

Chapter 7

The Pilgrims' Civil Code

The Pilgrims believed the Bible should guide their everyday lives, and their code of civil laws clearly reflected this belief. By 1636, the Pilgrims had compiled what historians describe as *"the first comprehensive body of law to be enacted in North America."*¹¹³ That legal code served as a model for future American codes, and while revisions occurred to the original *Laws of the Pilgrims* over subsequent years, those laws always remained rooted in the Bible.

For example, the preface to the 1658 *Book of Laws* specifically stated that *"laws...are so far good and wholesome as by how much they are derived from and agreeable to the ancient platform of God's Law."*¹¹⁴ Reflecting this, many of their individual laws cited specific Scriptures as their basis,¹¹⁵ and several of the rights protected by these laws were later incorporated into the Bill of Rights.

Unlike many European countries, the Pilgrims chose civil leaders separately from religious ones.¹¹⁶ Although modern writers accuse the Pilgrims of being "theocrats,"¹¹⁷ that claim is false. The Pilgrims understood that the Church and State were separate institutions, a view very different from what was customary in Europe at that time.

The long-term result of Plymouth Colony was that it literally changed the world. It introduced and successfully demonstrated many concepts largely unpracticed at that time but which thereafter became common—principles such as local self-government, a free-market/free-enterprise economic system, racial equality, religious freedom, education for all children, protection for the rights of individual religious conscience, and much more.

As famous historian George Bancroft affirmed:

In the cabin of the *Mayflower*, humanity recovered its rights and instituted government on the basis of "equal laws" for the "general good."¹¹⁸

Bancroft further pointed out that the Pilgrims also *"founded a state on the basis of democratic liberty," "formed the mold for the civil and religious character of its institutions,"* and *"scattered the seminal principles of republican freedom and national independence."*¹¹⁹ Americans today owe much to the Pilgrims.

Chapter 8

Pilgrim Myths

Sadly, many modern portrayals of the Pilgrims are at best superficial. Too often they reflect a trend by some academics of attacking and vilifying traditional American heroes, presenting a picture quite different from what actually occurred. One example is the increasingly popular narrative that Thanksgiving Day should be changed to a national day of mourning because the Pilgrims killed and oppressed the natives.¹²⁰

The "history" used to support this claim focuses on three early conflicts involving Pilgrims and Indians: a 1623 clash, the Pequot War of 1637, and King Philip's War of 1675. But what is the truth? Are the modern claims correct that the Pilgrims oppressed and killed Indians? Since we have not covered any of these conflicts as they involved the Pilgrims, let's briefly do so.

In 1623, two years after the Pilgrims and Wampanoag entered into their peace treaty, Chief Massasoit informed the Pilgrims of a treacherous assault to be made against them by the Algonquin tribe, which was gathering other chiefs for an unprovoked surprise attack.¹²¹ Facing potential extermination, Miles Standish led a preemptive strike against the Algonquins,



thus saving the colonists. But this did not impede the good relations between the Pilgrims and Wampanoag; after all, it was the Wampanoag who had warned them of the eminent Indian attack.

The 1637 Pequot War was the next period of tensions between the Pilgrims and other tribes. The Pequot Indians were warlike and aggressive not only against colonists (remember that Samoset had warned the Pilgrims of this) but they also fought their own Indian neighbors on every side, including the Wampanoag as well as the Narragansett, Algonquian, and Mohegan tribes.

The Pequot had established an exclusive trading monopoly with the Dutch and believed the arrival of English colonists threatened that lucrative arrangement. They therefore determined to strike

English settlements in the region and kill all colonists, including the Pilgrims, completely ridding the area of them and thus eliminating their competition.

The Pequot launched their economically-motivated surprise attacks in Rhode Island, murdering colonists there. Other colonists were able to respond and organize counter strikes.¹²² The war spread across much of Connecticut and threatened the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies. It ended when Sassacus, the chief of the Pequot, was pursued and killed by the Mohegan and Mohawk tribes.¹²³ The Pilgrims killed *no* natives during this conflict,¹²⁴ but some modern articles nevertheless claim that the Thanksgiving of 1637 was held to give thanks that they slaughtered natives.¹²⁵ This is completely wrong. It was called to give thanks for the end of the Pequot War and the restoration of general peace to the region.¹²⁶



The Pilgrims lived in harmony with the Wampanoag from the time of their treaty through both the 1623 and 1637 conflicts. In fact, no other historic treaty with Native Americans lasted longer than the 54 years of the Pilgrim-Wampanoag treaty. When that treaty was finally broken in King Philip's War in 1675, it was not the Pilgrims who did so but the Wampanoag.

One of the modern allegations is that King Philip's War was the result of Indians pushing back against the greedy, land-grabbing colonists—that the Indians were simply trying to regain territory that was rightfully theirs.¹²⁷ But at the start of this war, Pilgrim Governor Josiah Winslow openly avowed:

I think I can clearly say that before these present troubles broke out, the English did not possess one foot of land in this colony but what was fairly obtained by honest purchase of the Indian proprietors.¹²⁸

Many today reject this statement, accusing these colonists of taking unfair advantage of the Indians—that they gave natives much less than what the land was actually worth. This claim is very misleading. Whenever the Pilgrims and Indians negotiated and made a

treaty, each side voluntarily agreed to the terms. If they had not, they would not have signed it.

So, if King Philip's War was not retaliation for the unjust seizing of land by colonists, then what was its cause? One of the primary reasons was Christian missionaries—but not in the way many critics today think.

As an historical sidenote, there was a vast difference in the practice of various missionary groups in early colonial days. Spanish missionaries could be harsh in their treatment of natives, using forcible conversions and beating them for wrongdoings after their “conversions.” The Spanish view of Christianity at that time allowed for torture and barbaric persecutions, even a brutal inquisition. The French missionaries, while better in their treatment of natives, generally did not recognize the equal value of individuals or the right of personal religious faith and conscience. But the English, as well as Dutch, Moravian, and other missionaries shaped by the Reformation, showed the best personal character and displayed the most civilized practices of the various missionary groups. They used neither coercion nor force but instead presented faith on a voluntary-choice basis. Of course, there were exceptions for each of the groups, but this characterization reflects the general practices of each.¹²⁹

The Indian leader who instigated the 1675 war was Metacom, the chief of the Wampanoag, and grandson of Chief Massasoit, who had been the friend of the Pilgrims. Although he took the English name King Philip, he strenuously objected to missionaries teaching Christianity and Christian morals because those teachings were changing native traditions.¹³⁰

Which traditions? One of the most notable was the Indians' prolonged barbarous and sadistic torture of captives. First-hand accounts from the time of that conflict record that the Indians:



King Philip

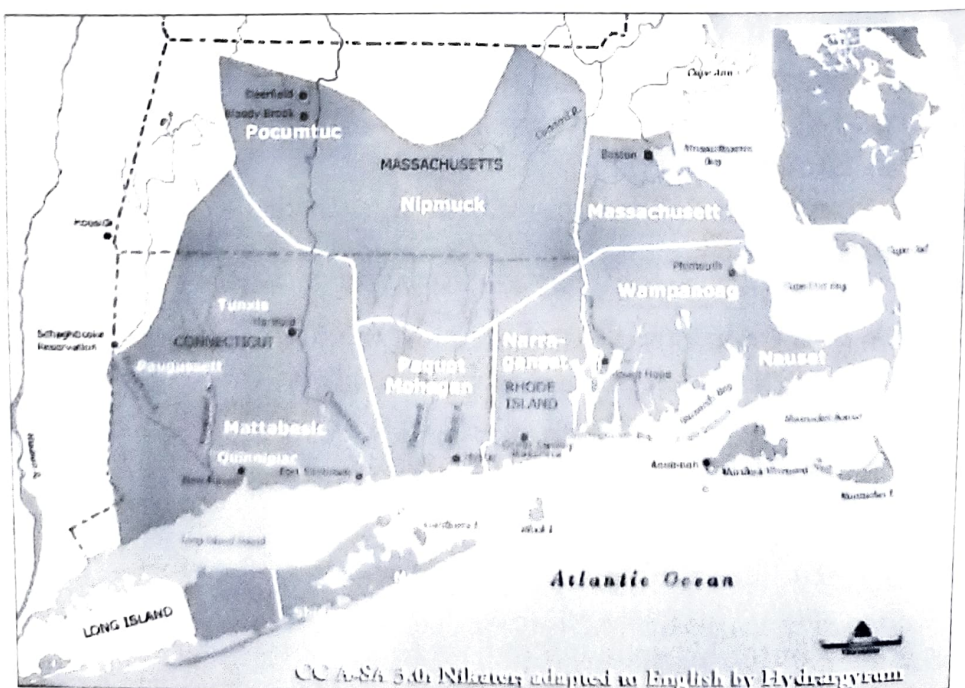
- “killed one of the prisoners presently after they had taken him, cutting a hole below his breast out of which they pulled his guts and then cut off his head”¹³¹
- “burnt his nails and put his feet to scald them against the fire and drove a stake through one of his feet to pin him to

the ground. The stake about the bigness of his finger, this was about 2 days after he was taken”¹³²

- “stripped these unhappy prisoners and caused them to run the gauntlet, and whipped them after a cruel and bloody manner. They then threw hot ashes upon them and cutting off collops [thin slices] of their flesh, they put fire into their wounds and so, with exquisite, leisurely, horrible torments, roasted them out of the world [burned them to death]”¹³³

Numerous additional examples document these disturbing Indian “traditions.”¹³⁴ Christians sought to end those horrific practices,¹³⁵ and missionaries such as John Eliot, Thomas Mayhew, and Andrew White worked extensively with various tribes. They had great success in converting natives to Christianity and thus to a different pattern of behavior. By 1674, just before the outbreak of the war, Eliot’s Christian villages of “*praying Indians*” numbered as many as 3,600 converts.¹³⁶

This was too much for Metacom, so he launched a ferocious surprise attack against settlers throughout the region, even those who had long lived in peace with their Indian neighbors.¹³⁷ Every English settlement was to be destroyed and every English settler in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts was to be killed—no exceptions.



Map of the vast and expansive region of the Wampanoag and their allies during King Philip's War, covering much of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island

Colonists were wantonly murdered and their belongings destroyed.¹³⁸ This included even the town of Providence, where Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, had his home burned.¹³⁹ Ironically, Williams had always been on the best of terms with the Indians, having purchased his colony from them¹⁴⁰ and championing native rights and claims.¹⁴¹ But regardless of how well Christian settlers treated the Indians, Metacom's warriors were to exterminate all Christians; their simple existence posed a threat to indigenous practices, such as torture.¹⁴²

It is important to note that King Philip's War was not solely natives versus whites, for Metacom also attacked and killed many Indians—but they were *Christian* Indians, so they, too, were targeted, hunted, and tortured in ways similar to those used on the settlers.¹⁴³ At its core, the war was essentially an anti-Christian crusade, not a war between races, and many of the Christian Indians fought side-by-side with the colonists throughout the conflict.¹⁴⁴ In fact, the war finally ended when Metacom was killed by an Indian, not a settler.¹⁴⁵

The war lasted about 15 months, and in the early part of the conflict, more settlers died than Indians—primarily because of the native's surprise attacks at the beginning. Of the 90 towns in Massachusetts and Plymouth Colony, 12 were totally destroyed and 40 more partially so,¹⁴⁶ totaling about 60% of the towns. Eventually, the colonists organized local militias and fought back, finally gaining the upper hand.

By the conclusion of the war, from 400 to 800 settlers and 900 to 3,000 Indians had been killed—the highest casualty rate by percentage of total population of any war in American history.¹⁴⁷ (Another casualty of the war was the “*praying Indians*,” who were reduced nearly 50%.¹⁴⁸)



Natives burning towns

The Pilgrims did indeed kill Indians in this war, first in their own self-defense against the treacherous and unprovoked attacks

from Metacom's warriors, then in ending the war he had started. But there is no historical basis to support the modern claim that the Pilgrims "oppressed" the natives. Like all humans, the Pilgrims were not perfect, but they attempted to live their lives by a code of standards much higher than those around them, and encouraged others to do likewise.