

STATE OF AFFAIRS AT THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

When the Pilgrims landed in North America in 1620, they were not the first Europeans that the Wampanoag Indians had seen. Europeans had been sailing up and down the coast for years, trading with the American Indians. Sometimes the Indians would come on board the boats to trade. Sometimes the Europeans would kidnap them and take them back to Europe as slaves or “souvenirs.”

The Wampanoags were happy to trade with the Europeans, but did not want them to stay on shore too long. The Indians noticed that following visits from these strangers, large numbers of people would get sick and die. That, along with the kidnappings, did not make the Europeans welcome in North America. So, why did Massasoit, leader of the Wampanoags, allow the Pilgrims to settle in Patuxet? He needed an ally against another Indian tribe, the Narragansetts. The Wampanoag had lost many more people to the diseases carried by European sailors than their enemies the Narragansetts.

The Pilgrims did not seem threatening. There were only a hundred people, including women and children. They didn’t look that healthy, and winter was coming. This made them a small enough threat to ignore. Also, they had guns, and that made them worth befriending.

Because some of the kidnapped Indians had made their way back to America, Massasoit had two

translators to help him make an alliance with the Pilgrims. Although the alliance was weak, it lasted long enough for the two groups to feast together in 1621. The Indians brought most of the food, and the harvest celebration lasted for three days. Sadly, the friendship between the Indians and the settlers didn’t last long after that first “Thanksgiving.”

Tisquantum was the translator Massasoit left with the Pilgrims. He is sometimes called “Squanto” in stories of the first Thanksgiving. He did not grow up with the Wampanoag Indians, and he may have said things that made the Pilgrims mistrust Massasoit and the Wampanoags. Also, the English took more and more land that had belonged to the Indians. More settlers arrived from England, and they started to outnumber the Indians. They tried to convert the Wampanoags to Christianity and make the Indians give up their traditions.

Tensions were high by the time Massasoit’s son Metacom became the leader of the Wampanoags. The English settlers called Metacom King Phillip, and the war that eventually erupted between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags would be called King Phillip’s War. The English killed Metacom and displayed his severed head on a pole. The English and Wampanoags were no longer friends like they had been at the first Thanksgiving.

