



When chief Massasoit first met the Pilgrims in Plymouth in 1621 (a fanciful 19th-century rendering), months before the first Thanksgiving, he was actually trying to co-opt the newcomers in a clever scheme to save his tribe.

SQUANTO AND THE PILGRIMS NATIVE INTELLIGENCE



The Indians who first feasted with the English colonists were far more sophisticated than you were taught in school. But that wasn't enough to save them **BY CHARLES C. MANN**

ON MARCH 22, 1621, a Native American delegation walked through what is now southern New England to meet with a group of foreigners who had taken over a recently deserted Indian settlement. At the head of the party was an uneasy triumvirate: Massasoit, the sachem (political-military leader) of the Wampanoag confederation, a loose coalition of several dozen villages that controlled most of southeastern Massachusetts; Samoset, sachem of an allied group to the north; and Tisquantum, a distrusted captive, whom Massasoit had brought along only reluctantly as an interpreter.

Massasoit was an adroit politician, but the dilemma he faced would have tested Machiavelli. About five years before, most of his subjects had fallen before a terrible calamity. Whole villages had been depopulated. It was all Massasoit could do to hold together the remnants of his people. Adding to his problems, the disaster had not touched the Wampanoag's longtime enemies, the Narragansett alliance to the west. Soon, Massasoit feared, they would take advantage of the Wampanoag's weakness and overrun them. And the only solution he could see was fraught with perils of its own, because it involved the foreigners—people from across the sea.

Europeans had been visiting New England for at least a century. Shorter than the Natives, oddly dressed and often unbearably dirty, the pallid foreigners had peculiar blue eyes that peeped out of bristly, animal-like hair that encased their faces. They were irritatingly garrulous, prone to fits of chicanery and often surprisingly incompetent at what seemed to Indians like basic tasks. But they also made useful and beautiful goods—copper kettles, glittering colored glass and steel knives and hatchets—unlike anything else in New England. Moreover, they would exchange these valuable items for the cheap furs that the Indians used as blankets.

Over time, the Wampanoag, like other Native societies in coastal New England, had learned how to manage the European presence. They encouraged the exchange of goods, but would allow their visitors to stay ashore only for brief, carefully controlled excursions. Those who overstayed their welcome were forcefully reminded of the limited duration of Indian hospitality. At the same time, the Wampanoag fended off Indians from the interior, preventing them from trading directly with the foreigners. In this way the shoreline groups had put themselves in the position of classic middlemen, overseeing both European access to Indian products and Indian access to European products. Now, reversing long-standing policy, Massasoit had decided to permit the newcomers to stay for an unlimited time—provided they formally allied with the Wampanoag against the Narragansett.

Tisquantum, the interpreter, had turned up at Massasoit's home a year and a half before. He spoke fluent English, because he had lived for several years in Britain. But Massasoit worried that in a crisis Tisquantum might side with the foreigners. Samoset—the third member of the triumvirate—had appeared a few weeks before, having hitched a ride from his home in Maine on an English ship that was plying the coast. Because Samoset also spoke a little English, Massasoit had first sent him, not Tisquantum, to meet with the foreigners.

On March 17, 1621, Samoset had walked unaccompanied and unarmed into the circle of rude huts in which the British were living. The colonists saw a robust, erect-postured man wearing only a loincloth; his straight black hair was shaved in front but flowed down his shoulders behind. To their amazement, this almost naked man greeted them in broken but understandable English. He left the next morning with a few presents, returning a day later with five “tall proper men”—in colonist Edward Winslow's words—with three-inch black stripes painted down the middle of their faces. The two sides talked inconclusively, each checking out the other, for a few hours.

Now, on the 22nd, with Massasoit and the rest of the Indian company hidden from view, Samoset and Tisquantum walked into the foreigners' ramshackle base. They spoke with the colonists for about an hour. Then, Massasoit and the rest of the Indian party suddenly appeared at the crest of a nearby hill, on the banks of a stream. Alarmed, the Europeans withdrew to a hill on the other side of the stream, where they had emplaced their few cannons behind a half-finished stockade. A standoff ensued.

Finally Winslow exhibited the decisiveness that later led to his selection as colony governor. Wearing a full suit of armor and carrying a sword, he waded through the stream and offered himself as a hostage. Massasoit's brother took charge of Winslow, and then Massasoit crossed the water himself, followed by Tisquantum and 20 of Massasoit's men, all unarmed. The colonists took the sachem to an unfinished house and gave him some cushions on which to recline. Both sides shared some of the foreigners' homemade moon-

shine and settled down to talk, Tisquantum translating.

Massasoit wore the same deerskin shawls and leggings as his fellows and, like them, had covered his face with bug-repelling oil and reddish purple dye. Around his neck hung a pouch of tobacco, a long knife and a thick chain of the prized white shell beads called wampum. In appearance, Winslow wrote afterward, he was “a very lusty man, in his best years, an able body, grave of countenance, and spare of speech.” The Europeans, who had barely survived the previous winter, were in much worse shape. Half of the original colony now lay underground beneath wooden markers painted with death's heads; most of the survivors were malnourished. The meeting between the Wampanoag and the English colonists marked a critical moment in American history.



“A FRIENDLY INDIAN”

THE FOREIGNERS called their colony Plymouth; they themselves were the famous Pilgrims. As schoolchildren learn, at that meeting the Pilgrims obtained the services of Tisquantum, usually known as Squanto. In the 1970s, when I attended high school, a popular history text was *America: Its People and Values*. Nestled among colorful illustrations of colonial life was a succinct explanation of Tisquantum's role:

A friendly Indian named Squanto helped the colonists. He showed them how to plant corn and how to live on the edge of the wilderness. A soldier, Capt. Miles Standish, taught the Pilgrims how to defend themselves against unfriendly Indians.

My teacher explained that maize was unfamiliar to the Pilgrims and that Squanto had demonstrated the proper way to plant it—sticking the seed in little heaps of dirt, accompanied by beans and squash that would later twine themselves up the tall stalks. And he told the Pilgrims to fertilize the soil by burying fish alongside the maize seeds. Following this advice, my teacher said, the colonists grew so much maize that it became the centerpiece of the first Thanksgiving. In our slipshod fashion, we students took notes.

The story in *America: Its People and Values* isn't wrong, so far as it goes. But the impression it gives is entirely misleading.

Tisquantum was critical to the colony's survival. He moved to Plymouth after the crucial meeting and spent the rest of his life there, during which time he indeed taught the Pilgrims agricultural methods, though some archaeologists believe Tisquantum picked up the idea of fish fertilizer from European farmers, who had used the technique since medieval times. But *America: Its People and Values* never explains why he so enthusiastically helped the people who had invaded his homeland. Skipping over such complexities is understandable in a book with limited space. The lack of attention, however, is symptomatic of a larger failure to consider

Indian motives, or even that Indians might have motives.

Much the same is true of the alliance Massasoit negotiated with Plymouth. From the Indian point of view, why did he do it? The alliance was successful from the short-run Wampanoag perspective, for it helped to hold off the Narragansett. But it was a disaster from the point of view of New England Indian society as a whole, because it ensured the survival of Plymouth Colony, which spearheaded the great wave of British immigration to New England. All of this was absent not only from my high-school textbooks, but from the academic accounts they were based on.

This omission dates back to the Pilgrims themselves, who ascribed the lack of effective Native resistance to the will of God. "Divine providence," the colonist Daniel Gookin wrote, favored "the quiet and peaceable settlement of the English." Later writers tended to attribute European success to European technology. In a contest where only one side had rifles and cannons, historians said, the other side's motives were irrelevant. By the end of the 19th century, the Indians of the Northeast were thought of as rapidly fading background details in the saga of the rise of the United States—"marginal people who were losers in the end," as James Axtell of the College of William and Mary dryly put it in an interview with me. Vietnam War-era denunciations of the Pilgrims as imperialist or racist simply replicated the error in a new form. Whether the cause was the Pilgrim God, Pilgrim guns or Pilgrim greed,

Native losses were foreordained; Indians could not have stopped colonization, in this view, and they hardly tried.

But beginning in the 1970s, historians grew dissatisfied with this view. "Indians were seen as trivial, ineffectual patsies," Neal Salisbury, a historian at Smith College, told me. "But that assumption—a whole continent of patsies—simply didn't make sense." Salisbury and other researchers tried to peer through the colonial records to the Indian lives beneath. Their work fed a tsunami of inquiry into the interactions between Natives and newcomers in the era when they faced each other as relative equals.

"When you look at the historical record, it's clear that Indians were trying to control their own destinies," Salisbury said. "And often enough they succeeded"—only to learn, as all peoples do, that the consequences were not what they expected.



THE DAWNLAND

MORE THAN LIKELY Tisquantum was not the name he was given at birth. In that part of the Northeast, *tisquantum* referred to rage, especially the rage of *manitou*, the world-suffusing spiritual power at the heart of coastal Indians' religious beliefs. When Tisquantum approached the Pilgrims and identified himself by that sobriquet, it was as if he had stuck out his hand and said, Hello, I'm the Wrath of God.

Nor did Tisquantum think of himself as an "Indian," any more than the inhabitants of the same area today would call themselves "Western Hemisphereans." As Tisquantum's later history would make clear, he regarded himself first and foremost as a citizen of Patuxet, one of the dozen or so shoreline settlements in what is now eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island that made up the Wampanoag confederation. The Wampanoag, in turn, were part of an alliance with the Nauset, which comprised some 30 groups on Cape Cod, and the Massachusetts, several dozen villages clustered around Massachusetts Bay. All of these people spoke variants of Massachusetts, a member of the Algonquian language family, the biggest in eastern North America at the time. In Massachusetts, the name for the New England shore was the Dawnland, the place where the sun rose. The inhabitants of the Dawnland were the People of the First Light.

Ten thousand years ago, when Indians in Mesoamerica and Peru were inventing agriculture and coalescing into villages, New



Come the European conquest, the Wampanoag Indians' alliance with the Massachusetts and Nauset against the rival Narragansett would prove fateful.

England was barely inhabited, for the excellent reason that it had been covered until relatively recently by an ice sheet a mile thick. As the sheet retreated, people slowly moved in, though the area long remained cold and uninviting, especially along the coastline. Because rising sea levels continually flooded the shore, marshy Cape Cod did not fully lock into its contemporary configuration until about 1000 B.C. By that time the Dawnland had evolved into something more attractive: an ecological crazy quilt of wet maple forests, shellfish-studded tidal estuaries, thick highland woods, mossy bogs of cranberries and orchids, complex snarls of sandbars and beachfront, and fire-swept stands of pitch pine—"tremendous variety even within the compass of a few miles," in the phrase of ecological historian William Cronon.

By the end of the first millennium A.D., agriculture was spreading rapidly and the region was becoming a patchwork of communities, each with its preferred terrain, way of subsistence and cultural style. Scattered about the many lakes, ponds and swamps of the cold uplands were small, mobile groups of hunters and gatherers. Most had recently adopted agriculture or were soon to do so, but cultivated crops were still a secondary source of food, a supplement to the wild products of the land. New England's major river valleys, by contrast, held large, permanent villages, many nestled in constellations of suburban hamlets and hunting camps. Because extensive fields of maize, beans and squash surrounded every home, these settlements sprawled along the Connecticut, Charles and other river valleys for miles, one town bumping up against the other. Along the coast, where Tisquantum and Massasoit lived, villages tended to be smaller and looser, though no less permanent.

Unlike the upland hunters, the Indians on the rivers and coastline did not roam the land; most shoreline families would move a 15-minute walk inland, to avoid direct exposure to winter storms and tides. Each village had its own distinct mix of farming and foraging—one adjacent to a rich oyster bed might plant maize purely for variety, whereas a village just a few miles away might subsist almost entirely on its harvest, filling great underground storage pits each fall. Each community was constantly "joining and splitting like quicksilver in a fluid pattern within its bounds," wrote Kathleen J. Bragdon, an anthropologist at the College of William and Mary. Such settlements, she remarked, have "no name in the archaeological or anthropological literature."



"SWEET, TOOTHsome. AND HEARTY"

IN THE WAMPANOAG confederation, one of these quicksilver communities was Patuxet, where Tisquantum was born at the end of the 16th century. Tucked into the great sweep of Cape Cod Bay, Patuxet sat on a low rise above a small harbor, jigsawed by sandbars and so

shallow that children could walk from the beach hundreds of yards into the water before it reached their heads. To the west, maize hills marched across the sandy hillocks in parallel rows. Beyond the fields, a mile or more away from the sea, rose a forest of oak, chestnut and hickory, open and park-like, the underbrush kept down by expert annual burning. "Pleasant of air and prospect," as one English visitor described the area, Patuxet had "much plenty both of fish and fowl every day in the year." Runs of spawning Atlantic salmon, short-nose sturgeon, striped bass and American shad filled the harbor. But the most important fish harvest came in late spring, when the herring-like alewives swarmed the fast, shallow stream that cut through the village.

Tisquantum's childhood *wetu* (home) was formed from arched poles lashed together into a dome covered in winter by tightly woven rush mats and in summer by thin sheets of chestnut bark. A fire burned constantly in the center, the smoke venting through a hole in the roof. The *wetu*'s multiple layers of mats, which trapped insulating layers of air, were "warmer than our English houses," sighed the colonist William Wood. It was also less leaky than the typical English wattle-and-daub house. Wood did not conceal his admiration for the way Indian mats "deny entrance to any drop of rain, though it come both fierce and long."

Around the edge of the house were low beds, sometimes wide enough for a whole family to sprawl on together; they were usually raised about a foot from the floor, platform-style, and piled with mats and furs. Going to sleep in the fire-light, young Tisquantum would have stared up at shadows of hemp bags and bark boxes hanging from the rafters. Voices would skirl up in the darkness: one person singing a lullaby, then another person, until everyone was asleep. In the morning, when he woke, big, egg-shaped pots of corn-and-bean mash would be on the fire, simmering with meat, vegetables or dried fish to make a slow-cooked dinner stew. Outside, he would hear the thuds of the large mortars and pestles in which women crushed dried maize into *nekake*, a flour-like powder "so sweet, toothsome, and hearty," colonist Gookin marveled, "that an Indian will travel many days with no other but this meal." According to one modern reconstruction, Dawnland diets at the time averaged about 2,500 calories a day, a higher level than those in famine-racked Europe.

Pilgrim writers universally reported that Wampanoag families were close and loving—more so than English families, some thought. Europeans in those days tended to view children as moving straight from infancy to adulthood around the age of 7 and often thereupon sent them out to work. Indian parents, by contrast, regarded the years before puberty as a time of playful development, and they kept their offspring close by until they married. Boys like Tisquantum explored the countryside, swam in the ponds at the south end of the harbor, and played a kind of soccer

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with a small leather ball; in summer and fall they camped out in huts in the fields, weeding the maize and chasing away birds. Archery began at age 2. By adolescence, boys would make a game of shooting at each other and dodging the arrows.

The primary goal of Dawnland education was molding character. Men and women were expected to be brave, hardy, honest and uncomplaining. Chatterboxes and gossips were frowned upon. "He that speaks seldom and opportunely, being as good as his word, is the only man they love," Wood reported. When Indian boys came of age, they spent an entire winter alone in the forest, equipped only with a bow, hatchet and knife. These methods worked, Wood added. "Beat them, whip them, pinch them, punch them, if [the Indians] resolve not to flinch for it, they will not."

Tisquantum's regimen was probably even more rigorous than that of his friends, according to Smith College's Salisbury, for it seems that he was selected to become a *pniese*, a kind of counselor-bodyguard to the sachem. To master the art of ignoring pain, prospective *pniese* had to subject themselves to such experiences as running barelegged through brambles. And they fasted often, to learn self-discipline. After spending their winter in the woods, *pniese* candidates came back to an additional test: drinking bitter gentian juice until they vomited, repeating this process over and over.

Patuxet, like its neighboring settlements, was governed by a sachem who enforced laws, negotiated treaties, controlled foreign contacts, collected tribute, declared war, provided for widows and orphans, and allocated farmland. The Patuxet sachem owed fealty to the great sachem in the Wampanoag village to the southwest, and through him to the sachems of the allied confederations of the Nauset in Cape Cod and the Massachusetts around Boston. Meanwhile, the Wampanoag were rivals and enemies of the Narragansett and Pequots to the west and the Abenaki to the north.

Sixteenth-century New England was home to 100,000 Native people or more, a figure that was slowly increasing. Most of them lived in shoreline communities, where rising numbers were beginning to change agriculture from an option to a necessity. These larger settlements required more centralized administration; natural resources like good land and spawning streams, though not scarce, needed to be managed. In consequence, boundaries between groups were becoming more formal. Sachems, given more power and more to defend, pushed against each other harder. Political tensions were constant. Coastal and riverine New England, according to the archaeologist and ethnohistorian Peter Thomas, was "an ever-changing collage of personalities, alliances, plots, raids and encounters which involved every Indian [settlement]."

Armed conflict was frequent but brief and mild by Euro-



Coastal Indians lived in elaborate settlements (from a 1585 painting of an Algonquin village in present-day North Carolina) that were graced by orderly cornfields and enviably warm rainproof homes.

pean standards. The catalyst was usually the desire to avenge an insult or gain status, not conquest. Most battles consisted of lightning guerrilla raids in the forest. Attackers slipped away as soon as retribution had been exacted. Losers quickly conceded their loss of status. Women and children were rarely killed, though they were sometimes abducted and forced to join the victors. Captured men were often tortured. Now and then, as a sign of victory, slain foes were scalped, and in especially large clashes, adversaries might meet in the open, as in European battlefields, though the results, Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island Colony, noted, were "farre less bloody, and devouring then the cruell Warres of Europe."

Inside the settlement was a world of warmth, family and familiar custom. But the world outside, as Thomas put it, was "a maze of confusing actions and individuals fighting to maintain an existence in the shadow of change."

And that was before the Europeans showed up.



"BEAUTIFUL OF STATURE AND BUILD"

BRITISH FISHING VESSELS may have reached Newfoundland as early as the 1480s and areas to the south soon after. In 1501, just nine years after Columbus' first voyage, the Portuguese adventurer Gaspar Corte-Real abducted more than 50 Indians from Maine. Examining the captives, Corte-Real found to his astonishment that two were wearing items from Venice: a broken sword and two silver rings.

The earliest written description of the People of the First Light was by Giovanni da Verrazzano, the Italian mariner-for-hire commissioned by the king of France in 1523 to discover whether one could reach Asia by rounding the Americas to the north. Sailing north from the Carolinas, he observed that the coastline everywhere was "densely populated," smoky with Indian bonfires; he could sometimes smell the burning hundreds of miles away. The ship anchored in Narragansett Bay, near what is now Providence. Verrazzano was one of the first Europeans the Natives had seen, perhaps even the first, but the Narragansett were not intimidated. Almost instantly, 20 long canoes surrounded the visitors. Cocksure and graceful, the Narragansett sachem leapt aboard: a tall, long-haired man of about 40 with multicolored jewelry dangling about his neck and ears, "as beautiful of stature and build as I can possibly describe," Verrazzano wrote.

His reaction was common. Time and time again Europeans described the People of the First Light as strikingly healthy specimens. Eating a nutritious diet, working hard but not broken by toil, the people of New England were taller and more robust than those who wanted to move in. Native New Englanders, in William Wood's view, were "more amiable to behold (though [dressed] only in Adam's finery) than many a compounded fantastic [English dandy] in the newest fashion."

Evidence suggests that Indians tended to view Europeans with disdain. The Huron in Ontario, a chagrined missionary reported, thought the French possessed "little intelligence in comparison to themselves." Europeans, Indians told other Indians, were physically weak, sexually untrustworthy, atrociously ugly and just plain smelly. (The British and French, many of whom had not taken a bath in their entire lives, were amazed by the Indian interest in personal hygiene.) A Jesuit reported that the "savages" were disgusted by handkerchiefs: "They say, we place what is unclean in a fine white piece of linen, and put it away in our pockets as something very precious, while they throw it upon the ground."

For 15 days Verrazzano and his crew were the Narragansett's honored guests—though the Indians, Verrazzano admitted, kept their women out of sight after hearing the

sailors' "irksome clamor" when females came into view. Much of the time was spent in friendly barter. To the Europeans' confusion, their steel and cloth did not interest the Narragansett, who wanted to swap only for "little bells, blue crystals, and other trinkets to put in the ear or around the neck." On Verrazzano's next stop, the Maine coast, the Abenaki did want steel and cloth—demanded them, in fact. But up north the friendly welcome had vanished. The Indians denied the visitors permission to land; refusing even to touch the Europeans, they passed goods back and forth on a rope over the water. As soon as the crew members sent over the last items, the locals began "showing their buttocks and laughing." Mooned by the Indians! Verrazzano was baffled by this "barbarous" behavior, but the reason for it seems clear: unlike the Narragansett, the Abenaki had long experience with Europeans.



A SMALL SHIP

DURING THE CENTURY after Verrazzano, Europeans were regular visitors to the Dawnland, usually fishing, sometimes trading, occasionally kidnapping Natives as souvenirs. (Verrazzano had grabbed one himself, a boy of about 8.) By 1610, one historian has estimated, Britain alone had about 200 vessels operating off Newfoundland and New England; hundreds more came from France, Spain, Portugal and Italy. With striking uniformity, these travelers reported that New England was thickly settled and well defended. In 1605 and 1606 Samuel de Champlain visited Cape Cod, hoping to establish a French base. He abandoned the idea. Too many people already lived there. A year later the British nobleman Ferdinando Gorges tried to found a community in Maine. It began with more people than the Pilgrims' later venture in Plymouth and was better organized and supplied. Nonetheless, the local Indians, numerous and well armed, killed 11 colonists and drove the rest back home within months.

Tisquantum probably saw Champlain and other European visitors, but the first time Europeans are known to have affected his life was in the summer of 1614. A small ship hove to, sails a-flap. Out to meet the crew went the Patuxet. Almost certainly the sachem would have been of the party; he would have been accompanied by his pniese, including Tisquantum. The strangers' leader was a sight beyond belief: a stocky man, even shorter than most foreigners, with a voluminous red beard that covered so much of his face that he looked to Indian eyes more beast than human. This was Capt. John Smith of Pocahontas fame. According to Smith, he had lived an adventurous and glamorous life. As a youth, he claimed, he had served as a privateer, after which he was captured and enslaved by the

Turks. He escaped and awarded himself the rank of captain in the army of Smith. Later he actually became captain of a ship and traveled to North America several times. On this occasion he had sailed to Maine with two ships, intending to hunt whales. The party spent two months chasing the beasts but failed to catch a single one. The fallback plan, Smith wrote later, was "Fish and Furs." He assigned most of the crew to catch and dry fish in one ship while he sailed up and down the coast with the other, bartering for furs.

Despite Smith's peculiar appearance, Tisquantum and his fellows apparently gave him a tour, during which he admired the gardens, orchards and maize fields, and the "great troupes of well-proportioned people" tending them. At some point a quarrel occurred and bows were drawn, Smith said, "fortie or fiftie" Patuxet surrounding him. His account is vague, but it seems likely that the Indians were hinting at a limit to his stay. In any case, the visit ended cordially enough, and Smith returned to Maine and then England. He had a map drawn of what he had seen, persuaded Prince Charles to look at it, and curried favor with him by asking him to award British names to all the Indian settlements. Then he put the maps in the books he wrote extolling his adventures. In this way Patuxet acquired its English name, Plymouth, and the region became known as New England.

Smith left his lieutenant, Thomas Hunt, behind in Maine to finish loading the other ship with dried fish. Without consulting Smith, Hunt decided to visit Patuxet, and, once there, he invited some Indians to come aboard. The thought of a summer day on the foreigners' vessel must have been tempting. Several dozen villagers, Tisquantum among them, canoed to the ship. Without warning or pretext the sailors tried to shove them into the hold. The Indians fought back. Hunt's men swept the deck with small-arms fire, creating "a great slaughter." At gunpoint, Hunt forced 19 survivors, including Tisquantum, belowdecks, then sailed with them to Europe, stopping only once, at Cape Cod, where he kidnapped seven Nauset.

In Hunt's wake, the outraged sachems of the Wampanoag and Nauset confederacies vowed not to let foreigners rest on their shores again. Because of the "worthlesse" Hunt, lamented Gorges, the would-be colonizer of Maine, "a warre [was] now new begunne between the inhabitants of those parts, and us." Despite European guns, the Indians' greater numbers, entrenched positions, knowledge of the terrain and superb archery made them formidable adversaries. About two years after Hunt's offenses, a French ship wrecked at the tip of Cape Cod. Its crew built a rude shelter with a defensive wall made from poles. The Nauset, hidden outside, picked off the sailors one by one until only five were left. They captured the five and sent them to groups victimized by European kidnappers. Another French vessel anchored in Boston Harbor at about the same time. The Massachusetts killed everyone aboard and set the ship afire.



"GOD'S GOOD PROVIDENCE"

THE PILGRIMS HAD REFUSED to hire the experienced John Smith as a guide, on the theory that they could simply use the maps in his book. In consequence, as Smith later crowed, the hapless *Mayflower* spent several frigid weeks scouting Cape Cod for a good place to land, during which time many colonists became sick and died. Landfall at Patuxet did not end their problems. The colonists had intended to produce their own food, but had neglected to bring any cows, sheep, mules or horses. (They may have had pigs.) To be sure, the Pilgrims had intended to make most of their livelihood not by farming but by catching fish for export to Britain. But the only fishing gear the Pilgrims brought was useless in New England. Only half of the 102 people on the *Mayflower* made it through the first winter.

How did even that many survive? In his history of Plymouth Colony, Governor William Bradford himself provides one answer: robbing Indian houses and graves. The *Mayflower* hove to first at Cape Cod. An armed company of Pilgrims staggered out. Eventually they found a deserted Indian habitation. The newcomers—hungry, cold, sick—dug open burial sites and ransacked homes, looking for underground stashes of food. After two days of nervous work, the company hauled ten bushels of maize back to the *Mayflower*, carrying much of the booty in a big metal kettle the men had also stolen. "And sure it was God's good providence that we found this corn," Winslow wrote, "for else we know not how we should have done."

The Pilgrims' lack of preparation was typical. Expeditions from France and Spain were usually backed by the state, and generally staffed by soldiers accustomed to hard living. English voyages, by contrast, were almost always funded by venture capitalists who hoped for a quick cash-out. Decades after first touching the Americas, London's venture capitalists still had not figured out that New England is colder than Britain despite being farther south. Even when they focused on a warmer place like Virginia, they persistently selected as colonists people ignorant of farming; the hope of fleeing religious persecution uppermost in their minds, the Pilgrims, alas, were an example. Multiplying the difficulties, the would-be colonizers were arriving in the middle of a severe, multiyear drought. Jamestown and the other Virginia forays survived on Indian charity—they were "utterly dependent and therefore controllable," Karen Ordahl Kuppermann, a New York University historian, has written. The same held true for the adventurers in Plymouth.

Inexperienced in agriculture, the Pilgrims were also not woodspeople. Huddled in their half-built village that first terrible winter, the colonists rarely saw the area's inhabitants, except for the occasional shower of brass- or claw-tipped arrows. After February, glimpses and sightings became more frequent. Scared, the Pilgrims hauled five small cannons

from the *Mayflower* and emplaced them in a defensive fortification. But after all the anxiety, their first contact with Indians went surprisingly well. Within days Tisquantum came to settle among them. And then they heard his stories.

No record survives of Tisquantum's journey across the Atlantic, but Hunt—John Smith's renegade subordinate, who had kidnapped Tisquantum and more than a score of his fellows—would have tied or chained and jammed the Indians into whatever dark corner of the hull was available. Presumably they were fed from the ship's cargo of dried fish. Smith took six weeks to cross the Atlantic to England. There is no reason to think Hunt went any faster. The only difference was that he took his ship to Málaga, on Spain's Mediterranean coast. There he intended to sell all of his cargo, including the human beings.

In fact, Hunt managed to sell only a few of his captives before local Roman Catholic priests seized the rest—the Spanish Church vehemently opposed brutality toward Indians. (In 1537 Pope Paul III had proclaimed that "Indians themselves indeed are true men" and should not be "deprived of their liberty" and "reduced to our service like brute animals.") The priests intended to save both Tisquantum's body, by preventing his enslavement, and his soul, by converting him to Christianity, though it is unlikely they succeeded in the latter endeavor. In any case, this resourceful man convinced them to let him return home—or, rather, to try to return. He got to London, where he stayed with John Slany, a shipbuilder with investments in Newfoundland. Slany apparently taught Tisquantum English while maintaining him as a curiosity in his town house. Meanwhile, Tisquantum persuaded him to arrange for passage to North America on a fishing vessel. He ended up in a tiny British fishing camp on the southern edge of Newfoundland. It was on the same continent as Patuxet, but between them were a thousand miles of rocky coastline and the Micmac and Abenaki alliances, which were at war with one another.

Because traversing this unfriendly territory would be difficult, Tisquantum began looking for a ship to take him to Patuxet. He praised New England bounty to Thomas Dermer, one of Smith's subordinates, who was then staying in the same camp. Dermer contacted Ferdinando Gorges, who despite his previous failures retained his interest in the Americas, and with Tisquantum sailed back to England and met with Gorges. Gorges provided Dermer with a fresh ship, and after touching land in Maine, they set out in May 1619 for Massachusetts.



THE EUROPEANS' SECRET WEAPON

WHAT TISQUANTUM SAW on his return stunned him. From southern Maine to Narragansett Bay, the coast was empty—"utterly void," Dermer reported. What had once been a line of busy communities was now a mass of

tumbledown homes and untended fields overrun by blackberries. Scattered among the houses and fields were skeletons bleached by the sun. Gradually Dermer's crew realized they were sailing along the border of a cemetery 200 miles long and 40 miles deep. Patuxet had been hit with special force. Not a single person remained.

Looking for his kinsfolk, Tisquantum led Dermer on a melancholy march inland. The settlements they passed lay empty to the sky but full of untended dead. Finally, Tisquantum's party encountered some survivors, a handful of families in a shattered village. These people sent for Massasoit, who appeared, Dermer wrote, "with a guard of fifie armed men"—and a captive French sailor, a survivor of the Cape Cod shipwreck. Massasoit told Tisquantum what had happened.

One of the shipwrecked French sailors had learned enough Massachusetts to inform his captors before dying that God would destroy them for their misdeeds. The Nauset scoffed at the threat. But the Europeans carried a disease, and they bequeathed it to their jailers. Based on accounts of the symptoms, the epidemic was probably of viral hepatitis, likely spread by contaminated food, according to a study by Arthur E. Spiess, of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, and Bruce D. Spiess, of the Medical College of Virginia. The Indians "died in heapes as they lay in their houses," the merchant Thomas Morton observed. In their panic, the recently infected fled from the dying, unknowingly carrying the disease with them to neighboring communities. Behind them the dead were "left for crows, kites, and vermin to prey upon." Beginning in 1616, the pestilence took at least three years to exhaust itself and killed up to 90 percent of the people in coastal New England.

Massasoit had directly ruled a community of several thousand people and held sway over a confederation of as many as 20,000. Now his group was reduced to 60 people and the entire confederation to fewer than a 1,000. Both the Indians and the Pilgrims believed that sickness reflected the will of celestial forces. The Wampanoag, wrote Salisbury, the Smith historian, came to the obvious conclusion: "their deities had allied against them."

Similarly, Governor Bradford is said to have attributed the plague to "the good hand of God," which "favored our beginnings" by "sweeping away great multitudes of the natives . . . that he might make room for us." Indeed, more than 50 of the first colonial villages in New England were located on Indian communities emptied by disease. The epidemic, Gorges said, left the land "without any [people] to disturb or appease our free and peaceable possession thereof, from when we may justly conclude, that GOD made the way to effect his work."

Much as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which killed tens of thousands, prompted spiritual malaise across Europe, the New England epidemic shattered the Wampanoag's sense that they lived in balance with an intelligible world. On top of that, the massive death toll created a political crisis. Because the hostility between the Wampanoag and the neighboring Narragansett had restricted contact between them, the disease

had not spread to the latter. Now Massasoit's people were not only beset by loss, they were in danger of subjugation.

After learning about the epidemic, the distraught Tisquantum returned with Dermer to southern Maine—the home he had been trying to find no longer existed. But he couldn't stay with the Europeans, either. He ended up returning to Massachusetts on foot—the long, risky journey through war-torn territory that he had wanted to avoid. Almost inevitably, Tisquantum was seized on his journey home, perhaps because of his association with the hated Europeans, and sent to Massasoit as a captive.

Once again, Tisquantum tried to talk his way out of a jam, filling Massasoit's ears with tales of the English, their cities and powerful technology. Tisquantum said, according to a colonist who knew him, that if Massasoit "Could make [the] English his Friends then [any] Enemies yet weare to[o] strong for him"—in other words, the Narragansett—"would be Constrained to bowe to him," Massasoit demurred, apparently keeping Tisquantum in a kind of house arrest. Within a few months, word came that a party of English had settled at Patuxet. The Wampanoag observed them as they suffered through the first punishing winter. Eventually Massasoit concluded that he should ally with them—compared to the Narragansett, they were the lesser of two evils. Still, only when the need for a translator became unavoidable did he allow Tisquantum to meet the Pilgrims.

Massasoit told the Pilgrims that he was willing to leave them in peace (a bluff, one assumes, since driving them away would have taxed his limited resources). But in return he wanted the colonists' assistance with the Narragansett. To the Pilgrims, Massasoit's motive for the deal was obvious: the Indian leader wanted guns. "He thinks we may be [of] some strength to him," Winslow said later, "for our pieces [guns] are terrible to them."

From today's perspective, though, it seems likely that Massasoit had a subtler plan. He probably wanted more to confront the Narragansett

with the unappetizing prospect of attacking one group of English people at the same time that their main trading partners were other English people. Faced with the possibility of disrupting their favored position as middlemen, the Narragansett might think twice before staging such an incursion. If this interpretation is correct, Massasoit was trying to incorporate the Pilgrims into the web of Native politics. Not long before, he had expelled foreigners who stayed too long in Wampanoag territory. But with the entire confederation now smaller than one of its former communities, the best option seemed to be to allow the Pilgrims to remain. It would turn out to be a drastic, even fatal, decision.



FIRST THANKSGIVING

TISQUANTUM worked hard to prove his value to the Pilgrims. He was so successful that when some anti-British Indians abducted him, the colonists sent out a military expedition to get him back. Never did the newcomers ask themselves why he might be making himself essential. But from the Pilgrims' accounts of their dealings with him, the answer seems clear: the alternative to staying in Plymouth was returning to Massasoit and renewed captivity.

Recognizing that the colonists would be unlikely to keep him around forever, Tisquantum decided to gather together the few Native survivors of Patuxet and reconstitute the old community at a site near Plymouth. More ambitious still, he hoped to use his influence on the English to make this new Patuxet the center of the Wampanoag confederation, thereby stripping the sachemship from Massasoit. To accomplish these goals, as Governor Bradford later recounted, he intended to play the Indians and English against each other.

The scheme was risky, not least because the ever-suspicious Massasoit had sent one of his pnieese, Hobamok, to Plymouth as a monitor. Sometimes Hobamok and Tisquantum worked together, as when the pair helped the Pilgrims negotiate a treaty with the Massachusetts to the north. They also helped establish a truce with the Nauset of Cape Cod after Governor Bradford agreed to pay back the losses caused by the colonists' earlier grave robbing.

By fall the settlers' situation was secure enough that they held a feast of thanksgiving. Massasoit showed up with "some ninety men," Winslow later recalled, most of them with weapons. The Pilgrim militia responded by marching around and firing their guns in the air in a manner intended to convey menace. Gratified, both sides sat down, ate a lot of food and complained about the Narragansett. *Ever Thanksgiving.*

All the while, Bradford wrote, Tisquantum "sought his own ends and

played his own game." Covertly he tried to persuade other Wampanoag that he could better protect them against the Narragansett than Massasoit. In case of attack, Tisquantum claimed, he could respond with as many Indian troops — plus the Pilgrims. To advance his case, Tisquantum told other Indians that the foreigners had "buried in the ground" a cache of the agent that had caused the epidemic and that he could manipulate them into unleashing it.

Even as Tisquantum attempted to foment distrust of Massasoit among the Indians, he told the colonists that Massasoit was going to double-cross them by leading a joint attack with the Narragansett on Plymouth. Then he tried tricking the Pilgrims into attacking the sachem.

In the spring of 1622 Tisquantum went with a delegation of Pilgrims to the Massachusetts in Boston Harbor. Minutes after they departed, according to Bradford, one of the surviving Patux-

et "in seeming great fear" informed the settlers that the Narragansett and Massasoit were planning to attack. Apparently Tisquantum believed that the colonists, upon hearing this news, would rise up and kill Massasoit. Since Tisquantum was away, his hands would seem clean. Instead, everything went awry. Upon hearing the news of an impending attack, Bradford ordered the firing of a cannon to call back the delegation, including Tisquantum. Meanwhile Hobamok, who had acquired some English, indignantly denied the rumor. Then in a move that Tisquantum had not anticipated, Bradford sent Hobamok's wife to Massasoit's home to find out what he was up to. She reported that "all was quiet." When Massasoit found out about the plot, he demanded that the Pilgrims send Tisquantum to him for a quick execution.

Bradford refused; Tisquantum's language skills were too vital. Tisquantum is one of my subjects,

Massasoit said. You Pilgrims have no jurisdiction over him. And he offered a load of furs to sweeten the deal. When the colony still would not surrender Tisquantum, Winslow wrote, Massasoit sent a messenger with a knife and told Bradford to lop off Tisquantum's hands and head. To make his displeasure even clearer, he summoned Hobamok home and cut off all contact with the Pilgrims. Nervous, the colonists began building defensive fortifications. Between mid-May and mid-July, their crops withered for lack of rain. Because the Wampanoag had stopped trading with them, the Pilgrims would not be able to supplement their harvest.

Now a marked man, Tisquantum was unable to take a step outside of Plymouth without an escort. Nonetheless, he accompanied Bradford on a trip to southeast Cape Cod to negotiate another pact. They were on the way home when Tisquantum suddenly became sick. He died after a few days.

In the next decade tens of thousands of Europeans came to Massachusetts. Massasoit shepherded his people through the wave of settlement, and the pact he signed with Plymouth lasted for more than 50 years. Only in 1675 did one of his sons, angered by the colonists' laws, launch what was perhaps an inevitable attack. Indians from dozens of groups joined in. The conflict, brutal and sad, tore through New England.

The Europeans won. Historians attribute part of the victory to Indian unwillingness to match the European tactic of massacring whole villages. Another reason was manpower—by then the colonists outnumbered the Natives. Groups like the Narragansett, which had been spared by the epidemic of 1616, had been crushed by a smallpox epidemic in 1633. A third to half of the remaining Indians in New England died of European diseases. The People of the First Light could avoid or adapt to European technology but not to European germs. Their societies were destroyed by weapons their opponents could not control and did not even know they possessed. **O**