

# AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORY

## **AT A GLANCE:** **INDIAN RELATIONS IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND**

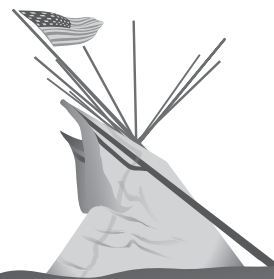
Between 1616 and 1618, a disease brought by European explorers swept through American Indian populations living along the coast of what is now Massachusetts. This epidemic, possibly the plague, decimated some tribes, in many cases wiping out whole villages. The Pilgrims, who landed on the south shore of Massachusetts Bay in 1620, were the unknowing beneficiaries of this epidemic. They landed at a recently abandoned Indian village, and because the former inhabitants had already cleared fields in the area, it was an ideal place for the Plymouth colonists to build their settlement.

The epidemic also set the stage for the alliance the Pilgrims forged with the Wampanoag Indians. Europeans had been exploring the coast for decades, and local Indians were happy to trade with the visitors but tried to discourage settlements. Massasoit, the leader of the Wampanoags, allowed the Pilgrims to settle the area because he believed it was in the best political interest of his people. The decade prior to the arrival of the Pilgrims had been devastating for the Wampanoags. Indian groups attacked them from the north and west, and they lost large numbers to disease. Moreover, the nearby Narragansett Indians had not traded heavily with Europeans and, therefore, had not lost as many to the epidemic. The Narragansetts began to demand tribute from the Wampanoags, and Massasoit decided to ally himself with the English to maintain the balance of power between his people and the Narragansetts.

With the help of two translators, Samoset and Tisquantum, Massasoit forged an alliance with the English governor. This alliance also served the interests of the Plymouth colonists, who had lost half their

population in the long, harsh winter of 1620–21. Tisquantum—sometimes referred to as “Squanto,” though this is less accurate version of his name—was an especially able translator. A Patuxet Indian whose village was wiped out in the epidemic, he had been enslaved by Europeans and had toured England before returning to America and joining the Wampanoags. Tisquantum showed the Plymouth colonists how to grow corn and catch eels, and with his aid the colony had a successful harvest. Interestingly, Tisquantum is remembered for teaching the colonists to fertilize their crops with fish, but it is likely that this was not an American Indian farming practice. Certain areas in Europe had used fish as fertilizer since the Middle Ages, and Tisquantum probably learned it during his enslavement.

In the late summer of 1621, the Pilgrims held a celebration to commemorate their successful harvest. This is the event that we now refer to as the first Thanksgiving, and much of what we know about it comes from the writings of Edward Winslow. The problem with the way we remember Thanksgiving today is that we think its main purpose was to celebrate peaceful Indian-European relations. Winslow’s retelling gives us a different picture. After the Pilgrims “exercised our arms,” Massasoit arrived with ninety men and no women and children. The absence of women and children is a clear indication that this was not a planned party. The fact that there had been a large amount of shooting just prior to the arrival of Massasoit and his men suggests that they may have been checking to see if there was a problem. Only after the confusion was cleared up did Massasoit send hunters to bring deer to support the feast and send for the women and



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children. It is likely that the party continued for three days. Interestingly, most of the food at the celebration was probably Indian food provided by the Wampanoags.

Ultimately, this isolated celebration could not mask the growing conflicts between the Wampanoags and the English. Cultural differences created a gulf between the groups. Indians, for example, could not understand why Europeans did not bathe regularly or why they blew their noses into handkerchiefs that they then kept. In addition to these small misunderstandings, Tisquantum may have deliberately discredited Massasoit in the eyes of the colonists in an attempt to usurp Massasoit's power and social standing for himself.

Most importantly, the growing number of English settlers tipped the balance of power against the Wampanoags. By the late 1640s the English were no longer content with allowing the Indians to remain independent. They erected a series of "praying towns" meant to keep the Indians under close surveillance and to force the Indians to convert to Christianity and adopt sedentary lifestyles. As an added benefit to the English, the "praying towns" restricted Indians to a fixed area, freeing up more Indian lands for colonial settlement. For their part, the Wampanoags had little interest in adopting European ways. They considered their relationship with the English a political partnership, and praying towns seemed like a threat to their authority.

It was in this context that Metacom, Massasoit's son, came to power. Known to the English as King Philip, Metacom considered war with the English inevitable if the Wampanoags were to preserve their way of life. Allied with several other local sachems, he mounted a rebellion against the English from 1675 to 1676 in which at least a thousand English colonists and almost three thousand Indians (a quarter of the Indian population of southern New England) died. The English victory in this

bloody war marked the end of Indian power in New England. Those who did not die or flee were confined to reservations and relegated to the lowest ranks of colonial society.

Though separated by time and space, the story of contact between Utah's Indians and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints parallels the New England story in many ways. Many Utah tribes saw LDS settlers, at least initially, as potentially valuable allies and trading partners. The Utes and Shoshones sought to acquire firearms from Mormons to use against their enemies, including each other. The Southern Paiutes invited the Mormons to settle because they saw the settlers as a potential buffer against Ute slave raids and hoped to gain access to Euro-American material goods. The Goshutes, too, were friendly to LDS settlers, even as first Utes and then Mormons began to overrun traditional Goshute lands.

Another important parallel stems from the fact that both the settlement of New England and the settlement of Utah were driven by religious impulses. Like the Puritans, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were interested in Indians as potential converts, though they experienced varying degrees of success in their attempts to convert Utah's Indians.

Finally, like the Wampanoags, Utah's indigenous people could not have predicted the sheer numbers of Mormon settlers that would pour into the Great Basin during the last half of the nineteenth century. Tribes that initially welcomed the Mormons soon found themselves fighting over resources and lands. (For a more extensive look at the history of contact in Utah, see the lesson plans "Rethinking First Contact" and "Rethinking Manifest Destiny.")