



November 14, 2023

Letter of Intention to Join the First Light Community

The purpose of this letter is to provide the rationale for the Falmouth Land Trust's commitment to and support of the goals of First Light Community.

Historical context of the area now known as Falmouth, Maine

Please note that we understand that this information is incomplete and that the written materials preserved by Europeans and settlers were often biased.

When the Laurentide Glacier retreated 13,000 years ago, meltwater formed the Presumpscot River, and mosses and lichens grew on the land. Caribou moved north to graze on them, and the ancestors of the Wabanaki followed them. People dug clams and feasted along the shore, fished in the Presumpscot River, paddled up and down its waters to and from Sebago Lake, and planted corn, squash and beans along its banks.

The first contact between the Abenaki and Europeans was with fishermen, trappers and explorers. From 1605-1607, so many indigenous people along the coast died from European diseases like the common cold, measles and smallpox that it is estimated that only 25 percent survived the years known as the "Great Dying."

In 1623, Christopher Leavitt, commissioned by Fernando Gorges to explore the unceded Abenaki land that he had recently been "awarded" by the English king, sailed into Casco Bay. Near the mouth of the Presumpscot, Leavitt met with Abenaki sachems Skitterygusset and his sister Warrabitta. As the English colonists hunted, occupied land, cut trees and built houses on both sides of the Presumpscot river, relationships soured quickly. An uneasy arrangement developed: the colonists would live only on the west side of the river and the Abenaki on the east side.

In 1735, two colonists, Thomas Westbrook and Samuel Waldo, built a dam at the Lower Falls on the Presumpscot which blocked fish passage from the ocean up to Sebago. The Abenaki leader Chief Polin twice petitioned the Massachusetts governor to require a fish ladder but the colonists ignored the governor's agreement. Following the assassination of Chief Polin in 1756 and other acts of violence, most of the remaining Abenaki withdrew to the north and west while the English took possession of all land in present-day Falmouth.

In recent years, four properties significant for indigenous history have been conserved in Falmouth:

1. River Point, at the confluence of the Presumpscot and Piscataqua rivers, the site of numerous activities of the Abenaki and their predecessors;
2. Presumpscot Falls on the east bank of the Presumpscot, a traditional Abenaki fishing spot at the head of tide, where colonists constructed the first dam (finally removed in 2002);
3. Skitterygusset Creek, named for the 17th century sachem and where members of the Passamaquoddy tribe currently exercise elver fishing rights; and
4. Clapboard Island, where shell piles testify to a long period of clamming by the Abenaki.

Statement of Intention

The Falmouth Land Trust (FLT) was created in 1981. FLT is responsible for the stewardship of over 2,700 acres of protected open space, most of which is open for sustainable foraging and fishing and much of which is open for sustainable hunting. This acreage includes the three mainland areas listed above. Its mission is:

- to preserve and care for natural and agricultural land in perpetuity,
- to enhance habitat for plants and wildlife,
- to advance the quality of life for all in our community, and
- to educate the public on the history and stewardship of protected lands.

The FLT board and staff are committed to a process described by one Wabanaki man (in the documentary *Dawnland*) as “a necessary transition from being an occupier to a neighbor.” FLT Board member Clifford Gilpin was honored to participate in the November 2022-January 2023 First Light program. This was a process of deep learning and better understanding of the injustices forced on the Wabanaki since their first contact with European colonizers. These injustices include not only the illegal seizure of Wabanaki land but also attempts to destroy Wabanaki culture and denial of access to land of spiritual and economic significance — injustices which continue to the present day.

Following his participation in First Light, Clifford Gilpin made a presentation to the FLT board and staff on his learnings. This has begun the process of better understanding the injustices endured by the Wabanaki since first contact and the steps necessary to establish a right relationship with the Wabanaki. These steps include:

1. Better understanding of the history of our relationships since first contact
2. Acknowledgment of the harmful consequences of these relationships over time
3. Increased awareness of opportunities to learn from, support, and collaborate with the Wabanaki, including those living in southern Maine
4. Exploration of opportunities to increase access to land significant to the Wabanaki for their traditional uses
5. Education of Falmouth residents and users of conserved land about the history and significance of Wabanaki presence in Falmouth

Actions have included:

- a) Including Wabanaki history and current significance in monthly guided nature walks for the public
- b) Teaching school groups about Wabanaki relationships with nature
- c) Identifying brown ash trees for potential Wabanaki use
- d) Including specific information on Wabanaki history and current traditions on kiosks and signs on conserved land
- e) Individual board members pooling their contributions to the Wabanaki Self Determination Fund on behalf of FLT
- f) Identifying two staff members within the organization to serve as liaisons for accountability to these commitments and help continue and grow the internal learning

FLT recognizes there is still learning and work to do to expand upon these efforts. FLT would be honored to participate in and support the goals of the First Light Community and is committed to asking questions, learning more, and growing our understanding of how to be a better partner in this work.

On behalf of the FLT Board of Trustees:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Vance', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Michael Vance, Board President

On behalf of FLT staff:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mila Plavsic', written in a cursive style.

Mila Plavsic, Executive Director