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**Locating “Wissatinnewag”:
A Second Opinion**

By

Lion G. Miles

Appearing in the Winter 2006 issue of the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* was an article about the identity of the Indian word “Wissatinnewag” by Marge Bruchac and Peter Thomas. As they explained, the word is found in only one place: a July 1663 letter that John Pynchon of Springfield wrote to the Dutch colony of Rensselaerswyck in New Netherland. Pynchon wrote in English, which was then translated into Dutch, but the original document has been lost. However, an English text of the document exists, published in 1881 by the State of New York. It opens with the following paragraph:

This is written to your Honors at the request of the Indians of Agawam, Pajassuck, Nalwetog, Pacomtuck and the Wissatinnewag, to inform their friends, the Dutch, that they are very much put out, because the Sowquackick Indians had killed and murdered some of the Maquaas [Mohawks]; all the above named Indians request herewith, that the Dutch Commissaries will believe, that only Sowquackick Indians had been killing the Maquaas.¹

¹ Berthold Fernow, ed., *Documents Relating to the History and Settlements of the Towns along the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers from 1630 to 1684, Vol. XIII of Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, ed. by E. B. O’Callaghan and J. H. Brodhead (Albany: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1856-

The Bruchac-Thomas article offers a long argument in an effort to locate Wissatinnewag, but it relies almost exclusively on an elaborate, inconclusive linguistic analysis of the word itself, without providing any real historical evidence. They conclude that Wissatinnewag was a corruption of the Algonquian Indian name for “Housatonic” in what is now Berkshire County, Massachusetts. This conclusion is probably incorrect.

Whether or not Pynchon was familiar with the Dutch or Indian languages is immaterial because there was no Indian community on the Housatonic River of Massachusetts in 1663. On that account alone, the Bruchac-Thomas argument is not particularly convincing when other factors are considered.

A better approach is an examination of the historical context in which Pynchon wrote his letter. By 1656 he and his father had established Indian fur trading posts at Springfield and on the Westfield River.² In 1661 John began trading on the Housatonic River with Mohicans from the Hudson River Valley but that endeavor proved unsuccessful and was abandoned the next year.³ By 1663, there were no Indians living year-round on the Housatonic. The Mohicans of the Hudson River followed a seasonal lifestyle in the seventeenth century and visited their traditional hunting grounds in western Massachusetts only for two-month periods in the fall and winter.⁴

1887), 308. This document is cited in Carl Bridenbaugh, ed., *The Pynchon Papers* (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1982) I, 45-46, but alters the names of the Indians without explanation.

² The 1656 Van der Donck map of New Netherland shows “Mr. Pinsers handel huys” on the Westfield River and “Mr. Pinsers Cleyne val” near Springfield. See E. B. O’Callaghan, *History of New Netherland; or New York Under the Dutch* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1848) II, 205.

³ *Pynchon Papers II*, 58-59; Stephen Innes, *Labor in a New Land: Economy and Society in Seventeenth-Century Springfield* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 31.

⁴ Adriaen Van der Donck, *A Description of the New Netherlands*, ed. by Thomas F. O’Donnell (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 25, 82, 96-97. In 1676 after warring Indians from eastern New England had fled to a place on the Housatonic River and been pursued by Connecticut troops, it was reported that there were no Indians there. See James H. Trumbull and Charles J. Hoadly,

John Pynchon acted as agent for the Indians of the Connecticut River Valley, those whom he called “our Indians.” He had no jurisdiction over the Mohicans of the Hudson Valley, known then as “Albany Indians” and later as “New York Indians.” Thus he had no authority in 1663 to petition the Dutch in favor of any Indians on the Housatonic. They would have sent their petitions directly to the Dutch authorities.⁵

Even if Bruchac and Thomas could establish the presence of Mohicans at Housatonic in July 1663, then it would make no sense for that tribe to enlist the aid of Pynchon for protection from the Mohawks. Mohicans and Mohawks were at war with each other in 1663 and it seems unlikely that the former would be requesting that their enemies not attack them for murders committed by the Sowquackicks.⁶

Within the body of Pynchon’s letter are two phrases that offer significant clues to the location of Wissatinnewag. Pynchon begins by mentioning five tribes or locations: Agawam (Springfield), Pajassuck (Westfield), Nalwetog (Northampton), Pocumtuck (Deerfield), and the mysterious Wissatinnewag. In his second paragraph, he refers “to the other Indians of the Caneticot [Connecticut] river, as Pacomtuck, Nanatan, Agawam and further down.” Later he describes “the Southern Indians of Pacomtuck and Agawam and farther South.”⁷ Since Pynchon had no agency over Indians on the Housatonic, he was representing only those tribes on the Connecticut River. These phrases then suggest that Wissatinnewag was on that river to the south of Agawam and within the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

eds., *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut (1636-1776)* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood & Brainard Co., 1850-1890) II, 472.

⁵ Edmund B. O’Callaghan, *Calendar of Dutch Historical Manuscripts in the Office of the Secretary of State, Albany, New York, 1630-1664* (Albany: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1865), 211, 291; *Documents of Colonial New York XIII*, 168, 310.

⁶ A. J. F. van Laer, ed., *Correspondence of Jeremias van Rensselaer, 1651-1674* (Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1932), 413, 449. The war lasted until 1671.

⁷ *Documents of Colonial New York XIII*, 308-309.

When William Pynchon, John's father, arrived on the Connecticut River in 1635, he received a conditional grant from the General Court for the establishment of a warehouse below the Enfield Rapids at what is today Warehouse Point in East Windsor, Connecticut. In 1660 this land was included within the bounds of Springfield and, as such, fell under the authority of John Pynchon.⁸

There were a number of small Indian tribes along the river above Windsor but the documentary record of them is sketchy at best. In 1614 the Dutch navigator Adriaen Block sailed up the river as far as the rapids, where he found an Indian village with people he called Nawass and Sequins, neither or whom can be identified today. In 1634 William Bradford of Plymouth reported a company of about one thousand Indians living on the Connecticut River at a distance from the future Warehouse Point, half of whom would soon die of a small pox epidemic.⁹ Benjamin Trumbull's *History of Connecticut* (1797) described the number of Indians there in 1633:

From the accounts given of the Connecticut Indians, they cannot be estimated at less than twelve or sixteen thousand....Within the town of Windsor only, there were ten distinct tribes, or sovereignties. About the year 1670, their bowmen were reckoned at two thousand.¹⁰

Not all of these tribes are identified today but among them may be included the names Agawams, Windsor Indians, and River Indians.

Agawams claimed the land between Enfield Rapids and the falls at South Hadley and it was members of that tribe who sold land south of

⁸ Henry M. Burt, *The First Century of the History of Springfield: The Official Records from 1636 to 1736* (Springfield: Henry M. Burt, 1898) I, 284; Frances Armytage and Juliette Tomlinson, *The Pynchons of Springfield, Founders and Colonizers (1636-1702)* (Springfield: Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, 1969), 29; John Warner Barber, *Connecticut Historical Collections* (New Haven: Durrie & Peck and J. W. Barber, 1836), 76-77.

⁹ William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647* (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1912) II, 164n, 193.

¹⁰ Benjamin Trumbull, *A Complete History of Connecticut, Civil and Ecclesiastical* (1797; reprint, New London: H. D. Utley, 1898) I, 22.

Agawam to William Pynchon in 1636.¹¹ An Agawam Indian, who identified himself as “ye proper owner of al the Land below the Long medow brooke, on the East side of Quinnecticot River; down to the fals,” sold land there to John Pynchon in 1652.¹² A Windsor Indian named Tawtaps, who also claimed to own all the land east of the river down to “Umsquattanuck” in Enfield, sold parts of East Windsor, Ellington, Enfield, and Somers to John Pynchon and others in 1680. He earlier sold an island at Windsor in 1678.¹³ This man may have been the Windsor Indian living near Hartford who warned the settlers at Springfield of an attack during King Philip’s War. He was known by various names: Captain Toto, Toutops, Totaps, Tots, and Top.¹⁴

When Pynchon wrote of a place “further down” and “farther south,” he was probably referring to the former part of Springfield now within the bounds of Connecticut, an area then populated by several tribes. Those people occupied the east side of the river as far as Nipmuck territory at the mountainous terrain just west of the Wabaquassett country in what is now Tolland County, Connecticut.¹⁵ A 1684 deed from the Mohegan chief Oweneco referenced a place called “Missatchawag” at the western bounds of Nipmuck territory between Tolland and Ellington, Connecticut.¹⁶ The noted Indian philologist, Dr. James H. Trumbull,

¹¹ Nathaniel B. Sylvester, *History of the Connecticut Valley in Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1879) I, 20; Harry A. Wright, ed., *Indian Deeds of Hampden County* (Springfield, 1905), 11-13.

¹² Wright, *Indian Deeds*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 94-96.

¹⁴ William Hubbard, *The History of the Indian Wars in New England* (1677; reprint, New York: Heritage Books, 1990) I, 121; Benjamin Trumbull, *A Compendium of the Indian Wars of New England*, ed. by Frederick B. Hartranft (Hartford: Edwin Valentine Mitchell, 1926), 37.

¹⁵ The bounds of the Nipmuck territory are shown on the map in *Forty- Third Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1925-1926* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1928), opp. 212.

¹⁶ *Records of Connecticut Colony* III, 156.

interpreted this word to be a derivation of “Massa-adchu-auk,” meaning “at the great hill.”¹⁷

There may be a linguistic relationship between Wissatinnewag and Missatchawag and, if so, they may refer to the same location. The pronunciation of Indian names has always been a puzzle for English speakers so it would not be surprising if John Pynchon used an inaccurate spelling, just as the name “Wisconsin” evolved from Father Jolliet’s “Miskonsing” in 1674.¹⁸ It is also possible that the Dutch copyist of Pynchon’s letter misread an initial letter “M” for a “W.”¹⁹ Examples of John’s handwriting in 1663 contain “M’s” that could be seen as “W’s.” The name Wissatinnewag would have been as strange to a Dutchman in the seventeenth century as it is to us today.

Whatever the meaning of the word, two factors tend to locate it south of Springfield on the Connecticut River. In 1663 there were no Indians on the Housatonic River and John Pynchon represented only those tribes on the Connecticut River, including those “farther South” of Springfield in what is now the state of Connecticut.

¹⁷ James H. Trumbull, *Indian Names in Connecticut* (1881; reprint, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1974), 30-31.

¹⁸ Alice E. Smith, *From Exploration to Statehood, Vol. I of The History of Wisconsin*, ed. by William Fletcher Thompson (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973-), 30n.

¹⁹ Armytage, *Pynchons of Springfield*, 30.