

MOONANUM JAMES (Cambridge City Council, 5/26/16)

My name is Moonanum James. I am a member of the Wampanoag Tribe of Aquinnah and co-leader of United American Indians of New England, and have lived here in Cambridge for many years.

I recently took a look at the City of Cambridge's website, where there is a brief history of the City of Cambridge written by the Cambridge Historical Society. It begins this way: "In 1630, a fleet of 11 ships carrying 700 passengers, set sail from England, bound for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The newcomers settled several villages around Massachusetts Bay, but could not agree on a capital. Seeking a protected site, John Winthrop and his assistants chose a small hill on the north bank of the Charles River, at the entrance to a small creek, 5 miles upstream from Boston. Later, a "pallysadoe," a series of stockade fences and a trench, was built around the town. In Newtowne, as Cambridge was known until 1638, each family owned a house lot in the village, planting fields outside, and a share in the common land."

I kept reading, and was informed a bit about the history of African-Americans in Cambridge, which I was glad to see, and about various immigrant groups who came here, and about some other things. But nowhere are the Indigenous people whose land was taken mentioned.

All around us, we see markers and signs that Cambridge was established in 1630, as though no one was already living here.

The Massachusett people had villages here. That is where the name of this state comes from. The Massachusett and thousands of others from this region – Nipmuc, Wampanoag, many others – traveled on footpaths here for thousands of years and on the Quinobequin [Quinn-AH-buh-quinn] River, or what the English renamed the Charles River. Our people had names for places, for the rivers, for the coves and villages.

When the English came, they dispossessed the Massachusett and everyone else of nearly all their lands. Lands where the Massachusett had farmed and lived were reserved for the exclusive use of the English settlers. Often,

historians will say that it was disease that wiped out so many thousands of our people – entire villages – as though the problem was that we had weak immune systems. But our decimation cannot be called an accident. Diseases such as smallpox were intentionally spread by the settlers and endorsed by luminaries such as Lord Jeffrey Amherst. When our people were dispossessed of their lands, starving, watching families and communities die and get wiped out by warfare waged by invaders. what happened to them? They did not merely fade into the mists of time. They went from place to place, seeking safety and shelter and a morsel of freedom with others, and suffered deeply from the separation from their land. In the case of many of the praying Indians who had accepted Christianity, they would be forced to stay in villages such as Natick where the missionaries could control our lives. We were pressured into giving up our cultures and our languages, because they were supposedly heathen. In some cases, a handful of our people were compelled to sign pieces of paper ceding land to the English – but can anyone say that was done by free will, when we were starving, had witnessed slaughters, been thrown off our land and reduced in numbers? Soon, the English began to write our presence out of history, as though we had never been here at all and this was an empty land waiting for their arrival.

During King Philip's War, hundreds of "Praying Indians" were interned by the English on Deer Island in Boston Harbor, where starvation and lack of shelter swept away many. Many of us including my own family had ancestors who were sold into slavery by the English. We know about some massacres by the English settlers, but how many massacres were not recorded? We believe they were common, daily occurrences, and condoned because we were not considered fully human and were in the way of settlement. George Washington himself practiced a scorched earth policy with the Iroquois, who called him Destroyer of Towns.

I have come tonight to say that Indigenous peoples are still here: in Cambridge, in Boston, in towns and cities across this state. Some of us are from this region, some from other places such as Canada and North Dakota and New Mexico. Some Indigenous people are called Latino or Hispanic because they

come from El Salvador or Mexico or Peru, but they are still Indigenous. Indigenous students from throughout the Americas come to our many universities here in Cambridge, as well – some of them are even graduating this week!

Many non-Native people seem to believe that we all live on reservations, but in fact, 70 – 80% of us do not, and most of us are urban. Right here in Cambridge, we get asked if we live in tipis – even though tipis are not even from this region. Non-Native people may think that we walk around with buckskin and feathers on every day, and that we all have a particular shade of skin and texture of hair. What we look like can vary widely – especially because some of us also have African ancestry or European or other ancestry – but we are still Native, still belong to our own Indigenous nations. We do not have to satisfy someone's requirements of pure blood like a dog with papers in order to provide our validity as Indigenous humans.

Some non-Native people think we get everything handed to us, or that our young people go to college for free. None of that is true.

When non-Native people do not like what we have to say, they might tell us: “Go back to where you came from!” We are from here. We are not going anywhere. Our roots do not extend across the ocean to an old country. When our people die, when our lands and waterways and air are stolen and devastated, when our languages die, we cannot recover them from elsewhere.

Did you know that 87% of US history textbooks have no mention of Native people past 1890, as though we had simply ceased to exist? And that history books have often said that there were no Native people left in this entire region.

Some people are even surprised that we are still alive at all – I would be willing to bet that nearly every Native person this room has been told at some point that we are extinct.

Some Americans talk of what their great great grandparents gave up to come to this country. We talk of what ours lost because they did.

Dear Cambridge: We want you to know where you are living, who lives here next to you, about the history of this land where our ancestors are buried and we continue to live. It is long past time to listen to our voices.

Finally, even if not one of us remained here, abolishing Columbus Day and honoring Indigenous Peoples Day would still be the right thing to do.

Thank you.

(written with Mahtowin Munro)