

CMA 2025 #31
IN CITY COUNCIL
March 3, 2025

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Please find attached a memorandum regarding AR 24-63 recognizing and honoring the Massachusett Tribe from the Historical Commission's Preservation Planner, Sarah Burks.

Very truly yours,

Yi-An Huang
City Manager





CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: February 24, 2025

To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager

From: Sarah Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: Response to Policy Order POR 2024 #145

The policy order, adopted by the City Council on November 4, 2024, presents historical background about the [Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag](#) whose ancestors occupied much of the eastern part of Massachusetts including what is now known as Cambridge for thousands of years and to specifically recognizes the historical figure recorded as The Sqa Sachem. She was the leader of the band of the Massachusetts Tribe residing here at the period of the English settlement of Massachusetts Bay in 1630.

The policy order lays out the following directives,

1. That the City Council recognize the Massachusetts Tribal Nation as the original inhabitants of Cambridge and acknowledge the historic injustices they have faced, committing to an ongoing partnership that respects their history and contributions;
2. That the City Manager direct the appropriate City staff to
 - a. Prominently incorporate recognition of the Massachusetts Tribe during key official events, documents, websites, and communications;
 - b. Establish a living memorial in Cambridge that honors the Massachusetts Tribe with special recognition of The Sqa Sachem.¹
 - c. Place a plaque in a prominent location within City Hall to ensure that the City's acknowledgment remains visible and lasting.²
3. That the City Manager report back to the City Council on the progress of these actions in a timely manner.

Historical Commission staff, together with staff of several other City departments, has been building a relationship with members of the Indigenous community of Cambridge over the last two years while working to carry out the objectives of a Participatory Budget project (Round 8).

¹ While the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag refers to this historical figure as The Sqa Sachem, it is important to note that many Native People in the United States and Canada consider the term squaw/squa/sqa to be an ethnic slur that is highly derogatory toward women and may be deeply hurt or offended to see the term used by a non-Native entity. Since Cambridge City Hall is visited by people from around the world, an alternate term, Sunksqa, is recommended for the plaque and living memorial. This suggestion was made by a member of the Massachusetts Tribe's tribal council.

² An inquiry to the Mayor's office clarified that the content for the plaque was intended to be the same as the text of the Policy Order.

These community members include Elizabeth Solomon of the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag; Sage Carbone, East Cambridge resident and member of the Northern Narragansett Tribe of Rhode Island, and Dr. David Shane Lowry, an MIT alumnus and former MIT Distinguished Fellow in Native American Studies (2021-2022) and a member of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina. We have also been engaged in a project with Ms. Solomon as a contracted consultant to re-write the content for the historic markers in Winthrop Square Park in a way that presents the history of the founding of Newtowne/Cambridge in a broader context and provide the background of the Massachusetts Tribe as the original and still present inhabitants of this area.

To carry out the directives of the City Council in the policy order, the following plan of action is proposed.

1. Hire a consultant to facilitate an educational training for the City Council and City staff to learn about the Massachusetts Tribe and its history and to define the intent of adopting a meaningful land acknowledgment statement. The purpose of the training would be to build an understanding of the Indigenous perspective of our past and present and lay the groundwork for an ongoing relationship with the Tribe. Elizabeth Solomon has facilitated such training sessions in the past both individually and with the [Upstander Academy](#) has did something similar with faith leaders in Cambridge last year. The wording and recommended uses of the acknowledgement statement can be discussed at the conclusion of the training or discussed by a smaller working group. See #2 below.
2. Maintain and expand the working group of Indigenous community members and city staff. The addition of community leaders and additional city staff would be beneficial. This working group can develop an appropriate and meaningful “living monument” to the Tribe and its leader, the Sunksqa. One idea that has been brought forward is a garden or monument on Cambridge Common, though Winthrop Square might be a suitable place since the reworked historic marker is already in development.
3. Install a plaque with the text of the Policy Order in the lobby of City Hall. There are a number of memorials and honorary plaques in the lobby already and it would be helpful to have a design consultant help to organize what’s there and put forward a plan to guide future additions.

Charles Sullivan and I look forward to the work ahead in partnership with City leadership, Indigenous residents of Cambridge and the members of the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag.