

Squanto, Who Helped Pilgrims Survive, Honored With New Plaque

by Debra Lawless

CHATHAM – Last Saturday afternoon Ron Nickerson of the Nickerson Family Association, Inc. (NFA) and Jill James, a member of the Wampanoag Tribe who is also a 12th generation descendant of a Mayflower passenger, together unveiled a new plaque honoring Tisquantum, or Squanto, the Native American who aided the Pilgrims during their early days in Plymouth.

The new plaque, which highlights moments in Squanto's life, is on the grounds of the NFA at 1107 Orleans Rd. It stands near a plaque honoring Native Americans and a monument proclaiming that Squanto died "within gunshot" of the stone. The plaque was created in preparation for the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the Mayflower Pilgrims in 2020. After turning around off Chatham due to dangerous shoaling, the Mayflower sailed north and landed first in Provincetown, where the Pilgrims stayed for roughly five weeks, and then sailed on to Plymouth. Both Provincetown and Plymouth are planning events to commemorate the Mayflower landing.

For the unveiling ceremony and reception, which lasted under an hour, the weather was perfect with bright sunshine, a blue sky dotted with cumulus clouds and temperatures hovering in the low 60s. After the ceremony, the NFA served cornbread and apple cider on the lawn behind the Caleb Nickerson Homestead.

Representatives of both Plymouth 400 and the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants addressed the 50 or so who attended the event.

"It's fitting we are honoring and highlighting the life of Tisquantum here today," Michelle Pecoraro, executive director of Plymouth 400, said in remarks before the unveiling. Pecoraro noted that for many years since Pilgrim days "the Wampanoag perspective rarely if ever has been a part of the dialogue to the Pilgrim landing." The relationship between the people of these two radically different cultures was complex, and Squanto's own life exemplified that complexity. Squanto was born into the Patuxet tribe in about 1585 and later sold into slavery in Europe and exhibited as a curiosity there. When he returned home in about 1619 he found that his people had been wiped out by disease and the "natives were now wary of him," Pecoraro said.

Since he spoke English, Squanto acted as a liaison between the natives and the Mayflower Pilgrims. During the Pilgrims' first winter and spring he taught the newcomers to catch eels and to grow corn by fertilizing the poor soil with dried herring and shad and thereby helped them to survive.



Ron Nickerson and Jill James at the unveiling of a plaque honoring Squanto. DEBRA LAWLESS PHOTO

Speaking of Squanto's tutoring of the Pilgrims, Alice L. Mohnkern, secretary of the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants, said, "It's an incredible feat and without that they probably would not have survived." Mohnkern claims descent from William Nickerson, and she applauded the NFA for sponsoring the plaque.

"The plaque is a great way to celebrate Squanto's life," she said. "Many passersby will pull in and it will make more people aware of the story of this man."

Squanto's life was not without controversy, moving as he did between two peoples, and some, such as Nathaniel Philbrick, author of "Mayflower," have speculated a plot against him led to his death. In November 1622 Squanto traveled with Gov. Bradford from Plymouth to Chatham, then known as Monomoy, on a trading mission with the Monomoyicks. Their sloop, the Swan, anchored in Pleasant Bay, most likely at Jackknife Cove, about a quarter of a mile from the NFA. The trip was a success but just before departure Squanto fell ill and died. Squanto's burial place has long remained a mystery. When Native American bones are excavated in Chatham during construction, someone inevitably asks: Could it be Squanto? One theory by William Sears Nickerson (1880 to 1966) is that Squanto was buried somewhere beneath Eastward Ho! Country Club overlooking Jackknife Cove.

In his introductory remarks, Ron Nickerson quoted

Chatham's historian William Smith who about a century ago wrote, "No more graceful act could be performed by the grateful descendants of the Pilgrims than to erect... at Chatham a simple monument to this unhonored, but most deserving, friend and protector of their forefathers."

"Three-hundred-ninety-five years after Squanto's death, we are gathered here to honor that wish," Nickerson said. He pointed out that many Nickersons, like both Mohnkern and himself, are also descendants of Mayflower passengers, so it is fitting for the plaque to be on the grounds of the NFA. In about 1664, roughly 40 years after Squanto's mysterious death, William and Anne (Busby) Nickerson established their homestead behind the current-day campus of the NFA. The homestead is currently being excavated by a team of archaeologists.

"Since many Nickersons are descendants of Mayflower Pilgrims, the NFA was proud to sponsor this plaque and continue to tell Chatham's involvement in the Pilgrim story," Nickerson later said.

The plaque was designed by Chatham Selectman Shareen Davis and uses as its backdrop a watercolor by Ginny Nickerson of Chatham, who attended the event with her mother, Jane West. The painting depicts three historical times: "the Wading Place" Wampanoag Village on Muddy Creek; the early settlers' deforestation of the Nickerson Neck area; and the present day.