



The Girls Who Found History

How a group of Massachusetts teens rewrote their town's backstory—and our country's maps

BY BROOKE ROSS

THE AUDIENCE WAS QUIET under the bright blue sky as tall blades of grass rustled in the breeze.

Then, in a powerful voice, Larry Fisher, a member of the Massachusetts Native American tribe, began singing a song in his **indigenous** language. His steady chants, rising above the chirping of birds in the distance, were not for the 100 people seated in front of him but for the six eighth-graders standing beside him at the podium.

Fisher, whose tribal name means “White Feather,” was performing an “honor song” to thank the students, known as the History Girls.

That was the scene in June at a salt marsh in Quincy, Massachusetts. The crowd, made up of lawmakers and tribal leaders, was there to celebrate the salt marsh, which, thanks to the teens, had just been renamed in honor of the tribe.

The site's new name, Passanageset (*pass-uh-nuh-ges-it*) Park at

Broad Meadows Marsh, will soon appear on official U.S. maps. The renaming is the culmination of a two-year campaign by the students, which began after one of them stumbled upon a part of Quincy history unknown to most residents.

While doing research for a school project, Michaela O'Gara-Pratt discovered that a chief of the Massachusetts had once lived with his people in the salt marsh—right next to her school. It was their

home for thousands of years until the early 1600s, when European settlers arrived.

Following Michaela's discovery, the teens did more research and met with city officials, advocating to get the tribe the recognition they believed it deserved.

“These were the *first* people here, and everyone should know that,” Michaela, 14, explains. “Our history doesn't start with the Europeans' arrival. It goes back much, much further than that.”

An Amazing Discovery

It started with a homework assignment in 2013, when Michaela was a seventh-grader at Broad Meadows Middle School. Her teacher, Ron Adams, asked his students to each research a historical site in Quincy that they'd like to show tourists. But there was a catch: The site could not be related to the town's most famous family. (Quincy, about 10 miles south of Boston, is the birthplace of two U.S. presidents: John Adams and his son John Quincy Adams.)

Looking for ideas, Michaela began leafing through some books that belonged to her parents. She couldn't believe what she found. According to one historian, the salt marsh adjacent to her school—known in 2013 as Broad Meadows Salt Marsh—was once called Passanageset Knoll. It had been the headquarters of Chickataubut (*chik-uh-taw-but*). He was a sachem, or chief, of the Massachusetts in the early 1600s. (*See map, p. 21.*)

Michaela verified her findings at the local historical society. Then she let her teacher in on the news. Adams admits he was fascinated—and embarrassed. “I've been teaching in this building for 30



◀ Massachusetts tribal members Larry Fisher (left) and Ren Green at the opening of Passanageset Park at Broad Meadows Marsh

▼ Few people in Quincy knew that the tribe had lived on the land for thousands of years.



“The Massachusetts were the first people of Quincy, but no one knew that they lived at the salt marsh.”

years, and I had never heard that before,” he explains.

Michaela felt that the Massachusetts's history and its status as the original inhabitants of the area needed to be recognized. So she reached out to classmates for help.

Five students joined Michaela, and they started collecting records and giving presentations around the community to spread the word. They also met with Massachusetts members. While they were doing all this work, Adams, their teacher, nicknamed them the History Girls.

After a meeting with Quincy mayor Thomas Koch in 2014, the teens came up with the idea of renaming the salt marsh in honor of the Massachusetts. The land, once overrun with invasive species, had

recently been restored. It seemed like the perfect time to rename it.

With the support of local leaders, the History Girls submitted a proposal to rename the salt marsh to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names earlier this year. (The board approves the names of geographic features for the federal government.) Then they waited.

“The Massachusetts were the first people of Quincy, but no one knew that they lived at the salt marsh,” notes Mackenzie Maguire, one of the History Girls. “We wanted to make sure their story was told.”

Quincy's First People

The Massachusetts's story begins thousands of years ago. Before European settlers arrived, the →

tribe lived in what today is Massachusetts, from Salem to Cape Cod along the Atlantic coast, and inland as far as Worcester, explains Ren Green. She is a Massachusetts tribal leader who helped the History Girls with their research.

“We were a large nation of many, many tribes,” Green tells *JS*. “Many people don’t realize the state of Massachusetts got its name from us.” (The word *Massachusetts* means “at the large hill,” in reference to the Great Blue Hill, which is southwest of Boston. See “Native Names,” below, for more.)

But then came the **pandemic**. From 1616 to 1619, a plague killed about 90 percent of native people from Maine to Rhode Island, including many of the Massachusetts. The illness is believed to have been smallpox, and was most likely carried by the Europeans.

To save his tribe, Chickataubut moved his people from the marsh to a disease-free site in Quincy called Moswetuset (*moss-weh-too-set*) Hummock. Although the chief lived there for only a short time—until his death in 1633—Moswetuset became widely regarded as the tribe’s original headquarters in Quincy, and



Passanageset was slowly forgotten.

According to Green, one reason Passanageset and other parts of the Massachusetts’s past may have fallen off historians’ radar has to do with Chickataubut himself. Unlike some well-known American Indian chiefs who “went down in history as the good guys, Chickataubut was not looking to befriend the English,” she says. “He was looking to defend his territory.”

Mission Accomplished

The Massachusetts’s history in the salt marsh is unlikely to be forgotten again. About a month after the History Girls submitted their proposal, they received good news. The U.S. Board on Geographic

▲ The History Girls, with their teachers and Massachusetts members, hold two of the signs they created for the new park.

Names had granted their request: The name Passanageset Park at Broad Meadows Marsh had been approved for use by the federal government. It will appear on U.S. maps with a precise latitude and longitude later this year.

In addition, the marsh will soon feature four signs that tell the story of the Massachusetts and the tribe’s connection to the area. The History Girls wrote the text for the signs with help from Green.

The History Girls are now in high school, but their work is not finished. The students are working with Quincy teachers to get more of the Massachusetts’s history included in local schools’ curriculum. They are also petitioning archaeologists in Colorado for the return of Native American artifacts that were discovered in Massachusetts in 1999.

Still, gaining recognition for the Massachusetts’s first home in Quincy was always the History Girls’ main goal. They hope that when people visit the park, they’ll reflect on the area’s history.

“It feels like something has been accomplished,” Michaela says. “Passanageset is literally on the map now.” ♦

NATIVE NAMES

About half of the names of America’s 50 states are based on Native American words. Here are the stories behind four state names.

TENNESSEE

Experts believe that the name *Tennessee* came from the Cherokee tongue. In 1567, explorers found a Native American village named *Tanasqui* in the present-day state. In the 1700s, traders came upon a village called *Tanasi*. The meaning of both words has since been lost.

NORTH DAKOTA & SOUTH DAKOTA

Both of these states get their names from the Dakota, a tribe of Sioux people who lived in the region. Historians think that the word *Dakota* may mean “friend” or “ally.”

UTAH

One theory about the origin of Utah’s name is that it stems from the Ute tribe, and the word means “people of the mountains.” Another possibility is that *Utah* comes from the Apache word *yuttahih*, meaning “those who are higher up.”

PINPOINTING THE PAST

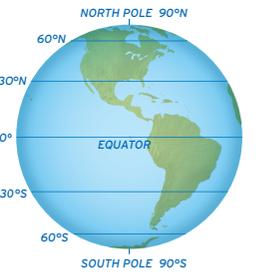
Thanks to the History Girls, the salt marsh next to their school received more than just a new name. The park also has been designated with a precise address on maps: the point at which lines of latitude and longitude cross. Read more about latitude and longitude below. Then answer the questions.



*Degrees of latitude and longitude are divided into minutes (') and seconds ("). *JS* usually rounds to the nearest degree, but we included minutes in the new park’s location to give its precise position.

QUESTIONS

1. Latitude measures distance north and south of which imaginary line?
2. Longitude measures distance east and west of which imaginary line?
3. When the Massachusetts tribe moved from Passanageset Knoll to Moswetuset Hummock, about how many miles did they travel?
4. Which line of longitude passes through the History Girls’ hometown?
5. Historians believe that the Massachusetts once lived as far west as Worcester. What is that city’s latitude and longitude, rounded to the nearest degree?



LATITUDE is measured in degrees (°) north (N) and south (S) of the equator, an imaginary line that circles the middle of the globe at 0°. Lines of latitude increase up to 90°N (at the North Pole) or 90°S (at the South Pole).



LONGITUDE measures distance in degrees east (E) and west (W) of the prime meridian, an imaginary line at 0° that passes through Greenwich, England. Longitude increases up to 180° as you move east or west.

JIM McHARDON/MAPMAN™ (MAP AND GLOBES)

YOUR TURN

Complete Ron Adams’s assignment: Research a historic site in your town, then create a poster about it.



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