
From the Archivists

The Mashpee Archives

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Mashpee was originally an Indian village. Its unique history presents many challenges to the members of the Mashpee Historical Commission as they open the Mashpee Archives to the public in 1988, the youngest of Cape Cod's town archives preserving the history of the descendants of the oldest Cape Cod inhabitants.

Many areas were settled as towns throughout Massachusetts beginning in the 17th century. In those new towns roads were laid out and town centers developed around a meeting house. The meeting house served both religious and governmental purposes and was often a repository for public records and documents. Mashpee was different. It was an area set aside by the Plymouth Colony as a home for the Indians displaced by the new towns being built on their ancestral lands.

The Hotel Attaquin was built in the 1840s on the banks of the Mashpee River behind the present archives building by Solomon Attaquin, a Mashpee Indian. The hotel changed hands several times but retained its original name until destroyed by fires in the 1960s. Histories recall the names of several luminaries, including Daniel Webster, President Grover Cleveland and Boston lawyer John Welles Farley, who were guests at the hotel while enjoying the renowned fishing in the pristine waters of Mashpee's ponds and rivers. Courtesy Mashpee Historical Commission.



Unlike the English settlers who created a town center and spread from that location, the Indians followed their own traditions and settled in separate small villages close to the several large bodies of water in Mashpee. A meeting house was located in the center of the area about equidistant from the many settlements, but a town center never developed around the meeting house. Neither did it become a central place of government because of continual differences of opinions among the residents.

Mashpee was at first designated a Plantation. The inhabitants shared the land in common and were supervised by Overseers appointed by the Governor. In 1834, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts named Mashpee a District, allowing residents to become self-governing and to sell the common lands among themselves. In 1840, Mashpee was recognized as a Parish, permitting proprietors to support a religion of their choice. Mashpee was incorporated as a Town in 1870. Eighteen years later the semblance of a town center appeared when a public hall was erected near the North District School and leased to the town for town meetings. However, Mashpee did not own a town hall to house the public records until 1905 when the town finally purchased the public hall.

Before 1905, records were scattered among the Overseers, the Selectmen, the District, the Parish and various individuals. The Historical Commission is actively responding to the challenge to gather copies of these records into the Mashpee Archives. A valuable acquisition is an account book of Mashpee expenditures covering twenty years beginning in 1822. Primary source materials are being thoroughly researched in order to provide accurate dates for the very few old buildings existing into the 20th century whose dates were assigned by oral or undocumented written histories. Deeds and wills at the Barnstable

Registry of Deeds detailing the transfer of Mashpee lands are being studied by commission members and transcribed for the archives.

Chairman Ann Tanneyhill, the guiding force behind the volunteers, has set up the archives in a very workable fashion with the assistance of archivist Charlotte Price. A library of Mashpee and Indian history is being developed. At present, the library contains over three hundred volumes of Massachusetts Public Documents which were previously stored in town hall. The earliest volume dates to 1692. Town Reports, starting in 1870, are gradually being collected; and school records and vital records dating to the mid-19th century have been donated to the archives. Marie Scalley has gathered information about every aspect of Mashpee's history during the last fifteen years, including the explosion in land development and the Indian land suit. The material is stored in several filled drawers of vertical files. Photograph and map collections continue to grow as public awareness of the newly opened archives increases.

Native American commission members Frank Hicks, Hazel Oakley and Joan Tavares are adding their memories and personal anecdotes of Mashpee history to the oral histories of other descendants of Mashpee's early families. These oral histories will be available on tape.

As the collections expand, volunteers spend more and more hours each week at the Mashpee Archives copying loaned documents and preserving donated materials. The Mashpee Archives was established by Town Meeting action on December 2, 1985, and is housed in the former Mashpee Public Library building, Great Neck Road North. The archives is open to the public on Thursdays from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. and by appointment (telephone 477-9787.)