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Indian History Leaves Prints in Rhode Island Names

By CHARLES HILLINGER,
Times Staff Writer

QUONOCHONTAUG, R.I.—Michael Pellam stood in front of the Grange Hall in this tiny Rhode Island coastal village, sheepishly shrugged his shoulders and said: "Only those of us who live here can pronounce the name of our village and *we* have a hard time." You will hear it pronounced a dozen different ways by locals. Strangers don't even try.

Pellam, 39, owner of Michael's Grocery and Michael's Garage, said he did not call his businesses Quonochontaug Grocery or Quonochontaug Garage "because it's too much of a mouthful for one person to handle." Residents here call the place Quany and themselves Quanyes.

Rhode Island, which measures only 48 miles north to south and 37

Charles Hillinger's America

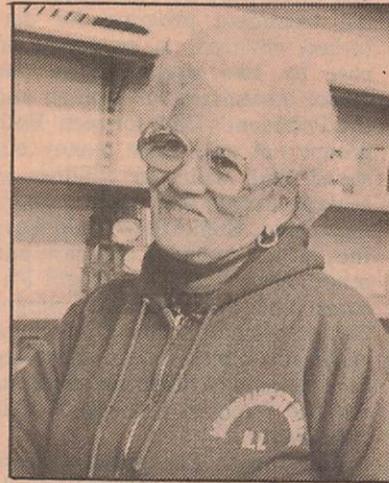
miles east to west, is sprinkled with tiny villages bearing colorful, hard-to-pronounce names, legacies of five Indian tribes that lived here—the Narragansetts, Niantics, Nipmucks, Pequots and Wampanoags.

Quonochontaug means black fish. Dentist George R. Gray, 59, and his son, George S. Gray, 30, a teacher, are known as the Quonochontaug fish taggers. For 13 years they have been tagging striped bass for the American Littoral Society to track migratory patterns, longevity, growth and other information.

The Grays also are Quonochontaug historians.

"The oldest farmhouse in Rhode Island's south county still standing was built here in 1710," the dentist noted. "Three British sailors killed during the War of 1812 are buried behind the farmhouse.

"British vessels would fire hot cannonballs at Quonochontaug Beach to set houses on fire and terrorize the farmers," he continued. "To this day, when seaweed washes in on the beach, a flag is run up a pole to alert farmers. The



CHARLES HILLINGER
Christine Sisco, owner of general store in Misquamicut.

farmers gather the seaweed for fertilizer."

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In Weekapaug, down the road from Quonochontaug, mail carrier Ronald MacDonald was delivering mail. "My work is picking up," he said. "In winter most of the homes here are boarded up. These big old houses belong to families from all over the East Coast who use them mainly as summer homes."

At the Weekapaug Dairy on Passapapaug Road nobody was home except the cows. Posted on the door and window of the dairy's retail store were stickers that read: "Never Mind the Dog, Beware of Owner," "Milk Drinkers Are More Passionate," "This Place Guarded by Shotgun 3 Nights a Week. You Guess Which 3 Nights."

Neither MacDonald nor anyone in the village knew what Weekapaug means.

Land of Johnny Cakes

Usquepaug (us-ka-pog), another village, population 35, is famous throughout New England for its 260-year-old grist mill and its annual Johnny Cake Festival.

Johnny cakes, also known as Jonny or Journey cakes, are a Rhode Island specialty dish made of white cap Indian flint corn. The cornmeal cakes, fried on a griddle until the crust is crispy, are eaten

by many Rhode Islanders at breakfast, lunch and dinner—instead of potatoes. There is a Society for the Propagation of Johnny Cakes in Rhode Island.

Paul Drumm Jr., 55, and his son Paul III, 23, operate Kenyon's Corn Meal Co., the historic stone mill where corn, wheat, rye and oats are ground in the traditional way between two Rhode Island fine-grained granite millstones. In addition to Johnny cake mix, they produce clam cake and fritters mix and buttermilk and honey pancake mix.

Baffling Sounds

"You know a couple drove in here the other day. They were lost. The man came into the mill," the elder Drumm recalled. "He asked me where the fork in the road to the left went. I said Quonochontaug. He asked me where the fork in the road to the right went. I said Escoheag.

"He went out to his car and told his wife: 'That fella in there doesn't speak a word of English.'"

Drumm explained that Usquepaug is an Indian word borrowed from the Scottish-Gaelic word for whiskey. He reached into a cabinet and brought out a bottle of Tullamore Dew Irish whiskey. On the back were the words *Uisge Baugh*, meaning *water of life* or *whiskey*.

"The Indian version of Uisge Baugh was Wowoskepog, which became Usquepaug. So, however you figure it, Usquepaug, Rhode Island means Whiskey, Rhode Island," he said.

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At Misquamicut, near the Connecticut border, Christine Sisco, 69, owner-operator of Sisco General Store, wore a sweat shirt inscribed with the peculiar name of her hometown.

"Misquamicut has something to do with an Indian maiden," Sisco said.

"No, it doesn't, Chris. It means a fish," said her sister Nancy Fiore, 72.

A local historian said it is Indian for *salmon*.

Two of Rhode Island's eight cities have Indian names—Pawtucket and Woonsocket. Among

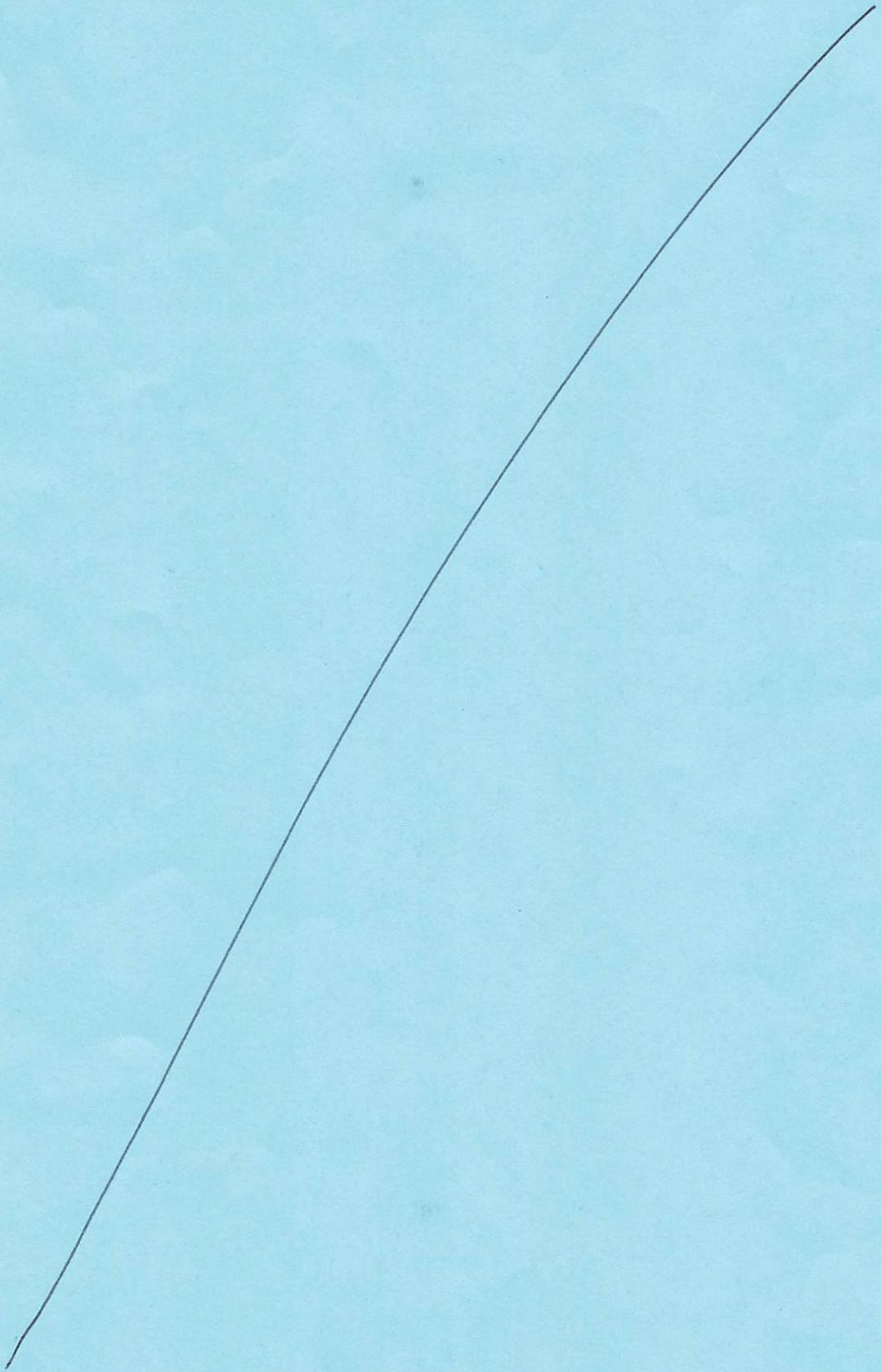
the other villages with tongue-twisting names are: Apponaug, Canonchet, Chepiwanoxet, Coninicut, Matunuck, Meshanticut, Misquamicut, Moosup Valley, Nausaquet, Ninigret, Pettaquamscutt, Quidnick, Sakonnet, Scituate, Shawomet, Watchaug, Winnapaug and Yawgoo.

Oldest General Store

The Brown & Hopkins County Store, located in the village of Chepachet, is filled with original 19th-Century grocery items. Founded in 1809, it is reported to be the oldest continuously operating general store in America. Carol and Paul Wilcox are the 21st owners of the establishment.

Corona Magner, 60, lives in Pawcoag and is a postal clerk in Chepachet. "I have no idea what either name means," she said. "But that's not so strange. These names are something we live with all our lives. To us they do not seem that unusual."

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RHODE ISLAND

PORTSMOUTH was an original town settled in 1638. Indian name was Pocasset. Named for a town in the south of England of that name and a celebrated seaport at that time.

NEWPORT was an original town, settled in 1639; named because it was a new port, to distinguish it from the old port at Portsmouth.

MIDDLETOWN was incorporated June 16, 1743; taken from Newport. So named because it was the middle town on the island lying between Newport and Portsmouth.

NEW SHOREHAM was incorporated November 4, 1672. Admitted to the colony as Block Island May 4, 1664. New Shoreham so-called "as signes of our unity and likeness to many ports of our native country."

JAMESTOWN was incorporated November 4, 1678. Named in honor of King James II. Indian name Quononoquitt (Conanicut).

LITTLE COMPTON was one of the five towns received from Massachusetts January 27, 1746-47. Named from Leocompton, England. Indian name - Seaconnet.

TIVERTON was one of the five towns received from Massachusetts January 27, 1746-47. Named from Tiverton, England. Indian name Pocasset. We think there is an error here in saying that the Indian name was Pocasset, when Portsmouth, across the river or strait, was called the same. In all probability the Indian word had very near the same sound.

Before doing research in Rhode Island it is wise to get acquainted with the various subdivisions of the early days. Clues then may be traced back to earlier records and these records might not even be in the same township or even the same state but in parent towns and states.

For instance; Bristol Co., Rhode Island is made up of three towns acquired from Massachusetts; Bristol, Barrington and Warren. Early records of many early settlers in Bristol Co. (prior to 1746-7) will be found in Massachusetts towns of Swansea, Rehoboth, etc. Coventry into Warrick records, Richmond into Charleston into Westerly; Exeter into North Kingston into Kings Towne records, etc. This is especially true in the case of townships making up Providence County.

RHODE ISLAND HISTORIES - Gen. Helper June 1948

PROVIDENCE CO. formed June 22, 1703 from Original Co. - Co. Seat, Providence

KENT CO. formed June 11, 1750 from Providence and Newport Cos. - Co Seat, E. Greenwich

WASHINGTON CO. formed June 16, 1729, formerly Narragansett - Co. seat, S. Kingston

NEWPORT CO. formed June 22, 1703 - original county - Co. Seat, Newport.

BRISTOL CO. formed Feb. 17, 1747 from Newport Co. - Co. Seat, Warren

PROVIDENCE COUNTY was known in 1647 as PROVIDENCE PLANTATION

DATES OF CITY AND TOWN INCORPORATION

Providence - 1636	Jamestown - 1678	Bristol - 1747	Barrington - 1770
Portsmouth - 1638	S. Kingston - 1723	Warren - 1747	Foster - 1781
Newport - 1639	Glocester - 1731	Cumberland - 1747	Pawtucket - 1862
Warwick - 1643	Scituate - 1731	Cranston - 1754	E. Providence - 1863
Westerly - 1669	Smithfield - 1731	Hopkinston - 1757	Woonsocket - 1867
N. Shoreham - 1672	Charlestown - 1738	Johnstown - 1759	Lincoln - 1871
E. Greenwich - 1677	Coventry - 1741	N. Providence - 1765	



