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**Windsor Founder Series:
John Mason & his statue**

by Christine Ermenc

Addressing the continuing controversy of John Mason, his legacy and statue

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John Mason and His Statue

by Christine Ermenc
Executive Director

In December of 2016, Windsor Town Council voted to exclude Mason's statue from a list of monuments and burial places being assessed for restoration, and they discussed whether the statue should remain on the Palisado Green because of its controversial nature. At this point, Windsor Historical Society stepped in to provide some historical context for John Mason and the statue. Subsequent research by Town Manager Peter Souza revealed that the statue is owned by the State of Connecticut, and that Windsor is in year 20 of a 50-year lease of the statue from the state. The statue will remain on Palisado Green for now. The following article is excerpted from the history provided to the Town Council and the public in December.

The John Mason statue located on Windsor's historic Palisado Green has been controversial from its very beginning. Unveiled in 1889, it was sited in Groton on the ruins of what had once been a fortified village occupied by the Pequot, the dominant Native group in what is now Connecticut.

In 1631, Native sachems in the Connecticut River Valley journeyed to Massachusetts Bay to offer land to the English in exchange for trade and protection from the Pequot,



*John Mason statue and the Strong-Howard House
Photo by Len Hellerman*

who later disputed their right to offer such a trade. There was little interest from the English until the Dutch established a fort in Hartford during the summer of 1633, giving them potential control of all fur trade upriver. In late September, men from the Plymouth Colony established their own fort north of the Dutch outpost, where the Farmington and Connecticut Rivers meet in what is now Windsor. The balance of power amongst Dutch, Pequot, Mohegan, and Narragansett groups began to shift as English settlement proceeded.

Within a few short years, misunderstandings escalated between the English, Dutch, and Native Americans. The inability of these groups to distinguish between one another also fueled conflict. Dutch traders killed a Pequot sachem, and the Pequot took revenge against an English trader and his crew. After the Manisses of Block Island killed another English trader and crew, the English burned Pequot wigwams and crops and one of their guides killed a Pequot. By April of 1637, when Pequots killed six men and three women and captured two girls in

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OUR MISSION

We aim to inspire public awareness and appreciation of the diverse peoples, places, and events that contribute to Windsor's evolving history. We preserve and interpret Windsor's historical record through active collecting, research, exhibitions, programs, and communications in the belief that an understanding of history can provide individuals and communities with connections to the past, a sense of belonging in the present, and responsibility for the future.

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John Mason's statue

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Wethersfield, Connecticut was becoming an increasingly dangerous place to live for Natives and English alike. It was estimated that thirty settlers had lost their lives at Pequot hands. Likewise, many Native Americans lost their homes and lives at English and Dutch hands. On May 1, 1637, representatives of the River Towns — what is now Windsor, Hartford, and Wethersfield — held a court, declared war against the Pequot, and commissioned one of Windsor's founders, Captain John Mason, who had extensive military experience in the Thirty Years' War. Mason's assignment was to lead a force of 90 largely untrained men (or, as his colleague Captain John Underhill was to term them, "young souldiers that never had beene in Warre") against the Pequot.

Joined by 60 Mohegan allies, nineteen Massachusetts Bay men under the command of Captain John Underhill, and eventually 200 reluctant Narragansett, Mason's untried force of tradesmen and farmers attacked and burned the fortified Pequot village at Mystic, which at the time was hosting a force of 150 men from the second Pequot stronghold Weinshauks (now Groton), possibly massing for a pre-emptive strike against the English. The pre-dawn attack of May 26, 1637, now known as the Pequot Massacre, was fast, confusing, and bloody. The English encountered fierce opposition, despite the surprise attack. Within minutes, twenty men (fifty percent of the English forces inside the fort) were wounded. Mason, seeing his men in danger of losing the battle, grabbed a firebrand and set one of the wigwams aflame. Winds spread the fire, and eventually, the English retreated to circle the palisade with the rest of their forces. Pequot who

emerged from the burning fort were killed by the English and their allies. Less than ten Pequot escaped. Over 400 men, women, and children were killed. It was brutal. It was war.

The remaining Pequot fled west towards Manhattan and after a two-week hiatus, Mason was again ordered to engage with them. He caught up with them near Fairfield, driving them into a swamp. Then, Mason states in his History of the Pequot War, "We being loth to destroy Women and Children, ...Mr. Tho. Stanton a Man well acquainted with Indian Language and Manners, offered his Service to go into the swamp and treat with them...did in a short time return to us, with near Two Hundred old Men, Women, and Children" given to their Native allies or sold as slaves.

The next year was a bad year for crops, and starvation loomed in the valley. John Mason was called to trade with Pocumtuck Natives in the Deerfield area for corn. The success of his mission established him as a skilled negotiator. He went on to found Old Saybrook and continued to negotiate for lands, arbitrate quarrels, and write treaties. He founded Norwich. He served as Magistrate and Chief Military Officer of the Connecticut Colony. He was elected Deputy Governor of Connecticut, serving for ten years from 1660 to 1669, after which he declined to be elected again due to illness, dying in 1672. In 1661 and 1662, Mason served as Acting Governor of the Connecticut Colony while Governor John Winthrop Jr. was in England, negotiating for Connecticut's Charter of 1662, an astonishingly liberal document which legalized almost every act previously taken in the Connecticut Colony.

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The statue now standing on Windsor's Palisado Green was originally designed for the site of the old Pequot fort in Groton, the ruins of which could apparently still be seen in 1889, when the statue was installed. Some felt that the monument should be a "combined representation of the Indian and white races", (*A History of the Statue... compiled by Thomas S. Collier, 1889*). However, the winning entry in the competition was the statue we see today, sculpted by James G. C. Hamilton of Westerly Rhode Island, and cast at the Ames Manufacturing Company of Chicopee, one of the leading producers of public statuary in the country at the time.

Over a century later in 1992, a group petitioned to have the statue removed from what they saw as sacred ground. A committee was appointed to study the matter. They wanted the statue to go to a publicly-accessible site, near an educational facility where the statue could be interpreted, and to a host municipality that would be a willing recipient of the statue despite its controversy. Windsor stepped forward to house the statue on its historic Palisado Green, close to Windsor Historical Society and Mason's original 1630s home lot. It was installed here in 1996.

Mason's legacy is complex and nuanced. Was he a religious zealot? A butcher? A skilled negotiator? An able military leader who brought decades of peace to Connecticut? A recorder of history who informs much of what we know about the Pequots and the Pequot War? The statue, as an expression of its time, and Mason the man, as an expression of his time, are important touch points for learning about history in all of its complexity. Dr. Kevin McBride, Director of Research at the Pequot Museum, remembers that when the statue was removed from Mystic in



John Mason statue on the Palisado Green

Photo by Sue Tait Porcaro

the 1990s, the tribal chairman Skip Hayward was against removal. "If you take it down," he said, "no one will remember what happened here."

Captain John Mason and his statue provide a doorway into discussion of issues that continue to be important to this day. On Windsor's Palisado Green, a place of and about history, Windsor Historical Society continues to help groups

of all ages, from schoolchildren to seniors, learn about settlement, displacement, and community building in our town.



Visit us

Admission is free to browse the museum store, the *450 Years of Windsor Stories* galleries, and the Hands-On-History Learning Center.

Wednesdays - Saturdays
11 AM - 4:00 PM
closed on major holidays

Tours of Historic Houses
11 AM & 1 PM

Tours & Library Admission
\$8 Adults
\$6 Seniors & Students
FREE for children under 12
and WHS members

Can't make it to the Society in person? For in-depth research resources, check out our website, windsorhistoricalsociety.org

Upcoming events

For more information contact the Society at 860-688-3813 or info@windsorhistoricalsociety.org

May 2, 7 PM to 8 PM

Recent Archaeological Discoveries in Windsor and Glastonbury

With State Archaeologist Brian Jones who will talk about recent excavations and what they reveal about 17th-century life.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors and students, WHS members \$4

May 4, June 1, August 3, 5:30 PM to 7 PM

First Thursdays Genealogy Support Group

Just starting out? Experienced but stumped? Want access to Ancestry.com? Join others for discussion and problem-solving. Laptops are encouraged!

FREE

May 6, 9 AM to 11 AM

Learn-and-Play First Saturday!

Legos, train table, colonial dress-up, and more in our Hands-on-History Learning Center. Scavenger hunts through our Windsor history galleries available, face painting at 10. Perfect for even the youngest learners.

Galleries and Hands-on-History Learning Center: FREE; Strong-Howard House: children 12 and under, teachers, and members are FREE, adults \$8, students and seniors \$6. Admission covers the whole day if you decide to stay.

May 20, 10 AM to 4 PM

Windsor Historical Society at the Shad Derby!

Visit Windsor Historical Society's photo booth at the Shad Derby Festival featuring life-size historic photos with head cut-outs and an exhibit on Broad Street Green history. Participate

in a trivia contest with a chance to win a tote bag and one-year family membership to the Society.

May 21, 8:30 AM to 10 AM

Rainbow Fish Ladder and Farmington River Power Company Tour.

More shad after Shad Derby? Rainbow Fish Ladder and Farmington River Power Company Tour. Here's a rare opportunity to view migrating fish, fish ladders, turbines, and generators at work. Space is limited. Reserve your spot by May 19th.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors and students, WHS members \$4. Rain or shine, thunderstorm cancels.

June 3, 10 AM to 11 AM

Bridges and Boats for Kids with Captain Bob

Make a sailor hat, build a bridge, see how the Windsor Locks Canal worked, and race your own balloon-powered boat outside in the courtyard. You may get just a bit wet! Reserve by June 2.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 children, \$3 members, \$15 family rate

June 9, 6 PM to 8 PM

Historic Libations of the Roaring Twenties

Sample and learn the history of some favorite cocktails, and hear about Prohibition and speakeasies. Over 21 only.

\$15 adults, \$14 members, \$1 off admission if you arrive in 1920s costume.

June 11, 1 PM to 4 PM

History Live: At Home with the Howards (Free Open House Days)

As part of Connecticut Open House Day, step into the year 1810 at Windsor Historical Society's national award-winning hands-on Strong-Howard House and be welcomed by Captain Nathaniel Howard who will show you around.

June 13, 7 PM to 8 PM

The Trial of Amy Archer-Gilligan

100 years ago, Connecticut's biggest event was Amy Archer-Gilligan's trial for mass arsenic poisonings at her home for the elderly in Windsor. Rob Robillard and Christine Ermenc will share perspectives on the events leading up to the trial, and on the trial itself.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 WHS members

June 21, 7 PM to 8 PM

Windsor's Farmington River Railroad Bridge Celebrates 150 Years!

Built on the heels of a tragedy, this bridge is an iconic symbol of Windsor. Bob Bell will share its history, and also talk about Windsor trolleys. Program follows short annual meeting.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors and students, WHS members FREE

July 15, 8:30 AM to 10 AM

Palisado Cemetery Tour with emphasis on World War I stories.

In conjunction with Windsor Historical Society's The Changing Face of War: Windsor Responds to World War I exhibit, Christine Ermenc leads a tour through Palisado Cemetery. Afterwards come see the exhibit.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 WHS members

August 27, 2 PM to 3 PM

The Colonial Kitchen Garden

An examination of historic kitchen gardens: their purpose, design, plants, and garden tenders with horticulturalist Gordon Kenneson. Outdoor program if weather permits. Plants for sale.

\$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$4 WHS members