

## More Than a Bingo Hall: A Story of Mashpee Land, Food, and Sovereignty

By Hartman Deetz

*Buddy Pocknett had been fishing the canal that day, pulling up lobster pots like he had been doing since he could walk. Like his father before him and the generations before, Buddy lived from the land. Like Buddy, his father Vernon was one of our beloved men, a fisherman and a hunter who, I imagine, may have never bought a pound of meat from a store. When electricity came to Mashpee, the Pocknett home didn't want none of it; Vernon's father thought it would make them dependent on the outside world. Vernon was raised with kerosene lamps and a wood burning stove – with game meat and a vegetable garden. Vernon raised his kids the same. So that day, Buddy had been out fishing the canal when he came in to the docks the fishwarden was there waiting.*

*Mashpee people have aboriginal fishing rights, but local officials oftentimes resent when tribal members exercise their right to fish, unregulated by the county or state. The fish warden decided to measure the lobsters and found one that, in his estimation, was too small. He told Buddy he was going to take his entire catch for the day because of this slight infraction, but Buddy said if he was not going to eat what he caught, the fishwarden was certainly not going to feed them to his family that night, either. So he dumped the lobsters back into the canal. The fish warden then pepper sprayed, beat, and arrested Buddy for fishing the way he had been doing since he learned to walk.*

*The legal process took some time, but eventually Buddy was vindicated by the courts and cleared of all charges. As he arrived home from court, the paperwork for the case in his back pocket, three police cruisers pulled into his driveway behind him, lights flashing. The officers didn't even question him; they simply attacked Buddy, beating him to the ground and stomping on his knees in front of his wife and small children. They beat him in his own driveway for harvesting a lobster that may or may not have been too small over a month before. The whole time, Buddy pleaded with the officers to look in his back pocket to read the release of the warrant issued from the court less than an hour before. Old wounds were torn open; that night, the community found itself gathered in resistance in front of the police station in a town that has sought to displace our tribe from our ancestral land for many, many years.*



Monomoscoy Island looking out on Hamblin Pond.

“For Mashpee people,  
our life has always  
been about the land.”

So often native people in the Americas are defined solely by their relationship to the colonizer’s story. Rarely are we defined in terms of our own story. As Wampanoag people we share in the very origin stories of this country, the United States. We are [“the Indians” who saved the Pilgrims](#) from starvation and taught them how to grow corn. But our particular tribe is not important to the colonial narrative, though for us our distinct Wampanoag identity is very much a part of our story. The story of the first Thanksgiving for my ancestors in the 17<sup>th</sup> century is just one part in a complicated, interwoven tale of alliances, deception, war and betrayal.

We are the Mashpee Wampanoag. Our tribe is building a casino. To do that, we need to establish a federal trust. To the white residents of Taunton Massachusetts our effort to establish a land trust is just [a political maneuver](#) to build the casino. But they have our story backwards:

the only way for us to recover our land and the sovereignty to fish and hunt as we have always done—without fear of being beaten—is by building a casino.

I first fell in love with my homeland at age fourteen. I had come to visit my father in Mashpee, Massachusetts from California where I had lived since age two. We were driving along a dirt road when my father told me, “This is Great Hay road, an ancient way. This road is older than America.” This dirt road that winds through the woods of Mashpee follows the Mashpee River from the Mashpee Pond out to the Bay at South Cape Beach. For thousands of years my relatives used this road to walk from the central village out to the coast. This old dirt road was literally made by the feet of my ancestors, and I could walk in their footprints. Walking down to the Bay has been central to Wampanoag life for all eternity. The Bay is where we gather seaweed, clams, mussels, quahogs and scallops. It is where we fish for crabs, blue fish, or scup. The coast is also where we planted our crops: corn, beans, pumpkin, Jerusalem artichokes, sunflowers and wild onions.

For Mashpee people our life has always been about the land. When I was born, my grandfather Russell Peters was tribal council chairman. His administration had fought a land suit against the town of Mashpee that failed [when the tribe was dismissed as a viable plaintiff after our identity as native people was brought into](#)



*Muhshunukusuw picks up quohog shells at Punkhorn Point, where mashpee river meets Popponesett Bay.*

[question](#). This finding in our land suit case brought our tribe to file one of the first applications for federal recognition in 1974. For thirty-three years our federal recognition case languished in the courts where it was systematically backlogged as other cases moved past us. Finally, [in 2007 we won our recognition as a tribe](#) and in 2015 after eight years of intergovernmental negotiations, [we established our land into trust](#).

I was born in 1976, and many changes have come to Mashpee in my lifetime. Mashpee peaked as the 4<sup>th</sup> fastest growing town in the US. In the 1960s our people were the majority of the town at 800 tribal members. Today, even at 2000 tribal members, we make up less than 1% of the town of Mashpee. The waterfront is full of mansions; many of the ancient trails are now paved roads. Attempts by private landowners to block access to water have come in the form of parking restrictions, blocking roads, and building fences. “No Trespassing” signs are abundant in new developments that cut Mashpee tribal members off from their traditional fishing places. Now, tribal members buy their meat from a su-

permarket where my uncle’s favorite hunting spot once was.

Mashpee is the name of the pond; “great pond” is the translation. Mashpee Pond flows out through the Mashpee River and the Mashpee people take their name from these waters. My grandfather used to say that the Great Depression never came to Mashpee, because people in Mashpee didn’t use money anyway. They lived off the land – hunting, fishing, and farming as our people had for all of time. However, the last forty years has seen this change. People who used to make a living fishing the waters have now turned to building the houses for the people that have pushed them out of their fishing holes, and pushed Mashpee out of their income bracket. Unlike the Great Depression, the housing crash of 2008 is driving Mashpee people out of Mashpee, myself included. But Mashpee people are Mashpee—the pond, the river, the land.

Is our federal recognition and putting our land into a trust about a casino? It is, but it is much more than



*Punkhorn Point is also where Deetz first learned to shellfish from his grandfather Russell Peters Senior. Now, septic runoff from luxury homes on the waterfront have left the water contaminated.*



Left to right: Kerri Helms, Alex Pocknett, Danielle Hill, Courtney Turner. Mashpee Wampanoag women at the tribe's 95th annual Pow Wow, one of the oldest in the nation.

that. When we depended on our merits to make the case of our tribal status, we languished in courts for thirty years. When casino investors hired lobbyists our case moved forward to active consideration. When the case was finally heard, the merits were said to be the strongest to ever come before the review board, with documentary evidence going back to 1621. So yes, it is about casinos, because merit alone is not enough. We may have won our case on merit, but without money we could not be heard.

For my people, casinos are about economics, sovereignty, and jurisdiction. For the citizens of Taunton it is a job creator. Some would argue that there are other industries that the tribe could invest in to create jobs, and it is true. We could invest in restaurants, fishing boats, museums and retail shops, creating jobs to help people stay in Mashpee. However, this approach would not be possible without the financial ability of the tribe to actually invest, and none of these create the kind of profits that a casino does. A casino can be the economic engine that funds our tribal government programs, such as small business grants, housing assistance, education, cultural and historic preservation, natural resource management, courts and legal and political representation.

We have a long history of members of the tribe assert-

ing their rights to hunt, fish, and gather, as well as to access water in all of our usual and accustomed places. These rights have been used to defend against parking violations, trespassing charges, hunting without a license, fishing without a license, and tree poaching, [among others](#). Asserting our rights was a part of what made our federal recognition case so strong. We have [a case history of tribal rights](#) beginning in 1833, with letters of complaint to the state – and even to the old colony of Massachusetts. Opening the doors of a casino would be an additional act of exercising our sovereign jurisdiction over our economy.

When we can assert our own laws on our own lands we can do more than assert economic rights, we can assert our legal jurisdiction. For the Akwasasne Mohawk tribe of New York, this has proven to be effective for environmental protection; the tribal council has set [environmental standards](#) for land contamination and water pollution that are among the most stringent in the nation. The Akwasasne have asserted the need for higher standards based on their cultural connection to the land. Because their people depend on hunting, fishing, and gathering from the environment, they reject false solutions such as eliminating local fish from their diet. For Akwasasne people, much like many other native people, eating from the earth is about more than diet,

it is about cultural continuity. It is about the recipes, methods of harvest, the cycle of the seasons, and holidays. It is identity.

For Wampanoag people such as the Mashpee tribe, our new year is tied to the return of the herring. In the late spring there is always a buzz of excitement waiting for the first herring to be taken from the river. When the first catch is made, word spreads through town. *“You hear Buddy caught the first herring? ....yeah down past the meeting house.”* To be the fisher who takes the first herring will draw both jealousy and admiration. It is still an honor among our people. After the news spreads, the medicine man, the chief, elders, and members of the community at large will [gather at the herring run](#), throwing hands full of corn meal into the water, singing songs, and passing general blessings to the waters and this fish that has brought the return of life after winter. Traditionally, herring were smoked and preserved the previous year, and what’s left could now be turned into the soil to fertilize the fields. This year’s herring would be smoked and preserved for the lean times of winter, where they could be eaten dry or reconstituted into a soup or stew.

A week after the fields are fertilized with the herring, the corn can be planted, followed by the beans and squash. Traditionally, our lives depended on the success of these crops to get us through the winter. Without the herring there is no corn, beans, squash, or pumpkins. How can we have live as Wampanoag people today without our new year? How do we have our green corn festival, our strawberry thanksgiving or our cranberry day without

these fruits of our land? How do we call ourselves Mashpee Wampanoag without herring swimming up the Mashpee River to the Mashpee Pond?

In today’s world, protecting the river that we belong to is no longer about controlling the hunting grounds now paved over by parking lots; it is no longer about defending the fishing holes from neighboring tribes when the water is being contaminated. To defend our river, our land, our mother Mashpee, we must be able to leverage the legal power of jurisdiction, environmental standards, and land use approval. We must have the resources to leverage political power to enforce these. This is power that comes with economic strength. Economic strength for a whole community comes from projects and businesses the size of a casino.

For some people, Mashpee is where they live or where they own a house or some land. For the Mashpee Wampanoag, we *belong* to the land. For the people who see the world as something that belongs to them, the river, the fish, and the land is a commodity to be used. For those of us who belong to the land, we must defend it as our mother. The fish and trees as our brothers and sisters. If we are not here in Mashpee, who is left to defend our relatives? Who will be here to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves? Is our land trust about a casino? You could say it is, because a casino provides the resources for our people to stay in Mashpee, to have sovereign control over our land. For Mashpee people, it is a means to an end, a means to care for our mother land.



*Muhshunukusuw watches his older brother Mutahunun swimming in Mashpee Pond.*

## About the author and photographer:

**Hartman Deetz** is a Wampanoag of the Mashpee community. Born in Massachusetts, he moved to Berkeley, California at age 2. Beginning at age 12, Deetz became a bicoastal child after his father's return to Mashpee. Deetz spent ten years living and working within the community for tribal cultural education programs. Deetz returned to college and in 2016 earned his BA in cultural education and sustaining marginalized communities from Goddard College in Vermont. Deetz currently lives in Richmond, California where he continues to be active in native environmental rights with the San Francisco chapter of Idle No More.

## About this special series:

This Backgrounder is the third in a multi-authored series on “Dismantling Racism in the Food System.” In this series we seek to uncover the structural foundations of racism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions and structures that hold racism in place. Food First is convinced that to end hunger and malnutrition we must end injustices in the food system. Dismantling the injustices of racism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society.

Food First invites contributions on this topic from authors engaged in research and community action to dismantle racism in the food system. Different aspects of the topic can include land, labor, finance, food access, nutrition, food justice and food sovereignty organizations.



is a “people’s think tank” dedicated to ending the injustices that cause hunger and helping communities to take back control of their food systems. We advance our mission through three interrelated work areas—research, education, and action—designed to promote informed citizen engagement with the institutions and policies that control our food.

[www.foodfirst.org](http://www.foodfirst.org)

398 60th Street, Oakland, CA 94618, USA