

# PITA NEWS LETTER

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Spring 2020 Vol. 20 Issue 1

## A HISTORY OF PLUM ISLAND By Michele Simone

As I began writing this article on the history of Plum Island, it made sense to me to start by pointing out the obvious... first and foremost, Plum Island is a barrier island. Barrier islands protect the mainland, taking the brunt of the angry ocean and unrelenting wind. Barrier islands shift and move by nature. The shifting and moving has been the main topic of conversation on the island since the first structures were built. This history is presented in two installments: the first covers the earliest recorded information through the Revolutionary War conclusion; the second installment picks up after 1780 and continues to contemporary times.

Written records of the island did not exist until Colonial times. What we know about Plum Island and how it formed is based on science. The oldest history on record tells us 13,000 years ago woolly mammoth roamed the land east of what we now know as Newbury. The next piece of information we have is about 10,000 years ago, the earliest aborigines arrived in the area. Their migration followed the last great Ice Age. Archaeologists call them "Paleo-Indians." They migrated, over a great many centuries, from what now is Russia, coming over what was the Bering land bridge, down through Alaska and Canada, and, then, across the North American continent.

Over the next 9,000 or so years glaciers melted, the earth shifted, minerals deposited here from the north and sand filled in our area. All of that action led to the formation of Plum Island. At that time it was still dramatically different from what we are all familiar with today. As the island



"...On the east is an isle of two or three leagues in length; the one halfe plaine marish ground fit for pasture, or salt Ponds, with many fair high groves of Mulberrie trees and gardens; and there is also Oaks, Pines, Walnuts and other wood to make this place an excellent habitation, being a good and saf harbor." Captain John Smith

increased in size, the southern end eventually attached itself to four glacial-drumlin islands that are today called Cross Farm Hill, Bar Head, Ipswich Bluffs and Grape Island. In length, the island extends nearly nine miles from its northern point at the mouth of the Merrimack River to Bar Head, which rises, overlooking the mouth of the Ipswich River. Once the area now known as Plum Island was formed, Native Americans saw the value in spending their summers here, living, fishing and hunting. Life was good. The Agawam were an Algonquian Native American people in New England. They lived a nomadic lifestyle... closer to the coast during the summer and inland during winter.

There has been much speculation that the Vikings visited North America 500 years before Columbus. Many

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### EVENTS AND RENTALS PITA HALL

- **PLEASE NOTE:** *All PITA sponsored events are on hold temporarily due to covid-19 restrictions.*
- *As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, Plum Island Hall remains closed for all public and private events. It is expected that additional guidance will soon be forthcoming from both the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Town of Newbury concerning the reopening of our facility, as well any restrictions or requirements that may be necessary in the interest of public safety.*
- *Renters may cancel or reschedule their bookings at Plum Island Hall at any time without penalty. All cancellations will be refunded in full. Please contact the Hall Manger at 978 853-9057 if you have questions, or if you would like to change your booking. For more local information see [www.cityofnewburyport.com](http://www.cityofnewburyport.com) and [www.townofnewbury.org](http://www.townofnewbury.org)*

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Viking discoveries have been made in areas all around Plum Island including Martha's Vineyard, Rhode Island and Maine. These discoveries have been runes, carvings, and coins that would have been left behind by the Norsemen. These findings have been made somewhat recently, and are still in the process of being studied for positive confirmation. If positive confirmation is made, there is a great chance the Vikings would have at least sailed by Plum Island, if not stopping to scope it out.

We know the Native Americans were already enjoying the beauty and benefits of Plum Island well before the Vikings arrived in North America, well before the Europeans began their explorations. Between 1604 and 1608, a Royal French cartographer Samuel de Champlain explored the New England coast, on an expedition led by Sieur de Mons, after they had established a temporary colony in nearby Nova Scotia. There isn't direct evidence they landed on Plum Island, but they did explore Cape Ann at length, so it is logical to assume they would have stopped off on Plum Island on their way back to Nova Scotia.

On the heels of Samuel de Champlain, Captain John Smith (of Pocahontas fame from the colony in Jamestown, Virginia) began his exploration of the coast of Massachusetts in 1614. Smith explored the coast from Maine to Cape Cod and took notes that helped create a map of the coast. On the map, he names the area "New England", which of course is still in use today. Smith stopped on Plum Island and described it as follows:

"...On the east is an isle of two or three leagues in length; the one halfe plaine marsh ground fit for pasture, or salt Ponds, with many fair high groves of Mulberrie trees and gardens; and there is also Oaks, Pines, Walnuts and other wood to make this place an excellent habitation, being a good and saf harbor."  
—Captain John Smith



Plum Island History continued on next page

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## Plum Island History continued



We all know the story of the Mayflower landing in Plymouth late December 1620. There were about 100 people on the ship and the journey from England took two months. Among the group traveling were 40 members of the Separatist Church later known as Pilgrims. The Pilgrims were fortunate to meet Squanto (also known as Tisquantum, a member of the Patuxet Native American Indian tribe). Squanto helped the Pilgrims survive their first few years in the new world. The Native Americans were generally friendly and helpful to the new settlers all along our area. After hearing of the success of these early settlements, Nonconformist Ministers Thomas Parker and James Noyes, along with like minded British citizens decided to emigrate to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1633 with the sanction of the Council of New England at Whitehall. At that same time, Richard Dummer, Stephen Dummer, Richard Saltonstall, Henry Sewall, and others in Wiltshire had organized a company to establish a stock-raising plantation in the Massachusetts Bay Colony because of England's high prices for horses, cattle, sheep, and hogs. The group persuaded Thomas Parker to join them, and they arrived in Ipswich (then called Agawam) and spent the winter of 1634 there before moving farther east.

In the spring of 1635, this small group of immigrants petitioned the General Court to leave Agawam (Ipswich) and move to Quascacunquen (now known as Newbury) to begin a town there. In the colonial records, it is noted:

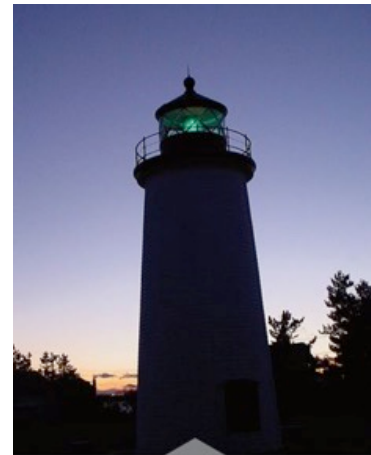
May 6th, 1635.

Quascacunquen is allowed by the court to be a plantation... and the name of the said plantation shall be changed, and shall hereafter be called Newberry.

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## ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: PEGGY POPPE

Providing a positive art  
experience by Sandra Turner

Originally from Vermont, Peggy Poppe has been an “islander” for the past eight years. Watercolor is her medium of choice, which she began experimenting with during her annual vacations more than 20 years ago. She has attended workshops and studied with Lee Boynton from the Cape Cod School of Art, as well as local artists Alan Bull and Susan Spellman to name a few. Little did she know that she would one day be assisting others to experience the joy art has given her.

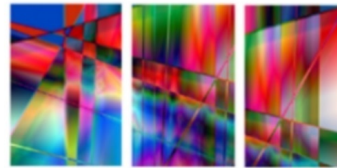
For Peggy, letting go of thoughts and being present in the moment is one of the joys of painting the landscapes that surround her. Over the past few years she has been working to make art accessible to others by teaching watercolor to residents of the Country Rehab, the Newburyport Senior Center and at the Counsel on Aging in Groveland. Her classes are geared toward providing a positive experience while giving an opportunity for students to get in touch with their creativity.

An active member of the NAA, she has started a Watercolor Interest Group that meets once a month to discuss common experiences in the medium.

Peggy has recently been involved in establishing The Pleasant St Gallery located at Vintage Chic Anew and the Commune café representing more than 25 local artists.



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### Plum Island History continued

The immigrants left Ipswich and rowed small boats known as shallops to the mouth of the Quascacunquen (now Parker) River. They came ashore at a spot on the north shore, east of the present Parker River Bridge. A commemorative boulder at the end of Cottage Road now marks the spot where it is said Nicholas Noyes was the first of the new settlers to leap ashore at Newbury, named after the town in Berkshire, England. In the beginning days of the colony, open pastureland was limited, and the island's marshes offered grazing for the colonists' livestock. The salt hay was also used for bedding and mulching and as insulation against the foundations of houses. The trees mentioned in the earliest descriptions of the island were cut for lumber and floated to the mainland. Pine trees existed, since they were used to define the land boundaries in some of the earliest land deeds. Only at the southern end of Plum Island, where the higher ground of the glacial drumlins provided rich topsoil, was there any attempt at settlement. Plum Island was not included in the territories granted to the early settlers of Ipswich, Rowley and Newbury but was under the jurisdiction of the General Court. In 1639, two residents of Ipswich obtained permission to keep "fourscore hogs on the island . . . from Aprille next until harvest. . . ." Eventually in 1649, the General Court divided Plum Island among the townships, two fifths each being awarded to Ipswich and Newbury and one fifth to Rowley.

Even in colonial times there was concern about erosion, and regulations were put in place to prevent the destruction of the dunes by the horses and cattle placed on the island by Newbury residents. They sought to protect the dunes since they knew the shifting sands would overrun the very valuable salt meadows.

By the mid 1600's people began building small sailing vessels to trade salt cod, timber and beef. They sought sugar, tobacco and indigo from the Carolina's and West Indies. The trade business was very profitable. It was during this time people began to pack their boats and sail to Plum Island to fish, dig clams and enjoy the water on hot summer days. The salt marsh hay was cut regularly, and there was such an abundance of it, they would transport the excess to be sold in Boston in Hay Market Square. Decades

Plum Island History continued on page 7

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## Plum Island History continued

went by and there were constant disagreements between the residents of Newbury, Ipswich and Rowley farmers over cattle who would be allowed to roam free on Newbury's section of Plum Island. The farmers of Ipswich and Rowley liked to keep their land properly fenced in. Ipswich complained the horses and cattle left to forage all winter were destroying the vegetation and would be the ruin and destruction of the whole island.

By 1764, the port was so prosperous and densely settled that it broke off from Newbury to become the City of Newburyport. The wealth people earned was obvious by the hundreds of Victorian, Federal and Colonial mansions still standing in Newburyport today. The key to the trades was the mouth of the Merrimack River. Anyone who lives in the area and is a boater should know enough to respect the mouth of the Merrimack, as it is incredibly treacherous. Area boaters have said the water at the mouth of the Merrimack River can get choppy and unstable due to convergence of the river's current, the tides, an underwater formation (called a sandbar) and the wind. The combination can create enormous swells, and boats are known to sometimes strike the bottom when passing over the sandbar. Also, wakes from large boats can roil the surface between the north and south jetties. There have been countless wrecks and strandings from the beginning and continue today.

The winter months have always been wicked on Plum Island.

The winter of 1716-1717 was one of the coldest winters anyone could remember. On March 1, 1717 a major snowstorm hit, followed by another on the 4th and the worst storm of all on the 7th. A settler named Jack Richman and his son Jack Jr. set out from Newbury to sail to the island to get more firewood. They were hesitant since there was already 5' of snow on the ground, but knew their wood supply would not last before the winter ended. It was gray and overcast, but they figured they could make it, load the boat and be back before the weather turned. Unfortunately, the storm shifted and hit much earlier than expected. The winds tore their sails, the mast snapped and they were blown onto the mainland marsh. The wind and snow made it difficult to see or walk and they froze to death.

It was mid-March before a search party could be organized to find their bodies. In town, the Native Americans said they never heard the elders speak of such brutal storms. Most of the settlers single story homes were so deeply buried you couldn't even see their chimneys. People got in and out of the larger homes by climbing through their second and sometimes third story windows. The snow was 10' deep and drifted as high as 20'. Hundreds of horses and cattle starved to death or froze under drifts of blinding snow. Deer were unable to find food and were exhausted from trying to run through the heavy snow. One by one,

Plum Island History continued

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### Plum Island History continued

wolves chased them down until over 90% had been killed and eaten.

The following autumn, farmers discovered their harvest of apples and pears were meager because the snow drifts had been so high that rabbits had been able to devour the buds of the branches twenty feet above the frozen ground. Plum Island would not experience a series of blizzards like that until 2015. Many of us living on the island that winter will never forget the massive piles of snow and drifts.

In the summer of 1769, Newbury and Newburyport joined together to share the cost of a hospital to be built on Plum Island to shelter and care for those ill with smallpox. This highly contagious disease was greatly feared and it was the custom to isolate the afflicted. The Hospital, or Pest House, was located near the Northern end of the island to make it accessible to ships arriving from foreign ports. If an incoming ship had disease on board, it was required to be washed down with vinegar, and its soft goods, such as cloth, were buried in sand for nine days. The Pest House was also used to care for local residents who had smallpox. Not all patients were cooperative. Newburyport's selectmen took the rules seriously. If you tried to leave the Pest House before you were well, the people in town would stone you and you would be sent right back. It is interesting learning about that now while we are currently in the middle of a global pandemic.

During the Revolutionary War, Newburyport had one of the largest fleets of privateers on the East Coast. Some of her vessels traveled far into the ocean and had multiple cannons and swivel guns. Citizens did what they could from home. Records kept tell us a British ship was sailing up and down the coast of the island when it was spotted and reported to Captain Boardman, a Colonial. Quickly, seventeen men began rowing out in three whaleboats to meet the British ship. When they met the ship, they offered a pilot into shore. The ship's captain, Captain Bowie was relieved and had his men throw down the ladder. Captain Boardman's men boarded the ship and informed Captain Bowie "...you have been boarded by the Newburyport Irregulars. Strike your colors sir, and I assure you nobody will be harmed." The Captain while angry, knew he had no choice. They had no arms so resistance was futile.



**This map done in 1771 is the oldest accurate map we have seen. After the British and French sorted out their differences on who gets what on the new frontier...the British realized they had only the foggiest idea of what they ended up with. As you can see, Plum Island hasn't changed much.**

The colonists unloaded 52 chaldrons of coal, 86 butts and 30 hogsheads of porter, 20 hogsheads of vinegar and 16 hogsheads of sauerkraut. They also led several head of cattle down the gangway. The Redcoats were plagued with hunger and smallpox. These provisions were supposed to arrive in Boston for the Redcoats army. They were entirely dependent on food imported from England since none of the colonial farmers would sell them produce. Things got so difficult for the British that on March 17, 1776 General Howe retreated from Boston and withdrew his starving soldiers to Halifax, where the locals would sell them food. There was rejoicing throughout the colonies, and the brave men and privateers of Newburyport had done their part.

In the next PITA Newsletter, we will continue with Part 2 of the History of Plum Island, The Post Revolutionary War Period.

If you would like to connect with others on Plum Island, and discuss any of the history or other topics, please go to our FaceBook page at <https://www.facebook.com/pi.taxpayers1/>



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