governments. Unlike in any other Massachusetts town, Wampanoag tribal members in Aquinnah have frequently maintained a Native presence on the town board of selectmen. At present, one of the three selectmen is an Aquinnah Wampanoag tribal member and local business owner. The current town administrator is also an Aquinnah Wampanoag tribal member and former town selectman of 17 years. In the recent past a former tribal council chair also served on the town board of selectmen, making for robust representation and engagement of Aquinnah Wampanoag individuals at the town and tribal levels. This has, on occasion, led to some differing perspectives on tribal activities by tribal members on the tribal council versus the town board of selectmen.

TRIBAL HOUSING AND THE RETURN OF AQUINNAH WAMPANOAG FROM DIVERSE ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS

Equally important to the change in sovereignty and representation, federal recognition gave the Aquinnah Wampanoag access to federal Indian housing dollars.

This enabled the tribe to build 30 affordable homes between 1995 and 2000 and make them available to Native community members that otherwise could not afford to live on Martha's Vineyard (*personal communication, Durwood Vanderhoop, Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) Tribal Planner, 2019*). Along with affordable housing, the tribe constructed a multi-purpose community facility with space for the programs and offices of the newly-robust tribal government. The tribal community also developed a land use master plan (*Commonwealth v. Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head, No. 16-1137, 1st Cir. 2017*). The strengthened tribal government meant an increase in jobs in housing, health, education, natural resources and other tribal services and administrative functions. Since federally recognized tribes are allowed to prioritize Indians in hiring, this made more positions available to Native residents.

The availability of affordable housing and employment opportunities has led to a recent rebound in the size of Aquinnah's Native population. In 1990, the number of self-identified American Indians/Alaskan Natives was 135. It more than doubled to 335 by 2016. This includes a notable increase in the number of children ages 5 to 9, from eight to 41 individuals. These youth and their families are supported by educational programs, health services and a tribally administered Child Care and Development Block Grant, which provides direct financial assistance for tribal families in need of child care.

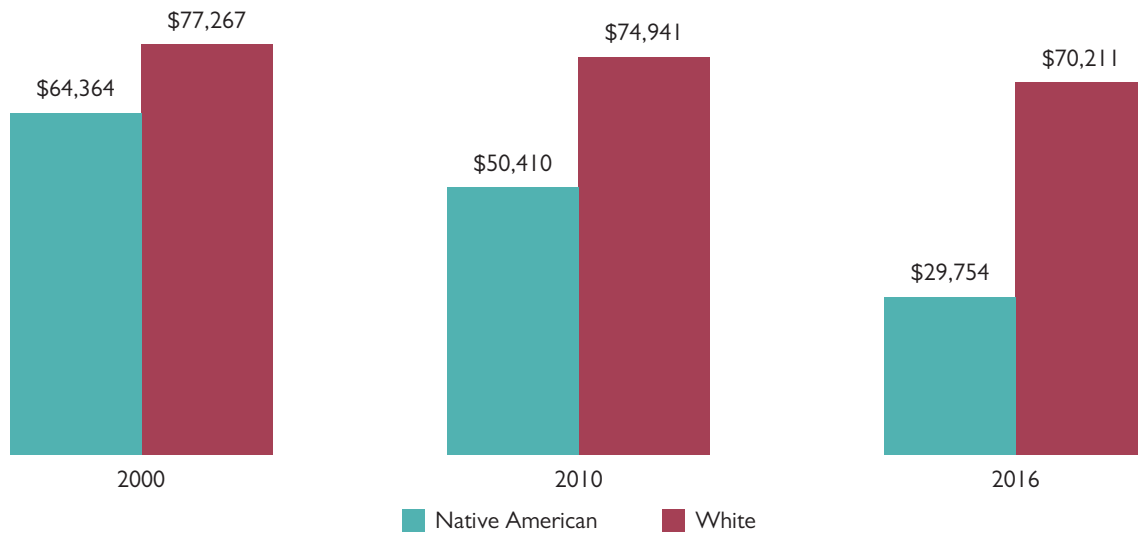
Median household income among Native Americans in Aquinnah dropped significantly from 2000 to 2014, as shown in the table below. Part of what may have happened is not so much that specific households saw a reduction in their incomes but more that a meaningful number of low-income Wampanoag families from the mainland have been able to come home due to this new provision of affordable housing.

Aquinnah's Native community still faces significant challenges in repatriating tribal members to their homelands. More than a thousand Aquinnah

FIGURE 4.5

Affordable housing built after tribal recognition may have allowed more low-income Native Americans to move back to Aquinnah.

Median household income. Aquinnah. 2017 \$.



Note: Other races/ethnicities not reported due to small sample sizes in Aquinnah.

Source: 2012–2016 American Community Survey.

Wampanoag live off the island, largely invisible to their non-Native neighbors in urban areas of Fall River, New Bedford and their environs. Housing costs in Aquinnah have increased by 303 percent from a little more than a decade ago, and due to the presence of wetlands and sensitive archaeological areas, tribal sources estimate that only 98 acres of the Wampanoag land base is developable. As a result, this homecoming remains an incomplete one—but the efforts continue.

Boston: A Diverse and Evolving Native Population

Unlike Aquinnah, Boston did not persist as a homeland over which Native Peoples exercised significant control after the 17th century. As a result of the outbreak of King Philip’s War in 1675, the mainland (approximately the area from present-day Providence to Cambridge) saw a precipitous drop in the Native population, with combined populations of Narragansett, Massachusetts

and Wampanoag tribal members decreasing by an estimated 86 percent, from 44,000 in 1600 to 6,400 in 1700 (*Snow and Lanphear, 1988:24*). Many who survived King Philip’s War were sold into slavery, or their descendants later died fighting as allies of the British in the Seven Years War or with the Sons of Liberty in the American Revolution. Others would enter into indentured servitude to disappear into the growing “free colored” population of the United States, thereby erasing their indigenous identities from historic records. Massachusetts tribal communities near the coast were quickly pushed into interior territories, with their reservation/Praying Town moving to Ponkapoag, now part of Canton. As if this were not enough, a 1675 law, the Indian Imprisonment and Exclusion Act, banned indigenous residents from living within Boston’s city limits. Though unenforced in modern times, it was not formally stricken from the books until 2004.

AMERICAN INDIAN REPRESENTATION IN BOSTON: STILL EXCLUDED?

A lack of representation at the civic and political level for Boston's Native American residents is the predictable legacy of this history. While Aquinnah evolved from the sachemdom system into a Praying Town and then a modern-day municipality, Boston's transition away from Native domain was more abrupt, with colonial government taking over directly after pushing the sachemdoms into the Blue Hills and Mystic River regions. With Indians officially banned from Boston, categorized as resident aliens or merging into free communities of color, there was no place for Native American representation in city government. It was not until 1969 that Boston's Native community found a voice in the Boston Indian Council, an advocacy organization that emerged from the Civil Rights and Red Power movements. The Council laid the groundwork for greater Native American visibility in the city. But to date, no Boston City Councilors have identified as American Indian/Alaska Native in their biographies, and Native political representation still has a long way to go.

The diversity of Boston's Native population is reflected in the makeup of the boards and staffs of local organizations that work most closely with Native residents of the city. These include the North American Indian Center of Boston (NAICOB), Native American Lifelines and the Massachusetts Center for Native American Awareness.

Of these groups, NAICOB is the longest-standing, for more than 45 years providing cultural, social, educational and professional services to the region's Native population, with an emphasis on Greater Boston. To accomplish its stated mission of "[empowering] the Native American community with the goal of improving the quality of life of Indigenous Peoples," NAICOB has accessed a variety of state, foundation and other funds to develop programs that support Native residents. The organization includes members of at least 25 federally recognized tribes indigenous to the U.S. and Canada.

As a nonprofit organization, NAICOB's influence is more limited than that of an officially constituted tribe with clear powers of self-governance, but it has nevertheless played an important role in responding to demographic trends and the changing needs of Greater Boston's Indigenous communities. As Boston's Native population becomes younger (a shift from a median 31.6 to 27 years of age), the organization focuses on developing more programs to engage this younger demographic, who frequently are in attendance at one of the many universities and colleges in the city. As the median income of Native residents in the city drops from \$32,820 to \$28,225—an increase in the poverty rate from 38.1 to 41.7 percent, as compared with 21.7 to 33.2 percent for all the people in Metro Boston—NAICOB assists its constituents with such programs as job fairs and computer skills training.

SAMPLE NAICOB PROGRAMS

- Timothy Smith Network Computer Technology Lab
- Advocacy services
- Workforce development services
- Math | Culture | Environment Academy
- Support for Native grandparents raising grandchildren
- Healthy diet and wellness training
- Support for Native survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault

AND COLLABORATIONS...

- Philips Brooks House's Native American Youth Enrichment Program
- New England Native American Studies at UMass Boston
- Other Universities

URBAN INDIAN HOUSING: AN ONGOING NEED

It's no stretch to connect the growing economic risk of American Indians/Alaskan Natives with the increase in the cost of housing by 391 percent in Boston and 205 percent in the Greater Boston area since 1996. As a nonprofit Native organization, NAICOB has no statutory authority or access to funding to create an American Indian-specific affordable housing community. As a result, an already diffuse community is becoming even more dispersed. Anecdotally, we see many of those who are middle class and cannot afford to buy a home move out of the city, which may in part explain declining median incomes as the renters who remain are typically lower-income, or students.

Another data set that could point to this growing dispersal of Native population across the city, and further removed from work sites, is the data on how American Indian/Alaskan Natives get to work. From 2010 to 2016, the number who drove to work increased from 13.3 to 31 percent. The number who carpooled dropped precipitously from 60 to 4.5 percent, while those who took public transit increased from 26.7 to 46.5 percent. The one clear conclusion from this data is that fewer Native people in the city live in close enough proximity to one another, or with others with whom they work, to carpool. This is reflected in larger numbers driving alone to work and would further exacerbate increased poverty rates. These dramatic changes in transportation habits invite further research, but could in part reflect the nature of the gig economy, in which people have to work for several places to make ends meet, and so aren't just going to a single work site.

WHAT MIGHT BE NEXT?

The last decade (2010 to 2019) has seen the continuation and acceleration of trends established in the previous decade (2000 to 2009) among the areas examined for Native Americans, for good or ill. Federal recognition of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) has served to create the conditions for a return home of some of their tribal members

from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. This is reflected in the larger percentage of American Indians in the town of Aquinnah. Additionally, representation of Wampanoag needs and interests are guaranteed by political representation on their tribal council, and their significant population in the town of Aquinnah increases the likelihood of their engagement in town affairs. However, the geographic challenges of their island homelands set a limiting factor over how many of their citizens can repatriate to Aquinnah. For Native Peoples in Boston, the continuing trend has been for greater tribal diversity, but also greater economic marginalization. If these trends persist, Greater Boston's Native communities will remain struggling on the boundaries of its economic success, continually seeking to navigate structures that rarely account for their presence. A tactic for mutual benefit might be more direct partnerships between federally recognized tribes like the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) and Native organizations in Boston and other cities where many Native citizens will most likely continue to reside and work in the decades to come. A shared push for the creation of an urban Indian housing authority, as exists in Minneapolis, could support both Aquinnah Wampanoag tribal members and the diverse eligible Native population resident in the city. This kind of synergy could be what allows for a more vital Indian community in Boston, versus one surviving in the shadows.