

Feds recognize Wabanaki name for Yarmouth waterfall on Royal River

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The waterfall on the Royal River closest to Casco Bay has been recognized as Pumgustuck, a Wabanaki name, by the federal government. *Contributed / Nick Ressel*

At the beginning of the month, the first waterfall of the Royal River gained federal recognition through the U.S. Board of Geographic Names by labeling it “Pumgustuck,” the Wabanaki name first known to describe the falls.

Stretching from New Gloucester to Yarmouth, the Royal River flows south, forming an estuary before emptying into Casco Bay. The river contains four waterfalls and its first, set closest to Casco Bay, acted as a portage spot for the Wabanaki peoples and was later used by settlers who operated saw and grist mills there by tapping the river’s hydropower.

Although Pungustuck, which translates to “falls goes out place,” is long recorded in Indigenous deeds, maps and oral histories, only informal names, such as First Falls or Grist Mill Falls, referred to its specific location on the river.

The Yarmouth Community Alliance for Racial Equity, whose projects focus on “restorative history, criminal justice and educational reform,” drove the effort to make Pungustuck the waterfall’s official federal name. A Nov. 7 press release from YCARE said that their request was met with swift approval from the country’s official geographic names database. Pungustuck already appears in the U.S. Geological Survey’s databases and the name will soon be reflected in federal maps.

While the river itself is directly named after William Royall, a European settler in the Yarmouth area, Pungustuck highlights another story: The name centers Wabanaki histories in the land and focuses on the waterfall as a place where Indigenous people lived and colonial settlers later occupied. Since much of the Wabanaki language persists in oral tradition and was not shared with colonizers, there is difficulty in translating and communicating Wabanaki knowledge, said Ron Siviski, a member of the Maliseet First Nation.

But, as he explains, recognizing the name Pungustuck “speaks to respect and sparks curiosity” about Indigenous histories, writing Wabanaki knowledge back into the spaces where it had often been erased.

To celebrate and inform the public about the official name, YCARE will work with the town of Yarmouth to create new signage at Pungustuck. The alliance is still in the process of designing the layout and content, but the signs will include information about the Wabanaki language and the falls’ existence as a location with layered, complex histories. Dale Shields, a member of the alliance and resident of Yarmouth, said that the new material will invite visitors to interact with Pungustuck and its past through a more complete Indigenous representation of the space.

Following the change at Pungustuck, YCARE plans to continue with more Wabanaki awareness projects, starting with adding more signage across the town to increase exposure of Wabanaki history and culture. Shields also emphasized the importance of building alliances with local organizations such as the Royal River Conservation Trust and the Yarmouth Historical Society.

She describes that through collaboration, community members and organizations can “add another layer to history,” forming a unified approach in amplifying Wabanaki histories in Yarmouth’s collective understanding and identity.

Comments are not available on this story.

[Yarmouth Scout restores WWII fort on Peaks Island](#)

Community Calendar: Nov. 22-29

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