

Researching the Battle of Great Falls

King Philip's War (1675–1676 and beyond) was fought between Indigenous communities and expanding English colonies. This war was named for the Pokanoket Wampanoag sachem Metacomb, called King Philip by the English. During this conflict, both Native and English experienced great losses. Native communities especially suffered from epidemics, famine, later enslavement, and multi-generational trauma. By the spring of 1676, all of the English settlements north of Hatfield had been attacked and abandoned. Most Indigenous communities had been displaced by the conflict. Those Native refugees had fled to their traditional sanctuary lands here at Peskeompskut, the Great Falls. The May 19, 1676, attack destroyed the village of non-combatants and claimed the lives of more than 250 Natives. However, Native American fighters from nearby camps rallied a counterattack, inflicting heavy losses on the English, including Captain Turner's death, as they tried to retreat south.

In recognition of the Battle of Great Falls/Peskeompskut (May 19, 1676), the National Park Service, American Battlefield Protection Program, awarded grants between 2014 and 2022 to research, survey, and map the engagement. The battle involved hundreds of combatants, fought over several miles through present-day Montague, Gill, Greenfield, and Deerfield, Massachusetts. The site of the English attack on the village at Peskeompskut near the falls and the location of Captain Turner's death crossing the Green River are well known, but the rest of the battlefield remained a mystery. The present landscape was developed significantly since 1676, but archaeological artifacts from the Battle of Great Falls remain preserved here in the Connecticut River Valley from Montague to Deerfield. Researchers used historical documents, colonial maps, studied landscape changes over time, and consulted with Native American advisors to reconstruct the battlefield route for archaeological testing.

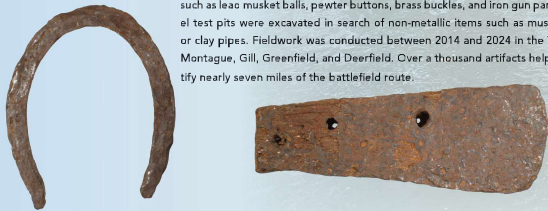


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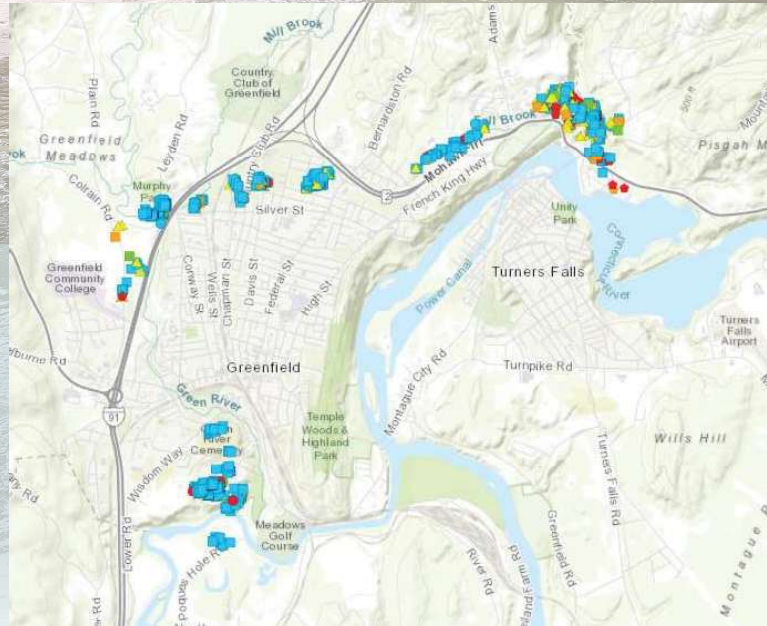
Text by David Naumec, PhD, and Kevin McBride, PhD, researchers.
Graphic design by Lynn Stowe Tomb, Ltomb@gmail.com
All photos courtesy of Heritage Consultants.
Background photo: searching the shores of the Green River near the fording area in Greenfield where Captain Turner was killed, June 2024.
Left: Dr. McBride, foreground; and researchers use metal detectors along the Green River.
Below: a 17th century horseshoe and pewter bead found near the battle sites along the Green River.
Right: A map of recovered musket balls and other battle-related artifacts from the Battle of Great Falls showing the extent of the project, c. 2024.

Battlefield Archaeology

Over 100 private landholders participated in the Battle of Great Falls/Peskeompskut study which made the project possible. Each property was surveyed by archaeologists using metal detectors who recovered metallic artifacts such as lead musket balls, pewter buttons, brass buckles, and iron gun parts. Shovel test pits were excavated in search of non-metallic items such as musket flints or clay pipes. Fieldwork was conducted between 2014 and 2024 in the Towns of Montague, Gill, Greenfield, and Deerfield. Over a thousand artifacts helped identify nearly seven miles of the battlefield route.



This material is based upon work assisted by a grant from the Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Interior.



Peskeompskut

The Battle of Great Falls during King Philip's War ♦ May 19, 1676

Artifacts from the Battle of Great Falls

Archaeologists identified nearly 1,500 battle-related artifacts during the study, most of which were musket balls used by soldiers on both sides. Dropped and impacted musket balls help determine the position of Native American or English troops on the battlefield. Personal items like buttons from clothing, buckles from equipment, and broken gun parts all help to understand battle events and boundaries.

MUSKET BALLS

Dropped

Impacted



A Community Effort

Beginning in 2014, the local Advisory Board, established under a grant from the American Battlefields Protection Program, has been the central body in the oversight, collection, and sharing of information flowing from research and oral history findings about the massacre on Indigenous non-combatants, and the counter-attack by Indigenous forces at the fall of Peskeompskut on May 19, 1676.

The Advisory Board has been composed of tribal representatives from the Nipmuck(k), Abenaki, Wampanoag, and Narragansett communities, as well as Historical Commissioners from the towns of Montague, Greenfield, Northfield, Gill, and Deerfield. This group has broken new ground in establishing strong relations between towns and tribes.

Their collaboration has included many different perspectives in trying to establish what really happened at the Falls. In particular, the tribal members have finally had the opportunity to share some of their oral histories about this tragic event and its on-going, multi-generational repercussions.

At monthly meetings open to the public, the archaeological team, local historians, and tribal representatives have shared the multiple perspectives of this conflict. Participants have been deeply committed to inclusive, respectful cultural insights which have strengthened a growing understanding of each other, of our past and present, of the river, and of the unique place where we live.

We offer here the histories that these grant participants have set in motion, in hopes of enriching our multiple communities and supporting the slow process of healing at the Falls.

Peskeompskut

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Kchi Pôntegok

At the Great Falls: A Native Perspective

This place is held together by the stories remembered deep in the Earth, carried by the wind and water, reflected in the sunlight and seasons, and told anew at dawn each day. Every voice that has ever been heard here, human and other-than-human, reverberates in the air and is repeated by the roar and murmur of Kwentekw—the Connecticut River. Listening and remembering are acts of continuance, meeting the constancy of change with trust in the strength of connections.

We join in the stories by honoring the confluence of Spirit here, an ancient and lasting meeting place for multitudes: the several rivers that blend their swift waters, the Fish People that thronged them annually to ensure their future, the diverse Human People that traveled here to meet them with gratitude, feasting, celebration, and exchange, and the renewing of longstanding agreements with All of Our Relations. Here, where Land, Water, and Sky worlds converge, we acknowledge the connections that continue to flow among us all.

Although some people brought violence and coercion to this landscape years ago, the deep rhythm of relationship persists, reminding those who are here today that we are an essential part of something bigger. The Great Falls has been a place of bounty, beauty, pilgrimage, and peace much longer than it has not, and this is a recurring promise that leads into the future.

We are reminded of our place in the circle: we are the sum of our ancestor's dreams, and we are the ancestors of those yet to come. The well-being of all those who have been here, those who are here now, and those who are yet to arrive has become a shared responsibility.

CREDITS

Text by Rich Holschuh, Elnu Abenaki Tribal Historic Preservation Officer.
Graphic design by Lynn Stowe Tomb, Latomb@gmail.com

Background photo of Great Falls, looking toward Riverside in Gill, taken c. 1857 by Ely and Popkins in Greenfield, MA. This is one of the earliest known photographs of the falls and dam area. The first crib dam was built in 1794, long after the events of 1676 but before the development of the land.

Right: Poem and painting by Robert Peters (2002), Mashpee Wampanoag. The original painting hangs in the Montague Town Hall and was purchased with support from First Light Power.

Below center in red: Simplified Wabanaki double curve graphic, recorded by anthropologist Frank Speck, 1914.

Above: Spiral design evoking river whirlpools: Logo for the "Atowi Project," Rich Holschuh, Director; artwork by Charlie Adams.

In three places: Red and yellow double-wave motif by Loree Hany, evoking river water.

Far right: Net fishing drawing by Jeannie Marie Nicklas for the Salmon Hole site at the Vermont State Park in Jamaica, Vermont.

Kwentekw ♦ Quonektakut The Connecticut River

The "Long River," called the Quonektakur or Kwentekw by Algonquian speakers and known as the Connecticut River by Europeans, was carved into the landscape by glacial activities over 10,000 years ago. Its waters and seasonal flooding resulted in fertile soils in the valley, diverse vegetation, and provided rich habitats for wildlife. The "Great Falls" were called Peskeompskut (peske=thunder, omp=rocks, skut=place), the site of annual fish migrations as shad, lampreys, and salmon made their way upriver in the spring. The earliest people who made the valley their home were attracted to the waters and resources here. The Falls became a communal place of gathering and ceremony shared by Pocumtuck, Abenaki, and Nipmuc(k) communities.

The People ♦ The Pocumtuck

The present-day towns of Deerfield, Greenfield, Gill, and Montague are located on the ancestral land of the Pocumtuck people. The land and its life-sustaining resources were vital to the daily life of the Pocumtuck who resided in large villages along the Connecticut River where they fished, hunted, and cultivated crops such as the "Three Sisters," consisting of corn, squash, and beans. Some of their settlements in this part of the Connecticut River valley included Peskeompskut (Turner's Falls), Pocumtuck (Deerfield), Norwottuck (Hadley), and Nonotuck (Northampton). Indigenous communities living along the river were closely related through kinship, culture, and trade.

Peskeompskut

Poem and painting at right by Robert Peters (2002)
Mashpee Wampanoag

An annual migration of
People coming from all over Turtle Island

gathering, laughing
Loving their lives
Loving life

Geese migrate from the northeast
Salmon migrate from the south
Flashing like fire as they leap
up torrents of water falling
through that gap
where the rock splits

This is the spot where the traveling spirit intermingles
where each thing makes the next thing
more complete, more relevant
more in sync with

The spot where water flows
From the north,
from the east,
from the north
and downward
carrying the blessings
to unknown waters
everywhere



The Massacre at Peskeompskut An Early American Atrocity

On the morning of May 19, 1676, Captain William Turner and Lieutenant Samuel Holyoke led 150 Massachusetts Bay colonists in an attack on a village at Peskeompskut killing over 250 Indigenous women, children, and elders at the traditional fishing place above Great Falls. This massacre dealt a devastating blow to the coalition of tribes gathered along the Connecticut River, from the Great Falls to Sokwakik (present-day Northfield). This included people from Abenaki, Narragansett, Nipmuck, Norwottuck, Pocumtuck, and Wampanoag communities as well as other displaced people from the region. We must remember the lives lost here, sacrifices made, and both the enduring impact and trauma of King Philip's War (1675–1676).

The war was fought due to escalating tensions between English and Indigenous people caused by many factors including colonial land encroachments, access to resources, and the erosion of tribal sovereignty. When war erupted in June 1675, Native American communities, angered by English actions, formed a coalition led by the Pokonoket sachem Metacomb, called "King Philip" by the English. Leaders, including Matoonas, Monoco, Shoshanini, and Mattaump, among others, joined Metacomb to drive the English from their homelands while sunksqua (women leaders), such as Awashons, Quipian, and Weetamoo, led their communities through the darkest times of the war. Refugees from Native American communities throughout the region gathered with the Pocumtuck at Great Falls in the Spring of 1676 where they could fish, hunt, and sow crops while others found safety with the Nipmuc at Wachusett Mountain. People gathered at the villages along the Connecticut River above Great Falls believed they were safe. The English used this false sense of security to launch a surprise attack on Peskeompskut in May 1676 which destroyed the village and many inhabitants, few of which were warriors.

We honor the memory of those who fought, those who died, and those whose lives have been changed forever through the generations by this conflict. Their stories remind us of the complexities of history, the resilience of Indigenous people, and the enduring struggle for justice and peace. In reflecting upon the past, we may strive for a brighter future of peace among all peoples.



Peskeompskut

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CREDITS

Text written by Elizabeth Coldwind Santana Kiser—Elder, Council Woman, and currently Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Chaubunagungamaug Band of Nipmuck Indians.

Graphic design by Lynn Stowe Tomb, Ltomb@gmail.com

Background photo of platform net fishing is an Edward Curtis photo from the Library of Congress. While the subject is Hupa, this portrayal is applicable to the local Sokoki Abenaki.

Below bottom left: Painting by Deborah Spears Moorehead (2002), Seaconke Pokanoket Wampanoag Tribal Nation. Quinnipiac Village (Q.V.C.) in the 17th century—scene of a Native American village near the water. The original is owned by Dudley Farm Museum in Gifford, MA. Oil on canvas, 22 in x 22 in. By permission of the artist.

Red and yellow doublewave motif by Loree Hany, evoking river water.

Far right: Vintage painting and modern photo of making a mishoon, from Liz Coldwind Santana Kiser.



The Counterattack

Soon after the English attacked, Peskeompskut men from nearby villages rushed to the aid of the villagers. Indigenous men rowed canoes to the Falls from villages upriver while men from across the Falls and others camped on islands downriver all rushed to Peskeompskut. When English forces at the destroyed village came under fire, Captain Turner ordered a retreat to their horses at the Fall River. English troops were under constant attack as they regained their horses and fled six miles back towards the Deerfield River. Fleeing English troops broke into smaller parties and were ambushed or lost in the woods. Captain Turner was killed attempting to cross the Green River while Lieutenant Holyoke took command of the survivors who fought their way to the Deerfield River Ford. Fighting ceased on the northern Deerfield plains.



Remembering

The massacre and battle at Great Falls were never forgotten, but the historical memory and legacy of the event has evolved over time. Following English victory in King Philip's War, the colonists who displaced the local inhabitants and settled the region renamed Great Falls, "Turner's Falls," in memory of Captain Turner and his men. Early town histories glorified English actions while vilifying the Indians fighting with King Philip. In the early 1900s granite monuments were erected in Gill and Greenfield commemorating Captain Turner and his soldiers. In recent years efforts to reinterpret and remember the events of May 19, 1676, have grown to include Indigenous perspectives and archaeological research.