

Montauk Tribe Extinct, Is Court Edict, but Assembly Bill Would Recognize Them

(Special to The Eagle.)

Easthampton, L. I., Feb. 17.—The bill seeking to appropriate \$300,000 for reimbursement of Montauk Indians, introduced by Assemblyman John J. O'Connor of Manhattan, is a continuation of attempts made by Indian descendants to obtain money for lands of the aborigines sold in 1649-50 to settlers and individuals. It is not taken seriously in this town, where heirs of Arthur M. Benson of Brooklyn own large tracts of the Indian fields at Montauk, or by others who hold title either from the town or Indians, or from the Bensons.

A decision given by Justice Abel R. Blackmar in 1910 is to the effect that there is now no Montauk Tribe of Indians. Wyandank Pharaoh, descendant of the Sachem Wyandanch, who was tribal ruler of the Indians when the Easthampton settlers laid out their colony in 1649, set himself up as king in 1885. Through his attorneys he sought to oust Arthur Benson. The mother of Wyandank, a Mrs. Banks, former wife of a King David, at the trial in 1909, testified that the tribal rights had never been signed away. Justice Blackmar took much time to consider the question at law. He searched the early records and ancient patents. He cited the governor Donnan patent by which the Easthampton people were given a right to purchase land from the Indians. He decided that when the late Mr. Benson bought from the Indians the land they claimed to own, Benson had a right to do it. He examined an ancient deed given by the Indians in 1680. This deed sold all of Montauk, including to the whites for 100 pounds sterling. He found that peaceable possession had been given by the Indians and noted that "in token thereof" the Indian grant told how "we have signed up a piece of earth and delivered it as our act and deed into the hands of the said inhabitants of Easthampton." The gist of the Blackmar decision is that the tribe, by intermarriage with negroes, had disintegrated and had been absorbed into the mass of present-day citizens. He said: "I hold that the purchase (by Mr. Benson) was a lawful act, and there is no consideration of justice which makes me loath to find there is no longer a tribe of Montauk Indians."

Even Washington Is Doubtful.

As to the exact status of the Montauk Tribe of Indians the Federal government and State differ. If there are any Montauk Indians they are wards of the Nation. But Justice Blackmar holds there is no longer such a tribe of Indians. In 1921 the small remnant of Indians who claim to keep up customs of the tribe, through counsel, applied to Washington to find out what their status is. No decision as yet been rendered.

David Gardiner, Easthampton historian, in 1871, says of the Montauk Indians: "Wyandanch first conferred privilege of pasture at Montauk, 1658." Thereafter deeds were passed giving the entire holdings in East-

hampton Town to the settlers and the islands of Plum Island, Gardiner's Island, to individuals. Two-thirds of the Montauks perished by pestilence in 1659. In 1871 the tribe had been reduced to a "beggary number of some ten or fifteen drunken and degraded beings."

The original Wyandanch left an only son, Wyandombone, but he died of smallpox at an early age. The tribe was then governed by a Dowager Queen. The Pharaoh descendants, living in 1867, were King Sylvester and Stephen Talkhouse, the former titular sachem and the latter his heir.

The Montauks have been legally declared extinct as a tribe, says a brief in defendant's case, Wyandank Pharaoh vs. Jane Ann Benson, New York Supreme Court, Suffolk County.

Present Queen a Negro.

When Benson bought the lands once owned by the Montauk Indians, a few Indians and half breeds, then living, were removed from Indian Field to Freetown, a settlement near Easthampton village, so-called because set aside for occupancy of the negro slaves freed in the first years of the last century. There is now a very large admixture of negro blood both in the survivors of the original Indians and the remnants of both the Montauks and Shinnecocks.

The queen, or consort, of the so-called King Wyandank of the Montauks, now a widow, is a full-blooded negro and a daughter of James Van Houten, a negro musician, who was born in a slave State and settled at Sag Harbor after the Civil War. King "Dank" left no children. "Dank" and his supporters worked for 14 years before they got an act through the State Legislature permitting them to bring suit against Benson. Up to that time, 1909, it was held that the Indians were not citizens and had no right to commence a civil action.

There are less than 25 so-called Montauk Indians now living. King "Dank" had his tribal council hut at Sag Harbor, in a negro settlement called Eastville. He was found dead in bed one morning. His queen was away from home nursing another negro at the time of his death. "Dank" had aunts and brothers living at Freetown. Whether the tribe ever met and chose Dank's successor is unknown. There are numerous half-breeds who assert titular headship of the Indians. Dank left a sister, the Princess Pocohontas, who when last heard from was living in New England. Both Sam and Ebenezer Pharaoh are called King Pharaoh now.

Dowager Queen Maria lives at Easthampton. Princess Olive died in 1921. The Montauk and Shinnecock Indians gathered in number to attend the funeral. To show how far away the Indians have drifted from former customs the Princess was buried with high ceremonial of the St. Luke P. E. Church, and Dean Tredor of Gardiner City Cathedral was sent for to officiate. Princess Olive was buried in Cedar Lawn Cemetery at Easthampton instead of at the Old Field Indian Cemetery at Montauk.

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