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COLONIAL AMERICA

A Very Short Introduction

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The southern New England Indians spoke related Algonkian languages, similar to those of the Virginia Indians, but they lacked political unity—and certainly had nothing like the paramount chiefdom of Powhatan. Primarily linguistic and ethnic groups, their many tribes included the Mohegan and Pequot of Connecticut; the Narragansett of Rhode Island; the Patuxet and Wampanoag of the Plymouth Colony; and the Nipmuck, Massachusetts, and Pennacook of Massachusetts Bay. The tribes subdivided into many local bands, each consisting of a few hundred people sharing a horticultural village for part of the year and a common hunting and gathering territory for the rest. Highly productive crops supplied most of their diet, yet the English dismissed the Indians as mere hunters who failed to improve the land, for the newcomers failed to recognize the farming of native women.

The northeastern Algonkians acquired few material possessions and shared what they had, for their culture cherished leisure and generosity more than the laborious accumulation of individual property for conspicuous display. Honor and influence accrued to chiefs who gave away food and deerskins rather than to those who hoarded all that they could acquire.

By contrast, the English lived and worked on fixed and substantial properties, primarily framed houses and barns set among fenced fields grazed by privately owned animals. Because they showed so little generosity to their poor and less to the Algonkians, the colonists struck the natives as mean and stingy, enslaved by their property and their longings for more. The natives were also

astonished that the colonists so rapidly cleared the forest. The colonists needed much more cleared land primarily because they kept domesticated cattle, pigs, and sheep—in contrast to the Indians who relied on wild fish and game for their protein. The colonists also cut into the forest to obtain lumber and timber for their buildings, fences, and ships, and they ran private property lines to subdivide the land into thousands of farms that could be bought and sold. In sum, the colonists substituted an English way of living within nature for the ways that had long sustained the natives in New England.

The first major conflict between the New English and their native neighbors erupted in 1636, when the colonists tried to impose a heavy tribute on the Pequot Indians. Rebuffed, the Connecticut, Plymouth, and Massachusetts colonies declared war and pressured the Narragansett and Mohegan peoples to join the fight. In May 1637 Narragansett and Mohegan warriors guided the Puritan forces deep into the Pequot territory to surprise a palisaded village beside the Mystic River. By burning the village and shooting those who fled, the colonists killed almost all of the 600 inhabitants, most of them women, children, and old men. The indiscriminate slaughter shocked the Narragansett and Mohegan allies, who had expected to capture and adopt the women and children.

Ravaged also by disease, the disunited Indian bands became shrinking minorities in a land dominated by the rapidly growing colonial population. In 1670 the 52,000 New England colonists outnumbered the Indians of southern New England by nearly three to one. The survivors debated how best to accommodate to the powerful and demanding colonists. By 1674 about 1,600 Indians had entered Puritan missions known as “praying towns,” where ministers sought to change their beliefs, behavior, and appearance. By consolidating natives in these praying towns, the Puritans sought to free up the rest of the Indian domain for their own settlements. Many of the natives saw the praying towns as their last hope for preserving their group identity on a part of their

homeland. Indeed, the largest and most successful community, Natick, derived its name from an Algonkian word meaning “my land.”

Most of the Indians, however, stayed away from the praying towns and resented the aggressive expansion of the settler towns. During the summer and fall of 1675, Indian rebels assailed fifty-two of the ninety towns in southern New England, destroying twelve. Armed with muskets obtained from traders, the Indians shocked the colonists with their firepower. When the colonists counterattacked, the enemy Indians took refuge in swamps and repelled their foes with heavy losses. The New Englanders blamed the uprising on a Wampanoag chief named Metacom, but known to the colonists as “King Philip.” In fact, every band fought under its own leaders and to avenge their own grievances. It was those shared woes that united most of the Indians in rebellion rather than any masterful plot by Metacom.

In early 1676 the colonial leaders recognized that they needed Indian allies, which they recruited in part from the Mohegan and the surviving Pequot and, in part, from the praying towns. Facing obliteration if they refused, the praying-town Indians had to join the fight against their rebellious kin in the swamps and forests. The Puritans required their allies to prove their loyalty and zeal by bringing in two scalps or heads taken from the enemy. Because a third of the region's natives assisted the colonists, King Philip's War became a civil war among the natives.

During the spring and summer of 1676, New England's native allies helped turn the tide of war in favor of the colonists. Running low on food and ammunition, the resistance collapsed, as one demoralized group after another surrendered. In August, a praying-town Indian shot the fleeing Metacom, and the colonists cut off his head for display on a post atop a brick watchtower in Plymouth. The colonists executed some of the captured chiefs and enslaved their families for sale in the West

Indies or the Mediterranean. Those sold included Metacom's wife and nine-year-old son.

The conflict had killed at least 1,000 English colonists and about 3,000 Indians, a quarter of their population in southern New England. Some of the defeated rebels escaped northward to take refuge among the Abenaki Indians in northern New England and New France. The refugees carried with them a bitter hatred of the New Englanders, returning in future wars to raid their frontier settlements. The colonists' Indian allies persisted in southern New England as a small and maligned minority, dwelling on a few shrinking reservations surrounded by the colonial towns.