

The 2013 Virginia Mayflower Society Mildred Ramos Scholarship recipient's winning essay



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The assigned topic for the 2013 essay was “Compare and contrast the Pilgrims’ relationship with Native Americans to the policies initiated by the Puritans toward the indigenous people of New England.”

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One of the most important, and unfortunately in some cases the most regrettable, chapters in American history is the early colonial period in New England, and in particular, the relationship between the English settlers and the Native Americans. This relationship was, in some cases, respectful and even mutually beneficial, but it was all too often marred by tension, distrust, and violence, and eventually left the Native Americans with their culture nearly extinguished, their population decimated, and their land taken. The stark contrast in the relationship with the Native Americans by the Pilgrims and the Puritans in the early settlement of New England encapsulates the differing views by settlers toward the natives, shows us much about the origins of the attitudes towards natives by the Europeans, and can teach us much today about how people of differing ideas, values, and cultures can choose to work toward mutual benefit or decide instead to let those differences lead to divisiveness and disaster.

Although both groups settled in New England in the same era, the Pilgrims and the Puritans had very different relationships with the indigenous peoples of the area. The Pilgrims, who were the first group of people to come to America in search of religious freedom and the first European settlers in New England, were a small group of Separatists who left Britain to escape from the Anglican Church. They sailed from Europe to North America in one of the most famous ships in history, the Mayflower, and settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620 (“The Pilgrims”). The Puritans, who followed the Pilgrims in settling New England, were a group who wanted to reform and purify the Anglican Church. They first arrived in 1632 and soon far outnumbered the Separatists and dispersed into numerous settlements through the region.

One of the keys to the success of the original Pilgrim settlement was their relationship with the native tribes in the area, and particularly with the Wampanoag people, the major group of tribes in the area. Although the relationship between these peoples of starkly differing cultures and backgrounds was occasionally tense as they adjusted to living in the same area and sharing the land, for the most part it was a relationship built on trust, mutual respect and a willingness by both groups to find ways to live harmoniously together for the benefit of both. In fact, the Pilgrims probably would not have survived without help from the natives. Early on, the relationship was marred by tension and distrust which was a largely a result of incidents in which some of the Pilgrims looted native graves for seed grain and necessary cooking and hunting equipment. The matter was resolved and the relationship improved when Pilgrims paid the natives for the supplies a few months later (“Massachusetts Bay Colony”). This exemplifies the degree to which the Pilgrims were dependent upon the natives for survival. The indigenous

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people helped the Pilgrims with hunting as well as gathering and growing food (“HISTORY PRIMER: Puritans and Indians”). In turn, the natives also saw great value in friendship with the newcomers. They saw them as a powerful new group of allies who could be helpful in defense against other tribes, and the Europeans’ weapons were seen as beneficial new hunting tools (“Massachusetts Bay Colony”). Similarly, the Pilgrims saw that friendship between the groups could lead to a better chance of survival and even made a mutual defense treaty with the Wampanoag people in 1621. The first Thanksgiving was shared between the two groups when the Pilgrims were celebrating a good harvest and members of the Wampanoag tribe came to see why there was so much noise coming from the settlement and were invited to the celebration (Toensing).

Eventually, however, this friendly relationship deteriorated to some degree over use of the land. The two sides quarreled over livestock trampling crops and the erection of fences as increasing numbers of Pilgrims and settlements further encroached on the natives’ lands (“Massachusetts Bay Colony”). The relationship between the Wampanoag people and the Pilgrims also deteriorated because most of the Pilgrims eventually moved away or were absorbed into other settlements as more and more settlers arrived (“The Pilgrims”).

The next group of settlers, the Puritans, had very different views regarding the natives, and this relationship led to further discord between the Native Americans and the European settlers. The Puritans were not as dependent on the Native Americans for survival as the Pilgrims since they arrived after settlement of the area had begun (Sultzman). Therefore, they saw no need to build alliances with the natives or learn their ways. Furthermore, the Puritans believed the natives were backward and sinful because they were not Christian. The Puritans felt it was their duty to convert the natives to their version of Christianity, and they were much less tolerant of religious diversity than the Pilgrims (Indians and Puritans). Like the Pilgrims, though, the Puritans viewed native property as theirs for the taking, because since the natives thought of land as communal, not belonging to one specific person, the settlers viewed the land as unclaimed (Graham). The Puritans took and sold land that had belonged to the natives, especially between 1640 and 1675, when there was a large influx of English settlers, and, in 1614, there was a documented case of settlers even kidnapping and selling Native Americans as slaves (Sultzman). The Puritans’ relationship with the Wampanoags was not built on mutual respect, and from its outset was very tense and full of mistrust. This relationship eventually deteriorated to the point of war. King’s Phillip’s War, also called Metacomm’s War, broke out between the Wampanoag and Puritans when a tribesman died near English territory, and it decimated the local native population. Many died in the fighting or fled to Canada or were sent to the West Indies, and those who remained were exposed to disease, loss of land, scarce resources, and cultural disruption. Of the several thousand Wampanoag living in the area before the war, only a few hundred were still alive when the war ended (Sultzman). Unfortunately, the attitudes and actions of European settlers in North America were, from that point on, modeled more on the Puritans than on the Pilgrims.

One explanation for the difference in treatment of the native people is the difference in attitude toward other cultures between the groups. Because the Pilgrims were separatists, they were more respectful of the value of individual rights and beliefs. Since they were trying to escape from a culture different from their own, they were more inclined to be tolerant of another culture. Also, they depended on the natives for support when they first arrived. They respected that the indigenous people had survived and thrived in the New World, and they hoped to learn from them and to be allies with them. In contrast, the Puritans, who were reformers, wanted to purify the Anglican Church by eradicating beliefs that did not align with

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their own. Because of their strong religious beliefs, they believed that they were superior to those who were not Christian. They viewed the natives as lost souls in need of conversion to the Puritans' beliefs and culture. This attitude made them very intolerant of other cultures, particularly those with non-Christian beliefs. Another possible explanation for the Puritans' behavior is their ability to survive without assistance from the natives. By the time the Puritans arrived, starting around 1632, there was enough support structure in place that the Puritans did not need to rely as heavily on the natives as the Pilgrims had.

Although we are separated from the Pilgrims and Puritans by nearly 400 years of history, there is much we can learn from them even today about how we should treat people who are different from ourselves. The evolution of the Pilgrims' relationship with the natives teaches us that an attitude of mutual respect can be beneficial to both parties: we can learn from each other and build friendships and alliances. In contrast, the Puritans' intolerance teaches us much about the disaster that results when one group insists upon imposing its beliefs, culture, and well-being ahead of another's. Since both the Pilgrims and Puritans were explorers who had never encountered a group of non-Europeans, there was no precedent for them to follow. They could only learn from trial and error. Today, on the other hand, we have the benefit of learning from them, but only if we choose to do so. ■

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