

Paula Peters, Wampanoag Scholar, in discussion with Cllr Satvir Kaur, Cabinet Member for Culture & Homes, and Cllr Sue Blatchford, Mayor of Southampton

14 August 2020 – opening of the SeaCity exhibition: Wampum, Stories from the Shells of Native America

Cllr Kaur:

So, a lot of the stories told in history often focus on men. So I just wondered, kind of the stories around the Wampanoag people, and the women, and kind of their place in the village and the community, and kind of how important it is to tell that story, like what position they had?

Paula Peters:

That's a great question and one that often gets overlooked because when the Mayflower arrived and brought the Pilgrims - the saints, and the strangers, whoever they were, none of them are really quite prepared for the way that women were represented among the Wampanoag. So, it does get written about to some degree, but usually it's with a little bit of shock and awe, that, oh, you know, they answer to the women, or the women are in leadership positions. But, unfortunately, they often didn't write them down, their names down, so we really wish that we knew more about them personally, like their names. But we do know that it was quite common for a woman to be a Sachem which is like Sue's position, like Mayor of the community. So that would be something that would happen quite often.

Cllr Kaur:

Oh, wow, so really progressive.

Paula Peters:

Also, because we are part of a matriarchal society women are, and still are today, in leadership positions in the families, clan leaders so to speak, and oftentimes make very very critical important decisions about their families, their communities. So we're quite accustomed to that, but it was something that was quite shocking to the colonists who oftentimes would have difficulty making agreements with women Sachems, even though they were the ones who were in charge of the territories. They were the ones that would have to make the agreements about any use or sale of lands and it just completely boggled their minds.

Cllr Blatchford:

Paula, we didn't actually have our first woman Mayor in Southampton until 1927. So obviously, the Wampanoag were actually far advanced with their matriarchal society than what we were actually here in Southampton.

Paula Peters:

We like to pride ourselves in that and it's something that's still really critically important in our society. I'm so glad that Southampton has caught up!

Cllr Kaur:

Oh no, thank you so much for allowing us to work together and to tell the story because it's so important. I'm so honoured that we're actually kick-starting our programme with the exhibition. I was just talking to the young people just now who were saying how they just had no idea, and actually, just moving forward, just retelling the story to ensure that no element of it is lost, at all. My question was just around how big the community is today?

Paula Peters:

Sure, um, there are roughly 5,000 people who consider themselves citizens, in some way or another, of Wampanoag tribes or villages. Two Wampanoag tribes are considered federally acknowledged tribes. Both my tribe which is based in Mashpee, Massachusetts, and the Aquinnah Wampanoag tribe which is based on the island of Martha's Vineyard. And then there are several bands of Wampanoag that continue to exist in the regions where their ancestral homelands are. So quite significantly fewer than who was here in 1620 when the Mayflower

arrived, but the fact that we were able to endure and to continue to practice our culture and our traditions in our ancestral homelands is, in and of itself, pretty significant.

Cllr Blatchford:

What administrative threats are there, are around at the moment? I'm sure I've read something about some court case, some judgment is actually being appealed by your government, as it were.

Paula Peters:

Yes, we've had, well, we've endured lots of administrative threats to our sovereignty and to our land ownership. According to the treaties, indigenous lands, native lands, are held in trust for federally acknowledged tribes and our trust land, which is in south eastern Massachusetts and primarily on Cape Cod, that trust land has been called into question more often by those who, for political reasons or for reasons based on greed, don't want us to have even a modicum of what we were promised from the very beginning.

After King Philip's War, Mashpee was an area that was identified by the colonists and given to the Mashpee Wampanoag, to the Wampanoag people, and it stretched from the town of Sandwich, which is another town over right over to Mashpee and it went from, you'd have to know what Cape Cod looks like, but it went right across Cape Cod and we're talking, thousands of acres of land, and it should have been protected for us. When we first began to sue the Government for return of the lands lost, that was back in 1976, and that started a whole ball rolling about, well, how can we give the land back if we don't acknowledge these people? And then they had to start a process of how we were going to be acknowledged even though we were obviously who we said we were. That took almost 30 years for them to acknowledge that, okay, yes we agree that you are the descendants of these people who were the ones who greeted the pilgrims in 1620, or 1621, and then the process of bringing our trust land under the protection of the Government began. That happened and then after it was brought under the protection of the Government there are people that challenged it. So, at the moment, yes, we have trust land, not nearly enough, we're talking maybe 300-400 acres of land. But the status of that trust land is greatly in question until we are able to get rid of all of these challenges against it. But recently there was a court case where in a federal court the judge struck down the efforts of the Trump administration to disintegrate our land trust.

Cllr Blatchford:

That's what I've read about, that was my concern.

What about the original settlers? Do they actually acknowledge the Wampanoag at all? You know, people boast that, you know, their ancestor actually sailed on the Mayflower, do they actually relate to the Wampanoag people? And do they actually even understand the issues at all?

Paula Peters:

I think to a large degree, especially now, yes, you're talking about Mayflower descendants?

Cllr Blatchford:

Yeah.

Paula Peters:

Yeah. We have a pretty lively conversation back and forth with Mayflower descendants and it's, more often than not, it's a very open platform. People are very interested in knowing what our story has been and some are in agreement with bringing that forward, and then there are people that are not so happy about it. But I'd say, by and large, especially where this anniversary is concerned, there's been an awful lot of openness to learning about it.

But, I mean that has not really been the case in the past, and just 50 years ago when there was an effort to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Mayflower arriving, they requested that one of the Wampanoag leaders go and speak to the annual dinner of the Mayflower Society and all of the people that were acknowledging the anniversary. And when they saw his speech, which referred to the plague that had happened,

and the kidnappings of native men, and the treaties that did not, were not honoured, and just the colonisation in general and how damaging that was to the native people, they did not want the man to speak. They wanted to censor his remarks and that became quite controversial, and actually became the impetus for what was the National Day of Mourning. So, every year on what we, or what the US celebrates as Thanksgiving Day, on the third Thursday in November, there is what is called by Native people, the National Day of Mourning. And it's a time where we go, and reflect upon the sacrifices of our ancestors, and also to celebrate that we are still here, that we are able to still practice our culture and our heritage and yeah, that we're still here. But, it left sort of a bad taste in the mouths, I think, of the Mayflower celebrants who had been, I think, looking for a completely different outcome. And I think over the 50 years, having 50 years to mull that over, decided, well, that probably didn't go over so well, maybe we might want to try a different, um...

Cllr Blatchford:
A different tack.

Cllr Kaur:

Do you think that, so nowadays sharing those stories, like we are trying to do with this exhibition, will hopefully bring communities together and kind of help bridge that understanding, so the community can finally get recognised? And rather than it just being this really grand celebration, actually, the story is told in its entirety. Do you think we'll ever get to a point where that can happen?

Paula Peters:

Well, I, you know, I feel like, where this commemoration is concerned it is happening on a much greater degree than I ever imagined, and especially, and I'm very grateful to the people in the UK for embracing this story and for bringing it out in such a grand fashion, it really moved me to see the exhibit. Jo was able to show me some of the images and pictures and I was just, as you would say, gobsmacked! (laughter) Really, really so impressed by what I saw, and actually felt at home in the space. So, I think that it will go a long way to telling the story from our perspective, which also goes a long way, and I believe for all of us, in teaching tolerance and teaching that all stories matter.

But it really is, um, we don't know hold you in the UK accountable for the past. We really do hold you accountable for the future. And, you know, you're getting high scores on bringing us into the future, so for that I appreciate (it).

Cllr Kaur:

No, thank you for allowing us to tell that story, I mean the young people that I spoke to earlier were absolutely gobsmacked as well (laughs). And I just think it's so important to teach the next generation, so that moving forward, we just never repeat what's happened in history because obviously, I suppose, England and Europe is known throughout the world for all this colonial history and actually, I suppose, people like that say, it's kind of, history belongs to those that tell it and actually it's about time that we retold that story, and a bit more accurately.

Paula Peters:

Right, right, right. And that's what we have an exhibit over here that's a traveling exhibit, and it's actually called "Our Story", not, as opposed to "his story" and it's really gotten a lot of rave reviews for doing the same thing, you know, over here. But the idea that, in the UK, we started telling this story through the story of the Wampum Belt is just, the children asked me if I thought that this would get the Wampum Belt back for us. And I always have to say yes, I always have to say, well of course, you know. And I know that it is an incredible long shot. But, you know, what if it does happen? (Cllr Kaur: Ah, wouldn't it be amazing). It would be really an amazing time for both the UK and for the Wampanoag. And, you know, I'm really really hopeful that I'll get to come to Southampton next summer. (Cllr Kaur: Oh, please do!) Yeah, if we're able to travel and get out, let's, let's hope we have some, some post-COVID life. And when I get to Southampton you guys will have my Metacom's Wampum Belt all packed up and ready for me to go.

Cllr Blatchford:
Yes, definitely.

Cllr Kaur:
So, we will put some nice chains over it!

(laughter)

Cllr Blatchford:
Paula, it is actually so disappointing that in this special year you actually haven't been able to cross the Atlantic to actually join us, and cross the Atlantic and actually come here to Southampton to see our efforts, but I mean, as the Mayor, I always have this role to actually thank people. And I really do truly thank you on behalf of the citizens of Southampton, for all the effort and hard work you've done in actually assisting people, you know, using this wonderful modern technology, and actually informing us more about the Wampanoag people and what had actually happened back in 1620, so thank you so so much for your contribution to your work.

Paula Peters:
I am absolutely thrilled that it's on display there, and, you know, I promise you that at some point I will get to come in person, I just don't know how long that's going to be.

But, yes, it's been an absolute thrill to have it open in your city and be so well embraced. I don't know if Caterina is in the room, she's been absolutely wonderful, (Cllr Kaur: Yeah, she's great!). We set up these weekly meetings, every Friday, and I look forward to my Friday mornings with Caterina, and all of her friends and it's like, it's become like a little tea party! And I, yeah, I just feel like I've made so many wonderful friends, of course I have to come to Southampton!

And you are all welcome to come here!

Cllr Kaur:
Oh, I'm there!

Cllr Blatchford:
I might not be Mayor, but I'm sure whoever is the Mayor will actually welcome you with open arms as well. And if not, I will be having words.

Paula Peters:
Okay.

Cllr Kaur:
Thank you so much Paula!

Cllr Blatchford:
Thank you Paula!

Caterina Loriggio (Mayflower 400 Southampton, Anniversary Director):
Thank you Paula! Amazing!