4.6: The Puritans and the Indians

The leading New England Indian tribes were the Mohegan and Pequot in Connecticut, the Narragansett in Rhode Island, the Patuxet and Wampanoag in Plymouth, and the Nipmuck in Massachusetts, and Pennacook in Massachusetts Bay. No political unity existed among the tribes, though they were able to communicate through the spoken word. The Indians were hunters but also horticulturalists, who believed that the land should be shared and contain no boundaries and no fences. Indian villages shared the proceeds from the land; no one went hungry in a village unless everyone did. Sachems led the tribes and were assisted by a council of lesser sachems and important warriors.

Puritan ideas about the land were quite different. Their approach was best expressed by John Winthrop, who said, “As for the Natives in New England, they enclosure no Land, neither have any settled habitation, nor any tame Cattle to improve the Land, and so have no other but a Natural Right to those countries, so as if we leave them sufficient for their use, we may lawfully take the rest.” Or as the records of the Milford, Connecticut town records state, “the earth is the Lord’s…the earth is given to the Saints…and we are the Saints.” Many of the settlers agreed with William Bradford who maintained that the Indians were “savage people who are cruel, barbarous and most treacherous.”
4.7.1: Puritan Mission and the Indians

The charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company proclaimed that the purpose of those who traveled to the Americas was “to win and incite the natives of this country, to the knowledge and obedience of the only true God and Saviour of mankind.” This mission was not unique to Massachusetts or even to those who sailed from England, as Columbus mentions in his journal that, as soon as he encountered the Taino people of the Caribbean islands, he saw that “they were very friendly…and perceived that they could be much more easily converted to our holy faith by gentle means than by force.” Similarly, Hernan Cortes, sent to conquer the Aztec Empire of Mexico, mentioned in his letter to Charles V, king of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, that the Aztecs acknowledged that the Spanish explorers “having more recently arrived must know better than themselves what they ought to believe; and that if I [Cortes] would instruct them in these matters, and make them understand the true faith, they would follow my directions, as being for the best.” Those living in Massachusetts Bay were continually reminded of their duty because the seal of the colony of Massachusetts Bay contained the image of a native crying, “Come over and help us!”

Years passed, however, before the Puritans actually began the work of conversion. One of the greatest obstacles was language. Puritans believed that conversion could come only when the converts could read and discuss the Bible. Through much of the 1630s, the Puritans dealt with the natives only through sign language, which worked well when bartering but was not sufficient for purposes of conversion. In order to have a true conversion experience, the natives needed a written language and a Bible written in that language. The conversion efforts did not begin seriously until after the Pequot War.

4.7.2: The Pequot War, 1636-1638

The first major conflict between the Puritans and Indians began in 1636. The Pequots, the most powerful of those living in the Connecticut Valley, looked with suspicion and alarm as the number of English settlers beginning to inhabit their land increased. The English had a hard time understanding why the Indians needed as much land as they apparently thought they did and refused to recognize these claims because the lands were not under cultivation. Cultivation to the Puritan way of thinking bestowed the right of ownership. Problems invariably arose with the result that the Indians
murdered several settlers at Saybrook and Wethersfield in 1635-1636 at the height of the Antinomian controversy. Even before these incidents, the government of Massachusetts Bay had sent an expedition under John Endicott into Pequot territory to avenge the murder of an English trader, John Oldham. In May, 1637, settlers in Connecticut raised a force of ninety men under the command of John Mason and John Underhill, both of whom had experience fighting Indians. One of the most notorious battles was the English attack on the Pequot fort at Mystic, Connecticut. The settlement, the greatest of the Pequot strongholds, had about four hundred inhabitants and seventy wigwams; many of the residents were women, children, and the elderly. The English and their Indian allies, the Narragansett, approached the fort at night and set it on fire. Those inhabitants who did not die in the fire were slaughtered as they attempted to flee the inferno. Of the hundreds living in the fort, only seven survived. The Treaty of Hartford, signed September 21, 1638, ended the war; the remaining Pequot were enslaved by the Mohegan or Narragansett or sold into slavery in Bermuda and the West Indies and their lands seized. Historians Curtis Nettels and Samuel Eliot Morison comment that the Pequot were “virtually exterminated” by the war and the subsequent enslavement.

John Eliot, Disciple to the Indians

Up until the defeat of the Pequot in 1638, New England Indians had been reluctant to accept the God of the Puritans. With the success of the English against the Pequot, however, “the Indians of Southern New England were impressed by the power of the white man and became more interested in the God responsible for his success.” John Eliot, later given the title “Apostle to the Indians,” received a Pequot servant at the end of the war from whom he began to learn the Algonquin language spoken by the Massachusett, Nauset, Narrangansett, Pequot, and Wampanoag. In 1644, the General Court instructed the county courts to see to it that the Indians residing in their villages should be civilized and “instructed in the knowledge and worship of God.”

In 1646, Eliot preached his first sermon in the Algonquin tongue to the inhabitants of the village of Nonantum. The same year, the General Court appointed Eliot to a committee whose purpose was to buy land from the Indians that should be set aside “for the encouragement of the Indians to live in a more orderly way among us.” Five years later, in 1651, the first “Praying Town,” Natick, was created. Although Natick remained the most famous of the Praying Indian towns, thirteen additional towns were created in the Bay colony by 1675. In 1663, Eliot translated the Bible into the Algonquin language, and, in 1666 he published a grammar for the Massachusetts called “The Indian Grammar Begun.” The towns had been located so as to serve as buffers for the defense of the colony; this function ended with the outbreak of King Philip’s War. By this time, however, 20 percent of the Indians of Massachusetts Bay lived in the Praying Towns that appeared throughout the colony.