

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Prologue

“My land”

Natick and the narrative of Indian extinction

The button-wood trees, in front of the south tavern, were set out in 1783 . . . Their being planted on the Indian burying ground gave offence to some of the few remaining individuals of the tribe; and one poor girl, with a mixture of grief and anger, endeavoured to uproot them; but they resisted her efforts, as they have many a violent storm, are still in a thriving condition, and measure 17 feet in circumference, at the height of two feet from the ground.¹

A. *The narrative construction*

This passage by William Biglow, from the section on “Remarkable Trees” in the first published history of Natick, Massachusetts (1830), describes a scene rich with symbolism. In planting buttonwood trees in front of a tavern and on the Indian burying ground, the relatively recently arrived English residents of the once all-Indian community engaged in a colonial act. In “grief and anger,” an offended Indian girl defiantly resisted this deed of desecration and erasure, presumably hoping to defend the graves and memory of her people. By the 1780s, the Indian burying ground constituted one of the last places within the town that Indians could claim as their own.²

These were not the only Natick trees Biglow found remarkable. The others he wrote about served to mark the Indian-mission origin of the town. He noted two oaks that grew upon the place English Calvinist missionary John Eliot preached to the Indians (between 1650 and 1690). He also noted the elms Indians had planted in front of the houses of their two eighteenth-century English ministers, Oliver Peabody (from 1722 until 1752) and Stephen Badger (from 1753 until 1799) as “trees of friendship.”³ In contrast to the buttonwood trees,

¹ William Biglow, *History of the Town of Natick, Massachusetts From the Days of the Apostolic Eliot, 1650, to the Present Time, 1830* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, and Lyon, 1830), 11–2.

² For an argument that focuses on the ways in which New England Indian identity was maintained by a shifting ideological connection to a mythic, then historic, landscape using the Native concept “manit” (power), see Constance A. Crosby, “From Myth to History, or Why King Philip’s Ghost Walks Abroad,” in *The Recovery of Meaning: Historical Archaeology in the Eastern United States*, ed. Mark P. Leone and Parker B. Potter (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 183–209; and for a study of the connection between memory and place, see Kent C. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993).

³ Biglow, *History of Natick*, 10–1.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

these plantings symbolized cooperation between two peoples and reflected cultural changes Indians had made in order to survive.

Like the buttonwood trees and unlike the displaced Indians, English residents were firmly rooted in Natick by the end of the eighteenth century. The condition of the other trees Biglow surveyed paralleled the historical legacy of the Indian community in telling ways. The oaks that had grown at the inception of the Indian mission community had decayed for forty years. The elms planted for Peabody had died in the early nineteenth century. Badger's vigorous elms stood "in front of the house now occupied by Mr. Oliver Bacon," who was neither a minister nor a friend, but a Euro-American whose relatives had bought land from Indian and English sellers in the last half of the eighteenth century. Land acquisition was a Bacon family tradition. Eight Bacons bought land from Indians in Natick. At least six more got Natick land from relatives who had bought land from other English sellers in the speculative frenzy of late eighteenth-century Natick.⁴

The planting of the buttonwood trees by English people who dispossessed Indians of their land mocked the dramatic transformation of Natick as an Indian place. Founded as a missionary experiment in 1650, Natick had endured as a largely autonomous Indian community well into the eighteenth century. But beginning in the 1740s, half a century before the Eliot oaks began to decay, so too did Indian ownership of Natick land start to erode.

Biglow's history resembled many other nineteenth-century accounts of New England towns in its minute description of the landscape, its recounting of the "glorious acts" of remarkable residents, the implanting of English institutions, and its laments about "the fate of the tribe of Aborigines."⁵ The "advertise-

⁴ Middlesex County Court, Grantee and Grantor Records (hereafter cited as MCG), Cambridge, MA, 65:503, to Oliver Bacon from Oliver Peabody, 1758/1765, 69 1/2 acres. Indian purchases: MCG 92:217, John Ephraim to Asa Bacon and Oliver Bacon Jr., 1784/1786, 17 acres; MCG 53:450, John Peegun to Daniel Bacon, 1755/1756, 4 acres; MCG 65:505, Daniel Thomas to Ephraim Bacon, 1759/1765, 7 acres; MCG 56:82, Isaac and Mary Ephraim to John Bacon, 1754/1757, 9 3/4 acres; MCG 65:502, Joseph Comecho to Oliver Bacon, 1752/1765, 9 acres; MCG 41:226, John Wamsquan to Stephen Bacon, 1740/1740, 20 acres; MCG 40:238, Joseph Ephraim to Timothy Bacon, 1739/1739, 6 acres; MCG 66:630, Jacob Chalcom to William Bacon, 1757/1767, 7 acres. From relatives or other English sellers, see: MCG 87:280, John Bacon to David Bacon, 1784/1784, 10 acres; MCG 56:638, Stephen Bacon Jr. to Elijah Bacon, 1760/1760, 12 acres; MCG 56:135, Stephen Bacon to Henry Bacon, 1740/1758, 100 acres; MCG 105:338, William Bacon to Joseph Bacon, 1791/1791, 30 acres; MCG 85:75, Ephraim Bacon to Josiah Bacon, 1783/1783, 10 acres; MCG 49:267, Matthew Hastings to Michael Bacon, 1749/1750, 20 acres and buildings; MCG 96:225, Oliver Bacon to Oliver Bacon Jr. 1782/1787, 23 and 10 acres. The first date refers to the year the deed was consummated, and the second, to the year the deed was registered with the county court.

⁵ Biglow, *History of Natick*, 84. This may have been the same Oliver Bacon who wrote his own history of Natick in which he declared Natick Indians extinct, "except this one poor Indian girl, the orphan daughter of a departed race." Oliver N. Bacon, *A History of Natick From Its First Settlement in 1651 to The Present Time; with Notices of the First White Families* (Boston: Damrell G. Moore, Printers, 1856), 17.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

"My land"

3

ment" for the book called attention to the present "excitement . . . respecting the rights of the Indians and the treatment, which they ought to receive," an allusion to the crisis over Andrew Jackson's Indian policy that aimed at (and partially accomplished) the forced removal of eastern Indian nations to "Indian territory" west of the Mississippi River. Removal proponents used stories of tragic decline to justify dispossessing eastern Indians. They lamented that whenever Indians and Europeans came together, Indians absorbed the vices rather than the virtues of Europeans. Their vision of Indian decline provided Euro-Americans with ideological justification for forcibly removing Indians from Native homelands to protect them from frontiersmen they refused to restrain who lawlessly encroached on Native lands and jeopardized Indian survival. Pushed well beyond the "frontier," Indians could take their time adopting the trappings of "civilization" or continue to reject them if they wished.⁶ By referring to the removal debate, Biglow claimed a connection between Natick's history and the "Cherokee crisis" and promised to reveal "the circumstances which accompanied the gradual decrease and final extinction of the first tribe, that was brought into a state of civilization and christianity, by a protestant missionary." Still, in telling the story about the Indian girl and her companions, he contradicted his claim about extinction and undermined the simplistic narrative of decline.

In fact, Natick's remarkable history as an Indian place reveals a complicated story of conquest and Indian resistance that serves as a counterpoint to stories of extinction that fueled the emerging myth of the "vanishing Indian" in which Biglow's narrative participated. Nineteenth-century local histories in New England and elsewhere claimed formerly Indian places as Euro-American by making heroic claims about conquest and "settlement." In the process, they erased Indians from the landscape by foreclosing the possibility of Indian futures. Recurrent stories within local histories about "the last full-blooded Indian" gestured toward Indian disappearance by making precise claims about the end of Indian lineages.⁷ By writing about Indians in this voice, local historians betrayed their assumptions about racial purity, their wishful thinking about

⁶ See, for example, Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1982); Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indian* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975); Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail: Andrew Jackson and the Indians* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (New York: Norton, 1973); and Joshua David Bellin, "Apostle of Removal: John Eliot in the Nineteenth Century," *New England Quarterly* (hereafter cited as *NEQ*) 69 (1996): 3–32.

⁷ William Simmons, *Spirit of the New England Tribes: Indian History and Folklore, 1620–1984* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986), 3–4. See also Russell G. Handsman, "Illuminating History's Silences in the 'Pioneer Valley'" *Artifacts* 19 (1991): 14–25.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Indian erasure, and their inability to grasp the complicated mosaic of Indian survival in New England.

B. An alternative narrative: expropriation and survival

These self-serving narratives of Indian extinction are false. Contrary evidence can be found in other remarkable histories: of the Mashpee and Gay Head Wampanoag and the Nipmuck in Massachusetts, the Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan in Connecticut, the Narragansett in Rhode Island, the Abenaki in Vermont and western Maine, and the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot in Maine, among others, who are all still there. This fact successively confronted the states of Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Vermont as legal problems beginning in the 1970s when Indian peoples there pressed their claims for recognition and restitution and often succeeded.⁸ In other words, Indian “disappearance” occurred in Euro-American imaginations, or rather in their failure to imagine how Indians struggled and survived, and how cultural change *is* persistence.⁹ The history of Natick Indians is somewhat different in that no identifiably separate group “Natick Indians” survives into the present. But, as this book will argue, that does not mean Natick Indians became extinct.

Rich scholarship that has appeared in recent years recognizes that survival into the present, not extinction in the remote and distant past, is the appropriate narrative for New England Indian history. The path-breaking work of William S. Simmons reminds us of an elaborate southeastern New England Indian spirituality still in existence, which includes stories about the landscape as well as larger patterns of Indian religious belief that changed over time and in conjunction with Christian religious belief.¹⁰ Other scholars, Native and non-Native (updating the insights of Frank Speck’s field work of the 1940s)

⁸ See, for example, Jack Campisi, *The Mashpee Indians: Tribe on Trial* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991); James Clifford, “Identity in Mashpee,” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 277–346; Paul Brodeur, *Restitution: The Land Claims of the Mashpee, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot Indians of New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985); and Jack Campisi, “The Trade and Intercourse Acts: Land Claims on the Eastern Seaboard,” in *Irredeemable America: The Indians’ Estate and Land Claims*, ed. Imre Sutton (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985).

⁹ On the invisibility of Indians in current historical scholarship, see James H. Merrell, “Some Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter cited as *WMQ*), 3d ser., 46 (1989): 94–119.

¹⁰ See especially Simmons, *Spirit of the New England Tribes*; Simmons, *Cautantowwit’s House: An Indian Burial Ground on the Island of Conanicut in Narragansett Bay* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970); Simmons, “Southern New England Shamanism: An Ethnographic Reconstruction,” in *Papers of the Seventh Algonquian Conference*, ed. William Cowan (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1976), 217–56; and Simmons, “The Great Awakening and Indian Conversion in Southern New England,” in *Papers of the Tenth Algonquian Conference*, ed. William Cowan (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1979), 25–36.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

"My land"

5

have connected the histories of the Wampanoag, Narragansett, Pequot, Nipmuck, Abenaki, and others from the past into the present.¹¹ Still more have built a solid bedrock of scholarly work on the colonial histories of New England Indians.¹² This growing scholarship resists the extinction myth that has so powerfully informed the paradigm of New England Indian history and educates a broader audience about something that Native people of New England knew all along: that they are still Indian and that they are still there.

How is it, then, that nineteenth-century Euro-Americans were so sure that New England Indians were about to vanish? The colonial history of New England Indians provided plenty of material for constructing such a narrative. Epidemics preceded permanent English invasion, and they continued to wreak havoc among Indian populations. The unidentified scourge of 1616-19 raged twenty to thirty miles inland from Massachusetts Bay, reducing the Native population by fifty percent to ninety percent. Smallpox, which appeared by 1633, ripped through Native populations, including those that had been spared from the mysterious 1616-19 outbreak.¹³

¹¹ See, for example, Frank G. Speck, "Reflections Upon the Past and Present of the Massachusetts Indians," *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society* 4 (1943): 33-8; Frank G. Speck, "A Note on the Hassanamisco Band of Nipmuc," *Ibid.*, 4 (1943): 49-56; Laurie Weinstein, "'We're Still Living on Our Traditional Homeland': The Wampagnoag Legacy in New England," in *Strategies for Survival: American Indians in the Eastern United States*, ed. Frank W. Porter III (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 85-112; Laurie Weinstein, ed., *Enduring Traditions: The Native Peoples of New England* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1994); Laurence M. Hauptman and James D. Wherry, eds., *The Pequots in Southern New England: The Fall and Rise of an American Indian Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990); Ethel Boissevain, "The Detribalization of the Narragansett Indians: A Case Study," *Ethnohistory* 3 (1956): 225-45; Ethel Boissevain, "Narragansett Survival: A Study of Group Persistence through Adopted Traits," *Ethnohistory* 6 (1959): 347-62; and Peter Benes, ed., *Algonkians of New England: Past and Present*, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings (Boston: Boston University, 1993).

¹² See footnote 20 for treatments of Natick's history. Published treatments of colonial New England Indian history include Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York: Norton, 1976); Neal Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500-1643* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Axtell, *After Columbus: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Dean R. Snow, *The Archaeology of New England* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980); Colin G. Calloway, *The Western Abenakis of Vermont, 1600-1800: War, Migration, and the Survival of a People* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990); David L. Ghere, "The 'Disappearance' of the Abenaki in Western Maine: Political Organization and Ethnocentric Assumptions," *American Indian Quarterly* 17 (1993): 193-207; Paul R. Campbell and Glenn W. La Fantasie, "Scattered to the Winds of Heaven - Narragansett Indians 1676-1880," *Rhode Island History* 37 (1978): 67-83; and Robert S. Grumet, ed., *North-eastern Indian Lives, 1632-1816* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

¹³ See, for example, John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953); S. F. Cook, *The Indian Population of New England in the Seven-*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Devastation of Indian populations facilitated English invasion and paved the way for other forms of encroachment. English colonization fundamentally altered Indian economies; cattle trampled their corn fields, and the short-lived fur trade and the English presence itself undermined hunting and fishing by fundamentally altering ecosystems and threatening species. The war of conquest against the Pequot in 1637 jeopardized their survival and provided cautionary tales for other Indians who considered military resistance. The 1676 Indian resistance movement, known as King Philip's War, ended in Indian defeat, enslavement in the West Indies, and thoroughgoing retribution for those who participated. From then on, New England Indians persisted through peaceful coexistence within their drastically reduced homelands, living in small clusters that barely entered English fields of vision.¹⁴

For a century before the English plantation at Plymouth in 1620 announced that colonists intended to stay, Europeans and Indians engaged in relations of exchange that transformed both peoples. During the sixteenth century, European manufactured items such as metal kettles, knives, glass items, and cloth traveled through elaborate existing Native trade networks in exchange for furs. Indians incorporated new items of material culture selectively and in Indian ways. Native notions about reciprocity and gift-giving, central to Native ways of relating to the natural, supernatural, and human world, regulated intergroup relations, alliance building, social interactions, marriage, and ritual performance as well as the exchange of uniquely available resources. These ideas governed the emergence of trade and diplomacy between Indians and Europeans. By the early seventeenth century, systematic fur trade relations replaced more sporadic exchange. Indian economies shifted in emphasis toward hunting as they became enmeshed in trade relations with Europeans, which diminished Indian autonomy and upset the balance implicit in Indian notions of reciprocity. The new trade, in combination with the devastating epidemics, altered power relations among Indian groups and even communities as Indian survivors formed villages with relatives.¹⁵

teenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Alfred W. Crosby, "Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America," *WMQ*, 3d ser., 33 (1976): 289–99; and Timothy L. Bratton, "The Identity of the New England Indian Epidemic of 1616–19," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 62 (1988): 351–83.

¹⁴ See, for example, Jennings, *Invasion of America*; Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence*; Salisbury, "Social Relationships on a Moving Frontier: Natives and Settlers in Southern New England, 1638–1675," *Man in the Northeast* 33 (1987): 89–99; Peter A. Thomas, "Contrastive Subsistence Strategies and Land Use as Factors for Understanding Indian-White Relations in New England," *Ethnohistory* 23 (1976): 1–18; Cronon, *Changes in the Land*; Axtell, *European and the Indian*; and Axtell, *After Columbus*.

¹⁵ See Snow, *Archaeology of New England*, especially 44–99; Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence*, especially chapters 1–3; Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, Chapter 5; Peter A. Thomas, "In the Maelstrom of Change: The Indian Trade and Cultural Process in the Middle Connecticut River Valley, 1635–1665" (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, 1979); Elise M. Brenner, "Sociopolitical Implications of Mortuary Ritual Remains in Seventeenth-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

"My land"

7

As Indians struggled to survive, English colonists multiplied rapidly. Twenty-one thousand colonists arrived in Massachusetts Bay in the "great migration" of the 1630s, and for two centuries their numbers doubled every generation. A relatively homogeneous group mostly from southeastern England, they came principally in families. In New England they married young and lived long, producing many children. During the 1630s, disputes over religion, as well as desire for land and participation in the fur trade, propelled colonists outward to the Connecticut River Valley and what would become Rhode Island and Connecticut. By the 1670s, English towns dotted most of the eastern third of Massachusetts Bay, stretching throughout Narragansett Bay, and much of the Connecticut River Valley and Long Island Sound.¹⁶

As they became surrounded by English people who seized their lands, Indians in southeastern New England could no longer sustain their mobile economy, which integrated agriculture, fishing, hunting, gathering of wild plant foods and shellfish, and provided them with abundance for what looked to the English like little labor. English expansion thrust surviving Indians onto marginal lands where they wrested their living from an altered and less abundant environment and continued to survive as Indian people even though "an earlier Indian way of life had become impossible."¹⁷ Those Indians who still owned land modified their economic pursuits and adopted aspects of English land use, including livestock raising as a replacement for hunting and the use of plows and fences. Over the course of the colonial period, they also engaged in wage labor and the emerging whaling industry, sold baskets and brooms, and became indentured servants.¹⁸ Indians persisted mostly in small clusters throughout southeastern New England, as indeed they did elsewhere throughout the eastern seaboard.¹⁹

Century Native Southern New England," in *The Recovery of Meaning*, ed. Leone and Potter, 147–82; and Virginia DeJohn Anderson, "King Philip's Herds: Indians, Colonists, and the Problem of Livestock in Early New England," *WMQ*, 3d ser., 51 (1994): 601–24.

¹⁶ For overviews, see Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); David Hackett Fisher, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986); and Douglas McManis, *Colonial New England: A Historical Geography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

¹⁷ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 164.

¹⁸ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, especially chapters 7–8; Anderson, "King Philip's Herds"; Richard R. Johnson, "The Search for a Usable Indian: An Aspect of the Defense of Colonial New England," *Journal of American History* 64 (1977): 623–51; Daniel Vickers, "The First Whalemens of Nantucket," *WMQ*, 3d ser., 40 (1983): 560–83; John A. Sainsbury, "Indian Labor in Early Rhode Island," *NEQ* 48 (1975): 378–93; Joshua Micah Marshall, "'A Melancholy People': Anglo-Indian Relations in Early Warwick, Rhode Island, 1642–1675," *NEQ* 68 (1995): 402–28; and Ruth Wallis Herndon, personal communication.

¹⁹ See, for example, Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 159, 162–5; Porter, *Strategies for Survival*; Weinstein, *Enduring Traditions*; Benes, *Algonkians of New England*; Karen Blu, *The Lumbee*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Natick, the community whose history is the focus of this study, was one of these places of Indian persistence.²⁰ Natick's history, though tragic in its own way, nevertheless belies the simplistic myth of Indian decline through disease, warfare, and extinction that Biglow and other historians purveyed. Instead, its story is one of slow but steady displacement of Indian by English landowners primarily through the workings of the market economy. While English chicanery plays its part in this story, English displacement of Indians within the

Problem: The Making of an American Indian People (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Gerald M. Sider, *Lumbee Indian History: Race, Ethnicity, and Indian Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); C. A. Weslager, *The Nanticoke Indians: Past and Present* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983); and David Stephen Cohen, *The Ramapo Mountain People* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

²⁰ Other examinations of Natick's history include Neal Salisbury, "Conquest of the Savage: Puritans, Puritan Missionaries, and Indians, 1620-1680" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1972); Michael Crawford, "Indians, Yankees, and the Meetinghouse Dispute of Natick, Massachusetts, 1743-1800," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 132 (1978): 278-92; Dane Morrison, "'A Praying People': The Transition from Remnant to Convert Among the Indians of the Massachusetts Bay Colony" (Ph.D. diss., Tufts University, 1983); Elise Melanie Brenner, "Strategies for Autonomy: An Analysis of Ethnic Mobilization in Seventeenth-Century Southern New England" (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, 1984); Harold W. Van Lonkhuyzen, "A Reappraisal of the Praying Indians: Acculturation, Conversion, and Identity at Natick, Massachusetts, 1646-1730," *NEQ* 63 (1990): 396-428; Daniel Mandell, "'To Live More Like my Christian English Neighbors': Natick Indians in the Eighteenth Century," *WMQ*, 3d ser., 48 (1991): 552-79; and Mandell, "Standing by His Father: Thomas Waban of Natick, circa 1630-1722," in *Northeastern Indian Lives, 1632-1816*, ed. Robert S. Grumet (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 166-92. Other works that contain extensive discussions of Natick as part of broader studies include Alden Vaughan, *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620-1675* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1965); Susan L. MacCulloch, "A Tri-Partite Political System Among Christian Indians of Early Massachusetts," *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers* 34 (1966): 63-73; Kenneth Morrison, "'That Art of Coyn-ing Christians': John Eliot and the Praying Indians of Massachusetts," *Ethnohistory* 21 (1974): 77-92; Salisbury, "Red Puritans: The 'Praying Indians' of Massachusetts Bay and John Eliot," *WMQ*, 3d ser., 32 (1975): 27-54; Jennings, *Invasion of America*; William Burton, "Hellish Fiends and Brutish Men: Amerindian-Euroamerican Interaction in Southern New England" (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1976); Kathleen J. Bragdon, "Probate Records as a Source for Algonquian Ethnohistory," in *Papers of the Tenth Algonquian Conference*, ed. William Cowan (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1979); Elise M. Brenner, "To Pray or To Be Prey: That is the Question[:] Strategies for Cultural Autonomy of Massachusetts Praying Towns," *Ethnohistory* 27 (1980): 135-52; Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Kathleen J. Bragdon, "Crime and Punishment among the Indians of Massachusetts," *Ethnohistory* 28 (1981): 23-32; Bragdon, "'Another Tongue Brought In': An Ethnohistorical Study of Native Writings in Massachusetts" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1981); James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); James Holstun, *A Rational Millennium: Puritan Utopias of Seventeenth-Century England and America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); James Nacher, "Dialogue in the Wilderness: John Eliot and the Indians' Exploration of Puritanism as a Source of Meaning, Comfort, and Ethnic Survival," *NEQ* 62 (1989): 346-68; and Daniel Mandell, "Behind the Frontier: Indian Communities in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1992).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

"My land"

9

bounded place called Natick occurred principally through the excruciating workings of business as usual.

In seeking to tell the intricate history of Natick as an Indian place, I use narratives about how it was bounded as a missionary experiment, and pull together the traces Natick Indians left in vital records, probate dockets, commonwealth political proceedings, and especially hundreds of land deeds and other documents regarding Indian landownership as well as the frustratingly few records Indians produced themselves. The identifiably Indian surnames of Natick families, such as Waban and Awassamug, plus geographical and racial labels included in some records, made it possible to link together scattered intriguing etches Indians made in the documentary record of colonial Massachusetts. In constructing this narrative, I draw upon evidence from these disparate sources to compile life histories and genealogies, to flesh out social relations within the community and the commonwealth more generally, and to reconstruct the land market that gradually transformed Natick from an Indian to an English place.

In addition to this transformation, Natick's history illuminates a protracted struggle over the place of Indians in Massachusetts and New England more broadly. Like Indians throughout the eastern seaboard, Native people in New England struggled within a "New World" that transformed relationships between peoples, within groups and their cultures, and altered their relationship to the land.²¹ As elsewhere, Indians negotiated about whose customs would govern the country in day-to-day, face-to-face encounters that represented and evoked "creative adaptations" in a colonial context.²² In Natick, Indians resisted erasure. They defended their lands, rebuilt kin connections and community, and retained their "Indianness" within the extraordinary constraints posed by English colonialism. By looking closely at Natick, we can come to understand how Biglow and others could conclude by the early nineteenth century that Indians were about to disappear, and how they could be wrong. The problem was with Euro-American eyesight, that is, their assumptions about what constituted Indianness and the place of Indians in society. These assumptions were not monolithic, and they changed over the course of the colonial period.²³

At the center of this story of survival and transformation is land: struggles

²¹ James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York: Norton, 1989).

²² James H. Merrell, "'The Customes of Our Country': Indians and Colonists in Early America," in *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 117–56; T. H. Breen, "Creative Adaptations: Peoples and Cultures," in *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era*, ed. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 195–232; and Daniel K. Richter, "Whose Indian History?" *WMQ*, 3d. ser., 50 (1993): 379–93.

²³ See also Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially 292–301.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56172-3 - Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650-1790

Jean M. O'Brien

Excerpt

[More information](#)

over the possession and “proper” use of land, ways different peoples viewed the connection between land and identities, and the means by which land served to mark the place of Indian people in New England. The colonial encounter involved a fundamental and enduring collision between two very different conceptions of the connection between land and identity that can be read through the emergence and transformation of the social order of English colonialism. In this study, I look at the connection between Indian land and identity in colonial Natick as a way of understanding the paradox of Indian persistence and change under an imposed social order through forms of adaptation that by the early nineteenth century rendered them invisible to Euro-Americans. New England Indians and English colonizers had different conceptions about the connection between land and identity, and these different ways of thinking about land help us understand how and why Natick Indians remained within their homelands, why they eventually became landless, and how New Englanders could come to regard landless Indians as marginal to the English cultural world and thus disappearing.

From the Indian perspective, the connection to homeland as the place where kin and community are sustained remained at the center of their identity despite the transformation of many of the traits that are usually interrogated as the building-blocks of identity, such as language, religion, political organization, and economic systems. Even the land itself was transformed, and so was the place of land in social transactions. By looking beneath the stories of diplomacy, fur trade, and wars, and by including not just massive tribal dispossession but also the minute transactions of Natick individuals, we can detect a story different from the usual one of wholesale tribal displacement, acculturation, assimilation, or extinction. It is a story with echoes into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the allotment policy of the United States government accomplished massive Indian dispossession on the individual level in remarkably similar ways.²⁴ Attention to the details of land allows the reconstruction of a narrative that is not easily told by focusing exclusively on the extent to which a list of cultural traits did or did not change. And it is for its records about changing connections of Indians to the land that Natick makes such a rich and informative case study.

²⁴ See Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); and Melissa L. Meyer, *White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1889–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). On constructing alternatives to the assimilation/persistence dichotomy, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Clifford, “Identity in Mashpee,” in *The Predicament of Culture*. For the closest parallels to Natick’s history, see Jeanne Ronda and James P. Ronda, “‘As They were Faithful’: Chief Hendrick Aupaumut and the Struggle for Stockbridge Survival, 1757–1830,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 3 (1979): 43–55; Edward Byers, *The Nation of Nantucket: Society and Politics in an Early American Commercial Center, 1660–1820* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), especially 15–101, 160–4; Patrick Frazier, *The Mohicans of Stockbridge* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); and Lion G. Miles, “The Red Man Dispossessed: The Williams Family and the Alienation of Indian Land in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, 1736–1818,” *NEQ* 67 (1994): 46–76.