

Asticou's Fjord or Somes Sound?

Mythistory of Wabanaki Dispossession

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Recreation of a winter campsite on MDI around one thousand years ago. Painting by Judith Cooper. *Courtesy of the Abbe Museum*

For this special issue of *Chebacco*, commemorating the 250th anniversary of Mount Desert Island's first settler, we were invited to contribute "a piece on the first European settlements from the Native American perspective . . . to balance the pre- and post-1761 [mainstream] histories." Although we have long worked with Maine's four Wabanaki tribal communities—initially primarily with the Mi'kmaq as well as Maliseet, and more recently with the Passamaquoddy and, especially, the Penobscot—neither one of us has any Native American ancestry. But, even if we did, we recognize that our view, however well informed, would be just one of many. With these qualifiers in mind, rather than trying to present the Native American perspective, we offer a critical perspective on the island's past, focusing on those who were dispossessed of their land and largely ignored or misrepresented in the historic records and oral recountings of newcomers who came from afar to settle a region inhabited by Wabanakis for thousands of years.

What's in a Name? A Mythistory of Wabanaki Dispossession

As with so many of Mount Desert Island's disregarded and then forgotten indigenous place names, we do not know how Wabanaki Indians originally identified the island's deep saltwater inlet, or fjord. But, surely, they didn't call it Somes Sound—a name meant to remind us forever of Abraham Somes,

the first white settler to successfully establish permanent residency here.

In a letter penned in 1816, Somes, then eighty-four-years old, told how he discovered and staked his first claim at Mount Desert Island as a young man in 1755, while sailing eastward from Gloucester, Massachusetts, in search of a place “to carry on the fishing business.” In what is now one of Mount Desert’s founding legends, he said he purchased a small island at the entrance to the fjord from the local tribal headman for a gallon of rum.¹ Notably, he claimed the transaction was recorded on a piece of birchbark inscribed by the chief. Such a document, known as an “Indian deed,” was commonly accepted as legal proof of sale by the regional courts in colonial New England. Yet, curiously, Somes didn’t bother to hold on to it, although he *did* hold on to the idea of settling at Mount Desert.

Because this alleged purchase took place just before the outbreak of colonial New England’s final war against Wabanaki Indians and their French allies on the Maine coast, Somes’ plans were delayed by several years of violent conflict that made settling at Mount Desert Island a suicidal venture. He didn’t return until 1761, after the region’s indigenous warriors had been forced into submission and acceptance of peace terms determined by the French and British royal governments far across the ocean.

In the fall of that year Somes began work on his homestead near a fresh-water pond at the head of the fjord. The following year, he brought his family and all their possessions there to begin a new life together. Soon, other white settler families joined this pioneering fisherman-farmer-cooper, forming the nucleus of the village that now bears his name, as do Somes Pond, Somes Harbor and Somes Sound.

As most readers of this article know, Somes Sound is often referred to as the only fjord on the East Coast of the United States.² And, as the title of this article implies, we conceive of it as a site of conflicting histories and contested memories commonly evidenced in place names. In this, we draw from British geographer J.B. Harley’s important essay, “New England Cartography and the Native Americans.”³ Beginning his narrative with a reference to the poetry anthology, *Victims of a Map*, he argued that maps are “a classic form of power knowledge [and] occupy a crucial place—in both a psychological and a practical sense—among the colonial discourses that had such tragic consequences for the native Americans.”

Moreover, noted Harley, “Place-names have always been implicated in

the cultural identity of the people who occupy the land. Naming a place anew is a widely documented act of political possession in settlement history. Equally, the taking away of a name is an act of dispossession.” Relating Harley’s work to the subject at hand compels us to consider how the Anglicized place names on Mount Desert Island’s maps can be interpreted as “a medium in a wider colonial discourse for re-describing topography in the language of dominant society.”

Taking into account the crucial role of fiction in the construction of any community’s cultural identity, our subtitle employs the concept of “mythistory.” This is a heads up that our narrative takes into account not only documented historical facts and events but also some of the folklore that shapes our understanding of the island’s past.

With all of this in mind, we offer a brief ethnographic baseline of Wabanaki life at Mount Desert Island, followed by a sketch of some of the key early European voyagers who sailed along its shores, a brief description of first contact and a survey of what happened in and around the fjord during the next two centuries of turmoil when the island became a dangerous place on the colonial frontier.⁴ Finally, we return to Abraham Somes and his now iconic story of besting a drunken and nameless Indian chief, comparing it with a few other similar fictions concocted in the region.

Ethnographic Baseline: The Wabanaki at Mount Desert Island

Wabanakis have lived, loved and died at Mount Desert Island and the surrounding seacoast for more than ten thousand years. Their name is a combination of *waban* and *aki-k*. The first word translates as “white,” and refers to the East where the sky first turns light. The second refers to “land-people,” or inhabitants. Traditionally, these “Dawnland People” were organized in bands of extended families, each forming part of larger ethnic groups known as tribes or nations. Today, Wabanakis are divided into five distinct tribes: Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, and Abenaki.

Among the scores of islands seasonally frequented by generations of Wabanaki families, Mount Desert was one of the largest and most favored. Early Wabanakis called it *Pemetic*, referring to its range of mountains—on a clear day this one hundred-square mile island can be seen from a few dozen miles across open water as well as from the interior highlands.

Before European seafarers first sailed into the Gulf of Maine nearly five

hundred years ago, Mount Desert Island was seasonally occupied by a highly mobile Wabanaki band of several dozen families. The island formed part of a much larger domain from which this indigenous community totaling a few hundred people harvested natural resources. The band's total range probably included the seacoast and offshore islands from the Schoodic Peninsula to the Bagaduce River, and perhaps beyond. This coastal woodland environment combined a saltwater archipelago with a one thousand-square-mile freshwater hinterland broken by hills, swamps, lakes and ponds, and drained by a few rivers and numerous streams. Its mosaic of tree stands included ash, elm, oak, pine, hemlock, beech, and of course birch. Summers were pleasantly warm, but winters were long, sometimes blanketing the woodlands with snow for as long as five months a year.

As inhabitants of Mount Desert Island and its surroundings, Indian families developed a deep ecological understanding of a habitat blessed with an abundance of game animals, fish, birds, fruit, nuts, and roots. Adapting to the seasonal rhythms of this environment, they migrated between seacoast and hinterland. They knew precisely where to find the best encampment sites, some preferred for winter, others for summer, spring, or fall. Inland sites were usually riverside and coastal sites were well-sheltered locations with good canoe-landing beaches and easy access to fresh water, food and fuel.

Typically, moving up and down river passages from inland regions to the sea, Wabanakis hunted seal from December to February and moose, deer, caribou, bear, beaver, otter, and muskrat from September to March. They pursued waterfowl (and their eggs) from April to June and picked off fledglings and molting adults with relative ease in late July and early August; eels in September and October; and salmon, sturgeon, and alewife from April to June. Usually they went after cod, mackerel, flounder and squid during the summer months, but caught tomcod and smelt through the ice in the cold season.

Shellfish (clams, mussels, crabs, lobsters) were consumed primarily from April to October. However, since clams could be dug in coastal mudflats year-round, they were an important winter food to fall back on in times of scarcity. Bar Harbor was a well-known place for shellfish collecting, in particular clams, which Wabanakis baked or dried by smoke. For that reason, they referred to this bay area with its long sand bar and wide mudflats as *Manesayd'ik* ("at the clam gathering place") or *Ah-bais'auk* ("clambake place"). Indians in the Mount Desert Island area may have even hunted small whales in bays, chasing

them by canoe into inlets (including the fjord) for the kill. Certainly, many families gorged occasionally on the blubber and meat of stranded whales.

Plants, like animals, had their seasons, and most of those used by Wabanakis could be found in the Mount Desert Island area—from sugar maples tapped for sweet sap to Queen Anne's lace dug up for its edible root to an array of nuts and relished berries. Numerous plants were steeped to make tea-like beverages, some for medicinal purposes.

With stone, bone, wood, leather, and gut, Wabanaki men and women made tools, weapons, snowshoes, toboggans. With the bark of white birch, they made lightweight canoes and portable wigwams. Inside these dwellings, they laid a floor of hemlock twigs or balsam fir needles, topped with woven reed mats—or, in winter, with soft sealskins or densely-haired bear hides.

Although many ancient camping grounds have disappeared by forces of nature and modern development, others are evidenced through archaeological and historical records. Hundreds of indigenous archaeological sites have been identified from Little Deer Isle to Gouldsboro Bay. An excavation at Fernald Point produced factual evidence that Wabanakis camped there intermittently from two thousand to seven hundred years ago. And the historic record shows that during summers in the early 1600s, Wabanaki families under the leadership of Chief Asticou camped almost opposite of Fernald Point, at a strategic and much favored site on the east side of the entrance to Mount Desert Island's great fjord—at Manchester Point (Northeast Harbor).

First Contact

Almost five hundred years ago, a few European explorers sailed across the Atlantic and mapped a bit of the Gulf of Maine's coast. But it was not until Samuel de Champlain navigated a small one-masted sailing boat to the shores of Mount Desert Island in 1604 that local Wabanakis made their first direct contact with foreigners from overseas. A French mariner and cartographer who later detailed his adventures as an explorer, Champlain was guided by two tribesmen from the Bay of Fundy. Upon seeing the island's range of barren peaks, a prominent coastal landmark for other European seafarers, he renamed it *Isle des Monts Deserts*.

The following summer, an English vessel sailed into the Gulf of Maine and traded with a Wabanaki band encamped at Pemaquid and closely related to Chief Asticou's Mount Desert Island community. Thereafter,

ever-larger numbers of English and French fishing boats began frequenting the Maine coast. Crews salted or dried cod and other fish on the islands and bartered with Wabanakis who eagerly exchanged beaver and other furs, as well as hides, for a variety of trade goods such as copper kettles, iron knives, woolen blankets, cloth, colored beads, clay pipes, and tobacco. The region's indigenous people also purchased firearms and alcohol—not only beer, rough cider, and wine, but also distilled liquors, especially rum.

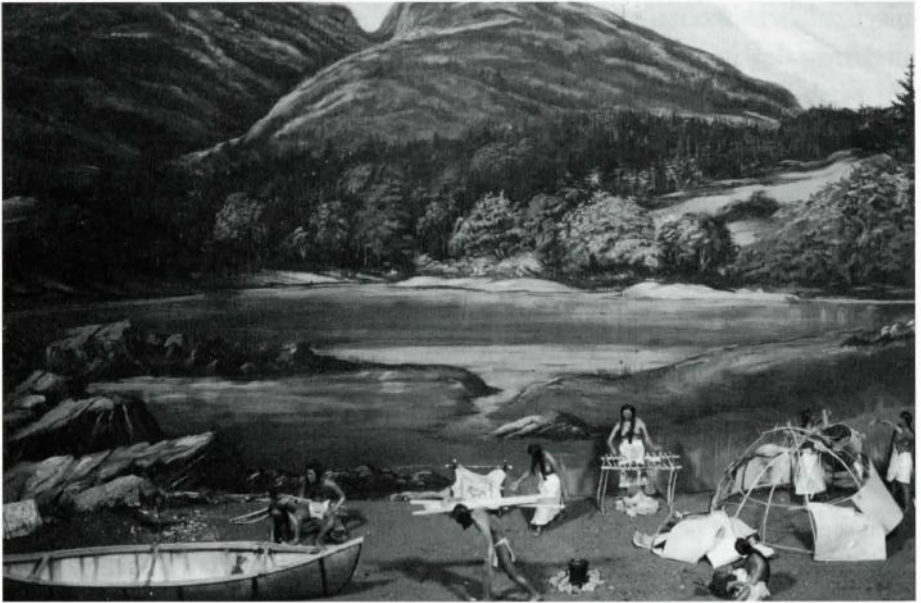
French Jesuit Mission Post in the Fjord

In 1613, a French sailing vessel carrying colonists in search of a place to build a new settlement anchored at Mount Desert Island. They quickly recognized the advantages of building a stronghold on the west bank of Mount Desert's great fjord at a sheltered place now known as Fernald Point, a site long frequented by Wabanaki families in earlier generations. Three Jesuits accompanied them. These "black robes," as the Indians referred to them, were responsible for the spiritual needs of the Roman Catholic settlers and of the French fishermen who labored along the coast in the summer. Situated across the water from Chief Asticou's encampment, the Jesuits also expected to convert the island's Wabanaki community. Dedicating their mission to the Holy Savior himself, they named it Saint-Sauveur. With that divine protection at such a wonderful location, plus friendly "savages" almost within shouting distance, what could go wrong?

Lured by the beauty of early summer days on the fjord's peaceful shores and relishing an abundance of wild food, the French may well have imagined they had landed in a new Eden. This illusion was shattered, however, when a well-armed English privateer from Virginia sailed into Penobscot Bay. Unaware that these other foreigners were from a rival nation, local Wabanakis told them about their new neighbors settling down at Mount Desert Island. Seeing the French as interlopers in the Gulf of Maine, the English commander launched an assault, taking them completely by surprise. The attackers killed a few Frenchmen and captured most of the others. Taking the ship as their prize, they loaded it with loot and destroyed what could not be carried away.⁵

Caught in the Clashes of Colonial Competition

The June 1613 assault on Saint-Sauveur marked the beginning of a long string of violent conflicts between the English and French competing for Wabanaki land, resources, and souls in the Gulf of Maine. Throughout



Diorama from the Abbe Museum, Sieur de Monts Spring, depicting a summer settlement on the shores of MDI during the Ceramic Period, 3,000-500 years ago. *Courtesy of the Abbe Museum*

much of the 1600s and 1700s, Wabanakis found themselves engulfed in the ebb and flow of this colonial contest. Sometimes, Dutch privateers joined the vicious scramble. In addition to the formally declared wars, countless skirmishes occurred among rival fishing captains, fur traders, tribal chieftains, bounty hunters, and many others.

Between clashes, Wabanakis continued to barter with foreign fishermen and other newcomers. Increasingly, this took place through competing trading posts established by the French and English. Few tribesmen spoke English or French, but a fair number could communicate in simple trade jargon with fishermen. When there were formal negotiations between Wabanaki leaders and English officials at garrisons or trading posts, use was made of bi-lingual interpreters. In contrast, it was not uncommon for fur traders and Catholic missionaries from France to speak one or more of the Wabanaki languages. Some of these fur traders adapted especially well to the coastal woodlands, even marrying into indigenous families. Their *métis* offspring played a significant role as cultural brokers on the frontier and often mediated in times of stress and violence—as did French missionaries.

Beyond trade goods, colonial competition, and missionization, Europeans brought killer diseases to Wabanakis, including smallpox, influenza, and the

plague. These scourges, added to the lethal combination of firewater and firearms, almost wiped Maine's indigenous coastal people from the face of the earth. Confronted with soaring numbers of English settlers in quickly expanding colonies southwest of Penobscot Bay, Wabanakis resorted to forging alliances with the French who were far fewer in number, more fair in matters of trade, more familiar with Wabanaki languages and lifeways and more inclined to peaceful co-existence with mutual benefit in mind.

Strained Anglo-Wabanaki Relations on the Colonial Frontier

In the era of colonial rivalry over Wabanaki Country, Mount Desert Island, like much of the Maine coast, was often a perilous place, and any plans Europeans had for establishing a permanent residence there were bound to be squashed. But this does not mean the island remained entirely uninhabited during those years. In times of peace, white fishermen occasionally came ashore to dry their daily catch on beaches, and small Wabanaki hunting groups continued to camp periodically on Mount Desert Island and the scattering of smaller islands in its neighborhood to hunt, trap, fish and gather. Even when danger appeared on the horizon, the Wabanaki's age-old familiarity with the island's waterways and coastal geography made it possible for them to slip in and out of the region undetected. Moreover, the island frequently served as an inter-tribal rendezvous for canoe-faring Wabanaki warriors who assembled there in times of war to launch raiding expeditions against New England coastal settlements.

In 1752, after the Fifth Anglo-Wabanaki War⁶ or "King George's War" (1744-49), Penobscot war-chief Colonel Louis Neptune and other Wabanaki delegates paddled their canoes toward the western entrance of Penobscot Bay and found their way up the St. George River to the colonial frontier trading post and garrison at Fort St. George. There they confirmed and renewed their peace treaty with New England officials. They also complained—for the umpteenth time—about white settlers and fishermen selling rum to their people. Tribal elders, they explained, had prohibited alcohol in their villages, but rum was now so cheap relative to furs that the problem was getting out of hand. Neptune appealed to the officials to control the alcohol trade: "We pray you would not let our women have any rum, nor our young men too much lest they should do mischief."⁷ Earlier, a Penobscot chief named Squadook, had pleaded:

Brother, once more—We don't like a great deal of rum. It hinders our prayers. [When] we buy too much of it, it hurts

our souls. It is not you, but we that do it. One keg & one bottle is enough for one man. The women must have none. This we ask of you. . . . The women buy and sell to the men and are debauched thereby. . . . Rum is the cause of quarrels among us.⁸

Rum was hardly the only recurring problem. Wabanaki delegates also spoke out about New England settlers encroaching on their lands. In the words of war-chief Neptune: "Brethren, as I said before, so I now say, that the lands we now own, let us enjoy; and let nobody take them from us. . . . God hath planted us here. God gave us this land, and we will keep it. God decreed all things; he decreed this land to us; therefore neither shall the French or English possess it, but we will."

Three years later, this same Indian leader leveled another protest. It concerned settlers on a particular island in western Penobscot Bay, but is indicative of countless Wabanaki complaints about white settlers usurping age-old Wabanaki hunting grounds and then treating the Indians as trespassers: "There are some English who live at Montinicus [Matinicus Island] that interrupt us in our killing of Seals, and in our Fowling [bird-hunting]. They have no right there; the land is ours."⁹ This settler, he complained, had called them "devils" and "dogs," and even killed a few fellow tribesmen.¹⁰

It was about this time, in the spring of 1755, that two small vessels sailed from northern Massachusetts to the Maine coast, crossed Penobscot Bay and arrived at Mount Desert Island. Both were two-masters known as Chebacco boats, one captained by Eben Sutton and the other by Abraham Somes. Perhaps about twelve tons burthen, these boats were built for New England's inshore and bay fisheries and were probably manned by three crew apiece.¹¹ Both boats steered into Southwest Harbor at the entrance to the fjord and anchored there. Spotting the strangers, a group of Wabanaki tribesmen paddled toward them in their swift bark canoes. Here, in full, is Abraham Somes' account of this event, penned by him six decades later:

I mean now to give you a history of my discovering the Island of Mount Desert which took place a short time previous to the war with Great Britain and France in this Country which took place in the year 1755 at which time the Indians were the only owners of the soil. I was in a Jebacco boat and one Eben Sutton of Ipswich [Mass.] in another, were in company, and in making discovery of the best places to carry on the fishing

business steered our course to the Eastward we went into several harbours by sounding, at length we arrive off Mount Desert we concluded to make an attempt to see if there was any suitable harbour in said Island and by sounding we run in and anchored in the South West harbour now called, soon after we had anchored our boats, we were boarded by a number of Savages in their Canoes and among them was the Governor of the Island who informed us that that land looking and pointing all around was his. We conceived them to be friendly and very peaceable began to talk with them about purchasing land of the Governor. I asked the Governor how much Occopy [rum] I must give him for that Island [Greening Island] which is a small island which lay between said Harbour and the sound, he answered Oh! A great deal, one whole Gallon. Then the said Sutton asked the Chief how much for that Island [Sutton Island] pointing to an island laying to the Eastward of the former island that I had bargained for the Governor said two quarts. We paid them the Rum. He took a piece of birch bark and described the same to us but we not understanding neither the description nor the worth of the Island never attended to the subject nor took care of the birch bark and left them to drink their Occopy and to take the good of their bargain.¹²

In mid-June, probably some weeks after this peaceful encounter, New England authorities declared war on several Wabanaki tribes. Not long afterwards, the Penobscots were also dragged into the conflict. Tied up in the Seven Years War between France and England, this Sixth Anglo-Wabanaki War lasted four years.¹³ During that time, fishing the coastal waters from Penobscot Bay eastward would have been extremely risky. Yet, some New England fishermen took even greater risks for greater stakes: When the government offered high bounty for Wabanaki scalps, they turned into marauders in search of human prey.¹⁴

Although the war raged on in Canada, fighting on the Maine seacoast had ended by 1760, allowing New England fishermen to return to their favorite bays and banks. As soon as possible, Massachusetts Province (already controlling southern Maine) expanded its political reach from Penobscot Bay to the St. Croix River. Swarms of land-hungry colonists and wealthy investors scrambled to get large grants of "free" land in Indian country.

In 1761, the British army defeated the French conclusively in Canada. The official end of this war came with the 1763 Peace of Paris. Decimated by diseases and warfare since the early 1600s, the tribal communities in Maine could no longer defend themselves and avoid being dispossessed of most of their lands. Completely outnumbered and outgunned, Wabanaki chiefs had no choice but to accept the imposed peace terms agreed upon by the European rivals and tell their warriors to lay down their weapons. Having lost so many friends and relatives, and facing an influx of settlers, they had good reason to fear for their future.

The Chief and the Settler: How the Indians Really Lost Mount Desert Island

Although Abraham Somes began squatting¹⁵ on Mount Desert Island in 1761, the official English Committee's report for settling bonds of "Eastern Lands" was completed on January 26, 1762. A month later, the island was formally granted to Sir Francis Bernard, who had succeeded Thomas Pownall in 1760 as the British Crown's governor of Massachusetts Province (which included Maine until 1820).

By this time, Somes had already "made a pitch" on the northwest flank of Mount Desert Island's fjord. As recounted by him in 1816:

The facts concerning my settling on the farm I now live in the town of Mount Desert [are as follows]. . . . Sometime before the French War was over I received a letter from Sir Francis Barnard [sic] inviting me to go to Boston for in it he wanted to see me – Accordingly I went to see him. He asked me if I did not want to farm on the Island of Mount Desert. I excepted [accepted] the proposal he likewise requested me to settle the land. I accordingly came down immediately after the War was over and peace ratified between Great Britain and the French and Indians – so that I could be safe moving into the Wilderness; I came to this place which was in the Autumn of the year 1761 and made a pitch on this lot I now live and in June the following I moved my family and settled on the same lot, and have occupied the same ever since.¹⁶

In late September 1762, Governor Bernard traveled to Mount Desert Island on the provincial sloop *Massachusetts*. In his "Journal of a Voyage to

the Island of Mount Desart 28 September to 15 October,” he told of sailing from Boston to Penobscot Bay, inspecting the recently built Fort Pownall at the mouth of the Penobscot River, cutting through Eggemoggin Reach, passing Naskeag Point, crossing Blue Hill Bay and anchoring in Southwest Harbor. His October 3rd journal entry suggests that until that day he did not know that two families, including that of Abraham Somes, had settled in at the head of the fjord on a prime piece of his new royal land grant:

After breakfast went on shore at the head of the bay [Southwest Harbor]. I went into the woods by a compass line for about half a mile, found a path which led us back to the harbour. This proved to be a passage to the salt marshes. In the afternoon some people came on board, who *informed* that four families were settled upon one of the Cranberry islands, and two families [including Somes] at the head of the river [fjord] 8 miles from our station.¹⁷

Four days later, Bernard wrote that he personally boated up the fjord: “At the end of it we turned into a bay [Somes Harbor] and there saw a settlement in a lesser bay. We went on shore and into Somes’ log house, found it neat and convenient, though not quite furnished, and in it a notable woman with four pretty girls, clean and orderly. Near it were many fish drying. . . .”¹⁸ Notably, Bernard said nothing to suggest that he had asked Somes to settle in the area or given him permission to do so.

Facts and Fictions in the Fjord

Given the above, how do we unpack what has become one of Mount Desert Island’s most popular founding legends? We begin with a reminder that Somes’ account of how he discovered Mount Desert Island and then settled there was presented in three letters written as defensive documents in 1816 when his land ownership was being challenged and he was seeking legal help against eviction.¹⁹

That said, much of the letter that recounts his venture to the island with Eben Sutton is plausible. We have little reason for doubt when he says that both fishing boats anchored at Southwest Harbor where they “were boarded by a number of Savages in their Canoes.” And while Somes may have exaggerated, he is credible when informing his audience: “We conceived them to be friendly and very peaceable began to talk with them. . . .” Since Somes did not speak Penobscot or Passamaquoddy, they probably communicated

in simple English trade jargon, as this pidgin language had not been uncommon among coastal Wabanakis since the early 1600s.

However, parts of this letter are pure fish tale. Most obviously, his statement about “discovering” Mount Desert is absurd, or, at the very least, misleading. Less obvious to present-day readers is the fishiness of his statement about obtaining an Indian deed to Greening Island—from an unnamed chief and for only one gallon of rum! In effect, *Somes* was saying that the chief considered the value of his one hundred-acre island, strategically situated at the head of the fjord, to equal that of just a half-pound of quality beaver, for that was the going rate for a gallon of rum at New England trading posts in the 1750s.²⁰

Did any of *Somes*' contemporaries really believe this story? Perhaps they did, since such “Robin Hood bargains” were quite common in coastal Maine, where Indian deeds played an important role in frontier land disputes between settlers competing for land in what they considered a “wilderness.”²¹ For their own self-serving reasons, royal authorities in colonial New England did not always accept these Indian deeds as legally valid documents, especially if such titles to large tracts of land were in conflict with the royal prerogatives of granting tracts of land in the free “wilderness.” For example, historian Emerson W. Baker opens his discussion of Indian deeds in colonial Maine with this example:

In 1688 Joseph Lynde, owner of large tracts of land in the Sagadahoc region of Maine, presented his deeds to Sir Edmund Andros, [British royal] governor of the Dominion of New England. Lynde later recalled that ‘after showing him an Indian deed for land, he said that their hand was no more worth than a scratch with a bear’s paw, undervaluing all my titles, though every way legal under our former charter [Commonwealth] government.’²²

Swindling Wabanakis out of their ancestral lands was a long-standing practice in colonial Maine. Especially when dealing with Indians who had become dependent on alcohol, land-hungry colonists commonly dropped their scruples and offered up rum, hoping to get the Natives drunk before inviting them to sign a simple document affirming they had sold a certain tract of land. Others simply forged signatures, invented names, or otherwise created a bogus document, expecting a court to accept title to land on which they settled as squatters.

That such trickery was unethical, if not illegal, was well understood by Thomas Hutchinson, Bernard's successor as British royal governor of colonial Massachusetts (1769-74), who admitted that alcohol had played a role in such dubious land grabbing efforts with so-called Indian deeds. In his words:

A bargain of this sort, made by some Englishman with any Indian he happened to meet with [went like this], 'I will give you a bottle of rum if you will leave me to settle here, or if you will give me such a place; give me the bottle, says the Indian, and take as much land as you have a mind to: The Englishman asks his name, which he writes down, and the bargain is finished.²³

Discovering white homesteaders moving into their tribal domains and settling on their best coastal lands, Wabanakis repeatedly protested against these deed games. As Governor Hutchinson explained: "Such sort of bargains being urged against the Indians, at the treaty, they rose in a body and went away in great wrath, and although they met again the next day and submitted to the governor's terms, yet when they came home all they had done was disallowed by the body of the nation and rejected."²⁴

Despite the popularity of (ill-gotten) Indian deeds, we argue that *Somes* never had one. We know of no other Indian land conveyances originally recorded on a "piece of birch bark." Moreover, *Somes* did not even bother to remember the name of the chief who supposedly signed this "document," making his dubious claim even more problematical.

All indicators point to the conclusion that *Somes* spuriously implied he had acquired an "Indian deed" when he first arrived at Mount Desert Island in 1755 in the hope of strengthening his case against a "writ of ejectment" presented to him in 1814. Clearly, he felt that this land acquisition story helped establish his credentials as an bona fide homesteader whose first stake in the area came through a deal made directly with the Indian "governor" of Mount Desert Island himself—even if he'd lost track of the chief's name and the record of the their transaction. In all likelihood, by the time *Somes* put the story in writing, he had told it many times as a good yarn guaranteed to resonate with frontier settlers.

Remarkably, *Somes* also lacked land title evidence from Bernard, as noted in this passage from one of his 1816 letters—a passage that doesn't

quite square with the land acquisition chronology given in another part of the very same letter, already quoted:

In the year 1763 or 4 the said Sir Francis [Bernard] came in person (who at that time was Governor of the then Colony of Massachusetts Bay) to this Island and remained here some considerable time, and I attended on him, and piloted him, and assisted him in making discoveries of natural privileges, if any there might be. At that time he gave me this lot with the privileges thereunto belonging, and advised me to build mills and clear up my farm, for he said you never shall be interrupted. I accordingly proceeded, and have been in the peaceable possession of the premises for the full term of 52 years before any difficulty. About two years ago I was sued with a writ of ejection which cause is now pending before the Supreme Judicial Court to be holden at Castine within the County of Hancock on the third Tuesday in June next, and as I had nothing in writing from Governor Barnard, but all was verbal I do not know but I may be lame in my defense, as the old people which were knowing to the agreement between us are dead, so I cannot get proof of anything but the length of time I have settled, that I have proved.²⁵

If “length of time” in a place ensured rights to it, Wabanakis surely would be Maine’s major stakeholders, and Mount Desert Island would still be called *Pemetic*. Obviously, this was not the case. After the war, only the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy in Maine secured a few tracts of land surrounding their major villages as tribal reservations, a mere whisper of their Wabanaki ancestral domains. Accustomed to ranging far and wide, and unable to survive within such imposed confines, they did not stay put. Like other Wabanakis, they continued to move around, following nature’s seasonal bounty and trade opportunities. Frequently, they camped on the saltwater coves, promontories and offshore islands of seacoast bays such as Frenchman, Blue Hill, and Penobscot—often on the margins of white settlements founded on locations long favored by their own ancestors.

This included the fjord on whose shores Asticou’s band and other generations of Wabanakis had seasonally encamped over so many centuries. Still paddling there by way of ancient canoe routes, they spent weeks or

months hunting, trapping, fishing, clamming, fowling, and gathering eggs and berries in the saltwater bays and at offshore islands. But even these old-time pleasures offered no lasting escape from the harsh reality that expanding white communities were quickly eclipsing Wabanakis. And with their demise, the often openly hostile attitudes most New Englanders had held toward these “benighted heathens” shifted. Gradually, contempt and hatred were replaced by patronizing pity and the growing popularity of the romantic historical myth of the vanishing Indian.

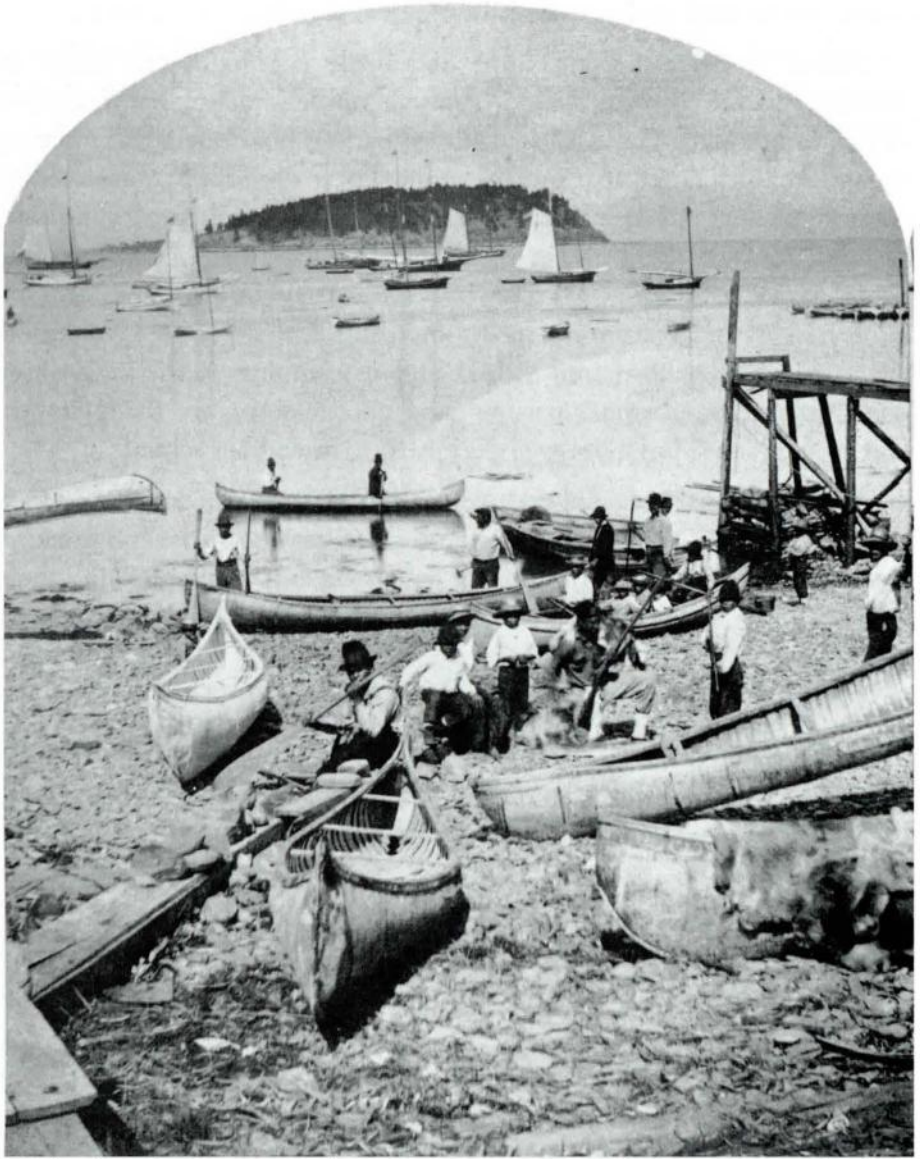
Conclusion: From Dispossession to Disposition

As Mount Desert Island’s first permanent white settler, Abraham Some’s must have been asked to relay the story of his pioneering days many times, perhaps especially in his later years when few people could remember what really happened in the truly hardscrabble pioneer days. *And what about his Indian deed?* some may have whispered. *Did the old man ever really have one?*

In light of the tragic history of the Wabanaki’s struggle to defend their homeland against encroaching white settlers at this time, Some’s story is unbelievable. This piece of Indian lore by Mount Desert Island’s founding father is probably “invented tradition.” It is significant not because it supposedly verifies Some’s land claim, but because it reflects popular ideology common in early settler communities on the island. It justified their presence as capable, God-fearing and hardworking people who, unlike the Native population they felt divinely destined to replace, knew how to improve a “howling wilderness.” Caught up in their own struggles and derring-do, few had the inclination or imagination seriously to consider the plight of the region’s original inhabitants.

And what about successive generations who reproduced Some’s narrative in oral tradition and in print, turning it into a popular legend? As with so many settler narratives about Mount Desert Island, a history of complex cross-cultural encounters simply folds into a series of short nostalgic tales about Indians—usually unnamed—coming from, and going to, nowhere in particular. Replacing history with folklore, storytellers omitted or twisted the facts, or simply made things up about drunk, dumb, or sadly unfortunate Indians getting their just deserts.

Among the many regional legendary stories along this line is one that aims to justify the murder of two unnamed “bad” Indians near Ellsworth.



Wabanaki guides awaiting sports hunters and tourists on Bar Harbor's shore between the wharf and the Indian encampment, ca. 1881. *Photo by Kilburn Brothers, Courtesy of the Abbe Museum*

Another tells of a settler killing an Indian named Swunkus, described as the drunken aboriginal proprietor of Black Island west of Mount Desert Island. A third features two tough Indians who got what they deserved when they threatened to kill the "pale face" settler who intruded on their hunting camp near the head of Frenchman Bay: The settler killed both of

them, ate the food in their pot and stole their furs.²⁶

Settler stories rising up from Somesville capture a full range of mythistory, from Abraham Somes' rum tale to the romantic reminiscences of his great granddaughter, Adelman Somes Joy, known as "Dell." Recounting family lore, Dell noted that Indians camped near the Somes' homestead at the head of the fjord over several generations and that relations with them were friendly. For example, in the 1770s Indians made her grandfather (Abraham's son John) a pair of snowshoes and taught him how to make splint baskets and a scoop net for fishing. And during her own childhood in the mid-1800s, her family visited Indians camping by the fresh-water pond "in my grandfather's pasture" and on occasion gave them supper. One of the Native boys was even permitted to attend her school.²⁷

Dell's narrative certainly seems well-intended. Yet, notably, settler stories of Wabanakis—whether romantic like hers or disparaging like so many others—lack any indication of awareness that while pursuing their own livelihoods and liberties, newcomers trampled those of the region's indigenous peoples.

Our critical perspective on Mount Desert Island's mythistory leads us to suggest that we are dealing with an ethnocentric tale of dispossession. This is perfectly, or should we say painfully, exemplified by Dell's nostalgic poem about the Penobscots who camped by Somes Pond near her girlhood home in Somesville:

*I loved the Indian, when he built his wigwam by the pond
And hunted, unmolested. No canvas wigwam had he,
But one of boughs, I've sat and watched the [women]
Doing their beadwork, and wished I were an Indian.
They were our friends, and we were theirs.
They came and we welcomed them; they lived upon our land,
No rent was paid or asked, our children played with theirs
And loved the Indian.*

*They often made us visits, wearing their bright plaid shawls
And shining beaver hats. They sat at table with them on;
It was their custom. We treated them like honored guests,
And they looked it. Why should we not?
Were they not here before us?²⁸*

Reading Dell's words today, how can anyone miss the irony of her wishing to be "an Indian" while portraying the indigenous Wabanaki as friendly strangers who "lived upon our land" as "guests" from whom "no rent was paid or asked"? Only the last line hints at a needling, inconvenient truth ignored for generations.

And what about the one hundred-acre island at the entrance of the fjord, supposedly purchased over 250 years ago for a gallon of rum? Today, its real estate may well be as high as \$50 million. One big fish story, indeed.

Having reviewed the evidence, we conclude our essay with a bold proposition—a modern-day disposition: Commemorating the year in which Abraham Somes settled at the head of the fjord that bears his name, we invite readers to critically rethink this mythistory and consider renaming the place in honor of the Wabanaki chief who did not need an Indian deed to prove his aboriginal title—Asticou's Fjord?



Indian Village, Bar Harbor. Original drawing by Charles S. Reinhart, engraved for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* August 1886. The drawing must have been made in 1883 or earlier since the Indians were forbidden to camp at the foot of Bridge Street after that year.

From Harper's Magazine

Notes

¹ Now known as Greening Island.

² According to the Maine Geological Survey, Somes Sound's "overall geology makes it like a fjord, but not quite. Another Scandinavian term, fjard, probably applies to the sound. A fjard is smaller in all ways than a fjord, and is simply a glacially carved embayment that is drowned by the sea." See Maine Geologic Study, *Somes Sound: Mount Desert Island*. 1998, 2006. <http://www.maine.gov/doc/nrimc/mgs/explore/marine/sites/nov98.htm>. See also Neal R. Pettigrew et al., "Somes Sound: Fjord or Well-Mixed Estuary?" *Northeastern Naturalist* 4(1) (1997): 35-44.

³ In *American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture, and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega*, eds. Emerson W. Baker, Edwin A. Churchill, Richard D'Abate, Kristine L. Jones, Victor A. Konrad, Harald E.L. Prins (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 296-97.

⁴ Much of what follows in the next few pages draws from Harald E.L. Prins and Bunny McBride, *Asticou's Island Domain: Wabanaki Peoples at Mount Desert Island 1500-2000* (Boston: Northeast Region Ethnography Program, National Park Service, 2007). This two-volume study is available online at <http://www.nps.gov/acad/historyculture/ethnography.htm>.

⁵ See also Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Story of Mount Desert Island, Maine* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1960).

⁶ Harald E.L. Prins, *The Mi'kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 148-51.

⁷ "Treaty with the Eastern Indians at St. George's Fort, 1752," in *Collections of the Maine Historical Society* (Portland: Maine Historical Society, 1856), 4: 180.

⁸ James Finney Baxter, *Documentary History of the State of Maine* (Portland: Fred L. Tower Company, 1916), 23: 427. We adjusted random punctuation and capital letters in this quote.

⁹ Baxter, *Documentary History*, 12: 174, 177.

¹⁰ Baxter, *Documentary History* 23: 449, 452.

¹¹ William A. Baker, *Sloops and Shallops* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1966), 86.

¹² Abraham Somes to Eben Parsons Esq, April 20, 1816, Boston, in "Copy of the Earliest Records of the Island of Mount Desert and Other Islands Thereto Belonging from A.D. 1776 to About the year 1820. Copied from the Original in 1910 by William Emery of Ellsworth. To which is Added an Historical Sketch and Some Ancient and Interesting Letters," 177-79, Maine State Archives.

¹³ Prins, *The Mi'kmaq*, 148-51.

¹⁴ In 1756, the British government accused French colonial peasants and fishermen long settled in the Wabanaki homeland of collaborating with the Natives, and placed a bounty on their scalps "matching that offered for Indian scalps: 20 pounds apiece—soon raised to 25" (Prins, *The Mi'kmaq*, 149).

¹⁵ Squatters were settlers who had no legal title to the lands they occupied.

¹⁶ Somes to Eben Parsons Esq.

¹⁷ Copy in the Sawtelle collection, 23, National Park Service, Bar Harbor, Maine.

(Emphasis added.)

¹⁸ Governor Bernard, Journal. This “notable woman,” obviously, was Somes’ wife Hannah Herrick Somes. Mrs. Seth A. Thornton, *Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island, Maine* (1938; repr., Bar Harbor: Acadia Publishing Company, 1988), 241.

¹⁹ See Emery, “Copy of the Earliest Records of the Island of Mount Desert,” 177-79.

²⁰ Commenting on the fur-for-rum trade in the mid-eighteenth century, a New England official at Fort St. George explained the prices to a Wabanaki tribal delegation in 1752: “As the trade is now carried on . . . you get more profit now, than you did [thirty years ago]; and here we will give you one instance: then you gave us five pounds of Spring beaver for eight gallons of Rum; but now you give us but four pounds for that quantity.” Treaty 1752, 179.

²¹ Harald E.L. Prins, “Chief Rawandagon Alias Robin Hood: Native ‘Lord of Misrule’ in the Maine Wilderness,” *Northeastern Indian Lives, 1632-1816*, Robert Grumet, ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 105-07.

²² Emerson W. Baker, “‘A Scratch with a Bear’s Paw’: Anglo-Indian Land Deeds in Early Maine.” *Ethnohistory* 36(3) (1989): 235.

²³ Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of Massachusetts: From the First Settlement Thereof in 1628 Until the Year 1750* (London: 1765-1768) 2: 199-200.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Somes to Eben Parsons Esq.

²⁶ These three stories are recounted in full in Prins & McBride, *Asticou’s Island Domain*, 264-65.

²⁷ Adelma Somes Joy, “Reminiscences of Somesville, ca. 1915 (part 13: 1-2), Northeast Harbor Library, Maine.

²⁸ Joy, 13: 2-3.