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Barrington property identified as flashpoint for King Philip's War

Dig reveals exciting history of Nockum Hill



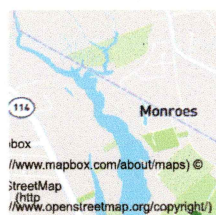
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Stephen Venuti stands near the monument that rests near the entrance to the Doug Rayner Wildlife Preserve on Nockum Hill. It was installed in 1906 by the Rhode Island Historical Society. Recent archeological surveys of the property at Lot 3A on George Street yielded dozens of musket balls and other munitions, including larger steel balls that were fired from weapons called swivel guns or murder guns.

RICHARD W. DIONNE JR.



Posted Wednesday, December 17, 2025 9:42 am



Lot 3A Nockum Hill
60 George Street
Barrington, RI 02806
View larger map (<https://maps.google.com/?q=60+George+Street%2C+Barrington%2C+RI>)

By Josh Bickford

Stephen Venuti walked to the middle of Lot 3A and pointed south. Through the leafless trees he could see Hundred Acre Cove. Was that where the raiding party arrived, along the southern shoreline at Nockum Hill, Venuti wondered aloud. Or did they come from the north?

Venuti's description of what covered that part of town in 1675 painted a vivid picture — he said a fortified meeting house stood in the center of what is now Lot 3A on George Street in Barrington. And just outside that house, on June 24, 1675, waited a group of armed Indigenous people who had grown tired of the colonists' never-ending sprawl, their insatiable desire to push their farms and their villages and their livestock deeper and deeper into Wampanoag land.

Venuti, who has been part of the team studying the town-owned property for years, said recent discoveries on Lot 3A are evidence — actual physical evidence — that the Barrington land played a crucial role in American history, serving as the location for the flashpoint, the very beginning, of King Philip's War.

Venuti said recent archeological surveys of the property yielded dozens of musket balls and other munitions, including larger steel balls that were fired from weapons called swivel guns or murder guns. Combined with historical documents, the artifacts show just how important that piece of land is, said Venuti. He is also keenly aware of the town's role in preserving the property (<https://www.eastbayri.com/stories/history-of-nockum-hill-was-nearly-lost-to-condominium-development,136381>) — a group of preservationists and historians worked to persuade Barrington officials to purchase the undeveloped 6.8-acre swath a few years ago.

"Realize that through an accident of history, that they are sitting on something that is uniquely important to the development of not only New England, but the entire country," Venuti said. "The events that happened on June 24, 1675 and through the following year shaped the development of this country like nothing else did up until the American Revolution."

Earlier this month, Venuti attended a town council meeting and shared details about the recent discoveries on Lot 3A. He spoke about the significance of the land, and the building excitement among people close to the project. In a later interview with the Barrington Times, Venuti said he was very happy to share the exciting news with the town council.

"I end up being the coordinator of what's going on here, but this, this is Barrington. This belongs to the town. Which means it belongs to the people, and my only wish is that they recognize what they have," he said.

'Hostile territory'

The story of how local preservationists came to understand the true history of Lot 3A is challenged by the story of what actually happened on the land.

Venuti, who lived in Barrington for many years, struggles to hide his excitement when recounting the history. On a frigid day in early December, Venuti stood near George Street and pointed to the monument that sits near the entrance to the Doug Rayner Wildlife Preserve on Nockum Hill. It was installed in 1906 by the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Venuti said that the information listed on the monument begins to tell the story of the land and what rested upon it. He said a man named John Myles, a Baptist who had started a congregation in Rehoboth but was later forced out of that town, had settled in Swansea. Myles built a meeting house on the land that would much later become known as Lot 3A, Venuti said.

"What we are standing on was the edge of Plymouth Colony," Venuti said.

"In 1653, a couple people from Plymouth Colony, led by a man named Thomas Willet — as you know Willet Avenue — purchased from the local natives an area called Sowams. And so when John Myles was kicked out of Rehoboth, he was allowed to start a new town, along with Thomas Willet. And that town was Swansea ... at that time it was Swansea, Plymouth Colony, later becoming Swansea, Massachusetts. And eventually this piece of Swansea was separated off and became an isolated part of the town of Barrington."

Myles later built a meeting house on Nockum Hill, Venuti said, and archeologists place that building in the center of Lot 3A. But it was more than a regular meeting house, Venuti said.

"It was a fortified structure," he said.

"This was a frontier settlement on the westernmost edge of Plymouth Colony, where they had actually encroached on the homeland of the Wampanoags and the Pokanokets," Venuti said.

"Basically, hostile territory."

Venuti said Willet was warned when he set out to purchase the land not to upset the Native Americans, as any misstep could lead to war.

"... he was told 'do not straight the Indians.' In other words, don't do this in a way that's going to get us into a war," Venuti said. "That didn't work out too well."

Venuti said multiple historical documents, including written accounts from Increase Mather and William Hubbard, detail a conflict between a colonist and a Wampanoag man. Venuti said the skirmish ended with the death of the Wampanoag.

"The record is quite clear that they expected trouble as a result of that," Venuti said. "So the Plymouth Colony governor called for a Day of Humiliation. On June 24, 1675, everybody that were settlers in the town of Swansea gathered here..."

Venuti said the settlers met at the Nockum Hill meeting house and, as they left were "set upon" by a group of Native Americans.

During the Nov. 3 Barrington Town Council meeting, Venuti told town leaders that the conflict on Nockum Hill served as the flashpoint of King Philip's War.

"This was... the historical significance, on a per capita basis, this was the bloodiest battle fought on American soil," Venuti said. "Based on the number of people that were here at the time, this was a very, very bloody battle. And in terms of historic significance, the native population ended up on the losing side of the war. They ended up being discriminated against, basically trying to be written out of history. They weren't but if you go back, people who are taught American history, are taught that the Pilgrims came over, there was a Thanksgiving Day celebration, and then suddenly the Indians disappeared. They didn't disappear. But they ended up on the losing side of the war and that legacy continues to this day."

Musket balls and more

The discovery of remnants from the fight that took place on Nockum Hill — now Lot 3A — stunned the group of preservationists and historians who called for the archeological survey.

Venuti and the others expected the artifacts would be limited to nails and other remains from the meeting house itself.

"What they found was a number of musket balls," Venuti said.

"We were not looking for musket balls."

Dozens of rounds of colonial ammunition, including large steel balls fired from swivel guns or "murder guns," were unburied across Lot 3A.

"We presented that to the National Park Service and they had a program, it's called the American Battlefield Protection Program," Venuti said, adding that the late Bonnie Warren played a key role in the process. "We submitted the application to them and said we want to look and see if we can actually find more evidence that there was a battle here and more evidence of the meeting house."

"The excavation work was done in our second grant."

The archeological work that followed removed any doubt Venuti had about the historical significance of the land at Nockum Hill. That property included the town-owned Lot 3A, Venuti said.

"Very confident," Venuti said, when asked how confident he was that Nockum Hill was the site of the flashpoint of King Philip's War.

"I'm a retired environmental health and safety manager who worked for the state of Massachusetts up until 2017, and this is a project that kind of fell in my lap and this is ... I had an exciting career up until now, but this dwarfs anything that I experienced," he said.

"Those of us who have been involved in this project, what we hope to see is that this land is not only preserved, but we'd like to see interpretive markers here that actually explains what happened here and the significance of it. We are really dedicated to having that be done from the viewpoint of not only the

colonists, but from the native Americans viewpoint."

History of Nockum Hill was nearly lost to condominium development

A vote by residents paves way for Nockum Hill preservation effort



(<https://epsilon.creativecirclecdn.com/eastbayri/original/20251217-102310-a47-nockum%20hill-lot%203a.jpg>)

In 2019, hundreds of residents voted to approve the purchase of Lot 3A, which included 6.8 acres of open space on Nockum Hill. The land acquisition cost residents \$1.125 million.

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By Josh Bickford

For many years, Lot 3A on George Street in Barrington was used for horseback riding, but about a few years ago, a developer purchased the land. The Warwick-based builder drew up plans for a large scale condominium complex on Lot 3A.

Environmentalists, preservationists and others opposed the planned development, and some questioned the impact it would have on endangered diamondback terrapins which nest in that area.

In 2019, hundreds of residents voted to approve the purchase of Lot 3A, which included 6.8 acres of open space on Nockum Hill. The land acquisition cost residents \$1.125 million.

"Shortly after the town bought the property, there was a meeting at the town hall where a bunch of people from the preservation society and the land trust met with Jim Cunha, who was the town manager at the time," said Stephen Venuti, who has been part of the team studying the town-owned property. "We convinced the town that since you own the property, we'd actually like to look and see if we can find the meeting house."

"There was an archeological firm in Connecticut that we knew about, which had a separate arm that was a 501c3 nonprofit, and they would do studies relatively cheaply. The town put up a couple thousand dollars, the preservation society put up a couple thousand dollars and we hired this team of archeologists called the Public Archeology Survey Team (PAST), and they came out here and they spent a couple days doing a study."

Venuti said the first round of the work featured an extensive amount of metal-detecting.

"What we did is we came out here and worked with the archeologists and they basically started at one end and worked to the other end," he said.

The group's discoveries (<https://www.eastbayri.com/stories/barrington-property-identified-as-flashpoint-for-king-philips-war,136379>) led to an American Battlefield Protection Program grant awarded to the town by the National Park Service, based on historical evidence suggesting that the site was the location of the flashpoint — the actual beginning — of King Philip's War.

The group has secured a second grant also, and has plans for the money.

"With our second grant we are trying to figure out a couple different things. Was there an approach that we can figure out — did they (the Native Americans) come from the west? Did they come from the north? Did they attack from the water? We don't know, but with our second grant we are going to be doing a lot of metal detecting in the surrounding area to see if we can find that out," Venuti said.