

Excerpts of Writings
Relating to the
Indigenous Peoples of
Bass River and their
leader Nauhaught

Compiled by Robert Dudley Kelley

Writings of the Rev. Timothy Alden, Jr. In *Memorabilia of Yarmouth*

From Alden's writing in 1798: ¹

“So late as 1779, there was a small cluster of wigwams in the south-eastern part of the town, about a mile from the mouth of Bass river, which were inhabited by some of the remains of the Pawkunnawkut Indians. The chief of them about this time had the small-pox. Five of those who had it survived, and eleven died. It is probable that this part of Yarmouth will ever retain the name of Indian Town. There is still one wigwam on the banks of the river, which is occupied by a negro and squaw.”

“A little to the south westward of Indian town is Swan's Pond, as may be seen by the map of Yarmouth, which was sometime since prepared by the direction of the General Court. On the north-eastern side of this pond is a spring, just above which, about forty years ago, stood an ancient Indian meeting-house.”

Legend of The Nauhaught

“Elisha Nauhaught was a very conscientious deacon; several anecdotes are related of him to the present day. He was a temperate, pious, well-minded Indian. He used to pray with great fervor, in his vernacular tongue, with his family, with the sick, and at funerals. In his last illness my father visited him, and

¹ 1798 Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Volume V (first series). Boston; *Mr. Alden's Memorabilia of Yarmouth*, pgs. 54 – 60; transcribed by Robert Dudley Kelley 2011. The Rev. Timothy Alden Jr. was Minister of Yarmouth after his father Timothy Alden.

conversing with him on death, the common allotment of mankind he asked Nauhaught if he were resigned to his approaching dissolution? He replied, in an Indian style, "Oh yes, Mr. Alden, I have always had a pretty good notion about death."

"The following anecdote, which may also be seen in the Massachusetts Magazine for March, 1794, is worthy a place among the memorabilia of Yarmouth. I believe there can be no doubt of its truth, for I have often heard the old people relate it.

...Our honest deacon was once attacked by a number of large black snakes. Being at a distance from any inhabitants, he was to be sure, in a very precarious situation; for, unfortunately, he had not even a knife about him for his defense. What to do he knew not. To outrun them he found utterly impossible, and to keep them off without any weapon was equally so. He therefore came to the determination to stand firm on his feet. They began to wind themselves about him; in a little time, one of them had made his way up to the Indian's neck, and was trying to put his black head into his mouth. Nauhaught opened it immediately for him. The black serpent thrust in his head, and Nauhaught, putting his jaws together, bit it off in a moment! As soon as the blood, streaming from the beheaded, was discovered by the rest of the snakes, they left their intended prey with great precipitation, and Nauhaught was liberated from the jaws of impending death."

Narrative and Legendary Poems

Nauhaught, the Deacon ²

A Poem by John Greenleaf Whittier

*NAUHAUGHT, the Indian deacon, who of old
Dwelt, poor but blameless, where his narrowing Cape
Stretches its shrunk arm out to all the winds
And the relentless smiting of the waves,
Awoke one morning from a pleasant dream
Of a good angel dropping in his hand
A fair, broad gold-piece, in the name of God.*

*He rose and went forth with the early day
Far inland, where the voices of the waves
Mellowed and mingled with the whispering leaves,
As, through the tangle of the low, thick woods,
He searched his traps. Therein nor beast nor bird
He found; though meanwhile in the reedy pools
The otter plashed, and underneath the pines
The partridge drummed: and as his thoughts went back
To the sick wife and little child at home,
What marvel that the poor man felt his faith
Too weak to bear its burden,—like a rope
That, strand by strand uncoiling, breaks above
The hand that grasps it. “Even now, O Lord!
Send me,” he prayed, “the angel of my dream!
Nauhaught is very poor; he cannot wait.”*

*Even as he spake he heard at his bare feet
A low, metallic clink, and, looking down,
He saw a dainty purse with disks of gold
Crowding its silken net. Awhile he held*

² John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892). *The Poetical Works in Four Volumes*. 1892. Narrative and Legendary Poems, Nauhaught, the Deacon, 1870; transcribed by Robert Dudley Kelley 2019.

*The treasure up before his eyes, alone
With his great need, feeling the wondrous coins
Slide through his eager fingers, one by one.
So then the dream was true. The angel brought
One broad piece only; should he take all these?
Who would be wiser, in the blind, dumb woods?
The loser, doubtless rich, would scarcely miss
This dropped crumb from a table always full.
Still, while he mused, he seemed to hear the cry
Of a starved child; the sick face of his wife
Tempted him. Heart and flesh in fierce revolt
Urged the wild license of his savage youth
Against his later scruples. Bitter toil,
Prayer, fasting, dread of blame, and pitiless eyes
To watch his halting,—had he lost for these
The freedom of the woods;—the hunting-grounds
Of happy spirits for a walled-in heaven
Of everlasting psalms? One healed the sick
Very far off thousands of moons ago:
Had he not prayed him night and day to come
And cure his bed-bound wife? Was there a hell?
Were all his fathers' people writhing there—
Like the poor shell-fish set to boil alive—
Forever, dying never? If he kept
This gold, so needed, would the dreadful God
Torment him like a Mohawk's captive stuck
With slow-consuming splinters? Would the saints
And the white angels dance and laugh to see him
Burn like a pitch-pine torch? His Christian garb
Seemed falling from him; with the fear and shame
Of Adam naked at the cool of day,
He gazed around. A black snake lay in coil
On the hot sand, a crow with sidelong eye
Watched from a dead bough. All his Indian lore
Of evil blending with a convert's faith
In the supernal terrors of the Book,
He saw the Tempter in the coiling snake
And ominous, black-winged bird; and all the while*

*The low rebuking of the distant waves
Stole in upon him like the voice of God
Among the trees of Eden. Girding up
His soul's loins with a resolute hand, he thrust
The base thought from him: "Nauhaught, be a man!
Starve if need be; but, while you live, look out
From honest eyes on all men, unashamed.
God help me! I am deacon of the church,
A baptized, praying Indian! Should I do
This secret meanness, even the barken knots
Of the old trees would turn to eyes to see it,
The birds would tell of it, and all the leaves
Whisper above me: 'Nauhaught is a thief!'
The sun would know it, and the stars that hide
Behind his light would watch me, and at night
Follow me with their sharp, accusing eyes.
Yea, thou, God, seest me!" Then Nauhaught drew
Closer his belt of leather, dulling thus
The pain of hunger, and walked bravely back
To the brown fishing-hamlet by the sea;
And, pausing at the inn-door, cheerily asked:
"Who hath lost aught to-day?"
"I," said a voice;
"Ten golden pieces, in a silken purse,
My daughter's handiwork." He looked, and lo!
One stood before him in a coat of frieze,
And the glazed hat of a seafaring man,
Shrewd-faced, broad-shouldered, with no trace of wings.
Marvelling, he dropped within the stranger's hand
The silken web, and turned to go his way.
But the man said: "A tithe at least is yours;
Take it in God's name as an honest man."
And as the deacon's dusky fingers closed
Over the golden gift, "Yea, in God's name
I take it, with a poor man's thanks," he said.*

*So down the street that, like a river of sand,
Ran, white in sunshine, to the summer sea,*

*He sought his home, singing and praising God;
And when his neighbors in their careless way
Spoke of the owner of the silken purse—
A Wellfleet skipper, known in every port
That the Cape opens in its sandy wall—
He answered, with a wise smile, to himself:
“I saw the angel where they see a man.”*

1870.