

ROOTS ■

Robert Norrell in
reverie over his
ancestors

Portland's first family

One man's quest for his
past leads him to the
Portland of today

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MIRA PTACIN

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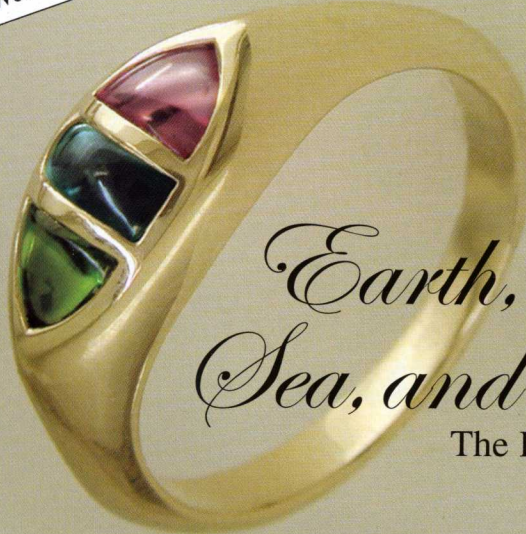
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ROOTS



It's noon on Wednesday, the time when Subarus zip up and down Forest Avenue for lunch break, when Portland's crows uniformly sweep over the city and land in clumps in the trees. But here in Deering Oaks Park, a burly man, flannel clad, stands still in the muddy grass. Carefully, he leans down and picks up a broken tree branch. He shakes the dark bangs out of his face and holds the branch to the sky.

"I see an Indian warrior, his face, with the eyes in it." He considers a nearby oak tree. "If you look at the bark, eventually the faces will come out and tell a story. Certainly the blood of our ancestors is here."

Robert Norell ought to know. He's a descendant of the Wabanaki Indians, the first natives of Portland who fought in defense of their land in the Battle of Deering Oaks, one of the largest and bloodiest battles of the French and Indian War.

"When I drive by the park here, I can imagine what it looked like. Some of these trees right here, there's a strong possibility they were here at the time of the battle."

As Norell circles around the park, his words conjure up a picture of Portland in the 1600s. He lifts a hand toward the east, where an Arby's restaurant blocks the view of glistening Back Cove.

In September 1689, the French and the "Indians paddled over from Peak's Island and through Back Cove to here, where the British were waiting in ambush. Supposedly, right where those cars are going, there was an inlet to the sea."

Portland, known then as Falmouth, was in the middle of a three-way struggle

between the Native Americans, the English, and the French. The Wabanakis had divided allegiance with the British and the French, and tension over land ownership had risen to a peak.

During the morning of battle, 400 Native Americans on the French side attacked through Thomas Brackett's orchard. Brackett was slaughtered, and his house was set on fire. Answering, English and Indian soldiers led by Colonel Benjamin Church, inspired by a bounty for scalps, charged into the fray.

"I sense a lot of souls out there," Norrell says of the Battle of Deering Oaks. "But Portland still hasn't heard the story of the natives before the Europeans settled in. When the Europeans won a battle, it was a victory. Anytime we [the Indians] won, it was a massacre. I'd like the city of Portland to recognize the first chapter in Portland's history, the Native American portrait."

Norell admits he spends a lot of time, "more time than I should," thinking about Portland before it was Casco, and before it was Falmouth.

"Back then we called this peninsula Machegonne. To us Micmacs it means 'shaped like a great knee.' The Portland I see now is a flourishing town—multicultural, living and supporting itself in some aspect the same way we had supported ourselves and that is the fishing industry. I see a town that is very proud of itself and its heritage but is neglecting the first locals."

Norell lives in Scarborough in what he calls the "countryish" area of the town, with his wife, three dogs, three cats, four doves, two parrots, and "I once counted 76 turkeys in my backyard." Born out of wedlock, he was given up for adoption as an infant. Growing up in a foster home, his curiosity grew about his origins. Once he moved out of the house, he began searching for his biological mother.

"She was a snake charmer. The circus came to town and she left with them. She was shunned; she was not overly welcome," he says. At the start of his search, Norell's mother had long since left the reservation and died, but during his investigation, Norell realized he knew nothing about his people's history, and more importantly, neither did most historians. So he began a lifelong dedication to piece together fragmented bits of the early Native American legacy in Portland, and he now creates art to tell it. He collects feathers from

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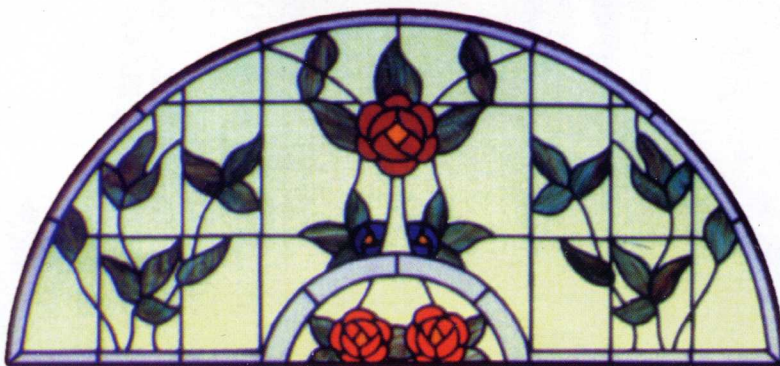
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■ ROOTS

his yard, shells from Maine's beaches, animal bones, teeth, hides, and antlers, and it wouldn't be surprising if Norell pockets the fallen twig he's just picked up in Deering Oaks Park. Through his crafts, Norell attempts to tell his story, a story that has nearly eroded from Maine's history.

"For 15 years I searched for my blood mother, and while I was hunting for her, I learned about my culture, and the more I got into it, the more I got into it! Right now I'm inlaying porcupine quills into a deer antler. One man's road kill is another man's treasure. In a way I'm hoping to keep the animals' spirits alive. They have the Manitou, the spirit. And the spirit stays alive when you're sharing it."

It's drizzling on the top of the Eastern Promenade, the fog so thick you'd never know the nearby Atlantic is sprinkled with islands. Robert Norell lights up a Marlboro, exhales, and the smoke instantly blends with the gray mist.

"In this whole area in Casco Bay were huge fishing villages, cod fishing villages, on all the different islands. When I look around, I can imagine what it would be like prior to European contact. You would have seen native people out at the harbor, fishing and clamming." At the time, lobsters were so plentiful they were used as fertilizer, and swordfish used to surge up rivers and slam into the muddy banks for easy catching.

"Commercial Street was close to the edge of the water. I'm sure there must have been some type of path to Deering Oaks and across. I know by Maine Medical there would have been a campground. It would have been the perfect location to oversee the harbor, looking to the west and watching the sunset. The stream by the Tate House was a shortcut to Westbrook, which was a huge fishing area, and there [were] Indian villages on both sides of that. The other route was up between the Presumpscot River leading into Westbrook and then beyond into Sebago Lake. That was used for between 8,000 and 10,000 years."

Norell stands on the edge of the prom, looking over the traffic sliding along Interstate 295. "I've been told this was once an ancient Indian campsite, that this hill went out another 100 feet and was scraped away. There was an ancient Indian burial ground in this corner where they've taken the land away. The burial ground was used to build I-295. Modern commuters are driving over our ancestors."



Norell stops short. "I can feel the energy. I really can. Then I look over the bank and I see our former fishing and camp grounds. What's here? A sewage system plant."

As he turns away from the peak, a heavy wind hits him in the back, pushing his salt-and-pepper hair into a wild dance. Hands in his pockets, Norell takes a few steps, lost in solitude, then whips his hands out and motions toward a Portland high-rise along the prom.

"Fort Allen. I'm assuming this was where the celebration Pow Wow was. Five tribes were involved in signing the peace treaty after the battle in Deering Oaks, including delegates from New Hampshire and Massachusetts." The park now hosts a gazebo and an apartment complex.

Norell pulls out a charm in his pocket, a round, carved piece of wood from Deering Oaks. It's smooth, polished, and he rubs his thumb across its surface. "I just look around, and I can feel my heritage, sense it. I have a vision. I have a mental picture in my mind of a single Indian with a staff, looking over Casco Bay and seeing the first ship coming into the harbor, wondering what they're thinking, and then welcoming the visitors." ■

Robert Norrell's works are on display at Native Art in Woolwich. His latest series includes striking polished jewelry created from slices of ancient trees in Deering Oaks.



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