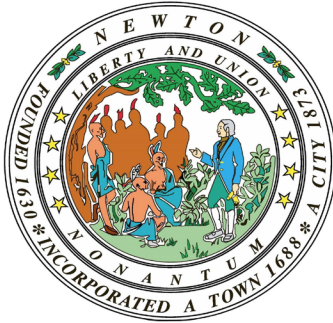


# Newton City Seal Working Group Report Summary



The Ad Hoc City Seal Working Group met biweekly from September 2020 to March 2021. The group submitted a draft report to the Mayor in April 2021 and a final version in November 2021. Meetings included invited speakers, design charrettes, and processing of public input.

## History of the Seal

Newton's selectmen voted in 1865 to adopt the current design as Newton's town seal. The designer's identity is unknown. When Newton became a city in 1873, the design was retained as our city seal.

## What Is Displayed on the Seal?

The seal depicts the English missionary John Eliot proselytizing a group of Native people under an oak tree, exhorting them to convert to Christianity and adopt English customs. Beneath it is the word "Nonantum"; above are the words "Liberty and Union." An outer ring displays the years of Newton's "founding," its incorporation as a town, and its incorporation as a city.

## History of the Scene Depicted

Missionary John Eliot arrived in the Bay Colony in 1631, learned the local language from Indigenous teachers, and sought to convert Native people to the Puritan religion. He achieved his first success in 1646 in Cohannet (present-day Newton), meeting with a Massachusetts leader named Waban in his longhouse near the present-day location of Newton's Eliot Memorial, in Newton Corner. Waban and his followers, who had few options for survival, perhaps saw an opportunity to gain status with and protection from the colonists, and agreed to form a Christian settlement. It was governed by rules enforcing English customs and given the name "Nonantum" by Eliot. (The settlement should not be confused with today's village of Nonantum, in another location). Nonantum lasted five years before its residents were moved to Natick to form a "praying town" there. John Eliot himself never lived in Newton.

## Why Was This Scene Chosen in 1865?

In the period after the Civil War, images of Native Americans were popular as symbols of American identity separate from Europe. Art and fiction portrayed Indians as "noble savages," a "vanishing"

people to be remembered with reverence, rather than as contemporaries with claims to land and rights of their own. Newtonians' choice of a scene from 200 years earlier may also have reflected their pride in the city's long history.

By the 1860s, several very similar depictions of John Eliot preaching to Native people existed and may have served as models for Newton's seal. The particular significance to Newton of the words "liberty and union" is unknown.

### **Community Feedback**

The Working Group solicited community input about the seal through an online survey, a public meeting, and letters from community members, including local Indigenous leaders and the pastor of the Eliot Church. Group member Isaac Tang also conducted an unofficial survey of fellow students at Newton North High School.

A large majority of community respondents recommended that the seal be redesigned. A small minority argued that retiring the current design would amount to "erasing history" and that Newton should preserve the original design because it has been in use for 150 years. Indigenous respondents pointed out that the Native people depicted on the seal are faceless and shown in a passive or subservient position. Numerous respondents found the seal's scene, in which an English Puritan preaches to Native people the error of their ways, to be offensive and not in keeping with how Newtonians see themselves or want the world to see them. Echoing many respondents, Maria Turner (Natick Nipmuc) wrote, *"I feel that it is important [that the seal]...does not make a group of people feel **less than** when they look at it."* The Working Group agrees.

### **Recommendation**

The Working Group recommends that the Newton City Seal be changed as follows:

- **Retain** the circular shape, for its official and traditional feel
- **Retain** much of the content of the outer rings, as a link to previous iterations of the seal.
- **Replace** the scene of John Eliot evangelizing Waban and other Indigenous people with a more suitable image. This scene lacks historical context and accuracy, glorifies the erasure of Indigenous culture, and is disrespectful to the Massachusetts Tribe, on whose land we live.
- **Remove** the word "Nonantum," chosen by John Eliot for the short-lived settlement of Native Christians, in part because it is easily confused with Newton's village of Nonantum at another location, named in the late 1800s. "Nonantum" might be replaced with another Algonquian word, such as "Quinobequin" (the Massachusetts word for the Charles River) or Cohannet, as this area was called before 1864.
- **Consolidate** the City's founding dates to read "Founded in 1630 on Massachusetts land." The Group feels that the years 1688 and 1873 are optional.
- **Retain or omit** the words "Liberty and Union," depending on context of the final design

In addition, the Group recommends that the overall design be simplified to allow for accurate reproduction in many formats, and that the central image include a quality black and white version to facilitate its use on City documents.

### **What New Elements Might Be Included?**

The Working Group gathered, documented, and synthesized community input as well as the Group's own considerations and analysis, about Newton's identity and how to represent it visually. [See full report.] It also identified those themes and imagery that came up most frequently in respondents' comments. Chief among these were:

- *Environment/Nature* (the Charles River; ponds & lakes; trees, the colors green and blue, seven hills)
- *Community* (13 Villages; people on equal ground; "union" in the motto; well-known community buildings)
- Also prominent were the themes of *education, progressivism, and global connection and inclusivity.*

### **Conclusion and Next Steps**

The conclusion that the City Seal should be changed can nearly be summed up in one sentence: Pictured is a Colonial authority telling a people that their ways of living and worshiping are wrong. Certainly, most Newtonians would not want a symbol of cultural arrogance to represent their city made up of many faiths and cultures. If Newton's City Council agrees, then the Mayor's administration will hire a design team to build on the Seal Report's recommendations for a new Seal.