THE UNSOLVED MYSTERY OF POMHAM ROCK

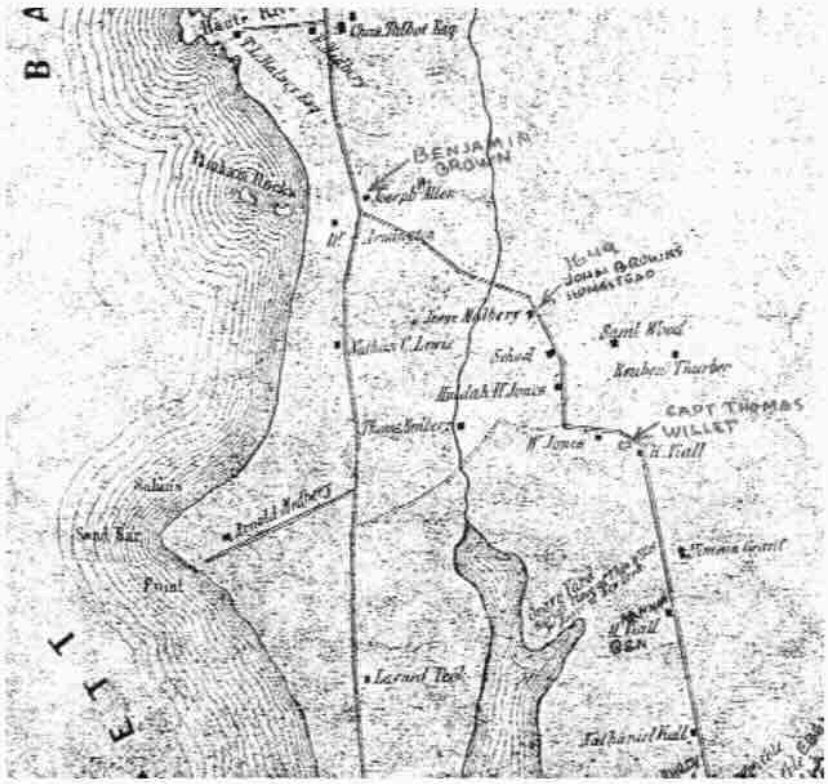
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Much as my research for my book *Some First Settlers of Wannamoisett* (2010) taught me about the Riverside area of East Providence, some questions remained unanswered. One of the notable features of the landscape was the Pomham Rock Lighthouse, built in 1871 and deactivated in 1974. After long efforts it was restored and relit in 2006 and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2009. My curiosity was not about the lighthouse but the large rock on which is stands. How did Pomham Rock come to be named and when was it first called that? The rocky outcropping, one of two tiny islands, was part of John Brown's purchase in 1645 and remained in the Brown family until it was sold as part of a parcel in 1799.[1] In any previous land evidence I never saw it described as anything but "a small island." It came to be known locally as Pomham or variant spellings of the name—but again why? In the seventeenth century Pomham was a Shawomet sachem under Narragansett rule in the Warwick area across Narragansett Bay. Pomham witnessed the original deed for Samuel Gorton's purchase of Warwick from Miantonomi in 1642 and remained an important Native American in the area to 1676 when he was killed in King Philip's War.[2] Pomham is a fascinating historical figure who refused to



Pen-and-ink sketch of Pomham Rock Lighthouse, by Natalie S. Thompson, author's collection.

1. Bristol County, Mass. Land Evidence, Bristol Co. District Court in Taunton, Mass., 70:503 In April 1799 William Armington, brother-in-law and executor of estate of Benjamin Brown, sold the land to Capt. Samuel P. Allin.
2. Oliver P Fuller, *History of Warwick R.I. from its settlement 1642* (Warwick: Angell and Burlingame, 1874), 11. For Pomham's often contentious relations with settlers see Howard M. Chapin, "Pomham and His Fort of 1644" [hereinafter Chapin, "Pomham and His Fort"] *Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society*, Vol. 11, 1918, 31–36. Samuel Gardner Drake, a early historiographer, wrote about Pomham in *Biography and History of the Indians of North America*, three vols. (third ed., Boston, Mass.: 1834), Vol. 3, Chapter 5, 71–76.



Detail from map by Henry F. Walling, Bristol County, Massachusetts, 1858.

be pushed off traditional lands despite deeds. He used the English to protect his people from their traditional enemies, and he deftly played the young colonies of Rhode Island and Massachusetts Bay against each other and the Crown.[3] While it has been asserted that the rock was named for him,[4] nothing that I have read suggests how or why the sachem could be connected to the rock.

Just south of Pomham Rock is Sabins Point. While there were Sabins in the area, I have not found any close connection between them and the Point. Like Pomham Rock, it was sold by heirs of the Brown family, in this case in 1755 to John Bullock.[5] Samuel Sabin, son of founder William, a Proprietor of Rehoboth, had multiple, vaguely described land holdings in and around Wannamoisett that he passed down to his son Samuel and grandson Israel. Israel Sabin and his family appear to have been located on the Barrington/East Providence line somewhere, although in the early 1700s—before the transfer of East Bay land to Rhode Island from Massachusetts in 1747—it was then the Swansea/Rehoboth line. Israel Sabin, his siblings, and his widowed mother Mary inherited lands in Swansea and Rehoboth from his father William. In a deed of 12 May 1717 Israel and mother Mary sold what vaguely appears to be a parcel around Sabins Point though not so named.[6]

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3. See *The Correspondence of Roger Williams* [hereinafter *Correspondence of RW*], ed. Glenn LaFantasie, 2 vols. (Providence, R.I.: R.I.H.S., 1988), especially 552n.
4. Robert Alexander Douglas-Lithgow, *Dictionary of American-Indian Place and Proper Names in New England* (n.p.: The Author, 1909), 302.
5. On 22 Aug 1755 Joseph and Mary (Brown) Turpin, by her right as heir, sold 36 acres to John Bullock including Sabins Point along the shoreline (Bristol County, Mass. Land Evidence, 42:114).
6. On 12 May 1717 Israel Sabin and his mother Mary sold what appears to be 18 acres of land in Rehoboth along the shore line to John Lyon lying on a plain called by Native Americans "Paxsorhuch" (Bristol County, Mass. Land Evidence, 12:300). This location,

Here is where the story becomes less dry and more intensely human. Israel and wife Mary (Ormsby) Sabin had a young daughter Margaret, born in 1706, who bore a child to Thomas Pomham, an Indian, in 1721.[7] At a session held the second Wednesday of August 1721 she was bound to the court for her transgression. "Margaret Sabin of Rehoboth" wrote John G. Erhardt, "was bound to the court for having a bastard child by (Thom) Pumham, an Indian. She was ordered to pay a fine of 40s. or 'receive ten stripes on her naked back well Laid' and to pay the cost of prosecution. She was commetted to the Gaol until her 'sentence be performed.' " Thomas Punham's punishment was, as for all fathers of illegitimate children, financial. Thomas Pumham, "Indian and father," was ordered to pay 3s. 6d. per week for maintenance of the child, to give a £50 bond, and pay prosecution costs. Margaret's punishment sounds worse than Thomas's, but both were standard in Massachusetts at the time with no additional severity for breach of racial norms.[8] The innocent child, presumably having spent a few years with Margaret, was taken away. A Rehoboth town meeting on 2 January 1724/5, ordered "Mr Jonah Carpenter of Rehoboth to deliver to Mr Joseph Bosworth of Rehoboth ye Mallatto Bastard Child born of ye body of Margaret Sabin... s^{d} Bosworth was directed to take care of sd child."[9]

It is not entirely clear what happened to these people. Of Thomas, I have found no sure trace, just suggestive clues. Margaret Sabin went on to marry Robert Otis, either in what is now Barrington, Rhode Island (then Massachusetts) or in Lyme, Connecticut, on 8 August 1737.[10] Robert Otis was, by tradition, born in Ireland ca. 1707; he died in Lyme, Connecticut 21 Apr 1799 at the age of 92.[11] If her mixed race child survived and was a girl (surmises only at this point), Barrington records hold an interesting clue. A Mary Pomham and an Indian, Wally Cheese, declared their intentions to marry 3

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mentioned in other land evidence, is an area north of the location of Crescent Park, to Sabins Point in Riverside..

7. John G. Erhardt, *A History of Rehoboth, Seekonk, Mass. Pawtucket & East Providence, R.I., 1692-1812* [hereinafter Erhardt, *Rehoboth, Seekonk...*], (3 vols., Seekonk, Mass., 1990), 3:262, 291.
8. See Melinde Lutz Sanborn, *Lost Babes, Fornication Abstracts From Court Records Essex County, Massachusetts 1692 to 1745* (Derry, NH: The Author, 1992), ix–x.
9. Erhardt, *Rehoboth, Seekonk...*[note 5], 291.
10. The marriage was recorded in Lyme, Conn. with intentions in Barrington 15 Jan 1736/7 (Verne M. Hall and Elizabeth Bull Plimpton, *Vital records* of *Lyme, Connecticut, to the end of the year 1850*, Volume 1 [Lyme, Conn.: American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Lyme, Conn., 1976), 1:61; James N. Arnold, *Vital Record of Rhode Island 1636-1850* [hereinafter Arnold, RIVR] [21 vols., Providence, R.I.: Narragansett Historical Publishing Company, 1891-1912], 6:3:15). Margaret, who had belonged to the Newman Church in East Providence, was discharged to "Lime" 25 July 1739 (Arnold, RIVR, 9:478).
11. See Gordon Allan Morris, Shirley I Bradshaw, and Phillip Sabin Hibbard, *William Sabin and His Descendants 1609-2000* (Yarmouth Nova Scotia: The Authors, 2000), 37.

March 1743/4, and they were married by Josiah Howland, Justice, 19 April 1744.[12] Although she could have been the bastard child of Thomas, it seems more likely, however, that she was the daughter of another Pomham family.

There were indeed other Pomham/Pumhum Native American families in the area, some connected to the Browns, the first English owners of the land that includes Pomham Rock. On 7 June 1748 Elisabeth Pomham, "Indian woman and mother to Thomas Pomham and Aron Pomham deaceast," and her surviving son Ephraim Pomham made their marks on a letter asking that Capt. Benjamin Brown of Rehoboth, gentleman, be appointed administrator of the estates of Thomas and Aron Pomham, Indian men of Rehoboth, deceased, intestate. While the two had died without issue—a statement that rules out this Thomas as the father of Margaret Sabin's child—they left "sum wages due to them as souldiers."[13] Did they serve under Capt. Brown? On 24 July 1752 the same Benjamin Brown of Rehoboth, gentleman, was appointed administrator of the estate of Moses Pumham of Rehoboth laborer, deceased, intestate.[14] There may be further clues to relationships: amazingly—as there are almost no Indian births on record— the Indian couple Ephraim and Mercy Pumham registered the births of their children in Rehoboth vital records: Mary (1726), Moses (1732/3), and Ephraim (1734).[15] Without knowing the ages of the men who died in 1747, we cannot be sure that Ephraim, Mercy's husband, was the man who signed with his mother, but it is a possibility.[16] While Benjamin Brown was a common name, I knew that Benjamin Brown, 1694–1761, by inheritance from his father James

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12. Arnold, RIVR, 6:3:9, citing 1-172, 184. The details were registered in Rehoboth with slight variations: the intentions of Mary Pomham and Wade Cheese "col.," were declared 24 Mar. 1743/4 (James N. Arnold, *Vital Record of Rehoboth, 1642-1896* [hereinafter Arnold, *Rehoboth VRs*] [Providence, R.I.: Narragansett Historical Publishing Co., 1897], 490).
13. Brown was also appointed administrator of the estate of Jacob Punham (Bristol Co. Probate Records, 11:511-512). These records merely show the appointment without explanation and contain no inventories or accounting. The letter appears on mf at NEHGS, "Bristol Co., Probate Records, 1690–1881," F/72/B8/B84, with no indication of how to find the original.
14. Rounds, *Bristol Co., Mass. Probate, 2* [note 11], 123, citing 13:213/4.
15. Arnold, *Rehoboth VRs* [note xx], 2:722, citing 1:156, 159. Ephraim Pomham and his immediate family and relatives moved to various towns in New London County, Connecticut by the mid 1750s and lived there for almost a hundred years. The name disappears just before the 1850 census.
16. Other references to these men in Rehoboth records are rare, just a couple of instances when they ran afoul of the law. Jacob was old enough in 1726 to have bought rum from a settler, a transgression of the English code that brought the seller into Bristol Court on the second Tuesday of April 1726. In June 1742 "Thomas Pumham and Jacob Pumham, both of Rehoboth in the County of Bristol … (Indian Men) Laborers," pleaded guilty to a violent attack on Ichabod Ide of Rehoboth (Erhardt, *Rehoboth, Seekonk…* [note 5], 3:298, 463).

Brown, lived at the top of the hill on Willett and Pawtucket Ave where the "so called" Whitcomb Farm house is. This spot overlooks Pomham Rock which was part of the estate.[17] Did the Pomhams live just below Benjamin, perhaps working his farm for him? Benjamin Brown did use men of color on his land. His own inventory in 1762 included a negro man Cesar, under the age of 35.[18]

One other piece of secondary evidence at the Trim Room at the Blanding Library in Rehoboth may tie the Pomhams with the Browns. In 1933 Dr. Frank Calef prepared a folder titled "Rehoboth births pre 1750," The sheets have three columns for father, mother, and finally the date of their first born child. Calef's entries, unfortunately undocumented except as Rehoboth VRs, include a John Pumham, no wife mentioned, then a date of 1649. This entry really throws me. Who would record the birth of an Indian child this early unless for some reason he was in the household of none other than John Brown, first settler of Wannamoisett in 1645, just down the hill and across the brook on Willett Ave.

Still, the problem of the surname, always difficult in Native American research, remains. Could any or all of these people, including Thomas, be descended from the Warwick sachem? Although the name is the same, the Rehoboth Pomhams appear to have belonged to different tribes than the Warwick sachem. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson written 28 June 1812, John Adams mentions "Aaron Pomham, the Priest, and Moses Pomham the King of the Punkapog and Neponset tribes" as "frequent visitors at my fathers house" in Quincy.[19] A Thomas Pumham, son of Betty Pumhum, appears in Massachusetts records as a boy in 1767. He was a Punkapoag Indian, however, and lineal descendant of Thomas Ahatton, one of the original Indian proprietors.[20] It is, nonetheless, possible that Chief Pomham left descendants who were completely disconnected from their original people in the diaspora at the end of King Philip's War. He was killed August 1676 in Dedham, Massachusetts along with fifteen other Indians. Pomham has been described as "among the oldest" of the sachems at the beginning of that war,[21] hence likely to have had grown

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17. Jeffrey Howe, *Some First Settlers of Wannamoisett* (Riverside, R.I.: The Author, 2010), 82–83.
18. The will was made 25 May 1761 and proved 13 Sept. 1762 (H.L. Peter Rounds, "Bristol County Probate Abstracts, Vol. 18, 1762–1765," *The Mayflower Descendant*, Vol. 45, No. 1, Jan. 1995, p. 13.
19. Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown & Company 1856), 10:19.
20. Massachusetts Archives Collection, Mass. State Archives, Boston, 33: 403-406. Canton claimed him as a the last known heir and named a street after his ancestor (Report of the Committee on Town Seal and the Committee on Naming the Streets of Canton [Canton, Mass.: 1881], 15).
21. Alan and Mary Simpson, "Introduction," *Diary of King Philip's War, 1675-6* (Chester, Conn.: Little Compton Historical Society, 1975), 10. As he had signed a treaty in 1645, Pomham had to have been "of age" then and was at least fifty years old when he died..

children. Early histories confuse the issue by mentioning both a son and a grandson with no name, just the relationship. We know the name of only one son, although there could have been many. In December 1665 Cheesechamut, the "eldest sonne of Pomham," necessarily of age, signed a "deed of acquitance" in which he promised to leave Warwick Neck in exchange for a substantial payment.[22]

Accounts generally agree that Chief Pomham's young son or grandson was among thirty-five others captured and taken to Plymouth at the end of King Philip's War. Was he killed? Sold into slavery? Indentured like many other captured native children? Was there one son and one grandson? Different diaries and records of the time state different outcomes.[23] In his book *A Narrative of the Indian Wars in New-England* (1677) Ipswich minister William Hubbard wrote: "Amongst the rest of the captives at that time was one of the said Pomham's sons, a very likely youth, and one whose countenance would have bespoke favor for him, had he not belonged to so bloody and barbarous an Indian as his father was."[24] He described him as "a handsome lad" aged 9. "Dr. Mather," according to Drake, said the boy was carried a captive to Boston. Perhaps there he became a slave. John Hull's "Account of Captives Sold by Mass. Colony" 24 August 1676 included the sale to Thomas Smith of "2 lads viz. Pomham and Matoonus" for £7.[25] Matoonus was the son of Matoonus, the Nipmuc chief, perhaps a clue as to why these two boys were grouped together and listed by name. This Thomas Smith had purchased forty-one captured Indians for £82 the previous day.[26] According to historian Jill Lapore, Thomas

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22. Oliver P Fuller, *History of Warwick R.I. from its settlement 1642* (Warwick: Angell and Burlingame, 1874), 67. Cheesechamut signed the deed at "Mr. Smith's trading house," i.e., Smith's Castle. Sir Robert Carr, writing a stiff letter to "Pumham, pretended Sachem on Warwick neck and his adherents" in Feb. 1665/6 refers to this agreement and orders Pumham to leave within a week (John R. Bartlett, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England* [hereinafter Bartlett, *Recs. of RI*] (10 vols., Providence R.I.: Alfred Anthony, 1857-1865), 2:134). The resulting firestorm of controversy engaged the efforts of John Eliot of Natick, Roger Williams, and other major figures of the day.
23. See "Historical Notes," *Narragansett Historical Register*, ed. James N. Arnold, Vol. 6 (1888), 137; Chapin, "Pomham and His Fort" [note 2], 36; Richard M. Bayles says, citing "Trumbull," that Pumham's grandson, "the best soldier and most warlike of the Narragansett chiefs," had been taken by Captain Denison before Pumham's death (*History of Newport County, Rhode Island* [New York: L.E. Preston & Co., 1887], 248).
24. William Hubbard, *A Narrative of the Indian Wars in New-England* [1677] (repr., Stockbridge, Mass.: Herman Willis, 1803), 229. Drake concluded from this allusion that the son had been killed (Drake, *History of the Indians* [note xx], 3:76).
25. George M. Bodge's *Soldiers of King Phillips War* (third ed., Boston, Mass.: The Author, 1906), 479, citing "John Hulls Journal, 398." Microfilm of the journal is available at NEHGS.
26. Ibid, 480.

Smith, artist and mariner, owned a ship *Seaflower* that sailed from Boston in late fall 1676 with "180 Heathern Malfactors" and arrived in Jamaica in December. Some captives may have been sold there; others were later sold into bondage in faraway places such as Tangiers and Fayal.[27] If that one captive son disappeared into foreign lands in slavery as seems likely, it is possible that others of Pomham's sons or grandsons survived, perhaps among the Punkapaug Praying Indians in Massachusetts,[28] and fathered children who gave their name to Pomham's Rock. Possible but certainly not yet proven. I would be delighted to hear from any readers with suggestions for further research.

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27. For a discussion of disposition of prisoners see Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 150–170.
28. Rev. John Eliot, who was a correspondent of Chief Pomham and had intervened on his behalf in his struggles with Rhode Island authorities, was active in supporting Native Americans in Massachusetts after King Philip's War. See the website *http://natickprayingindians.org/* for further information.