

Old Betty

by Doris Sherrow, March 2001

The last Wangunk Indian in Portland was called "**Old Betty**." In the early 1800s, she lived on the west side of Penny Corner Road, on a hill which was still called "Betty's Hill" a century later. It is possible that "Penny Corner" was actually "Betty Corner" and has somehow been changed over the decades.

Every year Betty hosted a great feast, and Wangunk from as far away as New York gathered to enjoy the good food and each other's company.

The Wangunks lived on the large part of the reservation between High Street and Gospel Lane — the small part, on Indian Hill Avenue, was largely for ceremonial purposes. Portland resident **David Sage** (1718-1803) told his grandson **Philip** (1786-1855) of the days of his childhood, when many Wangunk families lived on Penny Corner Road, and Philip passed on the information to **Dr. Joseph Barratt** (1796-1882), who recorded it in the pamphlet for the 1850 opening of Indian Hill Cemetery in Middletown.

Barratt wrote, "There were fourteen wigwams on Betnees Hill, near the old meeting house where **Mr. Talcott** now preaches. (In 1850 the meeting house stood on the site of 86 Bartlett Street.) Of the Indians, many went to Stockbridge. The settlement about Wangunk was thick with Indians. The present **Philip Sage, Esq.**, late Collector of this port, relates that his grandfather **David**, went to reside in Chatham [around 1725 after his father died]. There were then only three white boys. His playmates were fourteen Indian lads."

Beers' History of Middlesex County, written in 1884, offers more information about Betty. The Portland section of this magnificent book was written by **Mrs. Julia Bayne**, wife of **John S. Bayne**, the minister of the Congregational Church. Mrs. Bayne talked to people who could remember Betty as an old woman, "bent, white-haired, her dark skin almost blanched by age, living in a hut on the spot still called Betty's Hill." (p.496). One man of Mrs. Bayne's acquaintance recalled his terror as a child upon seeing a parade of Indians passing his grandmother's house on their way to Betty's for their annual visit. His grandmother pulled him out from under her bed where he had hidden, and made him watch the Indians as they cooked their food. They had brought sacks of small turtles which they threw into kettles of boiling water, cooked until tender, then ate off the shell with great relish. His fear disappeared. Betty was famous for her cooking.

Mrs. Bayne cites another dish of Betty's---"savory eel." The diner in this case was a Yankee rather than a Wangunk, a nearby landowner who had been out strolling when Betty invited him to lunch. Bayne speculates that he asked her where she got the delicious eels. "She answered calmly, 'plenty black snake on the ledge,' pointing to a pile of heads which were too serpentine to leave room for doubt." He was taken aback by the snake heads, but he had to admit, the meal had been wonderful!

Who was Betty? Deeds from the Wangunk show at least two "Bettys." A 1719 deed was signed by "**Sawoppin** alias Bette," who was the daughter of **Wesumsha**, one of the original 1673 Proprietors of the Wangunk reservation. A 1740 deed bore the signature of both "Old Bettynees" and "Young Bettynees." And a 1749 deed called the two women Old and Young Betty Neas.

One interesting 1726 entry in Middletown Land Records says, "Several Indians desired a record of their names & [descent] from Indians which were the proprietors of lands in Midletown [sic]." In it, **James Sasepequan**, born in 1719 (and doubtless one of David Sage's Wangunk playmates), traces his descent from Old Betty the daughter of Wesumsha--Betty was his grandmother. And in fact, one of the lots east of Penny Corner Road was long described as **Pequin Pasture**, "Pequin" being one of many shortened versions of James's name. The 1765 deed signing the reservation over to the English bore the mark of "**Betty Nepash**." It would be likely that "Old Betty" had passed away, and this was "Young Betty." Of course there is still a chronology problem: if Young Betty was old enough to sign in 1740, she would be well into her 90s or older by the 1810s. Perhaps there was a Betty Neas III, or perhaps Young Betty lived this long. Such longevity is not unheard of in native cultures. **Gladys Tantaquidgeon** of the Mohegan has passed the century mark, nurtured on native folk medicine and spiritual power.

A man called **Jonathan Palmer** (c.1756-1813) was the last Wangunk in East Hampton. His is a sad story, told in **Carl Price's Yankee Township**. Surely Jonathan Palmer would have known

Betty, and he probably attended her annual celebrations. One of Palmer's descendants lives in the area today. He has told me that the name Bette (with an e) was always held in some sort of respect in his family. I suspect that Old Betty herself was held in great respect, and that her glow radiates on some 180 years later.

About 1747, **Job Bates** built himself a house on a corner of the smaller part of the reservation. This was perhaps 18 years before the land was legally sold to the English---that means Bates was a squatter. I live in his house. I have often pondered why someone would put their young family in such a location if it were dangerous, and I am inclined to think that he got on well enough with the Wangunk to feel friendliness rather than danger.

His second daughter, born in 1750, was named Betty. Perhaps that was just a pretty girl's name. Perhaps his wife Faith's older sister Elizabeth had been called Betty.

Or perhaps he and Faith wanted to do honor to Betty, the Wangunk Proprietor's daughter.