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Chapter 7
Temporal Changes in a Precontact and Contact Period Cultural Landscape Along the Southern Rhode Island Coast

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Introduction

The state of Rhode Island has a rich maritime tradition. Much of its economy, culture, and history are strongly tied to the large bodies of saltwater to which it is adjacent, in particular Narragansett Bay and indirectly the Atlantic Ocean. As a result of deglaciation, the sea level in southern New England has risen approximately 70 m in the past 12,000 years, submerging coastal regions that were almost certainly previously inhabited (Oldale and O’Hara 1980, p. 106; McMaster 1983). However, although precontact period cultural materials have been recovered from underwater and intertidal contexts, no submerged sites have been inventoried in Rhode Island’s archaeological site database (David S. Robinson 2010, personal communication; Charlotte C. Taylor 2010, personal communication).

Nonetheless, one region of Rhode Island where the effects of rising sea levels on the cultural landscape are clearly evident is along the southern coast of the state. Approximately 4,150 years ago, during the Late Archaic period (3000–1000 BC), a series of nine coastal lagoons formed as topographic low points on the landscape were overtaken by encroaching shorelines (Dillon 1970, p. 98; McGinn 1982, p. 54). The ponds, which formed in ice block basins and low points on an alluvial fan, are relatively shallow, averaging 3–4 m in depth with an overall range from 1 to 8 m (Boothroyd et al. 1998, pp. 35–36). This “pond region” extends from the Connecticut border in the west to Narragansett Bay in the east. The ponds are separated from the Block Island Sound to the south by narrow (200–300 m wide) barrier spits (Boothroyd et al. 1985, p. 36). The northern boundary is somewhat arbitrarily defined by the present-day US Route 1, which traces a similar path to a precontact road (Leveillee et al. 2006, p. 85) (Fig. 7.1). The formation of these ponds was a dynamic event that had clear impacts on the cultural landscape, including settlement and subsistence patterns. Before this event, with few exceptions, evidence
of a human presence in the pond region is largely limited to isolated finds of
diagnostic projectile points. Afterward, occupation of the region was much less
ephemeral and archaeological evidence is much more abundant. Leveillee et al.
(2006, pp. 73–74) have argued that the productivity of the salt ponds was a key
variable in the eventual formation of semi-permanent settlements nearby. On the
other hand, the peripheries of interior swamps and river drainages to the north of
the pond region were intensively occupied as early as 5000 BC (Waller and Leveillee
2002, p. 10). Before the formation of the ponds, it seems that what would later
become the pond region was likely either an area where people hunted or a path
between the interior swamps and the coast. It was not until the centuries leading up
to the initial inundation of the ponds that the pond region became a coastal environ-
ment. This in turn allowed for the region to become a maritime cultural landscape
(MCL), a type of landscape that was described by Westerdahl (1992, p. 5) as signify-
ing "human utilization (economy) of maritime space by boat: settlement, fishing,
hunting, shipping and its attendant subcultures." As the sea level rose, the shoreline
moved landward and the ponds were formed, redefining the pond region as mar-
time space. At the same time, the pond region replaced recently submerged MCLs
further to the south as a source of coastal resources.

Later, another dynamic event, European contact and colonization, prompted
large shifts in the MCL of the pond region. This can be viewed in two ways,
physical and cognitive. Landscapes are not only made up of the physical environ-
ment, but human perception of that environment as well (Westerdahl 1992, pp. 5–6;
Knapp and Ashmore 1999, p. 1; Alanen and Melnick 2000, p. 6; Head 2000,
p. 64; Breen and Lane 2003, p. 478; Ireland 2003, p. 57; Cassell and Stachiw 2005,
p. 3; Ford 2009, p. 15). As such, when two populations come into contact, as is the
case during colonization, it is not uncommon for multiple cultural landscapes to exist
in the same physical space (Meining 1979b, pp. 33–34; Cooney 1999; Alanen and
Melnick 2000, p. 6; Hardesty 2000, p. 169; Head 2000, pp. 58–59; Breen and Lane
2003, p. 478; Ireland 2003). From the perspective of the English colonists in southern
Rhode Island, obtaining access to and eventual ownership of the pond region led to
the formation of a new MCL. Conversely, over the course of the seventeenth
century, the Eastern Niantics, who controlled much of the pond region (Chapin 1931,
p. 43; Sehr 1977, p. 43; Simmons 1978, p. 191; LaFantasie 1988, p. 80), lost much
of their land through transference using land sale deeds and other processes, as did
the other tribes of southeastern New England. This fundamentally changed the way
the Eastern Niantics viewed the land of the pond region, as resources and areas that
were previously accessible became inaccessible or forbidden to them. As a result,
while the physical environment did not undergo a major change, the MCL did.

The pond region presents an excellent opportunity to continue to extend the
concept of the MCL to precontact archaeology and also to highlight its dynamic
nature. In this chapter, a series of four archaeological sites within the pond region
are used as case studies to first reflect the development of the MCL in the pond
region associated with the formation of the saltwater lagoons. Historic accounts and
land sale records are then used to understand the changes in the MCL resulting
from European contact and colonization.
Landscape Theory and the MCL

Several slightly different definitions have been offered for cultural landscapes (Knapp and Ashmore 1999, p. 6; Cassell and Stachiw 2005, p. 3). On one hand, Alanen and Melnick (2000, p. 3) relate the presence of cultural landscapes to places where "human activities have affected the land." Others such as Tilley (1994, p. 25) and Knapp and Ashmore (1999, p. 10) view landscapes in a less tactile way. To Tilley (1994, p. 25), a landscape is a "setting in which locales occur and in dialectical relation to which meanings are created, reproduced and transformed." Many emphasize the importance of human perception in defining a landscape, not only visually, but with the other physical senses and memories of past experiences and observations as well (Ford 2009, p. 12, 15). Despite these differences, there are several important threads throughout most of the recent discussions of landscape. Notable is the fact that landscape cannot exist without people (Knapp and Ashmore 1999, p. 1; Alanen and Melnick 2000, p. 3; Anschuetz et al. 2001, p. 151). Furthermore, both culture and environment (or nature or space) are necessary for landscape to exist, and a number of definitions place it at the intersection of the two (Meinig 1979a, p. 2; Anschuetz et al. 2001, p. 184; Ford 2009, p. 8).

The dependence of landscape on human perception and culture leads to it being a dynamic entity, not only due to environmental change, but due to cultural impacts as well (Butzer 1980, p. 418; Cronon 1983; Alanen and Melnick 2000, p. 21; Melnick 2000, p. 32; Head 2000, pp. 9–11; Martin 2000, p. 48; Anschuetz et al. 2001, p. 177, 184). This is manifested both in a physical sense, for example through remnant settlement patterns (Dewar 1986; Dewar and McBride 1992), and in a cognitive sense, as affected by memory, past experiences or observations, and place names (Westerdahl 1992; Tilley 1994; Hardesty 2000; Head 2000; Anschuetz et al. 2001). By extension, this dynamic nature is undoubtedly present in MCLs as well.

Since the concept of the MCL was first introduced in English by Westerdahl (1992, 1994), it has been expanded to more fully include temporal change (Bannerman and Jones 1999; Parker 1999; Hale 2000; Martin 2000; McErlean et al. 2002; Breen and Lane 2003; O'Sullivan 2003; Westerdahl 2003, 2006; Flatman et al. 2005; Stewart 2007; Ford 2007, 2009) and prehistoric or precontact hunter-gatherers and fishermen (Bannerman and Jones 1999; Hale 2000; Tomalin 2000; Williams 2000; McErlean et al. 2002; Van de Noort and O'Sullivan 2006; Ford 2009), among other facets. The current chapter will continue in these veins.

Precontact Changes in the MCL

Precontact site use in the pond region will be assessed using a series of four case studies of sites that have been subject to previous archaeological fieldwork and analysis. These sites are Fort Ninigret (RI 0015), the Salt Pond Site (RI 0110), the Lavery Site (RI 2280), and the Potter Pond Site (RI 0171) (Fig. 7.1). All of these sites are located in the eastern half of the pond region. Considerably less archaeological fieldwork
has been performed in the west, and fewer sites, therefore, have been found in the town of Westerly, as opposed to Charlestown, South Kingstown, or Narragansett (RIHPHC 2002, p. 57).

**Fort Ninigret (RI 0015)**

Fort Ninigret is particularly useful for this analysis because there is evidence that it was occupied intermittently for thousands of years. Neville-like points found at this site suggest that it may have been occupied as early as the Middle Archaic period (6000–3000 BC), and it is also the Native American site that appears most frequently in historical sources from the seventeenth century (Taylor 2006, p. 278, 2009). The frequent reoccupation of the site was likely due in part to its location on top of a steep bluff, which provided its inhabitants with a large viewshed, especially to the south. This would have made the fort more easily defensible from people approaching by water, which Jones (2006) found to be an important variable in reconstructing site placement.

Cultural material from the Archaic occupation of the site is relatively scant. However, two later periods of habitation have yielded more substantial components. The first, smaller component dates between AD 700 and 1300, the end of the Middle Woodland (AD 350–950) and beginning of the Late Woodland (AD 950–1600). This occupation is represented almost entirely by small pieces of pottery of the Windsor Tradition, which is associated with the Middle Woodland period, but is uncommon in Rhode Island (Salwen and Meyer 1978, p. 57; Taylor 2006, p. 278). This may therefore represent evidence of sea trade. However, by far the most substantial component of this site dates to the mid- to late-seventeenth century, during which time it was a Native American fort (Taylor 2006, p. 280, 2009). Fort Ninigret is notable for being the site in Rhode Island with the greatest abundance of maize, which AMS tests have dated to the seventeenth century occupation (Lardy and Morenon 2008, p. 79). Also notable about the site is that it was a major hub for the production of wampum, beginning before the construction of the fort and extending through much of the seventeenth century (Salwen and Meyer 1978, p. 57; Taylor 2009). At least five iron drills of the sort needed for wampum production have been found at Fort Ninigret, and it is the only non-burial site on the mainland of Rhode Island where wampum has been found. Wampum was manufactured here despite the lack of sufficient whelk and quahog shells necessary for this industry in the adjacent Ninigret Pond, again suggesting the importance of sea trade or transportation (Taylor 2006, p. 283, 2009).

**The Salt Pond Site (RI 0110)**

Among the most significant precontact sites in the pond region is the Salt Pond Site, located on the northeastern shore of Point Judith Pond. RI 110 "is a site of extraordinary
significance. In its size, in its level of preservation, in the complexity of its features, it has no equal in New England and quite likely along the eastern seaboard of the United States” (Robinson 2007, p. 1). Like many other sites in the pond region, there is some evidence of Archaic period occupation, but this is very limited, especially when compared to the extensive Late Woodland deposits (RIHPHC 2008). Perhaps the most substantial contribution of this site is to the understanding of the early development of agriculture in Rhode Island and throughout southern New England. Also important is the potential information to be gained regarding the formation of permanent settlements or “villages” (Leveillee and Harrison 1996; Waller 1998; Leveillee et al. 2006; Waller and Leveillee 2006; Robinson 2007).

Among the most interesting facets of the Salt Pond Site is the presence of maize that can be clearly dated to before European contact (1180 BC) (Waller 1998, p. 84). Despite the fact that precontact agriculture in Rhode Island is clearly noted in historical records (Wroth 1970, pp. 137–139; Williams 1973, pp. 127–128), very little evidence has been found to support it in the archaeological record (Largy and Morenon 2008), leading to a debate as to whether it existed in Rhode Island at all before contact. The current evidence for maize agriculture is predominately confined to coastal areas including the pond region (Largy and Morenon 2008, p. 73, 80). It is quite possible that the nearby water bodies were instrumental in the presence of maize at these sites, whether because the agricultural knowledge or maize itself was disseminated by people entering the area on boats.

Waller (2000, p. 141) has described the Salt Pond Site as an “unplanned village,” as defined by Chang (1958, p. 304) to be a community in which households are arranged irregularly, and whose members may “have to walk a considerable distance to their fields.” In turn, Leveillee and Harrison (1996, pp. 54–62) have suggested that the site is part of the larger archaeological landscape of Point Judith Pond. They argue that it is likely that the Native American occupants used the entire perimeter of the pond for a wide range of activities over a period of several thousand years, extending from the Terminal Archaic (roughly 1400–700 BC) through contact. Leveillee et al. (2006, p. 79, 85–86) have argued that RI 0110 served as a centralized location for the resident population of this landscape, allowing people to maintain a dual social system in which autonomy and unity could be observed at different times.

**The Lavery Site (RI 2280)**

The Lavery Site is situated between Quonochontaug and Ninigret Ponds, allowing occupants of the site to potentially exploit the rich natural resources available at both. This site is most notable for its complex Woodland component. Leveillee et al. (2006, pp. 85–86) have argued that this site represents a Late Woodland village similar to the Salt Pond Site. Two hand-sized chipped-stone tools, potentially representing agricultural hoes, have also been recovered from the site, as has a single
carbonized maize or bean fragment (Leveillee et al. 2006, p. 83). Therefore, it is possible that the main basins of Ninigret and Quonochontaug Ponds could represent a densely occupied archaeological landscape in the same way that Leveillee and Harrison (1996, pp. 54–62) argue Point Judith Pond did.

**The Potter Pond Site (RI 0171)**

The Potter Pond Site, located on the western bank of Potter Pond, was first excavated in 1945 by members of the Narragansett Archaeological Society of Rhode Island (Fowler and Luther 1950, p. 91). Unfortunately, follow-up fieldwork or assessment of the site condition has not been possible, as requests for access were denied by the landowner in 1983 (National Park Service 1987, p. 7.10). Fowler and Luther (1950, p. 92) distinguished four distinct artifact-bearing strata based on the presence of ceramics, separating the periods of occupation into an early, pre-ceramic period, represented in the two lower strata, and a later, ceramic period, represented in the two upper strata. The two strata in the ceramic period can be further subdivided, as the top stratum only contained evidence of “Colonial contact.”

Based on the presence of steatite bowls, as well as Susquehanna and other diagnostic projectile points, the lower, pre-ceramic layer can be dated tentatively to the Terminal Archaic (Fowler and Luther 1950, p. 92, 95; Snow 1980, p. 238). The upper zone is defined by the presence of ceramics and a dramatic decrease in the number of sherds of steatite bowls. The lower stratum of the upper zone has been divided into two distinct cultural layers, with two ceramic types corresponding to each. Based on ceramic and projectile point typologies, the “early aspect” likely relates to the Early (1000 BC–350 AD) and Middle Woodland periods, and the “late aspect” likely dates to the Late Woodland period (Fowler and Luther 1950, p. 95; Snow 1980, p. 276, 288–289, 321–323). It is clear from Fowler and Luther’s ceramic and stone tool analyses that the Potter Pond Site was occupied with great consistency from the Terminal Archaic through contact, providing a unique opportunity to observe changes in the MCL over a long period of time.

Fowler and Luther (1950, p. 93) observed animal and fish bone throughout the three precontact strata, but shell remains were confined primarily to the ceramic layer. This is particularly interesting considering the fact that the pond was in place during all phases of occupation. Either the shellfish deposits from the Terminal Archaic have had time to decompose or shellfish were simply not a highly used resource during this period. The former possibility may have been due to the inundation from below by groundwater, which may explain the presence of a “black habitation refuse” (Fowler and Luther 1950, p. 92; Stein 1992, p. 137). The latter possibility, however, would suggest that even though shellfish almost certainly were available and easily attainable, they were not exploited to a great degree during the Terminal Archaic, at least at this site.
European Contact and the MCL

The English colonists of southern New England shaped the MCL within the pond region of southern Rhode Island both unintentionally and intentionally through three major mechanisms: thinning the population by disease, wars and conflicts, and by purchasing land, as signified by land sale deeds. The pond region is somewhat unique within southern New England, as many of the factors that forced the transference of land from the natives to the English affected it later than in surrounding areas. This section presents a brief narrative of some of the major events in seventeenth century southeastern New England and explores how they affected the MCL.

There were three military incidents that occurred during the seventeenth century that had significant impacts on the pond region. The first was the Pequot War of 1637–1638, a conflict between the Pequot Tribe of eastern Connecticut and the English, along with the Narragansetts and Mohegans, who were traditional enemies of the Pequots (Vaughan 1964, p. 261). As a result of this event, all of the Pequots were killed, forced into servitude, or forced to flee their homeland (Arnold 1859, p. 96; Fickes 2000). The second conflict was between the Mohegans and Narragansetts, and included the assassination of the Narragansett sachem Miantonomo in 1643. Finally, the third military incident was King Philip’s War of 1675–1676, during which nearly all of the tribes of southeastern New England banded together against the English, leading to an extensive loss of Native American land and life (RIHPHC 2002, p. 29).

The Pequot War

Before the Pequot War, there was great reduction in native population due to disease, particularly during the epidemics of 1616 and 1633 (Snow and Lanphear 1988, pp. 22–23). The earliest evidence for the documented sale of land to the English also dates to the years leading up to the Pequot War. The first cession of territory by the Narragansetts to the English was Chibachuwese, now Prudence Island, which they gave to John Oldham in the autumn of 1634 (Fig. 7.2). In the spring of 1636, Canonicus and Miantonomo, the chief sachems of the Narragansetts, gave to Roger Williams a tract of land lying between the Pawtuxet and Pawtucket Rivers, on which he founded the town of Providence (Chapin 1931, p. 14). On 24 March 1637, one of the largest and most important transactions was made; William Coddington and others purchased Aquidneck Island from Canonicus and Miantonomo (Canonicus and Miantunnomu 1856, pp. 45–46; Rider 1904, p. 62; Chapin 1931, pp. 31–32).

Traditionally, the Nanticoke were a single tribe that occupied the southern coast of Rhode Island and Connecticut as far west as the Connecticut River. Before European contact, however, the Pequots became more powerful and began to seize surrounding lands, which resulted in the bisection of the Nanticoke into eastern and western groups. The Western Nanticoke, who occupied southeastern Connecticut, fell
under the control of the Pequots, and the Eastern Niantics, who occupied much of
the south coast of Rhode Island, became subsidiary to the neighboring Narragansetts
(Denison 1878, p. 20; RIHPHC 1981, p. 6). The exact boundaries between Niantic
territory and that of the neighboring tribes were somewhat fuzzy except for a highly
contested region known as Misquamicut, the westernmost part of the pond region
of Rhode Island, extending from Weekapaug Brook to the Pawcatuck River
(Fig. 7.2). It is most likely that before the Pequot War, Eastern Niantic territory
stopped at Weekapaug, but following the war, they expanded westward to the
Pawcatuck River, and some may have settled even further to the west (Potter 1835,
pp. 26–27; Simmons 1989, p. 191).
The Death of Miantonomo

In the years following the Pequot War, the transference of land from the natives to the English began to accelerate. During the first half of the 1640s, Narragansett territory shrank to southern Rhode Island, with the Eastern Nantics being among the only remaining subsidiary tribes (Chapin 1931, p. 43). In 1643, the longstanding rivalry between the Narragansetts and the Mohegans, the tribe that occupied the land immediately west of the Pequots, came to a head, resulting in the assassination of the Narragansett sachem Miantonomo (Chapin 1931, pp. 50–51; Simmons 1989, p. 40; Winthrop 1996, pp. 472–473). Despite the fact that they were denied approval to do so by John Winthrop, the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and a supporter of the Mohegans, the Narragansetts and Nantics retaliated and attacked the Mohegan sachem Uncas in 1644 and 1645 (Sehr 1977, p. 46; Simmons 1989, p. 40). The threat of an English army led the Narragansetts and Nantics to sign a peace treaty requiring that they pay “two thousand fathome of good white wampom or a third part of good black wampem peage,” as well as cede all formerly Pequot lands and pay an annual tribute to the English for each Pequot that continued to live among them (Hazard 1792, pp. 40–42).

In 1649, the Massachusetts Colony used this treaty to establish the town of Southerton, which included the westernmost parts of the pond region (Denison 1878, pp. 43–44). Even still, it was not until 1655 that any other parts of the pond region passed into the hands of the English. The annual tribute that the Narragansetts and Nantics were forced to pay for the Pequots living among them led to debts that could only be covered by selling land, leading to a cycle of debt and land sale. The earliest official sale of Eastern Niantic land was on 20 January 1657, when Samuel Wilbur and his partners purchased land including “the hill called Pettequamscut,” bounded, in addition to other landmarks, “on the south and south-west side of the rock with Ninigret’s land” (Poter 1835, p. 275). On 20 March of that year, Ninigret sold to the same group “all the Land coming to the Hill of Petequoimscut running from the great Rock south and south-west to the maine sea & south West and West into the Country to living river beyound or westward of a fresh medow bounded Eastward with a river & on the north west the land” that was purchased previously (Wonaconchat 1657; Potter 1835, p. 276) (Fig. 7.2). In 1660, a group of English colonists purchased Misquamicut from Sosoa, a Niantic military leader during the Pequot War, a transaction that was unsuccessfully opposed by Ninigret (Denison 1878, p. 49). With the English having obtained the eastern- and westernmost parts of the pond region, Major Humphrey Atherton attempted to acquire the rest in 1662, but was rebuked by the Rhode Island Colony and King Charles II (Poter 1835, pp. 43–44; Arnold 1894, pp. 10–15; Chapin 1931, p. 57, 71–72; Sehr 1977, p. 46; Simmons 1989, pp. 44–46).

King Philip’s War

King Philip’s War was a monumental event for all of the occupants of southern New England. Before the war, Native American claims to land were tenuous. Afterward,
with few exceptions, they were nonexistent. Although King Philip’s War was not purely a struggle between the English and the natives, Native Americans put up more of a unified front during this conflict than in any of the preceding wars of the seventeenth century. The only sachem among the Narragansetts and their neighbors who did not participate in the war was Ninigret, who chose to remain neutral (Sehr 1977, p. 52). As a result, once the war had ended, the Niantics were permitted to maintain much of their land. Because the Narragansetts had lost all of theirs, many merged with the Niantics, calling themselves the Narragansett tribe (Chapin 1931, pp. 91–92). Over the course of the next two centuries, Ninigret’s heirs sold much of this land for personal profit, in many cases side-stepping attempts by the Rhode Island Colony’s General Assembly to prohibit such transactions (Simmons 1983, pp. 256–260). Fort Ninigret was the last piece of land that gave the Narragansetts access to the salt ponds, and was taken into state custody when they were detribalized in the 1880s, having by this time lost nearly all of its relevance to the tribe (Taylor 2009).

Discussion

The pond region of southern Rhode Island provides an excellent case study to trace the temporal changes in an MCL. Before the inundation of the ponds, it is possible that the landscape contained roads that were used to access the coast from interior swamps and river drainages. However, it is unlikely that the roads followed fixed courses (Westerdahl 2006, p. 100). Evidence for the occupation of the pond region during the Late Archaic and earlier, although mostly limited to isolated finds of projectile points, is widespread, including many of the sites with later period components (RIHPHC 2008).

Following the inundation of the ponds, the region became an MCL, as people began interacting with the coast and exploiting coastal resources. Fish bone was collected from throughout both the pre-ceramic and ceramic layers of the Potter Pond Site (Fowler and Luther 1950, p. 93). The lack of shellfish from the pre-ceramic layers is particularly interesting, given the patterns of shellfish use throughout New England. Although evidence of the consumption of shellfish in some parts of the continent has been dated to much earlier (Erlandson 2001, pp. 317–320), Kerber (1984) argues that estuarine succession did not develop in Rhode Island until after 4000 BC, and that protected coastal areas favorable for the development of shellfish beds were not abundant before 1000 BC. This date of 1000 BC is roughly coincident with when shellfish appear in the archaeological record of the pond region at the Potter Pond site. However, the ponds likely could have supported shellfish populations for about 1,000 years before this time. It is quite possible that earlier evidence of shellfish consumption may have decomposed due to inundation from below by groundwater, resulting in the “black habitation refuse” at the Potter Pond site (Fowler and Luther 1950, p. 92; Stein 1992, p. 137). In any case, it is clear from the sites described above that shellfish and other marine resources made up an important part of human diet following the inundation of the ponds.
Interestingly, the patterns of dominant shellfish species are different in the pond region from what Bernstein (1993) noted at the Greenwich Cove site along northwestern Narragansett Bay. Bernstein (1993, p. 147) observed a continually expanding and diversified resource base since about 1000 BC. The same is true in the pond region, as is particularly evident at the Salt Pond site, including the introduction of maize during the Late Woodland period. Still, oyster made up 90% of the shell assemblage at this site (Waller 1998, p. 37), which is very much different from the Greenwich Cove site, where Bernstein (1993, pp. 76–77) reported an assemblage during the Late Woodland period that was more evenly divided among oysters, soft-shell clams, and quahogs.

Due in large part to the stable and predictable resource base that was supported by the ponds (Leveillee et al. 2006, p. 73) along with the possibility of sea trade, the pond region allowed for the presence of some of the most complex precontact sites in southern New England, and certainly in Rhode Island. Leveillee et al. (2006) have compared the Salt Pond Site and the Lavery Site, arguing that they have no known parallels in terms of complexity, coherence, and condition. Leveillee and Harrison (1996, pp. 54–62) have suggested that the Salt Pond Site is part of the larger archaeological landscape of Point Judith Pond. They argue that it is likely that the Native American occupants used the entire perimeter of the pond for a wide range of activities over a continuum of several thousand years, extending from the Terminal Archaic through contact. It is possible then that the peripheries of some or all of the other salt ponds, particularly Quonochontaug and Ninigret Ponds, could represent densely occupied archaeological landscapes in the same way that Point Judith Pond did (Leveillee and Harrison 1996, pp. 54–62).

The possibility of sea trade and the use of the ponds as harbors during the precontact period is something that has received little attention in the archaeological literature. Westerdahl (2006, pp. 59–61) has found maritime culture to show “a striking rapidity of transport and spatially more extended communication lines than terrestrial or agrarian culture.” Also, “communications often have been livelier between the different coastal settlements than between the coastal settlements on one hand and the inland on the other” (Modéer 1945, p. 39f as translated by Westerdahl 2006, p. 61). Finally, Westerdahl (2006, p. 100) has observed that most principal roads on land, particularly those near the coast such as the trail that traced the present-day US Route 1 (Fig. 7.1), have an alternative in a coastal sea route. When combining these trends with the fact that the ponds would have offered sheltered harbors as well as protected routes between locations along their edges, the focus on the ponds to obtain subsistence resources, the availability of watercraft, and the ease of access from the ponds to the Block Island Sound and therefore Narragansett Bay, Cape Cod, the Connecticut coast, Long Island, Nantucket, Martha’s Vineyard, and Block Island, maritime activity almost certainly must have occurred on the landscape. The presence of the most complex sites and the greatest number of sites containing maize in Rhode Island are not in the pond region by coincidence. Rather, they are almost certainly there because of the confluence of natural resources and access to sea routes in place in the MCL of the south coast of Rhode Island.
Following European contact, the pond region was unique within southeastern New England in that the Eastern Nanticoke were able to maintain ownership of large parts of their land much longer than were many of the surrounding tribes. However, they did eventually lose control of the pond region, as the present-day Narragansett Reservation does not reach the coast. With the exception of Fort Ninigret, large sites in the pond region such as the Salt Pond Site and the Lavery Site are not mentioned in historic documents, suggesting that either they were no longer intensively occupied or that the English simply did not notice them. Fort Ninigret remained marine-oriented, as it became a major hub of wampum production, many of the raw materials for which were likely imported by water (Salwen and Meyer 1978, p. 58; Taylor 2006, p. 283, 2009).

The English went through the effort of formalizing many land transactions with deeds, which the native occupants may not have fully understood. Still, it is difficult to assert that the Eastern Nanticoke had no concept of land ownership, given their longstanding battles over Misquamicut. Despite this, the way that the territory was divided and sold necessarily altered the MCL. At the least, the part of the pond region containing the Salt Pond Site was sold to the English as part of the Petaquamscutt Purchase in 1657, depriving the Eastern Nanticoke of access to an important village and resource access point.

Additionally, there was a change in the MCL due to the reduced access to parts of the pond region. Before contact and subsequent land sale, the entire perimeter of Point Judith Pond comprised a singular archaeological landscape that was used for a wide range of activities. For this reason, the loss of access to even a small part of this landscape could force a dramatic restructuring of these activity areas and therefore the cognitive aspect of the Eastern Nanticoke MCL, even if the physical aspect was only moderately affected. Noting my suggestion that the shores of several of the other ponds could have represented similar archaeological landscapes, land transactions elsewhere in the pond region would have similarly affected this MCL. Following Westerdahl’s (1992, 2003) commitment to the importance of place names in the study of MCLs, it is believed that the name “Narragansett” was derived from an island in Point Judith Pond (Rider 1904, pp. 202–206; Waller and Leveillee 2006, p. 23). This reflects the tremendous importance of the pond region not only to the inhabitants of this area, but also to the entire Native American population of Rhode Island. As such, changes to the MCL in the pond region could have had more far-reaching implications.

From the perspective of the English, on the other hand, few Native American sites in the pond region, with the notable exception of Fort Ninigret, appear in historic documents from the early seventeenth century. The fact that other occupation of the region may have been dispersed across a larger landscape rather than confined to a particular structure could have caused the English to overlook the importance of these landscapes within their MCL. By purchasing land in these landscapes, the human presence there, in this case their own rather than that of the Eastern Nanticoke, became documented, structured within a European system, and therefore more noteworthy.
It is clear that the pond region represents an MCL that likely formed at approximately the same time as the salt ponds were inundated around 4,150 years ago. Over the succeeding millennia, the MCL became home to two of the region's more important Late Woodland village sites at the Salt Pond Site and the Lavery Site, and was the location of more than half of the sites at which precontact or contact period maize has been found. Following European contact and colonization, a second dynamic reconstruction of the MCL occurred, as the transfer of land from the Eastern Nanticoke to the English forced a change in how it was viewed by both sides. Because of these two events, the pond region provides a good opportunity to observe the dynamic nature of an MCL due to both natural restructuring of the physical landscape and the results of culture contact and colonization.

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