

Curious Cape Cod: Maybe a missing monument?

Search is on for the old stone marking the Pilgrims' first encounter with Native Americans

By Eric Williams

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EASTHAM — I was slouching around the Curious Cape Cod office, trying to choose between a nap and another bowl of pistachios, when this cannonballed into my inbox: "Eric, hopefully you can help us out. My children came to visit about a month ago and went to First Encounter Beach to look for the stone marker about the first encounter on the hill, right hand side of the parking lot. They remember visiting the marker about 30 years ago with their mother. They could not find stone. I tried to locate the marker but could only find a piece of stone barely sticking out of the ground on the path. I am wondering if the stone marker is visible or can you locate same? Thanks, Walt."

Nutshells went flying as I lurched to an upright position for the first time that day. The hidden first encounter stone! It marked the momentous get-together between Native Americans and newly arrived Pilgrims 400 years ago. I had seen it in 2011 and it was a little tricky to find. Could it possibly have disappeared?

Quickly, I dashed off a reply to my new friend Walt, with a map of where I thought the stone was located. Then I ran to the Curious Prius, lit the turbo booster with a welding torch and headed for Eastham. Along the way, I tried to remember the details of that rather unpleasant confrontation in 1620. From the Native American perspective, it might have seemed like a close encounter of the worst kind; perhaps the Pilgrims had a scary "what the heck are we doing here" moment.

The only primary source that describes this event (that I know of) is a book called "Mourt's Relation," first published in 1622. The section that describes the First Encounter is believed to have been written by William Bradford. Remember, the book tells only the Pilgrim side of the story, so you've got to take it with a grain of salt.

Here is the condensed version of that event from early December 1620 from the book: A group of Pilgrims was exploring Cape Cod, shortly after the Mayflower landed in Provincetown. They camped out in what is now Eastham and the morning brought trouble: "One of our company, being abroad, came running in and cried, 'They are men! Indians! Indians!' and withal, their arrows came flying amongst us. Our men ran out with all speed to recover their arms...In the meantime, Captain Miles Standish, having a snaphance ready, made a shot... The cry of our enemies was dreadful, especially when our men ran out to recover their arms... Our men were no sooner come to their arms, but the enemy was ready to assault them."

"There was a lusty man and no whit less valiant, who was thought to be their captain, stood behind a tree within half a musket shot of us, and there let his arrows fly at us... He was seen to shoot three arrows, which were all avoided... At length one took, as he said, full aim at him, and after which he gave extraordinary cry and away they all went."

My arrival at First Encounter Beach was much less eventful. In the parking lot, I noticed a stone with a plaque stating: "Near This Site The Nauset Tribe of The Wampanoag Nation Seeking To Protect Themselves And Their Culture Had Their First Encounter 8 December 1620."

This stone was dated 2001. But it wasn't the one that Walt asked about. I looked over at the right side of the parking lot and could just make out an overgrown path heading up into a patch of trees. It was time to battle ticks and poison ivy and see if the old stone was still there.

The vegetation was thick at the top of the hill, but there it was, in a deep slumber, poking out of the leaves and branches. This plaque had a different interpretation of events than the one in the parking lot: "On This Spot Hostile Indians Had Their First Encounter December 8 1620."

Ouch — that "hostile" part seems a bit rough! This stone, dated 1920, was installed by the Provincetown Tercentenary Commission, a group set up to mark the 300th anniversary of the Pilgrims' arrival. Over the last hundred years its prominence has dimmed to the point of obscurity as it was slowly swallowed by vegetation. Maybe it's poetic justice?

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A stone and plaque commemorating the first meeting between Native Americans and Pilgrims in 1620 is hidden on a hill above the parking lot of First Encounter Beach. [ERIC WILLIAMS/CAPE COD TIMES]