“Rhode Island Knows Now - THE NARRAGANSETT STILL EXISTS!”

By [Lara Savenije](http://rhodetour.org/items/browse?search=&advanced%5B0%5D%5Belement_id%5D=39&advanced%5B0%5D%5Btype%5D=is+exactly&advanced%5B0%5D%5Bterms%5D=Lara%20Savenije)

Native peoples had already lived on the land near Mashapaug Pond for many centuries when Roger Williams arrived in Providence in 1636. The pond’s very name comes from two Algonquin words: ‘massa’ and ‘pug’, meaning ‘large standing water’. In Pre-Contact time the pond provided local Narragansett, with a wealth of resources. Families built weetooash*,*or temporary dome-shaped homes, on the shores of the pond for summertime usage as they fished in the pond and gathered plants and herbs from its sandy banks. Nearby, gardens of squash, corn, melons, and sunflowers flourished. Along with daily lifeways such as hunting, fishing, gathering the Narragansett enjoyed the pond for community celebrations that included storytelling, dancing and drumming.

Although native families were displaced from around the pond as Providence’s Euroamerican community expanded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some of them managed to retain their connection to the land. Tall Oak Weeden, who shares both Pequot and Wampanoag ancestry, recalls visiting family members who lived near the pond. In the early twentieth century, his great-grandfather had moved from Connecticut to Providence, [settling in the ethnically diverse community of West Elmwood.](http://www.rhodetour.org/items/show/25#.U2UH98dX7Oc) Beautiful cherry trees and small gardens once filled the neighborhood, and in their free time, [his family members enjoyed fishing and ice skating at the pond.](http://www.rhodetour.org/items/show/22#.U2UIFcdX7Oc)The [Pond Street Baptist Church](http://www.rhodetour.org/items/show/24#.U2UINsdX7Oc) served as an important space for the Native American community to come together. To Tall Oak Weeden, “It was like the Indian town reconstituted itself in a sense, from the original Indian town that was there that the settlers felt needed to be moved.”

By the 1960s, new development, [such as the Huntington Expressway Industrial Park,](http://www.rhodetour.org/items/show/20#.U2UITMdX7Oc)again forced Native American families away from the pond. The Pond Street Baptist Church relocated, and the neighborhood of West Elmwood, where African American, Native American, and Euroamerican families had lived side by side, was bulldozed. Contamination of the local environment, through [Gorham’s pollution](http://www.rhodetour.org/items/show/19#.U2UIcsdX7Oc) and [storm water runoff,](http://www.rhodetour.org/items/show/12#.U2UIisdX7Oc) also had a direct impact on Native American families’ ability to interact with the pond.

Mashapaug Pond continues to be an important site of memory for the Indigenous community including the Narragansett, Wampanoag and other local tribes of the southern New England region. The Rhode Island Indian Council and the Tomaquag Indian Memorial Museum serve as important spaces for community life and cultural preservation keeping these memories alive through programs, exhibits, books and other cultural education opportunities. As such, memories of the community’s connections to Mashapaug Pond are preserved. The name of the pond, and nearby street names such as Niantic, Algonquin, and Narragansett, serve as testimony to the deep connections that Native Americans have to the region.

In September of 1936, the editorial in *Narragansett Dawn*, a monthly publication by and for the Native American community of Rhode Island, ended with the statement: “Rhode Island Knows Now - THE NARRAGANSETT STILL EXISTS!” Although weetooash no longer dot the shores of pond and the lush gardens are gone from the vacant lots in West Elmwood, the Narragansett presence still exists near Mashapaug Pond as well.

**Discussion Questions**Why do you think people chose to live around Mashapaug Pond? Why do you think people today choose to live there?

Imagine the area as an early indigenous settlement before Providence was founded in 1636. What images, sounds and smells come to mind?

How did the establishment of the industrial park affect the indigenous community in ways different from others living around the pond? Why do you think this is?

What are contemporary efforts by Native people living in Providence to preserve their culture?