What is the Traditional Government of the Nipmuc Nation?

The Constitution of the Nipmuc Nation, SECTION II Tribal Government, Part H, 1 defines the Traditional Government as:
“The Traditional Government of the Nipmuc Nation shall cultivate and perpetuate the customs, heritage, and religion of the Nipmuc Nation and shall include the current Hassanamisco Chief and an Elders Council whose members shall have attained sixty (60) years of age.”

The Traditional Government is in fact the continuation of the old Hassanamisco Tribal Council. One of our principal responsibilities is the stewardship of the Hassanamesit Reservation.

The Elders Council has an additional mission –
The Elders Council of the Nipmuc Nation shall cultivate and perpetuate our culture, history, and customs and encourage the harmony and unity of all of our People.
Any enrolled member of the Nipmuc Nation age 60 and over is welcome to serve on the Elders Council. The Elders meet on the 2nd Saturday of each month at 11 am via Zoom. Visitors are welcome at these meetings. Per the Elders Council Bylaws, there is a core group of 10 Elders with voting rights. Those members include (and can/do change):

Nellie Toney – Chair
Nancy Charleston – Treasurer
Gail Schuyler
Chief Walter Vickers
Sydney Schuyler

Ethel Toney
Muriel Geter
Ann White
Denise Lewis
Alicia Smith
The current Chief or Sonksq (female leader) of the Nipmuc Nation and Hassanamisco Band is Cheryll Toney Holley.

*** Please note that the Traditional Government and Nipmuc Nation Tribal Council are NOT the same. They are two different entities with different purposes. ***

Responsibilities of the Traditional Government

Below is the chart outlining the Traditional Government’s responsibilities.

What does the Traditional Government do all year?

As stated in the definitions above, the traditional government is responsible for the continuation of our culture. To that end, several programs and activities are sponsored by the traditional government. These activities are open to all Nipmucs regardless of enrollment status.
Powwow

The Nipmuc Nation Powwow (once known as the Hassanamisco Indian Fair) is held on the last Sunday in July at the reservation. It is open to the public, charges admission to all, and offers drumming, vendors, and dancing. This is the main fundraiser for the reservation as well as a yearly reunion for Hassanamisco Band.

The Powwow was cancelled this year due to covid restrictions.

Strawberry Moon

Held on the 3rd Saturday in June. This ceremony followed by a potluck social focuses on forgiveness. This year’s ceremony and social was held via Zoom on June 20, 2020.

This caused much controversy as there was a tribal member that felt that all ceremonies should be filmed and broadcast to not only tribal members but to the public at large. This request was not in accordance with our practices and so it was decided that we would no longer hold open ceremony via Zoom.

Winter Social

This is a winter gathering focused on sharing our connections with each other. This year’s winter was held on February 17, 2020 at the Tribal Office in Grafton. We included giveaways, hand-drumming by our guest, Deborah Spears Moorhead, and – for the first time – included vendors and craft demonstrations.
Hassanamisco Indian Museum

The Museum building is still closed for renovation, but activities continue either on the reservation or at the tribal office. School and scout visits are welcome. Each year a Native American Youth camp stays at the reservation. Visits to area schools have been suspended due to not enough volunteers. Language classes at the tribal office have been suspended but online classes are held once a month. When the Museum reopens, it will more accurately reflect Nipmuc history and culture throughout the years, have classroom space, and include visiting artists and instructors on a regular basis.

Homestead Restoration

**Rae Gould** is leading this effort to restore the 1801 Homestead on the reservation. Once restored, it will re-open as a Museum. The exterior is now finished, and the focus has shifted to plans for the completion of the interior.

Tribal Historic Preservation Office

**Rae Gould, Liz Santana-Kiser, and Cheryll Holley** monitor federally funded construction that may have an impact on historic or sacred Nipmuc landscapes. We also re-inter remains returned to the tribe by Museums, historical societies, and other tribes. In October 2020, we reinterred a large number of cremated individuals that were originally buried in nearby Millbury.
Reservation Extension

We are currently negotiating with the town of Grafton for the return of land to the reservation. The land will be used to practice stewardship of the land, invigorate our paddling activities and for ceremonial space.

Food Distribution

During covid, we sought to ensure that needs were met for all. Regular food distributions from the USDA and meat donations from The Farm School were carried out by multiple tribal members including Keshon Jackson, Ite Santana, Tashanna Carter, Kristen Wyman, and Nia Holley. Rest assured - No turkeys were killed during this time.

Flag-Raising

Cheryll Holley, with the help of Morgan Carlucci and Sonya Paulino, went before the Worcester City Council to request that the Nipmuc flag be flown outside of city hall next to the city, state, and federal flags. The motion was approved and, while our flag occupies the “cultural pole” for now, the city is creating a permanent spot for it.
The Farm School

Through relationships developed through agroecology encounters, the Farm School began to work with the tribe to assist with land based projects on the reservation including the removal of dead trees, building a bridge over the stream, and clearing paths. The Farm School decided to take steps to deepen the relationship between themselves and the tribe by offering us the opportunity to acquire one of their farms. Next year will begin a 2-year transition in ownership of Maggie’s Farm, a 181 acre mixed use landbase.

State-wide Anti-Mascot Group

The listening sessions and discussion groups aimed at raising awareness of Native Peoples in the Commonwealth, especially among legislators, and promoting the condition of and needs of tribal groups in Massachusetts narrowed their focus to removing Native mascots form all Massachusetts school systems. Both the Hassanamisco and Chaubunagungamaug Bands appointed Brittney Walley as our representative in this group. Brittney was also nominated and accepted to the State Flag committee. This committee was created to change the Massachusetts state flag to reflect less racist imagery.
Nipmuc Indian Development Corporation (NIDC)

The NIDC serves as a vehicle for funding community development projects. All the work and programs created and sponsored this year were funded through the NIDC.

Websites

The Hassanamisco Indian Museum website is www.nipmucmuseum.org.

The Nipmuc Indian Development Corporation website is www.nippi.org.

Food Sovereignty Programming

Many Nipmucs have family members that have diabetes and/or heart disease and many of our tribal members have died from these diseases. The NIDC, the Elders Council, the Women’s Group, and the Sonksq are working on ways to reduce these diseases in our community. One of the best ways to do this is to change what we eat. For the past six years, we have grown vegetables, berries, and herbs on the reservation, encouraged Nipmucs and their families to start food gardens at home, and taught medicine-making and plant identification.
Reservation Garden

Covid hit our gardening efforts hard this year. We mainly grew herbs and squashes – again stewarded by Nia Holley. The herb harvests went into the making of salves, tinctures and teas and anyone was able to harvest. The goal of growing food at the reservation is to produce food from non-GMO seeds for distribution to elders and other Nipmuc families -- with the ultimate goal to change what we eat thereby reducing diabetes and heart disease in our community. This year we added a very raised garden bed for the elders so that they would not have to bend to garden. The bed was conceived by Nia and built by Andre Gaines.

Herbal Education & Apothecary

Because of the threat of covid to our Community, the salves, teas, tinctures, and dried herbs were offered to our community at no charge. Packets of remedies were mailed out to Nipmucs and herb centered information was emailed and posted for all Nipmucs to read and discover.
Home Gardens

Kristen Wyman and Nia Holley from the Eastern Woodlands Rematriation Collective once again assisted Nipmuc families in establishing home gardens with the same goals for distributing food to Nipmuc families.

Youth Cohort

UMass Boston formed a partnership with the Nipmuc and Mashpee Wampanoag tribes to create a Life-Skills training program for middle-schoolers. It is an anti-substance abuse program that focuses on the good that our community offers and provides training with Nipmuc mentors in an online environment. There are hands-on activities included and children receive the necessary supplies via mail before each session.
Women's Group

*Squaognipmug Waantook Society* is a group of Nipmuc women from different bands and non-bands who meet once a month to talk, share, and work on crafts and other projects. Occasional field trips included! We also practice ceremony at the reservation. Below are photos from a hand drum making session and a moccasin workshop.

Eastern Woodlands Rematriation Collective

The NIDC is happy to be a fiscal sponsor for the remarkable group of people. Their self-description reads

“Eastern Woodlands Rematriation is a collective of Indigenous people and kin, inclusive of all genders AND led exclusively by Indigenous women, femmes and two spirits. We understand that in order to rematriate traditional food systems and heal our communities all of our people must be a part of the circle to restore and respect matriarchies again.”
There are many individual Nipmucs who work for and with the Traditional Government to help us accomplish many things.

Tashanna Carter      Donald Gould      Douglas Geter
Licine Carter        Sherry Cavers      Elizabeth Santana-Kiser
Rae Gould            Crystal Avakian     Ite Santana
David Tall Pine White Nia Holley         Anthony Richardson and family
Kristen Wyman        Kohar Avakian       Ken Gould Sr and his crew
Andrea Smith         Darlene Charleston  Bud Carter
Erica Campbell       Cheryl Stedler      Robert Carter
Danny Campbell       Talin Avakian       Keely Curliss
Mrs. Vickers         Lydia Curliss       Kim Toney
Eric Gould           Rana Smith          Brittney Walley
Robert and Sarah Stedler Millie McCowan  Keshon Jackson

Many thanks to these organizations who provide multiple layers of support to Nipmuc People and the Nipmuc Nation-

Eastern Woodlands Rematriation Collective
Suffolk University Law School Indigenous Peoples Rights Clinic
UMass Boston Institute for New England Native American Studies
Five College Native and Indigenous Studies Program
MA Commission on Indian Affairs
Stockbridge-Munsee Tribe
The Farm School