

## **“Love of Place”**

*The Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*October 8, 2023*

*First Church in Boston*

In a [2020 interview](#), Harmen Deetz, a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag, recounted a boyhood visit to the Tribe’s ancestral land in Mashpee, saying:

My father and I were driving on Great Hay Road. At the time it was just a narrow dirt road, the kind where if you drive a pickup truck down the middle, branches scrape the doors on both sides.

My father asked, “how old do you think this road is?” I said 100 years? 200? He said “Nope. It’s older than America.” So, I could literally stand in the footprints of my ancestors, on a road made by people walking back and forth between the pond and the bay. It presented me with something that I felt like I was missing in my life overall. I have a literal physical connection to this dirt, to this soil. It contains, it is made of the presence of my ancestors in the flesh. Their feet made the roads and their blood and bones are in the soil. It’s a connection like nothing else I’ve felt or experienced anywhere else. It is quite literally a part of me and I’m a part of it. Having spent years without that connection, to find it was overwhelming.<sup>i</sup>

For Deetz, the land, *this* land of his ancestors, is a part of him, an interwoven connection between place and people.

For many of us, particular places can hold significant power. We can feel connected to a place for any number of reasons. We may feel a familial sense of connection, such as returning to a grandparent’s house for a family gathering. Or, perhaps the sense of connection is more personal, like nestling into your favorite chair in your apartment. And, sometimes the connection may be communal, such as resting in a centuries-old Cathedral in Europe, walking a length of the Great Wall of China, or moving among the ancient walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. In such moments, the vastness of generations connected through the same place can somehow both shrink and expand time.

What if your history, your sense of culture and identity, lay not in buildings or stone monuments, but simply in a natural place? In the waterways and slants of the land? In the seasonal flow of plant and animal life? In how and when the stars or moon arrived in the night? What if your culture, your family, your identity was interwoven with a particular place . . . and then you were forced from that land?

Growing up, I felt a simple pride in my connection to the places I knew as home. My family had been in Michigan for four generations, in the Ohio Territory even before statehood, and in Massachusetts since 1620. Yes, I, too, have Mayflower ancestors. I also have many Puritan ancestors who were part of the Great Migration to Boston and the surrounding towns—including William Colburn, the 9<sup>th</sup> person admitted as member here at First Church Boston, as well as his wife Margery, the 15<sup>th</sup> member. Knowing this Colburn ancestry deepens my sense of connection to *this* place.

Over the years, I have poured hours into genealogical charts to trace the connections between people and places in my family. During my sabbatical in 2019, I followed the westward movement of my ancestors from the East Coast to the Midwest. I took the Staten Island Ferry to view a mural of a New Netherland ancestor in the Staten Island City Hall. With a friend, I quietly trespassed on some land in Pennsylvania to visit the May Meeting House, where some of my earliest May ancestors once farmed. On and on I went in search of landmarks and gravestones. I even drove to Savannah, Georgia where my great-great grandfather, Cyrus, arrived as part of General Sherman's March to the Sea. With a copy of his Civil War diary in hand, I stood in the leafy square where Cyrus once camped and wondered if any of the massive trees had been there then. Places can connect us to the past, to family, to a larger story that gives us a sense of belonging.

For most of my life, I have operated within stories shaped by white, European colonists and settlers. Taught to be proud of my American ancestry as pioneers who built this nation, I simultaneously understood that prior to European arrival Native Americans lived here. Such history is hard to miss when the names of lakes, roads, towns, or the entire state are rooted in Native American words. However, I was not taught as a child or even well into my adulthood that many of the Indigenous peoples resisted and fought back not out of "savagery," but so that they might be able to stay upon the places they loved. I was not taught to consider the stories of the First Thanksgiving, the founding of Massachusetts, or of the states of Ohio, Texas, or Hawai'i from the point of view of the Indigenous Peoples, who lived in these places for many centuries before Europeans arrived. And I was definitely not encouraged to consider what it means that Native Americans *still* live here. Were you?

Describing what I was not taught is not intended to be a specific indictment of my parents or the schools I attended. Rather, it is to point to widespread cultural stories that preferred to emphasize the *emptiness* of the colonial lands and the *wilderness* of the western frontier. Places where hard-working, Christian men and women could build new lives. Places that were not "stolen," but acquired and developed through Royal Charter, amicable treaties, and traded goods. Places where any violence emerged from the justified right of defense of one's family and one's property. Places where we started churches, baptized our children, and buried our dead.

Learning a different story is not easy.

Here are some of the local stories, which you may already know. [The Massachusetts](#) Tribe, from whom the state draws its name, were a coastal people with villages from Salem to Plymouth. At the time of the Puritan arrival in 1630, the Sachem of the Neponset band, Chickatabut, consented to the English occupancy of Dorchester, receiving what he may have perceived as tribute from the newcomers. After Chickatabut dies of smallpox in 1633, his son, Wompatuck, is raised by his uncle to be the next Sachem at Neponset. As more and more English arrive, the Neponset band of Massachusetts, continue to lose land. In 1657, the Rev. John Eliot persuades the Dorchester court to establish a “Praying Town” at Ponkakoag[*pong ka pō' əg*]—a place known today as Canton. Over the ensuing decades more land would be deeded to the European settlers and their descendants. Eventually no land would remain. And yet, descendants of the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkakoag remain today as an organized group with clear governance. In 2022, their collaboration with the Nipmuc Tribe of Central Massachusetts to create [a dugout canoe, or mishoon](#), with fire made the local news.

However, neither the Massachusetts, nor the Nipmuc are federally recognized tribes. In fact, the state of Massachusetts has just two federally recognized tribes: the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). And Mashpee’s status has been hotly contested in recent years.

When Harmen Deetz was a boy visiting his ancestral lands, the Mashpee Wampanoag were neither federally recognized, nor did they have a reservation. After a decades-long fight, the Mashpee Tribe was recognized in 2007 and land was taken into trust for them in 2015, creating a reservation. But, under the [Trump administration](#), the Department of the Interior rescinded this decision, kicking off a series of lawsuits over Tribal status and the right to a reservation. Finally, in [December of 2021](#), the Department of Interior, reversed the Trump era decision. Even so, the Tribe continues to face lawsuits from Canton neighbors in an effort to stop a planned casino. In other words, the centuries long conflict over land is not simply history. The [Mashpee Wampanoag website](#) currently includes an article about oral arguments made in court on October 4—just days ago.

These are not the only fights Indigenous Peoples are engaged in within the Commonwealth. For a number of years, the [MA Indigenous Legislative Agenda](#) has been lobbying for key bills. Already, they have successfully compelled the state to redesign the Massachusetts seal and motto. If it’s been a while since you looked, [the current seal](#) shows a Native man standing beneath a detached arm that is holding a sword. Surrounding the image is a Latin phrase which translates to, “By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty.” Definitely time for a change. Currently, the Legislative Agenda also seeks a statewide

change of “Columbus Day” to “Indigenous People’s Day” as well as more education on Native American history/culture and *no* racist mascots in public schools.

For centuries, Native American peoples have striven to preserve their connection to the places in which their history and culture is rooted. Naming those places through land acknowledgements honors the importance of this connection. Naming the linkages between place and people acknowledges that a connection remains—a spiritual bond that removal from their land by force of law or violence has not destroyed. However, land acknowledgements are not just about historical connections; they are also framed as commitments to engage in the continued work of honoring and respecting the Native Peoples *who are still here*.

As the descendant of white European colonists and settlers, I have been challenged to unlearn the simple narratives of pioneer hard work and Christian commitment. Now, as the Minister of First Church Boston, I also feel challenged to call us to engage in this work of learning a different story, one where our spiritual ancestors caused lasting harm and injustice upon the Massachusett, the Wampanoag, the Pequot, and other Native Peoples of the Americas. This is not simply about wrestling with our history; this is also about whether or how we engage *today* in the continued fights for acknowledgment, honor, and respect by Native Americans in the Commonwealth and beyond. I know I feel committed to this work. I hope some of you might as well.

Whatever lands we love and stories we tell, may we also be open to hearing stories from other points of view as well.

May it be so.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Goddard College Alumni News, “The Fight for the Mashpee Wampanoag Reservation.”  
<https://www.goddard.edu/blog/alumni-news/revoking-the-mashpee-wampanoag-reservation/>