

From Thankful to Thankless: Agreement and Conflict Between European Colonists and Native Americans in Massachusetts after the First Thanksgiving

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The relationship between European settlers and the native New Englanders began after the Pilgrims' first winter. In March 1621, William Bradford first met with Wampanoag sachem Ousamequin (Massasoit) and established a treaty of mutual defense and cooperation.¹ The two parties found many sources of agreement in that first year, and they had an abundance to celebrate from their first successful harvest. This led to a joint celebration and feast which has been labeled "the first Thanksgiving". While the relationships the Europeans had with native peoples began positively, cultural differences and struggles over power and influence began to mount, leading to conflict, skirmishes, and eventually all-out war.

Relations began well when Ousamequin and Bradford established a treaty at their first meeting that focused on mutual defense. Both parties considered this agreement beneficial and communicated openly, with Bradford notably considering Ousamequin a friend.² That first year, the Pilgrims traded with the natives and used what they, mainly Tisquantum (Squanto) who knew English, taught them to cultivate a good surplus of food. Compared with the first harsh and deadly winter, the colonists' food supplies were abundant. At that time, the relationship was also looked upon fondly by Ousamequin. When the neighboring Narragansetts captured Ousamequin, the sachem Corbitant came to usurp his position. Bradford and Standish were alerted of his capture, and marched to Pokanoket where their intimidation successfully stopped Corbitant.³ By

¹ Silverman, David J. THIS LAND IS THEIR LAND : The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History Of... Thanksgiving. S.L., Bloomsbury, 2020.

² Neal Sheldon Salisbury. Manitou and Providence Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500 - 1643. New York, Ny [U.A.] Oxford Univ. Press, 1984.

³ Neal Sheldon Salisbury. Manitou and Providence Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500 - 1643. New York, Ny [U.A.] Oxford Univ. Press, 1984.

the time of the first Thanksgiving, close ties with Ousamequin and the Wampanoags meant European settlers' relationship with the native New Englanders was overall very positive.

In the years following the first Thanksgiving, however, European relations with native inhabitants began to turn sour as conflicts cropped up and power dynamics shifted. For one, not everything about the pre-Thanksgiving period had been fully positive. The close alliance with Ousamequin upset other native leaders, and Miles Standish was constantly concerned of a possible fight with them.⁴ Even for Ousamequin, political differences with the Europeans made the treaty unfair. It made natives agree to be “subjects of the king”, and allowed colonists to enforce their laws on natives, without themselves being subject to native laws.⁵ The attempted establishment of the first Wessagusett colony in 1622 was not welcomed as kindly as at Plymouth. Accusations of theft heightened tensions until eventually a skirmish broke out causing multiple deaths on both sides, including the death of one Massachusetts sachem Pecksuot at the hands of Standish.⁶ In the years after the first Thanksgiving, the European population in New England grew bigger, stronger, and more ambitious. The native population, on the other hand, grew weaker from plagues of sickness and inter-tribal conflict.⁷

This cocktail of rising colonial ambition and weakening native cohesion would result in an ultimate breakdown of relations as conflict turned to all-out fighting. The Pequot-Narragansett war began over domination of trade with the Dutch.⁸ In 1633, the Dutch killed the Pequot sachem Tatobem and in revenge Pequots killed everyone on board a ship they thought was

⁴ Neal Sheldon Salisbury. *Manitou and Providence Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500 - 1643*. New York, Ny [U.A.] Oxford Univ. Press, 1984.

⁵ Neal Sheldon Salisbury. *Manitou and Providence Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500 - 1643*. New York, Ny [U.A.] Oxford Univ. Press, 1984.

⁶ Neal Sheldon Salisbury. *Manitou and Providence Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500 - 1643*. New York, Ny [U.A.] Oxford Univ. Press, 1984.

⁷ Breen, Louise A., and Daniel Gookin. *Daniel Gookin, the Praying Indians, and King Philip's War : A Short History in Documents*. New York, NY, Routledge, 2020.

⁸ Cave, Alfred A. *The Pequot War*. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.

Dutch, but was actually English, led by captain John Stone.⁹ It was this murder, and the Pequot refusal to turn over the perpetrators for punishment, that the colonists ultimately used to justify the Pequot War. They won with the help of the Mohegans and Narragansetts, notably obliterating the Pequot Fort Mystic, burning it to the ground and killing all the noncombatants inside in “an act of terrorism”.¹⁰ As the 17th century unfolded, English colonial expansion continued to build resentment in the native inhabitants of New England, particularly the Narragansetts and Wampanoags. This came to a head in 1675 with the execution of three Wampanoag men in Plymouth, for which the Wampanoags attacked Swansea and began what would be called King Philip’s War. What started as small skirmishes and raids led to the Great Swamp Fight in December 1675 and the eventual killing of Ousamequin’s son Metacom (King Philip). King Philip’s War would cement the souring of European-native relations in New England and fully tip the scales of power to the colonists’ favor.¹¹

Ultimately, the relationship between European settlers and native New Englanders was complex and constantly shifting after the first Thanksgiving. While the first interactions between settlers at Plymouth and natives of Pokanoket were positive and mutually beneficial, allies turned to enemies over the decades that followed. In conclusion, after the first Thanksgiving, it was competition over resources and territory that ensured relationships took a complicated but steady path from friendly to violent.

⁹ Cave, Alfred A. *The Pequot War*. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.

¹⁰ Cave, Alfred A. *The Pequot War*. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.

¹¹ Mandell, Daniel R. *King Philip’s War*. JHU Press, 1 Sept. 2010.

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