

Story by Jill Mudgett/
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Vermont Historical Society



VERMONT HISTORY

Indian Joe

Despite conflicting stories and sources, Indian Joe stands at the forefront of state history.



Roland "Sunny" Sundown played the role of Indian Joe for the 1931 opening of a new, 31-mile concrete stretch of Route 5 between Wells River and Lyndonville that followed the course of an ancient Indian trail.

THE STORY OF INDIAN JOE—A RANGER IN the American Revolution and a woods-wise and friendly ally to colonial-era settlers in what became Vermont—has always tended toward the upbeat and humorous and continues to resonate with Vermonters for what it suggests about cross-cultural cooperation and exchange in the Vermont wilderness. Tales of a gregarious Joe aiding white settlers by killing a catamount or by sharing moose meat before feeding himself have been published and passed down through generations of Vermonters. For nearly two centuries Indian Joe has been a central figure in the pantheon of Vermont Founding Fathers, his life intersecting with the lives of some of Vermont's most prominent early settlers in towns stretching the length of the state.

In 1956, a woman in Morristown, Vermont fashioned handmade dolls of Indian Joe and Molly and proudly sent them off to President Eisenhower. The woman was a member of the recently formed Morristown Historical Society, and Joe and Molly—central figures in stories about the town's early history—probably seemed to be a natural choice. The following summer two teenage boys pulled an old dugout canoe out from the depths of Morristown's Joe's Pond (long named after Joe) and claimed it for the famous Indian. The people of West Danville were less than amused and reminded Morristown that Danville's Joe's Pond was the original, the real deal. Unfazed, the Morristown Historical Society put the dugout on display, where it remains today. By the 1950s, Joe had been dead for nearly 150 years, but that mattered little to Vermont towns that continued to celebrate Joe's role in early Vermont history.

Vermont histories have long agreed on the basic contours of Joe's life. Born in Nova Scotia to Mi'kmaq or Abenaki parents, Joe lost his family during the British siege of Louisburg and was later taken in by Abenaki Indians at St.

April Joe Indian Dr
 to 19th of flour —
 to 2¹/₂ pork —
 to 3¹/₂ of flower —

W. Pomroy Dr
 to paying for one quarter
 of Moon Meat charged to Boardman 60

April 23rd ~~to~~ Cash three Dollars \$3.00
 1798

April by 5th of Tobacco 1/4 097
 1798

of Philip Peasley Dr
 to 1 Barrow's Mill a 6
 to 2 Shute's twist a 16 10
 to 3 Meads' Pithuals & Lodging 39

May 2nd Dr
 to 13¹/₂ of flour —
 to 6¹/₂ pork —
 to 2¹/₂ of Corn
 to 1/2 Bushel of Potatoes

Philip Peasley Dr
 to 2¹/₂ of Pork a 16

to a purchase a 16

Levy Hill Dr to a purchase
 a 16

Perrine Holman Dr
 to Cash of

Joseph Indian Dr
 to 5¹/₂ of Pork a 16 36

Levy Hill's work in Nov. 2
 1797 5/6 to a Corn Basket 70
 Saml Hill Dr Vermont Historical Society

A page from the 1798 day book of Derby storekeeper Timothy Hinman showing sales to "Joe" and "Capt Jos Indian." The storekeeper evidently extended credit for pork, corn, potatoes, and occasionally rum.

the interplay between indigenous languages and the French spoken by Catholic priests who lived among New England tribes. Joseph was commonly translated as "Susaph"; of the 13 names on Vincent's roll, 8 are either Josephs or Susaphs.

Given the commonality of those names, how can we be certain that the man popularly known as Indian Joe is among those listed on the muster roll? The fact is that we can't know for certain, although we can assume that he was, since we know that he served in the war and that he had ties to Newbury.

Indian Joe next appears in the archives at the Vermont History Center in the pages of Derby storekeeper Timothy Hinman's account book. In an entry dated May 7, 1798, "Capt Jos Indian" accrued debt in Timothy's store for flour ("flower"), pork, corn, and potatoes. In other entries, Joe acquired rum and other items from the store.

Recently, local people have begun asking new questions about Joe, including this one: Are all those stories really about the same man, or was the Joe of Derby, say, not the same person as the Newbury Joe? After all, we know that Vermont was home to Abenaki people and that Joe and Molly were far from being the only indigenous people around to witness Vermont achieving its statehood.

Archival sources provide one answer to that question. What we know is that early chroniclers of Vermont, including men who wrote histories of Newbury shortly after Joe's death there in 1819, believed that those stories referred to one person, and surviving letters document their fact-checking prior to publication. As he aged, Joe needed help, and the state assigned a series of guardians who were granted funds to provide for him. The first of those guardians was John McDonald of Hyde Park (1792), replaced by Timothy Hinman of Derby (1801), and, finally, Frye Bailey of Newbury (1809). The language of each act canceled out the previous one, documenting that state leaders were referring to one person:

And it is hereby further enacted, That an act entitled "An act granting relief to an infirm indian by the name of Joseph," passed October twenty-six, one thousand eight hundred and one, be, and the same is hereby repealed.

To me the more interesting and complex questions about Joe focus less on genealogy and more on what we say—and don't say—about him. We remember Joe partly because his story was repeatedly republished. Interestingly, earliest versions compared Joe to Revolutionary War Captain John Vincent, pointing out that while Joe was "friendly," John was kind of intimidating. That distinction suggests that antebellum historians were right in line with the popular "good Indian/bad Indian" narrative strategy of fiction at the time. Once John Vincent was erased from the story, Vermonters were left with Joe, who wasn't just friendly and loyal, but was comical, not unlike the characters in 19th-century Yankee humor writing. And it is not insignificant that Joe was celebrated at the same time that Vermonters were congratulating themselves for being strong defenders of liberty and personal freedom.

But why did Vermonters focus on Joe rather than another Native neighbor? Was it his oft-cited friendliness? The fact

that he and early settlers shared a common enemy in the British? That white settlers of his generation named lakes and landmarks after Joe and Molly in a way that embedded their stories into the very landscape? Much of the answer undoubtedly resides in what is often unknowable about the past, namely the aspects of a life—like a charismatic personality—not often documented in archival records.

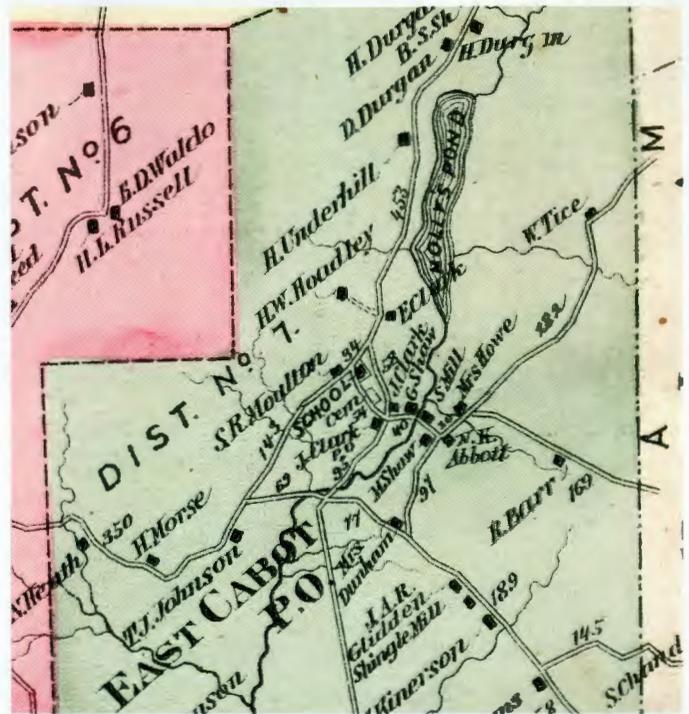
By the late 19th century, the memory of Indian Joe was widely romanticized and celebrated. In 1886, residents of Newbury considered erecting a monument in the center of town as a tribute to Joe, who had died in the care of the Bayley family. Although Joe had been dead for more than 60 years, he retained his legendary status as a central figure in the town's early history. The people of Newbury were proud to claim Joe as their own.

Native American scholars have pointed out that white celebrations of Indians from earlier times underscored European colonialism and cultural authority, and that is certainly the case. But more recently scholars have also observed that communal longing for American Indians was as genuine as it was problematic. In Vermont, that nostalgia had a competitive edge, as in the case of Morristown and Danville competing over claims to Joe and Molly. Scholarship similarly emphasizes early America as a landscape of cultural exchange and has focused on the idea of indigenous agency, or the ways in which Native people resisted assimilation and maintained elements of power and control in situations in which the odds were stacked against them. Joe, as white Vermonters have described him during the centuries, has been characterized as someone who made his own decisions.

The fact that Joe traveled from town to town throughout Vermont suggests the mobility of nomadic, indigenous people. Indeed, Joe has left his mark across a wide state geography; although we often think of Indian place names—Winooski, for example—Vermont has several natural features named after Joe himself. Joe's Pond in West Danville is the best known of these, although there is also the smaller Joe's Pond in Morristown. And both Cabot and Morristown have bodies of water named after Molly (Molly's Falls in Cabot and Molly's Pond—originally known as Mott's Pond—in Morristown).

In 1931, the state celebrated the completion of a cement road running from Wells River up to Lyndonville along an old Indian trail. Newspapers reported that "several hundred cars" formed Governor Wilson's automobile procession. Schoolchildren cheered along the route. And heading the procession to Lyndonville was Joe himself, or at least someone playing the part. Photographs from the event depict Roland "Sunny" Sundown, a Seneca from upstate New York and a student at Dartmouth College, leading the way and greeting the governor. For those Vermonters in 1931—as with so many Vermonters before and since—Indian Joe stands at the forefront of state history. ▽

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Vermont has several natural features named after Joe and Molly, including Molly's Pond in Cabot, shown in this 19th century atlas map.



These Joe and Molly dolls were made by Christena Foster of Morrisville, and are now in the collections of the Morristown Historical Society. An identical set was presented to President Eisenhower in 1956.



Joe and Molly dolls made by Katharine Dopp from a kit purchased at a gift store at Joe's Pond in the 1950s, now in the collections of the Vermont Historical Society.