

# CAPE COD TIMES

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## NEWS

# 'So much land ... lost.' Why a conservation group bought a restaurant on Martha's Vineyard

**Walker Armstrong** Cape Cod Times

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Seven years after the Aquinnah Shop Restaurant on Martha's Vineyard was sold outside the Wampanoag Tribe, a Mashpee-based Native land conservation group has bought the restaurant and surrounding land for \$2 million, with plans to return the land in perpetuity to the Aquinnah Wampanoag.

The Native Land Conservancy, the first Native-run land conservation group east of the Mississippi River, purchased the land and plans to temporarily hold the property until the newly formed Aquinnah Land Initiative is able to fundraise the purchase cost.

"The land itself is extremely important to us, and we feel that we are not separate from the land, we are part of the land, and the land is part of us," said Wenonah Madison, president of the Aquinnah Land Initiative.

Madison, the great-granddaughter of Napoleon and Nanette Madison, who founded the Aquinnah Shop Restaurant in 1948, said the Wampanoag women-run Aquinnah Land Initiative is waiting on its 501(c)3 status. She said there was a lot of concern within the community about the land falling into the hands of a developer, private homeowner or restaurateur.

"It's very important for us to have it back under the stewardship of the tribe," Madison said. "And as soon as we started this process, it felt important to reach out to the Native Land Conservancy to learn from them. ... You know, I'm humbled by their incredible generosity, and their willingness to share what they've learned so far."

Ramona Peters, founder and chairwoman of the Native Land Conservancy, said it's been a part of its mission to help other Indigenous people whenever they are able.

“To be able to do this in collaboration with dedicated tribal people who are ready to step up and participate in this way, it’s a very big thing,” Peters said. “I would encourage donations be made to the Aquinnah Land Initiative, they’re up and starting, they’re going to need some help.”

There are plans to prioritize erosion protection on the land, including an area on the face of the Gay Head Cliffs where there are “measurable” effects of climate change, according to an August 18 press release.

Also in motion, the press release stated, are plans for both organizations to acquire other important Wampanoag land for “cultural access and stewardship” on Martha’s Vineyard.

Peters said “cultural access” to tribal lands is a key element in the purchasing of the restaurant, as generations of Indigenous people have lost access to sacred lands.

“There’s so much land that has been lost to Indigenous people due to the lack of funds, that when I say I’m gratified, I’m really speaking for generations,” Peters said.

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