

Harvard Theological Review

<http://journals.cambridge.org/HTR>

Additional services for *Harvard Theological Review*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Plymouth's Debt to the Indians

Lincoln N. Kinnicutt

Harvard Theological Review / Volume 13 / Issue 04 / October 2010, pp 345 - 361
DOI: 10.1017/S0017816000029916, Published online: 03 November 2011

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0017816000029916

How to cite this article:

Lincoln N. Kinnicutt (1920). Plymouth's Debt to the Indians. Harvard Theological Review, 13, pp 345-361 doi:10.1017/S0017816000029916

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

PLYMOUTH'S DEBT TO THE INDIANS

LINCOLN N. KINNICUTT

WORCESTER

In considering the relations of the early settlers of Massachusetts and the Indians it is greatly to be regretted that the Red Men possessed no civilized method by which they could leave a record of their own ideas, their own thoughts, and their own reasons for their actions, and that consequently nothing has survived except through tradition or through the medium of records compiled and written by the invaders of their country. All that we really know is the White Man's version; he has always been the judge, the jury, and the advocate for the plaintiff, all in one. The defense has had no means of being heard except through the plaintiff's lawyers, whose knowledge, even of the Indian language, was very slight. Certainly a unique trial. When we stop for a few minutes in our present energetic, busy, hurrying everyday life, and consider the luxury in which we now live, our comfortable homes, our variety of food, our steam cars, our motor cars, our telegraph and telephone, all of which we now demand as necessities and as our lawful rights, it is almost impossible to realize that three hundred years ago in this same land, in our own Massachusetts, for one winter and more or less for two years, our ancestors were absolutely dependent on the Indians for food sufficient to sustain life.

An anecdote from Mr. James Fletcher's *History of the Town of Plymouth*, which I quote, is perhaps the Indian idea of the earliest relations between the two races.

"In the year 1789 a number of Indians, assembled in New York on a mission to President Washington, were invited to dinner by General Knox, Secretary of War. A little before dinner two or three of

the Sachems, with their chief or principal men, went into the balcony at the front of the house from which they had a view of the city, the harbor, Long Island, and the adjacent country. They appeared dejected, and General Knox noticing this said to the Chief, 'Brother, what has happened to you? You look sorry. Is there anything here to make you unhappy?' He answered, 'I will tell you, Brother. I have been looking at your beautiful city, the great water and rivers, your mighty, fine country, producing enough for all your wants. See how happy you all are. But then I could not help thinking that this fine country and this great water was once ours. Our ancestors once lived here, they enjoyed it as their own possession in peace; it was the gift of the Great Spirit to them and their children. At length the white people came here in a great canoe. They asked only to let them tie it to a tree, lest the waters should carry it away. We consented. They then said some of their people were sick, and they asked permission to land them, and put them under the shade of the trees. The ice then came, and they could not get away. They then begged a piece of land to build wigwams for the winter; we granted it to them. They then asked for some corn to keep them from starving; we kindly furnished it to them, they promising to go away when the ice was gone. When this happened and the great water was clear, we told them they must now go away with their big canoe; but they pointed to their big guns around their wigwams and said they would stay there and we could not make them go away. Afterwards more white people came. They brought spirituous and intoxicating liquors with them, of which the Indians became very fond. They persuaded us to sell them some land. Finally they drove us back from time to time into the wilderness, far from the water and the fish and the oysters. They destroyed the game; our people have wasted away, and now we live miserable and wretched, while you are enjoying our fine and beautiful country. This it is that makes me sorry, Brother, and I cannot help it.'

The earliest relations established between the Indians and the colonists had, from the standpoint of the settlers, only two objects in view — self-protection and personal gain; personal, as applied to the various units of colonization as they were attempted. When the welfare and prosperity of the Englishman had been practically assured, then the spiritual welfare of the Indian became an important factor in the relation between the two races; but

the material welfare alone of the Indian was not then considered, except by comparatively few, and it never has been otherwise.

Although the Pilgrims came to the new world for the freedom of worship, even their relations with the Indians were founded, through necessity, on personal gain, as well as on personal safety. Their leaders possessed little worldly wealth, and they had committed themselves to send back to England the valuable commodities which were supposed to be obtained easily in the "Paradise of all these Parts" — so called by Captain John Smith — in order to compensate those from whom they had been obliged to seek financial aid and who had given it only from speculative motives. Without this aid from the "Merchant Adventurers" (and the name itself defines their understanding of the situation), of whom Thomas Weston was the treasurer, the whole project would necessarily have been abandoned, at least for the time being. Their creditors were hard taskmasters, as is shown by a harsh, unjust letter written by Thomas Weston about seven months after their landing, stating that "the life of the business depends on the lading of this ship." Governor Carver, to whom this letter was written, had died some months before its arrival at Plymouth, and the reply which Governor Bradford wrote shows how pitiful was the whole situation of the colonists. The result, however, was that still harsher terms were insisted upon by the business partners of the enterprise.

Pilgrims, freedom of worship, merchant-adventurers, beaver skins, sassafras, and codfish — and the Indians! No ideal situation, surely.

It would almost seem that Plymouth was predestined to become the Mecca of the New World (to which all good Americans make pilgrimage), and that the Pilgrims were the chosen people, so many apparently accidental events occurred many years before their landing which

were of vital importance to the survival of the colony, and during the first two years such critical situations owed their fortunate solutions to apparently accidental causes. It was the result of accidental events, which took place before 1620, that made it possible for the Pilgrims to come to a better and more equitable understanding with the Indians than was obtained by any of the other early colonists, and also made it possible for a longer continuance of this relationship.

Plymouth owes its existence, in my opinion, to two Indians, and possibly to a third, Massasoit, Tisquantum (or Squanto as he is more generally known), and Hobomok. They have never been given their rightful place in the history of our country. Of Tisquantum Charles Francis Adams wrote, "If human instruments are ever prepared by special Providence for a given work, he was assuredly so prepared for his." It was through the influence of these three men alone that any mutual understanding or relationship was created and maintained between the Indians and the Pilgrims, and to the three the Pilgrims were indebted, certainly during the early years, for their food, their existence, and even their lives. Something of Indian history must be told in order to understand how events had shaped themselves or fate had intervened (call it what you will) to achieve the desired end.

For some years before and at the time of the Plymouth settlement, five different confederacies, each having its own territory and each governed by its own chiefs, occupied a large part of New England, not including Maine. The Pawtuckets peopled southern New Hampshire, the Pequots the eastern part of Connecticut, the Narragansetts Rhode Island and certain islands, the Massachusetts the country about Massachusetts Bay, and the Pokanokets a large part of the counties of Bristol, Plymouth, Barnstable, and a part of Worcester county and exercised some authority in Nantucket and Martha's

Vineyard. The Pokanokets included at least nine separate tribes, each governed by its own Sagamore, but all subject to one grand Sachem who was also the principal chief of the Wampanoag tribe, living about Mount Hope (Montaup), and he was Massasoit. The principal occupations of the Indian men were hunting, fishing, and fighting, while the women cultivated the fields. And there was no continuance of peace in the whole land.

Four or five years before the coming of the Pilgrims the Indians suffered terribly from a strange and unidentified epidemic which spread over a large part of the Massachusetts coast and was felt most severely in Cape Cod Bay. It was so very fatal among the Indians of the Pawtuxet tribe, a tributary of the Pokanokets, who inhabited the land in and about Plymouth, that they were practically annihilated, leaving their land vacant and uninhabited, ready and waiting for new inhabitants. It was this land that Massasoit practically gave to Governor Bradford for the new colony.

Two months elapsed after the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth before they came into close contact with any large number of the natives. The Indians, however, had been keeping close watch, and it is believed from circumstantial evidence, had been consulting together on what course to pursue and what relationship on their part should be established. Governor Bradford states in his *History of the Plymouth Colony*, "Before they" (the Indians) "came to ye English to make friendship they gott all the Powachs of ye cuntrie for 3 days together in a horid and devellish maner to curse & execrate them with their conjurations, which asembly & service they held in a darke & dismale swampe." This was the colonists' version of what probably was a Grand Council of all the tribes of the Pokanoket Confederacy, for before deciding any question pertaining to peace or war it was the custom among the Indians to call such a council. In the "dark

and dismal swampe" was assembled probably the first Congress of Americans to consult on foreign relations.

No record of what actually took place was ever written or known, but imagination can paint the picture: A forest council-chamber of which nature alone was the architect, with wigwams scattered among the tall pines, and the light of camp fires partially dispelling the almost impenetrable darkness of the woods and swamps and making weird shadows of the swaying branches of the leafless trees; the Indians wrapped in their blankets seated as age or rank prescribed around a great fire, passing the ceremonial pipe, and harkening to the conjurations and lurid spells with which their medicine men exorcised the Pale Faces, and then listening to the advice of their Sachems and their Sagamores. Neither they nor their chiefs could realize or even imagine the fateful consequences of this decision to themselves as well as to the colonists.

Massasoit was the great Sachem ruling over all that part of Massachusetts. He was a noble and wise chief, and on his decision and action depended the relations which should prevail. His ability, his wisdom, his justice, and his loyalty were always acknowledged by the Pilgrims, and as good a relationship and friendship as could possibly exist between two races whose objects were so diametrically opposed, was created and established by him. I believe that during the two months of apparent inactivity on the part of the Indians, Massasoit knew well all that took place among the Pilgrims, as well as among the Indians, and before that memorable first meeting on Watson Hill, he had decided what course he thought best and wished to pursue.

That first meeting was too important in respect to what its consequences might be not to have been in a measure previously conceived by the Indians. The terms of the treaty then signed, that embryo League of Nations

between the nine Indian tribes owning Massasoit as their Sachem, and the Pilgrims, subjects of King James, was so Indian-like, so simple and yet so powerful in its material, direct conditions, that although it may have been indited by Governor Carver it must have been conceived, although perhaps vaguely, by Massasoit. It was completed, agreed to, with no reservations, and executed in half a day. But that was three hundred years ago.

I think we have always underestimated the mental capacity of many of the great chiefs of the American primitive race before it was "civilized." How would a desired understanding of like nature be conceived or consummated today? There would be more diplomacy, more necessary safeguarding, more controversy and less sincerity, less honor and more delay, but the same fundamental ideas and methods would prevail.

Samoset, as a messenger, appeared with his salutation of welcome to the strangers, and remained a whole day and night, giving and obtaining all possible information. The next day he returned with five companions, subjects of Massasoit's own tribe, possibly to confirm the reports of the first messenger, for Samoset was of a northern tribe and was probably selected on account of his rank, although not of the Wampanoag tribe, and for his partial knowledge of the language of the white men. These messengers announced the near presence of their King and made way for his coming, and then four or five days later Massasoit himself appeared with a retinue of sixty subjects, bringing with him Squanto, an Indian who knew the English language and the English people better probably than any Indian in the whole country. Presents were exchanged, and after some ceremonies were observed a treaty was confirmed, and a peace and a friendship were established which lasted more than fifty years and as long as Massasoit lived.

The treaty is impressive in its simplicity and brevity, and yet it contains all necessary provisions for good relationship and states clearly in seven short articles all that was required. Only two of these articles stipulated any reciprocal action on the part of the Pilgrims, but one of these, the fourth, read as follows: "That if any did unjustly war against him [Massasoit], they [the Pilgrims] would aid him; and if any did war against them, he should aid them" (A requirement in most treaties, but seldom so plainly understandable).

This was probably the one essential condition that influenced Massasoit, for his confederacy had been much weakened, having been reduced by the epidemic, as is supposed, from three thousand fighting men to five hundred, and with the neighboring confederacy on the west, the Narragansetts, he was continually at war. They had escaped the ravages of the plague and were stronger than ever, and he recognized, to a certain extent, the power of the English and wished to seize the opportunity of obtaining so promising an ally; also he may have had ambitions for a greater and more extended power.

Fortunate it was for the Pilgrims and fortunate it was for the Indians that the new colony possessed such men as Carver, Bradford, Miles Standish, and Winslow. They understood and respected Massasoit, and by their personality were able to make Massasoit respect and partially understand them. He admired and approved of their stern and harsh justice, and was impressed by, although not understanding, their many merciful actions and decisions. Through this mutual friendly relationship the colonists probably escaped a massacre similar to that which befell the Virginia Colony in 1622, in which nearly four hundred white men were killed in a single day, and probably postponed until 1665, several years after Massasoit's death, a King Philip's war, which the united colonists were then strong enough to defeat.

Although Massasoit himself was never a convert, to a certain extent he prepared the ground unconsciously for Reverend John Eliot and Daniel Gookin, who many years after the making of the treaty attempted their good work of converting the Indians. In 1639, when renewing the compact and bringing his oldest son, Wamsutta (Alexander), to join with him in the renewal, he endeavored to make his allies agree to leave to his people their own religious faith. As the English expressed it, "He wished to bind us never to draw away any of his people from their old pagan superstition and devilish idolitry to the Christian religion." He died faithful and loyal to his allies, to his religion and his God.

Although the story of Tisquantum (Squanto) has often been told, I must refer briefly to several incidents in his life and recall a part of his history, in order to make clear the process of the shaping of the corner stone on which rested, certainly at first, the desired relationship between the Pilgrims and the Indians. His mission in life seems to have been the welfare of the colonists, and his training to prepare him for this work apparently began fifteen years before the arrival of the Mayflower. His adventures and narrow escapes are almost incredible. He was a native of Patuxet, the Indian name of Plymouth, and he belonged to the Pokanoket tribe. If we are to believe Sir Ferdinando Gorges, he was kidnapped by Captain Weymouth, who happened to come into Plymouth in 1605 on his voyage to the Penobscot, "from whence he brought five of the natives, one of whose names was Tisquantum"; and Sir Ferdinando Gorges also states that he had Tisquantum with him for three years in London.

Captain John Smith in his *Second Voyage to New England* writes: "The main assistance, next God . . . was my acquaintance amongst the saluages, especially with Dohoday, one of their greatest Lords, who had liued long in England, and another called Tantum I (had) carried

with mee from England and set on shore at Cape Cod." Among historians Gorges' statements in regard to Squanto have created much controversy as to their accuracy; but Captain John Smith's narrative appears partially to confirm them, for other notes seem to identify Tantium with Tisquantum. We know certainly that in 1614 he was kidnapped (for the first or second time) by Captain Thomas Hunt with a number of other Indians and taken to Malaga, where Captain Hunt tried to sell his captives for slaves, but was prevented by the priests, who took possession of the savages in order to convert them. It is not known how Squanto got to England; but in the beginning of 1615 he was living with a Mr. John Slany in Cornhill or Cheapside and remained two years, and then in some manner found his way to Newfoundland and there met Captain Thomas Dermer. Dermer was impressed by his account and his knowledge of Cape Cod and Plymouth and wrote to Sir Ferdinando Gorges, in whose interests he was associated, "of the good use that might be made of his employment"; with the result that Captain Dermer took Squanto with him again to England. Gorges almost immediately sent Squanto with Captain Dermer back again to New England, wishing to use him in his own colonization scheme, and the "Saluages own country" was their destination. So after many years' wandering Squanto was returned to his native place, Plymouth. It was a sad home-coming, for not one of his own tribe was alive. All had been swept away by the plague.

This was the summer of 1619, and Squanto probably passed the following winter on the coast of Maine. But in the summer of 1620 he was again at Cape Cod; for according to Bradford he was with Dermer at Martha's Vineyard when in a conflict with the Indians Dermer was mortally wounded and all in his party killed, with the exception of one man. Bradford does not state that this one survivor was Squanto, but from inference it must have

been he. This was only a few months before the landing of the Pilgrims, and there are reasons for believing that under instructions from Sir Ferdinando Gorges Captain Dermer and Squanto were in this locality in order to intercept them, for if the plans of the Pilgrims had not miscarried, they would have reached their destination in the autumn.

In March, 1620 (o. s.), Squanto came with Massasoit as an interpreter, probably the only Indian who, prepared as he was by strange experiences, could convey to both parties a clear understanding of what each desired. It is natural to suppose that Massasoit would take advantage of Squanto's knowledge of the white man, for Squanto was one of his own subjects, and could tell him much of their numbers, of their power, and of their habits, and it must have influenced him somewhat in regard to the relations best to be established.

After the treaty was made Squanto remained with the Pilgrims, either by order of Massasoit or by his own wish, and became an indispensable factor in the life of the little colony, for, quoting Governor Bradford again, "Squanto continued with them and was their interpretor, and was a spetiall instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation. He directed them how to set their corne, wher to take fish and to procure other commodities, and was also their pilott to bring them to unknowne places for their profitt, and never left them till he dyed. He was a native of this place, & scarce any left alive besids him selfe." Corbitant, a Sachem, an ally of the Narragansetts and an enemy of the English, wishing to kill him, said, "If he were dead, the English had [*i.e.*, would have] lost their tongue."

Squanto lived less than two years after his coming to the Pilgrims, and died in their service on an expedition to procure corn, of which the colony was in sore need. When dying he "desired the Governor to pray for him that he

might go to the Englishman's God in heaven, and bequeathed sundry of his things to sundry of his English friends as remembrance of his love; of whom they had great loss."

It would almost seem that Squanto's whole mission in life was fulfilled in these two short years, by giving that service which he alone could render to the founders of New England. When we remember that to prepare this savage for his task he was the only one of his whole tribe to escape death from the plague, that he was sold as a slave and was obliged to live in a strange land for many years, that he was sent back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean, and that he was saved from violent death at the hands of his own kindred, we stop and consider and ponder, and cannot help but realize that in this world of ours a guiding hand directs.

A few months after the treaty was made and before the death of Squanto the Plymouth colony was joined by Hobomok, an Indian from Massasoit's own tribe, the Wampanoags, who was held in high esteem by Massasoit. His coming proved to be of great value to the Pilgrims in maintaining the established relations, especially after Squanto's death. Much jealousy always existed between Squanto and Hobomok, which although very beneficial to the colonists, because each of the twain was striving ambitiously to make himself the more important, nearly resulted in costing Squanto his life. Hobomok was able apparently to prove that Squanto had made false statements in regard to Massasoit's loyalty, and Massasoit, learning of this, declared Squanto to be his enemy and demanded that by the terms of the treaty he should be delivered to him to be dealt with as he thought best. This meant that Squanto would be beheaded. Governor Bradford endeavored in vain to evade this demand, for he appreciated to how great an extent the colonists were indebted to Squanto and that they could ill spare him;

but finally, true to the spirit of the contract, he agreed to accede.

Squanto, knowing this decision and his probable fate, then proved his strong character. He went to the Governor, not attempting to flee, "and accused Hobomok as the author and worker of his overthrow, yielding himself to the Governor to be sent or not, as he thought meet." But at the instant he was to be delivered to his executioners, a boat was seen outside the harbor, and deeming that it might be a vessel from France Governor Bradford told the messengers who had been sent for Squanto he must first know what this boat was before delivering him into their custody. The Indians, angry and impatient at the delay, departed, and thus once again Squanto's life was spared. For some unexplainable reason the demand was not repeated, and Winslow states that before September of the same year peace had been wrought between Massasoit and Squanto. As an Indian characteristic is never to forgive or forget an injury, this occurrence remains still more unexplainable.

One of the most critical periods in the life of the colony was in the winter and early spring of 1622-23 (o. s.). The Plymouth colony in aiding the Weston colony at Wessagusset (Weymouth) had depleted its own stores and was obliged to depend largely on the Indians for its supply of corn. The relations between the Wessagusset colony and the Massachusetts Indians had always been antagonistic, and now, through that colony's own evil doing, was nearly at the breaking point. The Massachusetts tribe and the Narragansett tribe, realizing the weakened condition of the Weston colony, were endeavoring to influence some of the Pokanoket tribes to unite with them and massacre all the white men in both colonies.

At this time two incidents occurred, very dissimilar in their nature but each of vital importance, which serve as faithful witnesses to testify to the true relationship and

even friendship which existed between the Pilgrims and the Indians who acknowledged Massasoit as their Chief.

In March, 1622 (o. s.), news came to Plymouth that Massasoit was very ill. The Pilgrims, knowing it was a custom among the Indians that all who professed friendship to a dying chief should visit him in person or send some accredited messenger, decided it would be a friendly and humane act to observe the custom and possibly render aid. Therefore Winslow and one companion, with Hobomok as a guide, started immediately for Packanokik where Massasoit was. It was a long, hard journey of forty miles over the frozen forest trails and through swamps and streams, and was taken with the knowledge that probably they would be too late. They found, however, that Massasoit was still alive but unable even to recognize them. Fortunately Winslow had brought with him remedies which he thought might be of service, and he sent back a messenger to Plymouth for other medicines. By his prompt action and skilful treatment he undoubtedly saved Massasoit's life and he remained with him until he was entirely out of danger. Massasoit, before Winslow's return to Plymouth, expressed himself in these words, "Now I see the English are my friends and love me; and whilst I live I will never forget the kindness they have showed me."

This good action on the part of the Pilgrims received its own reward much sooner than experience has taught humanity to expect, for on their journey back to Plymouth Hobomok delivered to Winslow a message of advice which Massasoit had instructed him to give, in order that Governor Bradford should be informed immediately on their arrival at home. This message revealed the plot of the Massachusetts Indians, before spoken of, against Master Weston's colony and so against the Pilgrim colony. He [Massasoit] named seven tribes who had joined with them, and also said that he himself "was earnestly so-

licited, but he would neither join therein nor give way to any of his." He advised Governor Bradford, if he respected the lives of his countrymen or his own safety, to kill the men of the Massachusetts who were the authors of this intended mischief. He also advised him to strike first and not wait until they began, or Bradford would rue the delay.

Governor Bradford, on receiving this message, called the Pilgrim company together and informed them of Massasoit's message and advice. It was decided that Captain Miles Standish should go immediately to Wessagusset with as many men as he might select but enough to make the Massachusetts tribe powerless, to strike first and to bring back the head of Wituwamat, their Chief, as a warning to the other hostile Indians. No other than Miles Standish could have been entrusted with this all-important undertaking. He was their military commander, and no man could have been better equipped for it. Charles Francis Adams, analyzing his character, says, "He seems to have been gifted by nature with a quick ear as well as eye. . . . His instinct told him, and told him correctly, how a savage should be dealt with, and he seems never to have made a mistake. . . . Seeing what the occasion called for, he did not hesitate." He took with him eight of the Pilgrim company and Hobomok.

It is needless to repeat the happenings of these eventful few days, for Edward Winslow in his *Relation* has vividly depicted the minute details. But I will recall that scene of the final encounter, when with about an equal number of men Miles Standish and Wituwamat, the Sachem of the Massachusetts, met in a small room of one of the log cabins at Wessagusset. Miles Standish with his few followers, all brave and determined, although weakened by a winter of hunger and privation; Wituwamat, who only a day or two previously had audaciously sharpened his knife before Standish, and flourishing it, had pointed to

a woman's face carved on the handle and had boasted that he had another knife on which a man's face would soon be carved and the two would marry; and Peksuut, an Indian who, boasting of his great size and strength, had taunted Standish with his small stature — the Indians in their picturesque costumes, and the Pilgrims in dilapidated and worn clothing — all watching for that favorable moment which, although unrecognized, was so momentous in deciding the fate of the colony. It made a historic picture to be remembered by all Pilgrim descendants.

Miles Standish followed Massasoit's advice. He struck first. No guns were used, only the familiar weapon of the savage, the knife. No quarter was asked nor given. The English knew they were fighting for the future existence of the whole colony, and the Indians, although they did not know, were fighting for their homes and for the lands that Manito, their God, had given them. It was the old story of the progress of civilization, the survival of the fittest; and the Englishmen won. Wituwamat, Peksuut, and another Indian were killed, a brother of Wituwamat was taken prisoner and immediately hung, and the next day the remainder of the Massachusetts tribe either fled or were killed.

That "first stroke" delivered by Standish was a bold, hazardous stroke. It was as essential as the kindly visit to Massasoit in order to make secure the foundation upon which was being laid the structure of peace and understanding and friendly relationship between the Pilgrims and the Indian Pokanoket confederacy. The treaty had been sanctified by blood and by mercy, and it endured for almost fifty years, until many of those who had made it had gone to the Happy Hunting Ground.

Such is the history, briefly told, of the relations of the Pilgrims and the Indians for the first two years of the life of the Pilgrim colony. On a tablet at Plymouth should be

written the names of Massasoit, Squanto, and Hobomok, Indians only, but men worthy to be in company with Carver, Bradford, Miles Standish, and Winslow. Squanto died in their service, Hobomok remained faithful and devoted to their welfare until his death, and Massasoit, living many years, was true and loyal to the last.