



The Wampanoag and the Survival of Plymouth Colony

The English colonists who established Plymouth Colony arrived in a country they did not know how to cultivate. Weakened by their Atlantic crossing and poorly prepared for a New England winter, approximately half of the Mayflower's passengers died during their first year.

The survivors owed much of Plymouth's eventual success to the knowledge and assistance of the Wampanoag people. Native teachers showed the colonists how to raise local crops, harvest coastal resources, and navigate the surrounding country. Without that help, Plymouth might have suffered the fate of other unsuccessful English settlements.

Plymouth Was Patuxet

The colonists did not settle an untouched wilderness. They built Plymouth upon **Patuxet**, a Wampanoag village whose inhabitants had been devastated by an epidemic between approximately 1616 and 1619. The disease had been introduced through earlier contact with Europeans and killed much of the Indigenous population along the New England coast.

The colonists encountered cleared fields, stored corn, and the remains of the people who had lived there. They claimed the location for Plymouth without first purchasing or receiving the land from its Wampanoag owners.

The regional Wampanoag leader was **Ousamequin**, whom the English called Massasoit—a title meaning great sachem. His people had been severely weakened by disease and faced pressure from neighboring powers, particularly the Narragansett. Ousamequin therefore saw a possible strategic advantage in an alliance with the newcomers.

In March 1621, the Wampanoag and Plymouth colonists negotiated a treaty of mutual protection. Each side promised not to harm the other, to return stolen property, and to provide assistance if the other was attacked. The agreement brought the colonists into Ousamequin's network of alliances while giving Plymouth the security it desperately needed.

What the Wampanoag Taught the Colonists

The Wampanoag possessed generations of accumulated knowledge about the soil, seasons, plants, animals, and waters of their homeland. Their assistance helped the colonists adapt European practices to unfamiliar conditions.

Cultivating Corn

The colonists' European seeds performed poorly in New England, but Indigenous corn was suited to the local soil and climate. Tisquantum—better known as Squanto—showed the settlers how to plant corn in prepared mounds and fertilize the soil with herring or other fish.

Corn became one of Plymouth's most dependable foods. Its kernels could be roasted, dried, ground into meal, or cooked into porridge. Properly dried corn could also be stored through the winter, making it especially valuable during seasons when fresh food was scarce.

The Wampanoag also cultivated beans, squash, and other crops unknown or unfamiliar to many Europeans. Native agriculture was not a primitive form of subsistence but a sophisticated system adapted to the land over many generations.

Fishing and Gathering Shellfish

The rivers, tidal flats, and coastal waters provided fish, eels, clams, mussels, oysters, and other foods. The Wampanoag taught the colonists where and when these resources could be obtained and how seasonal fish runs could be used for both food and fertilizer.

This knowledge was vital. The colonists needed reliable sources of protein, and their survival depended upon learning the seasonal rhythms of the surrounding waters.

Hunting and Trapping

The Wampanoag also understood the movements and habitats of deer, turkey, waterfowl, and smaller animals. Native trapping and tracking methods allowed the colonists to obtain food and animal skins without depending entirely on their limited supplies of gunpowder and ammunition.

Plants and Healing

Wampanoag knowledge included the use of local plants for food, cordage, dyes, shelter, and healing. Native healers understood which plants could be prepared for particular symptoms and which were dangerous.

It would be inaccurate to call this knowledge “homeopathic medicine,” a European system developed much later. It was an Indigenous body of botanical and medical knowledge built through long observation and experience.

Building for the New England Climate

The Wampanoag did not live in Plains-style teepees. Their traditional homes were **wetus**—rounded structures framed with saplings and covered with bark or woven mats. Larger communal dwellings were sometimes called longhouses.

Wetus were well adapted to New England's seasons. Their design, coverings, fires, and insulation demonstrated how local materials could provide protection from cold, wind, and rain. Although the English continued building houses in their own architectural tradition, they benefited from observing how the Wampanoag used the resources of the region.

Tisquantum: Interpreter, Teacher, and Political Actor

Tisquantum was a Patuxet Wampanoag man with an extraordinary and tragic history. In 1614, the English captain Thomas Hunt kidnapped him and other Native men with the intention of selling them into slavery.

After years across the Atlantic, including time in England, Tisquantum learned English and eventually returned to his homeland in 1619. He discovered that Patuxet had been devastated by the epidemic and that most or all of his community had died.

His knowledge of English made him invaluable to both Ousamequin and the Plymouth colonists. He lived among the English, served as their interpreter and guide, and taught them how to plant corn and obtain food. He also helped them communicate and trade with neighboring Native communities.

Tisquantum was not simply a selfless servant of Plymouth, however. Like the English and other Native leaders, he pursued his own interests in a dangerous political environment. According to Governor William Bradford's account, Tisquantum attempted to increase his influence by telling Native communities that he could control Plymouth's actions. He

reportedly accepted favors in exchange for promising to protect people from the English.

He also exploited fears that the colonists could release disease against their enemies. At one point, he appears to have tried to deceive Plymouth into believing an attack was imminent, perhaps hoping that a display of English military power would strengthen his own position.

Ousamequin consequently demanded that Tisquantum be surrendered for punishment. Plymouth's leaders protected him, in part because they still needed his linguistic and diplomatic services. Tisquantum's story is therefore more complicated than the familiar image of the faithful guide. He was a survivor of kidnapping, enslavement, cultural displacement, and epidemic loss who attempted to build influence between competing powers.

The Harvest Gathering of 1621

In the autumn of 1621, the colonists marked their first successful harvest with three days of food, military exercises, and entertainment.

Ousamequin arrived with approximately ninety Wampanoag men, who contributed five deer to the gathering.

The surviving accounts do not establish that the colonists had planned a modern-style Thanksgiving dinner or invited the Wampanoag simply to thank them for teaching Plymouth to survive. The gathering was a harvest celebration shaped by English customs and by the political alliance between the two communities.

Its food nevertheless reflected the Indigenous country in which the colonists now lived. Venison, wild birds, fish, shellfish, and corn were more likely to have appeared than many dishes associated with the modern holiday. The event was only labeled the "First Thanksgiving" by later generations.

From Alliance to War

Relations between Plymouth and the Wampanoag remained comparatively peaceful during much of Ousamequin's lifetime, but the balance of power steadily changed. Thousands of additional English settlers arrived. Colonial farms and livestock spread across Native planting grounds, hunting territories, and gathering places. English courts and land deeds increasingly transferred Indigenous country into colonial hands.

After Ousamequin's death, tensions intensified. His son Wamsutta died shortly after being questioned by Plymouth authorities under suspicious and controversial circumstances. Leadership eventually passed to another son, **Metacom**, whom the English called King Philip.

By 1675, disputes over land, political authority, and colonial interference erupted into King Philip's War. The conflict devastated both Native and colonial communities, but its consequences fell most heavily upon the Indigenous nations. Many Native people were killed, displaced, or sold into slavery. Metacom was killed in 1676, and his head was displayed at Plymouth for years.

Hospitality, Strategy, and Betrayal

The traditional Thanksgiving story reduces the Wampanoag to friendly helpers who briefly appeared so that the Pilgrims could survive. The reality was more consequential.

The Wampanoag were an independent people making strategic decisions during a period of epidemic loss and political danger. Their assistance was generous, but their alliance with Plymouth was also intended to protect Wampanoag interests. Tisquantum was a teacher and intermediary, but also a survivor attempting to create power for himself in a world transformed by European intrusion.

The colonists survived because Indigenous people shared knowledge developed over generations. Their descendants repaid that assistance with expanding settlement, dispossession, broken agreements, warfare, enslavement, and forced removal.

The gathering of 1621 can still represent cooperation and mutual dependence, but it should not be separated from what came before or what followed. Plymouth stood upon the homeland of a people almost destroyed by an imported epidemic. Its survival depended upon those who remained. Within two generations, the alliance that helped save the colony had given way to a war for the survival of the Wampanoag themselves.