“The Bride of Motowampate”

Genesis 1:26-31

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***27****So God created humankind in his own image,in the image of God he created them;  
    male and female he created them.* ***28****God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” – Genesis 1:27-28*

This is a story of love and war, of hardship and trial, of courage and persistence. It is an age-old story, told so many times over the millennia, about the relationship between man and woman, mother and son, and father and daughter. It is also a story of the roots of Native America, of the local Massachuset tribe and the invader Mic-Maq tribe. Many local Saugus residents claim Mic-Maq heritage, a tribe from Maine and New Brunswick, and today we will learn how they happen to land here in Saugus.

In 1607 Nanapashemet became Great Chief Sachem of the Massachuset tribe. He married his wife, whose name has been lost to history, but in writings of the time she is called Squaw Sachem. Since “squaw” is considered an offensive word by Native Americans, I will use the name Mother Sachem instead.

The couple would have four children: a son, Wonohaquaham (1608); a son, Montowampate, (1609) whose likeness is seen on the Saugus Town Seal; a daughter, Yawate (1614); and a son, Wenepoykin (1616), who will late be known by the English name George Rumney-Marsh.

War began in 1607 between tribes trading with French fur-trappers. In 1615 the Mic-Maq from Maine killed the Great Sachem of the Penobscot tribe, who was a cousin to Nanapashemet. He retaliated, killing many Mic-Maq warriors and capturing their women and children. Those captives may be the descendants of present-day Mic-Maq Saugonians.

In 1617, 95% of Nanapashemet’s people are killed by a plague, probably small pox brought by Europeans, but his own family is spared. Two years later the Mic-Maq will finally accomplish their main goal: they kill Nanapashemet.

Now it is time for Mother Sachem to show her leadership skills. She assumes command of her tribe, and proceeds to conduct raids on neighboring villages to show, small as they may be in numbers, that they and she are not weak. It is also the same time the Pilgrims land in Massachuset territory, and the machinations begin to see which tribe will align itself with the settlers in order to drive out the other tribes. Many tribes do join the Pilgrims, afraid of both Mother Sachem and the Mic-Maqs.

Now Mother Sachem names each of her three sons as Sachems in three areas:

Wenepoykin, the youngest at age 8, gets Salem; Montowampete (13) gets Saugus;

Wonohaquaham, at the ripe old age of 14, gets Charlestown. Nowhere is it mentioned the daughter Yawate gets a Sachem-hood but, like her mother, she may later on have the chance to rule through her marriage with another Sachem.

In 1625 Mother Sachem meets the owner of a trading post in Quincy named Thomas Morton. They become very good friends and Mother Sachem was seen many a time at the trading post participating in what was called “merry making”: drinking, dancing, playing drums, and firing off rifles. The settlers were punished by the Governor of Massachusetts for consorting with the Natives and for selling them guns. Afterward, Mother Sachem settles down into semi-retirement, deeding many, but not all, of her duties to her sons.

Now we turn to the story of the most well-known of Mother Sachem’s sons, Montowampate. His love-life is an interesting one and is recorded in a book written in 1632 by Thomas Morton called *New English Canaan*. In 1629, at the age of 20, Montowampate married Wananuchus, the daughter of Passaconoway, Great Sachem of the Pennacook tribe from the Merrimack River region in New Hampshire.

This was a very favorable match – the daughter of a Sachem marries a Sachem. The wedding was a multi-day affair at Wananuchus’ village, as was the custom, and after it ended, the young couple traveled back to live in Saugus. After a time, the young bride felt homesick and asked her husband for permission to travel back to Pennacook territory to see her father. Montowampate agreed and gave her an escort of 30 of his warriors. Safely arriving at Passaconoway’s village, the warriors then headed back to Saugus.

Some time passed before the bride felt she should return to her husband. Passaconoway sent a messenger to Montowampate and told him to send his 30 warriors again to escort Wananuchu back. But Montowampate, feeling this was a social slight against his manhood, refused. He sent the messenger back to Passaconoway, saying that he had fulfilled *his* end of the agreement by escorting his wife there; now it behooved Passaconoway to send 30 of *his* warriors to escort her back.

Well, this did not sit well with the Great Sachem Passaconoway, to be treated this way by a mere 20-year-old upstart. He sent messengers *back* with his “no,” and Montowampate sent *his* back as well, and the two went back and forth for quite a long time, each refusing to capitulate to the other. It is not recorded who caved first, but Wananuchu did manage to return to her husband, as more adventures awaited her.

The poet John Greenleaf Whittier heard this tale of the bride of Motowampate and, taken by the story-telling possibilities, retold it, changing the name to *The Bridal of Penacook*, and renaming the bride Wetamoo. Whittier imagined that the bride, tired of waiting for the *men* to decide her fate, took it upon herself to travel back to her husband alone, in a canoe on the Merrimack River in the winter. But Whittier’s story doesn’t end well, as poor Wetamoo never makes it back. A few lines of poem go like this:

*Sick and a-weary of her lonely life,*

*Heedless of the peril, the still faithful wife*

*Had left her mother’s grave, her father’s door*

*To seek the wigwam of her chief once more.*

*Down the white rapids, like a sear leaf whirled*

*On the sharp rocks and piled up ice hurled*

*Empty and broken circled the canoe,*

*In the vexed pool below – But where was Wetamoo?*

In 1631 Montowompete and his brother Wonohaquaham are wounded in a battle with the Mic-Maq and the bride Wananuchu was kidnapped and held for ransom. After two months, the ransom is paid and she is returned.

In 1633 a smallpox epidemic killed a large number of Natives, including Montowompete and Wonohaquaham. However, Mother Sachem is still holding onto power somewhat. She makes treaties with the settlers, deeding them land which is now Charlestown, Arlington, and Natick. She then signs a Treaty of Submission with the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and her and her remaining tribal members are sent to the Praying Indian Village in Natick, where they will be Christianized and receive copies of the Bible translated into their language.

Residence in the Praying Village lasts only a few years, as King Philip’s War heats up and the,Natives are moved to Deer Island as prisoners. Conditions are so unsanitary that 40% of the Natives died. Fortunately, Mother Sachem never had to endure this suffering, as she died some years before the move. Her two surviving children will live out their days in Natick.

There’s a lot of American history packed into this story of Montowampate and his family. It’s safe to say we can multiply this story by the hundreds, and accurately describe what happened to countless tribes, consisting of millions of people, when they encountered Europeans who would become the conquerors of America. This history has divided descendants of both peoples to this very day.

Yet the small details of individual stories still resonate with us. We can relate to the death of a parent at a young age; to our first love; to our marriage; to our warring in-laws; and to the courage of a single parent trying to keep the family together.

The Book of Genesis says,

“*God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them;  
    male and female he created them.* ***28****God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

Christians who tried to convert the Native Americans forgot this teaching. Humans are humans, no matter their race, color, or gender. Did God create each person and see that they were good or not? If we believe that God created all people and things to be good, we must believe every single human being is holy and made in God’s image. I don’t know what the Natives were taught in that Praying Village, but today I hope that we know better - that Christianity teaches we are all equal – no ifs, ands, or buts.

For our shared history is a story of love, of hardship and trial, of courage and persistence. It is the age-old story, told so many times over the millennia, about the relationship between man and woman, mother and son, and father and daughter. This is our common story, lived out again and again in the sight of God and in community with one another. May we learn from our past and be united in our future. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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