

# Westford's natural setting bountious for early settlers

By June Kennedy

**W**ith Thanksgiving upon us, let us turn to the friendly host of red men who greeted the descendants of that first pilgrim ship. Concerning the tribes, or rather sub-tribes of Indians supposed to have been indigenous to Westford and its neighboring towns, there is little in the early records to indicate that the various Massachusetts red men were warlike, or otherwise than friendly toward the white settlers.

The tribes in this locality were probably, by affiliation, at least, of the Abenaki nation. To the northwest were the Algonquins, to the west the Mohawks, or Iroquois.

History tells us that the Massachusetts tribes suffered greatly, and in many instances were exterminated by the blood-thirsty Mohawks who came across the Berkshires by way of an established mountain trail now used as a scenic highway.

In Connecticut the powerful Narragansett tribes were alone able to hold their own against these warring tribes. Our local Indians were easy prey. Records seem to indicate that they were dignified and industrious, for they cultivated the soil as well as hunted and fished. We know of Wannalancit, son of the great Passaconaway, sachem of all the tribes in this locality including the Pawtuckets, the Nashuas, the Tadmucks, the Nashobas and indeed all the sub-tribes of the Abenaki nation as far north as the White Mountains.

The following are excerpts taken from a letter written about 55 years ago by a Mr. Goode of Westford: "I wish I knew more about the Indians who lived about Westford Hill, trod its wild forests, hunted the deer and the bear on Scribner Hill perhaps, or fished in Forge Pond, Nabnasset, the Stoney Brook and our other ponds and brooks. That he lived here once and in considerable numbers

there is plenty of evidence.

"In my quondam wanderings in our pine woods or along some crystal stream in quest of the elusive trout, I often see him in fancy, with his feathered head-dress, his bow and quiver, his copper skin glistening against the green of the foliage, threading his silent way cat-like through the almost impenetrable undergrowth. I come across undoubted signs of him by some bubbling spring, for he always set his teepee up where there was good water. Afraid of him am I? Oh no! Far rather would I meet with him than many a specimen of my own race in these modern and lawless days." (This was written in 1931).

"But you asked me to give you such items as I have been told by others, and for the absolute truth of which I cannot vouch — which does not mean that I distrust my informants, though they may have been led to accept as fact that which perhaps is tradition.

"Well, to begin: As I understand it, Forge Pond was considerably less in size in early days. In the outlet into Stony Brook, it is known that Andrew the Indian maintained a fish weir, the rights to which he sold for a red coat and a musket and some small consideration. Salmon and shad came up from the sea by way of the Merrimack River, therefore the pond was doubtless a favorite place for the Indians. So they named it, 'Mattawanakee' which is said to mean 'good fishing place'.

"From Mr. Parsons I learned that it was Indian custom to excavate in the slope of some high bank on the shore and construct an oven of stone. The stones were heated, the fish laid upon them, covered with some material that would retain the heat and thus nicely baked. He indicated to me two of these fish ovens, one on my shore and the other on the high bank near Dr. Sleeper's camp.

"To Mr. Frank Hildreth I was indebted for a bit of interesting

information. I think it was about his grandparents who lived in the old homestead — I am sure you know where it is — in Indian times. The Nashoba tribe lived and had their corn fields on the plain at the foot of Nashoba Hill. While they were friendly, the grandmother was afraid of them.

"On the hill above the homestead is a wood road. It was her custom to take a gun and walk up that hill after sunset to wait for her husband to come home from work. There was a particular boulder upon which she sat to wait for him. This became known as 'grandmother's rock'. I have sat there myself and tried to picture the scene — in those old pioneer days of peril. What brave hearts those old forebears must have owned.

"There is no doubt that a tribe lived on Westford Hill. I have been told many Indian relics were ploughed up on the Bunce Farm, as well as on the Chamberlain or O'Brien farm on the other side of the hill. Tadmuck swamp was probably a good hunting ground. In fact, the region about must have been the resort of much game, for Indians did not locate permanently in any other place.

"And now I speak of an incident which I have many times regretted. When I purchased my land at Forge Pond from Mrs. Parsons, I was shown a deed by Mr. Parsons signed by an Indian owner of the same land. I cannot recall the Indian's name, but his mark was on the deed which was written on heavy paper or parchment, I cannot say which. I did not give it much attention at the time as I was in a hurry to leave. He offered to give it to me, but I forgot to take it away with me when I left. I recall his calling my attention to the quaint phraseology viz: 'To have and to hold as long as wood grows and water runs'."

*June W. Kennedy, a Westford resident, is the author of "Westford Recollections", a compendium of photos and vignettes outlining local history.*