



The Atheneum Society of Wilbraham

Local People Preserving Historic Wilbraham

PRESS RELEASE

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Wilbraham - The Atheneum Society of Wilbraham will host soapstone sculptor, Jerry Wilson of the Orchard Mills on Sunday, September 14, 2-4 P.M. at the Old Meeting House on Main Street. The September Open House will also feature soapstone artifacts abandoned by the Nipmuc Indians on Wilbraham Mountain during the 17th century.

Children are invited to settle in with dozens of colorful children's books or to help complete an American Indian mural with friends. They can also see Native American Pictographs or *picture writing* and match-up Indian symbol cards or make some of their own. Freshly popped popcorn, apple juice and harvest fresh apples will be served on the garden porch. For more information on the Old Meeting House, please visit us on the web at www.wilbrahamatheneum.org

Local Background on the Exhibit

In 1674, William Pynchon of Springfield purchased land extending to the Springfield Mountains from the Nipmuc Indians. *Wequagan, Wawapaw and Wequampo* sold the land for a fathom of Wampum – 6 feet of strung shell beads. The word "Wampum" comes from the Narragansett word for 'white shell beads' harvested from the Whelk shell. A white wampum fathom was worth 10 shillings [half pound or half sovereign].

It was an unusual land transaction in that it involved only 3 Indians. They received their pay, but were driven away by the Indian War in 1675. The land transaction was recorded in the County of Hampshire July 12, 1679 [attested by John Holyoke, recorder] and can be found in the Registry of Deeds in Hampden County.

The agreement reserved the Indian's rights for hunting and fishing to continue on the land. This area, called Minnechaug or Berryland, became the town of Wilbraham with its incorporation in 1763. The Nipmuc are a group of Algonquin Indians native originally to Worcester County Massachusetts. Nipmuc originated from the word 'nipnet' meaning "small pond place." They are sometimes called "Fresh water people" because they first settled around the clear crisp lake system at the Chaubunagunamaug Lake in Webster, MA

These Native Americans settling in the area now called Wilbraham operated two steatite (soapstone) quarries on Wilbraham Mountain. Their finished products included implements of necessity and convenience. Soapstone artifacts include: arrowheads, bowls, scrapers, awls, pipe, spear points, plow heads, hoes, hand hammers, digging tools, pestles and cutting tools. Many of these early artifacts are on display at the Quadrangle Museums in Springfield and others are here at the Old Meeting House.

There were only two steatite quarries in the fertile Connecticut River Valley - one in Westfield (now gone) and locations in Wilbraham. Quarried soapstone lasted longer than pottery and provided an excellent trade item.

Indigenous natives are believed to have inhabited sections along Nine Mile Pond, the Chicopee River, Spectacle Pond (Spec Pond) and the hilly mountain area during the ***Plantation Period*** (1620-1675) - where they operated a three- season campground. The Chicopee River lowlands and the moderately sloping uplands in northwestern Wilbraham would have offered abundant natural resources to these early settlers. There have also been smaller unidentified native campsites found in the eastern uplands.

Good agricultural land was present in the northwest and the southeast and the Chicopee River was a major source of fish. Spectacle and Nine Mile Ponds provided excellent interior stream fishing as well. The wooded uplands and marshlands likely provided sites for hunting and gathering. They presumably trapped beaver in cool streams, speared salmon in river waters, hunted deer and fowl and gathered berries and nuts.

One Indian squaw, We-sha-u-gan, lived alone in a single wigwam by a small brook- giving rise to the name "Wigwam Hill" up on the mountain where the town's first meetinghouse and parsonage were established. She was the last known native inhabitant to live among us- the date of her disappearance and her burial place are unknown.