

Ways Native Americans Helped Pilgrims in the New World

How Native Americans Helped Pilgrims Arriving in the New World at Plymouth Massachusetts

By: R. Renée Bembry

Pilgrim and Native American interactions did not begin with the best start possible because Native Americans were in fear of enslavement and pilgrims, even if not concerned with enslavement, feared for their lives.

Squanto, the Native American who taught pilgrims to effectively utilize fishing and farming tactics, had been [enslaved by Europeans](#) prior to the pilgrims' Plymouth arrival. His and other Native American captures in conjunction with the pilgrims stealing from the natives led natives to mistrust the pilgrims.

Arriving in foreign lands with a ship of sick and malnourished persons that included women and children made self-preservation concerns natural. Thus, it was perfectly natural that a handful of men would have concern over living about armies of natives they had never before encountered nor understood.

The first battle between pilgrims and Native Americans occurred while pilgrim explorers were still trying to decide where to set up the colony. Prior to the battle, the pilgrim explorers stole corn and beans from a Native American hut which may, of course, have instigated the brawl.

Perhaps it was understandable that the pilgrims—despite

identifying themselves as “religious persons”—broke the “thou shalt not steal” commandment. Their food supply had become short and they needed to feed themselves and their families. No Native Americans were at the hut during the time of the theft. Therefore, the pilgrims could not have asked for the beans and corn even if they had wanted to. Fortuitous was it that all lives went unshed during this initial pilgrim-native battle.

Continuing to seek a place for settlement, the explorers eventually found a harbor that would accommodate the Mayflower and provide fresh water and farmland. The harbor, situated near a Native American cornfield, represented many opportunities for pilgrim-native interactions to occur since the pilgrims and natives would be residing in close proximity to one another.

Having spent weeks seeking a place to setup camp and build shelter, and even as more emigrants were becoming ill and dying from the “sickness”, the pilgrims decided to take their chances with the natives and began erecting their first building on December 25, 1620.

The pilgrims built the first structure with intentions that it would house the settlers and their belongings. Although the settlers would no longer need to live on the ship, they would still live together. Privacy provisions came about by dividing and curtaining areas of the “common house”. The house also included a church and a fort.

The pilgrims had an ongoing reluctance to assume they were safe living near the Native Americans, however. For this reason, they setup battle ready cannons atop the roof and on February 21 of the following year, they formed a military force to protect their “citizens”.

Shortly after the pilgrim camp was setup, Wampanoag chief Massasoit and twenty of his warriors spurred an interaction

with the pilgrims by disarming themselves and entering the pilgrim camp. Governor Carver accompanied by military personnel met with Massasoit and his men. During this get together, the men ate and drank ale together; and they even formed a peace treaty.

Signing of a peace treaty did not mean all native-emigrant interactions would be splivly from treaty sign point on. Problems still occurred between the groups. One problem surfaced after a native stole goods from a pilgrim boat, sachem (chief) Aspinet disciplined the native, ordered female natives to bake bread for the pilgrims, and personally appeared at Plymouth the following day with bread and apologies aplenty.

Despite sachem Aspinet's immediate apology that included bread and merrymaking, the pilgrims reinforced their camp by adding gateways and bastions to the fort. Bastions increased weapon-firing ranges using projections that extended beyond the walls of the fort.

Adding additional reinforcements to the fort did not prevent Winslow (a Plymouth governor in later years) from visiting or form helping Massasoit during the chief's illness. Massasoit showed his gratitude by informing Winslow of an upcoming attack on Plymouth. An indigenous group who did not possess Massasoit's peaceful intentions had planned to eliminate the pilgrims. If successful, this would not be the first wipe out of what these peoples considered "aliens".

To ward off the attack, however, eight soldiers accompanied their pilgrim captain to the plotters camp where they fought by hand. Before it was over, seven natives had died in combat. The pilgrim soldiers hanged one of the warriors after his death and erected Wituwamut on a palisade—a type of fortifying stake.

The aforementioned would not be the only instances during

which pilgrims would use brutal punishments toward Native Americans in attempt to prevent natives from committing crimes against them.

Despite discord that periodically interfered with pilgrim-native unity, the friendlier natives continued to help the pilgrims survive. They taught them how to fish which includes digging out sand during low tides in order to capture clams and other types of shellfish. Squanto taught pilgrims the ins and outs of home fertilizers – which yielded the pilgrims better corn crops. Native Americans also assisted pilgrims with a making maple sugar, utilizing tobacco, donning snowshoes, and the benefits of shell money called wampum, which were essentially beads made from seashells.

In taking this look at how the pilgrims interacted with Native Americans, it is clear that both groups imposed a degree of difficulty on the other causing friction to block their relationships. It is also clear to see the pilgrims needed the natives more than the natives needed the pilgrims; and that the natives proved much more beneficial and helpful to the pilgrims than what they may have received credit for being.