PRAYING INDIANS OF TITICUT

Chickataubut (Thankful Fire) was one of the "Great Sachems" among the Massachusetts Indians. His territory extended from Duxbury Mill to Titicut, to Nunchatateset pond, and from there to Wanamampuke, which is the head of the Charles River. His favorite resort was at Titicut, where he maintained a wigwam, and his land comprised three miles of each side of the Taunton River. He and his wife seemed to accept English customs and trappings of Christianity. After his death of smallpox in 1633, the Titicut Indians divided into two bands, separated by the Taunton River.

His son Josias (or Josiah) Wampatuck (White Deer) resided at Neponset, where he was raised by his uncle Kitchamkin. At one time he professed to be one of the "Praying Indians" but afterward turned apostate and separated from them, although he remained friendly with the whites. On June 9, 1664 Wampatuck deeded a three mile long parcel of land along the Taunton River called Cotunicut to the Titicut Indians, having succeeded his father in his rule. In 1669 Wampatuck joined in the war between the New England Indians and the Mohawk Indians. Here he lost his life. His son Charles Josiah became sachem in 1671 (Weston, 1906).

Prior to the plague of 1617, the number of inhabitants from southeastern Massachussetts was around 3000. After the pestilence swept through the area only a few hundred were left alive (Gardner, 1996). Smaller tribes of Indians around Boston, the Cape and Plymouth County embraced Christianity at an early date. By 1674 there were 497 praying Indians in Plymouth County. Seventy-two could write and 142 could read the Indian language, as it had been reduced to writing by apostle John Eliot, an Indian missionary. There were three Indian churches locally; one in Nemasket, one in Titicut and one in Assawompsett. Each had a membership of 30 +/-.

The site of the Titicut church was on Pleasant Street, about ¼ mile from the village green. This church continued until after 1755, then was disbanded and the few remaining Indians united with the Congregational Church. John Sassamon was the ablest and best educated of the Indian preachers. John Simons was the minister of the Titicut Indian church for nearly ten years, at the end of which most Indians had died out or disappeared by 1760.

In 1744 the Titicut area became a distinct parish and included a part of Bridgewater, to the "Four Mile line". In 1746 Praying Indian, James Thomas gave 5 acres of land to Titicut Parish. This gift was part of a donation by three Praying Indians, specifically giving 38 ¾ acres of land to Titicut Parish for a meeting house (church), burying place (old section of the cemetery), training field (green), parsonage and including land later used for Pratt Free School and several nearby houses. Grants for this property were duly confirmed by the General Court in 1750. This donation was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Thomas</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen David</td>
<td>18 ¾</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Ahanton</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Grant</strong></td>
<td><strong>38 ¾</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At least one of these Praying Indians (James Thomas) was buried in the old section of Titicut Parish Cemetery. A six-foot obelisk was erected many years later by members of the church to commemorate their gift to encourage the settlement of a Gospel Ministry (Emery, 1876).

"The Praying Indian Monument" of Titicut

In the years 1747 to 1749 this first church was completed. It was a simple barn-like structure with no spire, tower or bell; a plain place of worship. After the Indian church disbanded in 1755 the few remaining Indians united with the new church. The Indians had to sit in a distinct pew high over the stairs; in an area set aside for Indian and Negro, as was the custom of the times.
In October 1957, while digging the well for my house on Vernon Street, six skeletons were unearthed. These included five adults and one child, with no artifacts present. The discovery of copper pins and nails point to the late 1600’s as the probable burial date. It was the custom of this late period to wrap bodies, in an extended position, in heavy bark and secure the wrappings with pins or nails.

Lack of grave goods and manner of burial leads us to believe that these Indians were members of the Praying Indians of Titicut. Although some of them finally consented to burial in white-man cemeteries, most Indians still preferred to be buried in their old burial grounds.

During April of 1958, while excavating the foundation for my house by bulldozer, ten more graves were uncovered bringing the total to sixteen skeletons from the same era of contact burials. All bones were gathered together from the backfill and re-interned. One interesting observation was the size of one skeleton. Both arm and leg bones were over two inches longer than my own. This Indian must have been an exceptionally large man – well over 6’6” in height (Taylor, 1969).

In the next 70 years most Praying Indians faded into history.

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