

# Sowams Heritage Area Project

Community Conversion S.O.A.R. Discussions  
March 26, 2024, Seekonk Public Library, Seekonk, MA  
March 27, 2024, Mt. Hope Farm Barn, Bristol, RI

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The notes below are from community conversations held about the future of the proposed Sowams National Heritage Area (NHA) and its impact on the nine communities in the NHA study area. The discussions were part of the public outreach that is integral to the development of an NHA feasibility study. The discussions were organized in a **SOAR** analysis, focusing on the region's **S**trengths, **O**pportunities, **A**spirations, and desired **R**esults.

## Strengths:

(Hi)story:

- Ground Zero for the interaction between European and Indigenous cultures
- What happened in Sowams set the pattern for treatment of Indigenous people throughout the US. In succeeding centuries
- Region is also a centerpiece for the protection of religious freedom in the US; history of freedom of religion
- Sowams is the setting for the beginning of the country
- Bristol does a good job discussing their history, including enslavement – could be a model for other communities

Landscape:

- Waterways were and continue to be important
- Success of open space preservation and water quality improvements in Sowams, which allows some sense (*a glimpse*) of what the landscape was before first contact
- The landscape itself is part of the history and a resource for teaching about that history.
- RI Audubon Society; several land trusts and watershed coalitions
- All the waterways and marshes
- Unique geology
- Sedimentary Valley

People:

- The Pokanoket people; communities go back 12,000 years
- All the people of Sowams; from the Indigenous peoples, settlers, enslaved people, to the ongoing waves of immigrants
- Diverse communities throughout the region
- The existing artistic community and community support of the arts within the Sowams communities
- People in the region have a real interest in history
- Good work done by Dave Weed and the Sowams project in building relationships with the Pokanokets and with schools and universities
- Ability to share in the continuing preservation and revitalization of Tribal culture

#### Initiatives:

- Significant work underway to maintain Tribal heritage, ties into the “living landscape” of an NHA
- Build on the work of the Middle Passage Project in Bristol
- Good existing historical markers and signage
- RI’s slave medallion program
- Existing land acknowledgements in local towns and organizations

#### Preservation Resources:

- Haffenreffer Museum artifacts can educate the public
- Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor provides a framework or model for what can happen in Sowams
- Barrington Library (all libraries)
- Partnerships – Rhode Island and Massachusetts state and local public officials are aware of the project
- RI Historical Society, Providence Preservation Society, and all community historical societies; Rehoboth Historical Commission
- Good job in the region of protecting historical sites and buildings
- Academic institutions

#### Sites:

- Historic sites along the Route 44 corridor between Plimoth and Sowams
- East Bay Regional Bike Path
- Colonial homes
- Remnants of the rum distilleries
- 10-Mile River
- Ousamequin Preserve, Barrington
- Blithewold Mansion, Bristol
- Herreshoff Marine Museum, Bristol
- King Philip’s Chair, Bristol
- Linden Place and DeWolf Warehouse, Bristol
- Miery Swamp, Bristol
- Mt. Hope Farm, Bristol
- Potumtuk, Bristol
- Three Sisters, Bristol
- Hunts Mills, East Providence
- Newman Congregation Church and Cemetery, Rumford (East Providence)
- Palmer Rocks Light House, Riverside (East Providence)
- Roger Williams National Park, Providence
- Anawan Rock (and other historical assets), Rehoboth
- Garrison House, Swansea
- Ring of Green, Swansea
- Caratunk Reserve, Seekonk
- Jacob’s Point Village Park, Warren
- Margaret’s Cave, Warren
- Royal Burial Ground, Warren
- Weetamoo Woods (Tiverton, outside the proposed boundary)

## Opportunities:

### (Hi)story: Telling the Story

- Increase the acknowledgement of the importance of the Sowams story, land, its original inhabitants, the Pokanoket Nation (*and by extension all native lands and peoples*), and the history that flowed from those first interactions
- Use Sowams NHA to tie major stories together; Pokanoket history; keeping oral tradition alive
- Sowams is a place where people can hear about each side of history – Indigenous and Colonial
- Pokanoket Tribe is still here and their history needs to become known; Pokanoket Tribe needs to be a part of the outreach and education
- Document the oral history of the Tribe and distribute to a greater audience via new technology
- Build on the compelling story of the region's involvement in slavery
- Increase capacity to shine bright light on accurate history of what occurred here from first contact through present time
- Replicate Bristol/Barrington schools, who are incorporating Pokanoket history/culture into their curriculum; Pokanoket can share Indigenous history with:
  - Schools
  - Youth programs (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and others)
  - Museums
- Take advantage of state education departments and state legislators to bring history to the students.
- Continuing education of what really happened across the region in schools and in partnership with other organizations like Plymouth and Blackstone Valley

### Landscape: Conservation and Eco-Tourism

- Build on Indigenous knowledge of sustainable land and water practices
- Introduce visitors to the land preservation and restoration efforts underway like the Kickemuit Dam removal and marsh restorations on the Palmer River
- Educate people about how to contribute land to a trust
- Healing from invasive species and removal/restoration of Anadromous streams
- Regionalize efforts to preserve our rich natural history through local land trusts, like Seekonk, Rehoboth, Barrington, and Warren Land Trusts
- Use natural environment to restore Indigenous food systems

### People: Partnerships and Collaboration

- Tell the Sowams story (*the origin story of the United States*) together
- Sowams NHA is an opportunity to bring together a kaleidoscope of communities and peoples
- Collaborate between the Sowams communities to develop festivals, events, (*and commemorations*) of the story of Sowams and its peoples
- Leverage Providence Mayor's office of DEIB and East Providence Mayor's Indigenous Advisory Commission
- Connect to Rhode Island Slave History Medallion program
- Collaborate with Bristol Middle Passage Marker project, which honors and commemorates Bristol's African and Indigenous peoples
- Leverage Save the Bay's collaboration with all the communities sharing Narraganset Bay's estuaries and rivers
- Engage businesses, like Proctor and Gamble's Native American Project (sends P+G volunteers to clean-up Mt. Hope)

- Hire Indigenous people
- Regionalize efforts through collaborations of historic organizations
- Replicate collaborations between historic sites and schools, like Martin House in Swansea partners with high school students
- Cultivate funding partners like RI Community Foundation and state humanities and arts councils
- Need to get “buy-in” from the cities and towns to work together

#### Initiatives: Connecting to the Public

- Possibilities for creating arts, music and foods related to the Sowams story
- Seek International recognition w/ the UN
- Bring craft and artisan demonstrations to the region
- Promote the area on social media and presentations about the history, locations, activities, Pokanoket Tribe
- Art, sculpture, and theater can help tell the story of Sowams; writers-in-residence programs
- Haffenreffer Museum situation needs to be resolved with Brown University to share the Pokanoket history

#### Sites: Creative Placemaking:

- Program historical sites and destinations on the model of Plymouth and marked trails through the region
- Visitors should feel like they had the opportunity to tell their own stories and weave them into the rich fabric of stories and history in the region
- Complete establishment of land and water acknowledgements
- Create more scenic roads
- Celebrate and build on our foodways
- Replicate Rehoboth’s efforts to create a recorded history trail via QR codes with verbal histories of the area
- Manage tourism:
  - Involve owners of private properties
  - Address limited infrastructure (like parking)
  - Ensure protection and preservation of built and natural landmarks

### Aspirations:

#### (Hi)story: Telling the Story

- Highlight the importance of the history of Sowams as the origin story of the nation particularly regarding religious freedom, native interactions, and the slave trade (the good, the bad, and the ugly).
- Create a learning resource of the “accurate and full” story of Sowams and the United States
- Tell the complete story of the original inhabitants of Sowams and those who came after them and connect those stories, peoples, and communities.
- Highlight how what occurred in Sowams to the Pokanoket Nation became the mold for interaction with native peoples (from first contact to treaty to conflict to removal, enslavement, forced assimilation, or extermination) for the next 350 years across the entire continent (from sea to shining sea)
- Tell the story of how the Pokanoket Treaty worked for 50 years
- The history of the area becomes known and appreciated

- Get the story told and heard, e.g. King Philip's War
- Tell everyone's story so we can see how all connect and influence each other
- Honesty and equity in our understanding of what happened, why and where we go from here
- Improve education for residents of the region about the history of the area
- Create a curriculum for the schools
- Raise the volume of the story on the national level
- Digitize and promote the Pokanoket history

#### Landscape: Conservation and Eco-Tourism

- Indigenous traditions of sustainable stewardship of land and water become a model for regional efforts to address climate change and the critical need to protect the natural environment
- Promote respect for the land, air, and water
- Respect for the land area, and where the name came from – the heritage of the Pokanokets and others
- Honor the Pokanoket Tribe's stewardship of the region – learn from it and emulate it now
- Bring a sense of pride to the community, as reflected in protecting the environment
- Public access to water
- Keep land undeveloped
- Bring rivers back alive
- Emphasize how the Sowams communities are tethered to the land

#### People: Partnership and Collaborations

- Develop phone app that links videos to landmarks; in collaboration with the Bornstein Center for Holocaust and Genocide Education
- Get families involved
- Point out the important areas and promote them
- Build a network around Sowams
- Celebrate unsung heroes
- Create a coalition of arts and tourism programs
- Group intermingling, cooperative partners
- Collaborate and coordinate – do projects together
- Create alliances within communities with environmental groups, organizations, businesses, etc. to work together
- Bring historic societies together to collaborate w/ Pokanoket
- Each historic society can tell different stories, contributing to the whole
- Churches have a responsibility to take ownership of the story (UCC Newman/Barrington: Justice)

#### Initiatives: Connecting to the Public

- The new rail service will bring more people to the area!
- Sowams Heritage Area could bring in younger people involved in the history
  - Via education
  - QR codes around the area
  - Create a trail of the historic sites
  - Name an area using a theme to learn about
- Hire professional tour guides
- Create a cultural arts event – dance, theater, or music with a history component to it
- Organize activities for kids and families

- More teenagers are involved
- Sowams is recognized nationally and internationally
- Place needs to be respectful to existing land owners
- Education of school children
- Tourism – drive people to the area
- Develop initiatives to tell the good and bad history that occurred in the area
- Brand the area and create awareness about it – need name recognition
- Begin with the kids
- Make the curriculum of all the Sowams communities include Pokanoket history/culture

#### Sites: Creative Placemaking

- Connect and tell the Sowam story to the land through “physical manifestations of history” (Extant historic sites and resources)
- Cultural collaborative center – interactive museum / craft fair like Syracuse, NY
- Create living history on land from Brown University
- Replicate what the Blackstone corridor has done
- Celebrate our heritage
  - Tribal
  - Colonial
  - Agricultural
- Remove barriers between towns, cities, states
- Create a deeper sense of place
- Cultural Placemaking:
  - What kind of story do we want to tell?
  - Sowams can be a place to hear a story that no one else can tell
  - A place to think critically about how we want to tell the story
  - Don’t define a people by the trauma they experienced
  - Can’t separate R.I. (MA) from the Pokanoket; it’s our origin story, too
  - Highlight the importance of “different knowledges”
  - Be prepared to step way outside ourselves to tell the story

### Results:

#### (Hi)story: Telling the Story

- The Sowams story is known in Sowams, across the nation and around the world.
- The public will have access to publications; audio tours and trails; tour guides; QR codes at sites; phone app that links videos to landmarks
- Signage at airport about the heritage area; maps of identified areas / places
- Education about the Sowams story is in all local school curriculums
- Heritage area funding is used to jumpstart new research into the Sowams story and develop new educational resources
- An oral history will be available to the public
- National and international news outlets (NPR, BBC) regularly promote Sowams
- The dark side of history is shared
- Adolescents will know all the (hi)stories of Sowams

#### Landscape: Conservation and Eco-Tourism

- Brown returns Mt. Hope to the Tribe; Land Back reparations
- Continued open space protection, environmental protection efforts and water quality improvements for the land and waters of Sowams
- Native species are preserved
- Water trails will be developed, mapped, and used
- The land will have been healed, and we will be, too

#### People: Partnership, Collaborations and a sense of belonging

- Sowams NHA is an example of successful community collaboration (*across 9 communities, two states, the United States, and the Pokanoket Nation*)
- Develop a sense of belonging (*and ownership*) among the peoples of Sowams and its communities that they are a part (*and product*) of this ongoing history
- Unsung heroes are celebrated
- You will leave the Sowams Heritage Area knowing your voice has been included

#### Initiatives: Connecting to the Public

- [The public] take[s] advantage of recreational activities – conservation, environmental programs, restoration of historic properties
- Sowams is embedded into arts and tourism initiatives
- There will be more public art
- Foodways will be celebrated and maintained
- House tours showcase colonial architecture and explain history, daily life, culture, and conflict
- More businesses will adopt the name “Sowams”
- Sowams becomes part and parcel of the culture of this area, of government, in all aspects – Heritage becomes an economic engine
- Heritage tourism is an important industry
  - Interpretive panels are placed in certain areas to share our history and culture
  - Create a welcome center in the region that highlights the heritage area

#### Sites: Creative Placemaking

- Sowams NHA [will have] funded the creation of a regional resource base to support the projects; visitors’ center
- Sowams museum, cultural and arts centers, and educational centers are created
- There will be a museum dedicated to King Philip’s War
- Middle Passage monument erected in Bristol
- Visitors can see a reproduction of an Indigenous village

*“Footprints and tears on the land, ripples on the water, echoes across history.”*