

European Contact with New England Native Americans

There is a new book out written by Charles C. Mann that delves deeply into the initial contacts that occurred between the Europeans and the native peoples that occupied the area now known as eastern Massachusetts. The causes and results are somewhat different from what we were taught in school; here are the highlights:

Europeans had been visiting what is now New England for at least a century prior to the landing of the Pilgrims in 1620, drawn there by the plentiful amounts of fish along the coast. The English and French fishermen were shorter than the natives, dressed in strange garb and were generally unbearably dirty, many having never had a bath in their entire lives, as opposed to the natives, who were scrupulously clean. The natives found the newcomers often surprisingly incompetent at what seemed to them like basic tasks, but they also made useful and beautiful goods such as copper kettles, glittering colored glass and steel knives and hatchets. Moreover, they were willing to exchange these goods for furs that the natives looked upon as cheap and useful only for blankets.

On March 22, 1621, a Native American delegation walked through what is now southern New England to meet with a group of foreigners who had taken over a recently deserted Indian settlement. The party was led by Massasoit, the sachem of the Wampanoag confederation, a loose coalition of several dozen villages that controlled most of southeastern Massachusetts. Accompanying him was Samoset, sachem of an allied group to the north, and Tisquantum, a distrusted captive, whom Massasoit had brought along as an interpreter.

Massasoit was an able politician, but he faced a thorny dilemma. About five years before, most of his subjects had died as a result of contacting European diseases. Whole villages had been depopulated. Adding to this disaster was the fact that the Wampanoag's longtime enemies, the Narragansett alliance to the west, had been spared because of a lack of contact with the Europeans. As a result, Massasoit believed that it was just a matter of time before their enemies would realize their weakness and overrun them. The only solution he saw was to court the Europeans and form an alliance with them. This alliance between the Wampanoag and the English colonists marked a crucial moment in American history.

The foreigners, who had taken up residence at the abandoned village of Patuxet, renamed it Plymouth. Our history books told us that a friendly Indian named Squanto taught the colonists the Indian method of planting, especially maize, or corn. They were so successful, we were told, that corn was the centerpiece on the table at the first Thanksgiving. Squanto, or Tisquantum, as he was also known, was important to the survival of the colony, but not just because of his advice on agriculture. He moved to Plymouth and spent the rest of his life there. The question needs to be asked why he did this, in other words, what was his motive?

The same question could be asked about the alliance between the Wampanoag and the Pilgrims. It proved to be successful in the short term for the Native Americans, but it was a disaster from the point of view of New England Indian society as a whole, because it insured the survival of Plymouth Colony, which spearheaded the great wave of British immigration to New England. Modern research indicates that it is clear that Indians were trying to control their own destinies, and often they succeeded, only to learn, as all people do, that the consequences were not what they had expected.

For many years the Native societies in coastal New England encouraged the exchange of goods, but would allow their visitors to stay ashore only for brief, carefully controlled excursions. Those who overstayed their welcome were forcefully reminded of the limited duration of Indian hospitality. At the same time, the Wampanoag fended off Indians from the interior, preventing them from trading directly with the foreigners. In this way the shoreline groups had put themselves in the position of middlemen, overseeing both European access to Indian products and Indian access to European products. Massasoit reversed this long-standing

policy of short-term visits and allowed the Pilgrims to remain for an unlimited time – provided they formally allied with the Wampanoag against the Narragansett.

Tisquantum would not have thought of himself as an “Indian,” any more than the inhabitants of the same area today would call themselves “Western Hemispherians.” As Tisquantum’s later history would make clear, he regarded himself first and foremost as a citizen of Patuxet, one of the dozen or so shoreline settlements in what is now eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island that made up the Wampanoag confederation. The Wampanoag, in turn, were part of an alliance with the Nauset, which comprised some 30 groups on Cape Cod, and the Massachusetts, consisting of several dozen villages clustered around Massachusetts Bay. All of these people spoke variants of Massachusett, a member of the Algonquian language family, the biggest in eastern North America at the time. In Massachusett, the name for the New England shore was the “Dawnland,” the place where the sun rose. The inhabitants of the Dawnland were the People of the First Light.

By 1000 AD, agriculture was spreading rapidly and the region was becoming a patchwork of communities, each with its own special terrain, way of subsistence and cultural style. The uplands became populated by hunter-gatherer groups. New England’s major river valleys, by contrast, were home to large, permanent villages; many nestled in constellations of suburban hamlets and hunting camps. Because extensive fields of maize, beans and pumpkins (squash) surrounded every home, these settlements sprawled along the Connecticut, Charles and other river valleys for miles, one town bumping into another. Along the coast, where Tisquantum and Massasoit lived, villages tended to be smaller and looser, though no less permanent. In the Wampanoag confederation, one of these communities was Patuxet, where Tisquantum was born at the end of the 16th century. Tucked into the great sweep of Cape Cod Bay, Patuxet sat on a low rise above a small harbor. To the west, maize hills marched across the sandy hillocks in parallel rows. Beyond the fields, a mile or more from the sea, rose the primeval forest.

Pilgrim writers universally reported that Wampanoag families were close and loving – more so than English families, some thought. Europeans in those days tended to view children as moving straight from infancy to adulthood around the age of 7 and often thereupon sent them out to work. Indian parents, by contrast, regarded the years before puberty as a time of playful development, and they kept their offspring close by until they married.

European Contact With Native Americans, Part II

Last week we began a review of a recently published book by Charles C. Mann titled “Native Intelligence – Squanto and the Pilgrims” concerning the events that surrounded the contact between the Europeans and the Native Americans that lived along the shore of what is now eastern Massachusetts. The relationships that developed were replicated as the European colonies spread out from the Plymouth and Boston areas along the coastline and inland.

Europeans were well aware of the valuable fishing grounds that existed along the coast of North America from at least the end of the fifteenth century, but no attempts were made to colonize because of the Indian’s policy of not allowing strangers to remain on their land for prolonged periods of time. One of the first accounts written by Europeans was by Verrazzano in 1523, who observed that from the Carolinas northward the coastline everywhere was “densely populated” and smoky with Indian bonfires. By 1610, one historian has estimated, Britain alone had about 200 vessels operating off Newfoundland and New England, with hundreds more from France, Spain, Portugal and Italy. Virtually all of their accounts reported that New England was thickly settled and well defended. In 1605 and 1606 Champlain visited Cape Cod, hoping to establish a French base. He abandoned the idea when he realized that too many people already

lived there. A year later the British attempted to establish a community in Maine. It began with more people than the Pilgrims' later venture in Plymouth, and was better organized and supplied. Nevertheless, the local Indians killed 11 colonists and drove the rest back home within months.

During the century after Verrazzano, Europeans were regular visitors to our northeast coast, usually fishing, sometimes trading, and occasionally kidnapping Natives as souvenirs. One of these captives was Tisquantum, captured by the English and attempted to be sold into slavery in Spain. The plan backfired on the English because the policy of the Spanish Catholic church vehemently opposed brutality toward Indians, this in response to a papal edict issued in 1537 by Pope Paul III stating that "Indians themselves indeed are true men" and should not be "deprived of their liberty" and "reduced to our service like brute animals." Tisquantum eventually worked his way to London, where he stayed with a shipbuilder with investments in Newfoundland fisheries. Here he evidently learned the English language. Eventually he sought passage in a fishing vessel that was to travel to his home village of Patuxet (Plymouth).

What Tisquantum saw on his return stunned him. From southern Maine to Narragansett Bay, the coast was empty – "utterly void", the captain of the fishing vessel reported. What had once been a continuous line of busy communities was now a mass of decaying homes and unattended fields overrun with blackberry brambles. Scattered among the houses and fields were skeletons bleaching in the sun. The devastation was some 200 miles long by 40 miles deep. In Patuxet, not a single person survived.

Searching for any of his people, Tisquantum eventually came upon a handful of families in a shattered village. These people sent for Massasoit, who told Tisquantum what had happened. The Europeans carried a disease. Based on accounts of the symptoms, the epidemic was probably of viral hepatitis, likely spread by contaminated food. Beginning in 1616, the pestilence took at least three years to exhaust itself and killed up to 90 % of the people in coastal New England.

Massasoit had directly ruled a community of several thousand people and held sway over a confederation of as many as 20,000. Now his group was reduced to 60 people and the entire confederation to fewer than 1,000. Both the Indians and the Pilgrims believed that sickness reflected the will of celestial forces. The Wampanoag came to the conclusion that their deities had allied against them.

Similarly, Governor Bradford is said to have attributed the plague to "the good hand of God, which favored our beginnings by sweeping away great multitudes of the natives that he might make room for us." As a result, more than 50 of the first colonial villages in New England were located on Indian communities emptied by disease.

The New England epidemic shattered the Wampanoag's sense that they lived in balance with an intelligible world. On top of that, the massive death toll created a political crisis. Because the hostility between the Wampanoag and the neighboring Narragansett had restricted contact between them, the disease had not spread to the latter. Now Massasoit's people were not only beset by loss, they were in danger of subjugation.

After learning about the epidemic, the distraught Tisquantum returned to southern Maine – the home he had been trying to find no longer existed. Deciding that he couldn't stay with the Europeans, he started walking back to Massachusetts through hostile, war-torn territory. Almost inevitably, he was captured and sent to Massasoit as a captive. He tried to talk his way out of this jam by telling Massasoit tales about the English, their cities and powerful technology. He counseled Massasoit that if he could make the English his friends, then the Narragansett would be compelled to bow to him.

Massasoit held back any decision, apparently keeping Tisquantum in a kind of house arrest. Within a few months, word came that a party of English had settled at Patuxet. The Wampanoag observed them as they suffered through the first punishing winter. Eventually Massasoit concluded that he should ally with them – compared to the Narragansett, they were the

lesser of two evils. Still, only when the need for a translator became unavoidable did he allow Tisquantum to meet the Pilgrims.

Massasoit told the Pilgrims that he was willing to leave them in peace (a bluff, one assumes, since driving them away would have taxed his limited resources). But in return he wanted the colonists' assistance with the Narragansett. To the Pilgrims, Massasoit's motive for the deal was obvious: the Indian leader wanted guns. "He thinks we may be of some strength to him, for our pieces (guns) are terrible to them."

From today's perspective, though, it seems likely that Massasoit had a subtler plan. He probably wanted more to confront the Narragansett with the unappetizing prospect of attacking one group of English people at the same time that their main trading partners were other English people. Faced with the possibility of disrupting their favored position as middlemen, the Narragansett might think twice before staging such an incursion. If this interpretation is correct, Massasoit was trying to incorporate the pilgrims into the web of Native politics. Not long before, he had expelled foreigners who stayed too long in Wampanoag territory. But with the entire confederation now smaller than one of its former communities, the best option seemed to be to allow the Pilgrims to remain. It would turn out to be a drastic, even fatal, decision.

European Contact With Native Americans, Conclusion

We are reviewing a recently published book by Charles C. Mann titled "Native Intelligence – Squanto and the Pilgrims" concerning the events surrounding the contact between the Europeans and the Native Americans. The relationship was to set the tone for subsequent contacts between the two groups and indeed for the entire region.

The devastating European diseases decimated the Native tribes living along the coast of what was to become known as eastern New England. This produced a vacuum in the population density along the coast that encompassed an area of some 200 miles by 40 miles. It not only provided an opportunity for the Europeans to colonize, it also disrupted the balance of political and military power among the Native American tribes.

Massasoit, the sachem of the decimated union known as the Wampanoags, seeking to avoid domination by his rivals, the Narragansetts, created an alliance with the English that he felt would maintain a balance of power. This was favorable to the Europeans, as it allowed them to swell their presence in New England from less than 100 to more than 20,000 by 1641. Tisquantum, also known as Squanto, had been abducted to Europe in 1614 or 1615, where he learned to speak English. After his return, which occurred after the fatal diseases of the English, he found that his home village of Patuxet (Plymouth) had been completely wiped out, and he sought out a few remaining villagers in what was left of the Wampanoag Confederation. The sachem Massasoit needed Tisquantum as an interpreter, but he never fully trusted him, figuring that in case of a dispute or other problems, he would most likely cast his lot with the English. For this reason, Tisquantum was kept under what can best be described as house arrest. When the Pilgrims finally landed and founded the colony of Plymouth, Massasoit needed his service as an interpreter. This contact resulted in his deciding to make his home with the Pilgrims, as the alternative was to return to Massasoit and renewed captivity.

Tisquantum worked hard to prove his value to the Pilgrims. He was so successful that when some anti-British Indians abducted him, the newcomers sent out a military expedition to get him back. Recognizing that the colonists would be unlikely to keep him around forever, Tisquantum decided to gather together the few Native survivors of the Patuxet area and reconstitute the old community at a site near Plymouth. More ambitious still, he hoped to use his influence on the English to make this new Patuxet the center of the Wampanoag confederation, thereby stripping the sachemship from Massasoit. To accomplish these goals, he intended to play the Indians and English against each other.

The scheme was risky, not least because the ever-suspicious Massasoit had sent one of his officials, Hobamok, to Plymouth as a monitor. Sometimes Hobamok and Tisquantum worked together, as when the pair helped the Pilgrims negotiate a treaty with the Massachusett to the north. They also helped establish a truce with the Nauset of Cape Cod after Governor Bradford agreed to pay back the losses caused by the colonists' earlier acts of grave robbing and thefts of food, primarily corn.

By fall the settlers' situation was secure enough that they held a feast of thanksgiving. Massasoit showed up with some ninety men, most of them armed. The Pilgrim militia responded by marching around and firing their guns in the air in a manner intended to convey menace. Satisfied, both sides sat down, ate a lot of food and complained about the Narragansett and their Pequot allies. Thus went the first Thanksgiving.

All the while, Tisquantum was secretly attempting to persuade the remaining Wampanoag that he could better protect them against their enemies than could Massasoit. One of his arguments was that the English had buried a cache of the disease that had caused the epidemic and that he could manipulate them into using it if necessary. He then told the colonists that Massasoit was going to double-cross them by leading a joint attack with the Narragansett on Plymouth. Then he tried to trick the Pilgrims into attacking Massasoit.

In the spring of 1622 Tisquantum accompanied a delegation of colonists to visit the Massachusett tribe in the area of present-day Boston. Minutes after they departed, one of the surviving Patuxet came running into the village and informed everyone that the Narragansett and Massasoit were planning to attack. Apparently Tisquantum believed that the colonists would rise up and kill Massasoit. Since Tisquantum was away, he would not be suspected of being the mastermind of this scheme. The plan blew up when Governor Bradford ordered a cannon to be fired to recall the delegation. Meanwhile, Hobamok indignantly denied the allegation. Bradford then sent Hobamok's wife to Massasoit's home to find out what he was up to. When she reported back that "everything was quiet", Tisquantum's plot was exposed. Massasoit demanded that the Pilgrims send Tisquantum to him for immediate execution.

Bradford refused; Tisquantum's language skills were too vital. "Tisquantum is one of my subjects", Massasoit said; "you Pilgrims have no jurisdiction over him". When the colonists refused this, Massasoit sent a messenger with a knife and told Bradford to lop off Tisquantum's hands and head. He immediately ordered Hobamok home and cut off all contact with the Pilgrims.

Now a marked man, Tisquantum was unable to take a step outside the village without an escort. Shortly thereafter, returning from a negotiating session with the Nauset Indians, Tisquantum took suddenly ill and died within a few days.

In the next decade more than 20,000 thousand Europeans came to Massachusetts. Massasoit shepherded his people through the wave of settlement, and the pact he signed with them held up for more than 50 years. Only in 1675 did one of his sons, angered by the colonists' laws, launch what was probably the inevitable attack. Indians from dozens of tribes, including the Pequots, joined in. The conflict, brutal and sad, tore through New England.

Inevitably, the Europeans won. Part of the victory can be attributed to the Indians' refusal to employ the White Man's tactic of massacring whole villages. Another was manpower. Now the Europeans outnumbered the Native population. Groups like the Narragansett, which had been spared by the epidemic of 1616, had been crushed by a smallpox epidemic in 1633. A third to half of all remaining Indians in New England died of European diseases. The Native people could adapt to foreign technology, but not to European germs. Their societies were destroyed by weapons their opponents could not control and did not even know they possessed.