

Who the heck is Martha?

While America isn't as old as most of the world's nations, we've been steaming along for just shy of two and a half centuries now. Long enough to describe many places as "old" and certainly long enough that we've forgotten the who, what and why of place names.

I can't be the only one that hears a place name or comes across it while reading and wonders "Who is that person?" I assume that person was pretty important since a street, hill, building, et al was named after them. Over the years we just forgot the person, what they did for the community and the reason for dedicating a place name.

My hope with this series is to uncover who these people were and why they were special. Curious about a place? Send us a message at info@newbedfordguide.com and maybe you'll see it in the next one!



A recreation of a Viking home in L'anse-Aux-Meadows, the oldest known Viking site in North America that reaches back to approximately 1,000 C.E. Photo by D. Gordon E. Robertson.

Saying “Martha’s Vineyard” is as normal as saying “stuffed quahog.” There’s nothing to think about, nothing to ponder. If you had a dollar for every time Martha’s Vineyard rolled off your tongue, you’d be retired and sitting with your toes in the sand at a beach in the Azores sipping *caipirinhas*, *Vinho do Douro* or Madeira wine.

But who was Martha – a woman who was so important that an entire island was named after her? Was she someone’s mom, daughter or lover? Did the island earn its name posthumously or while Martha was alive so she could appreciate the gesture?

Colloquially known as “The Vineyard,” it was originally called “Noepe” which means “land amid the streams,” by the 3,000 Wampanoags that lived there before European settlers arrived. Sadly, within a century that population dwindled to around 300 people due to these settlers and the disease they brought with them. Some simply saw the writing on the wall and got “out of Dodge” because of what was coming.

This 100 sq. mile also includes the infamous Chappaquiddick Island is one of the largest islands in the U.S. – the third largest on the East Coast. The summer destination is a permanent home to approximately 16,000 people – the same as Fairhaven for comparison – but can easily swell to ten times that much (100,000+) in the height of summer season.



The map that Gosnold utilized to help navigate the New World. The island wasn't the first place to be called "Martha's Vineyard," that name was initially attributed to a smaller island just south perhaps Nomans Island – by Bartholomew Gosnold when he arrived in 1602. Interestingly, it is the 8th oldest place name in U.S. history. Before the name transfer, Martha's Vineyard was called "Martin's Vineyard" generally thought to refer to Gosnold's John Martin.

It is unknown why the name swap ever happened, but it is likely that when people orally transmitted knowledge of the nearby islands there was more known about the "big" island than the little island next to it. There was possibly some confusion and since more people were visiting the "big" island than the little island (some were likely unaware that the little one existed at all) it was assumed they were one and the same.

Either way, who the heck was Martha? In this case, it refers to "Marthas," plural. In fact, through much of the 19th

century, Martha's Vineyard was referred to as Marthas Vineyard without the apostrophe. The grammar police would say "The apostrophe comes *after* the 's.'" Well, the grammar Nazis love drama so this has been a source of much of that over the years, so much so that the United States Board on Geographic Names got involved.

All immaterial. People loooooooooooooove to point out the flaws in what everyone else does while ignoring their own as if they don't exist. Almost without fail that person's comment will be something along the lines of "Youse spelled it wrong" with poor grammar and bad punctuation. In fact, it is likely that people will make drama out of this article which in the big scheme of life means very little.



Vinland and Lief Ericksson's routes. Photo by Donald Weidman. What is "material" is who the island was named after and Gosnold had a daughter and a mother-in-law both named Martha. He must have thought to himself "I can kill two birds with one stone." Imagine if you are an explorer and tell your family about the amazing places you will see, "discover" and name and the promises you make to them. "Bart, while you are coming up with names for places, if you find a pretty place you better

name it after me or you'll be sleeping on the couch!"

Since I can't think of a place Gosnold went to that he named after his wife Mary, I bet he spent some time on the couch when he returned to England. Maybe the place has since been forgotten, maybe he figured by buttering up his mother-in-law was even better.

So, was there in fact ever a vineyard there? Around 1,000 C.E. Leif Eriksson set from Iceland/Greenland to search for three "lands," in North America: Helluland ("Land of Flat Rocks"), Markland ("Forest Land"), and Vinland ("Wineland"). All three referred to places in Canada – Helluland was Newfoundland, Markland the coast and interior, and Vinland referred to several islands likely lands in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence including Nova Scotia. These places were not far from here – about 1,000 miles as the crow flies.

The "wine" in Vinland refers to the berries and/or currants that grew on the eastern seaboard of New England and Canada and could be utilized to ferment into wine. Sailors love their grog, wine or anything to get drunk from, right? So anything that had grapes to eat and ferment would be on the itinerary.

So when Gosnold encountered these grapes growing on the island, he dubbed it Marthas Vineyard and that is how the island got its name.