

A man without a tribe: The true story of Squanto

Paula Peters, Special to the Cape Cod Times

Updated 6:17 a.m. EST Nov. 19, 2020



Paula Peters is a journalist, educator, activist and member of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe. CAPE COD TIMES FILE PHOTO

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from "Of Patuxet," an introduction to the 400th anniversary edition of William Bradford's "Of Plimoth Plantation," written by Paula Peters, a journalist, educator, activist and member of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. To mark the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower landing, the Cape Cod Times is working with tribes to raise up Native voices that have been historically oppressed and to correct and add context to the stories that have been written by white narrators. [Read Peters' full piece here.](#)

The first visitor to the Pilgrims' settlement in Plymouth would make himself known, remarkably, by speaking English.

Samoset, an Abenaki sachem who was visiting among the Wampanoag and likely learned to speak the language as a result of long-standing relations with English and European traders, bid them "Welcome, Englishmen." After establishing a modicum of goodwill with

the colonists, he left and returned with Wampanoag Tisquantum, known commonly as Squanto, who spoke more fluent English.

That each of these men spoke English was hardly questioned before Squanto was introduced into the historical genre as a “special instrument sent of God” in William Bradford’s book “Of Plimoth Plantation.” Despite a compelling and dramatic backstory, Squanto is all but a folk hero for his fast friendship with the English. He taught them to plant according to custom, using fish to fertilize the soil and planting beans and squash in a mound around the corn. It was a method, we learn, that settlers attempted and quickly abandoned, returning to their practice of planting in rows.

But Squanto’s enigmatic eloquence goes unquestioned and unexplained in many contemporary history texts, thus avoiding a more honest portrayal of him as the kidnapped, lost son of Patuxet, held hostage, spared of the plague, who returned as an orphaned Wampanoag.

His is such a seminal backstory to Plimoth Colony that the lack of historical reference to it is conspicuous. While Squanto avoided the Great Dying — an epidemic from 1616 to 1619 that wiped out tens of thousands of Natives from Maine to Cape Cod — his life was nonetheless tragic.

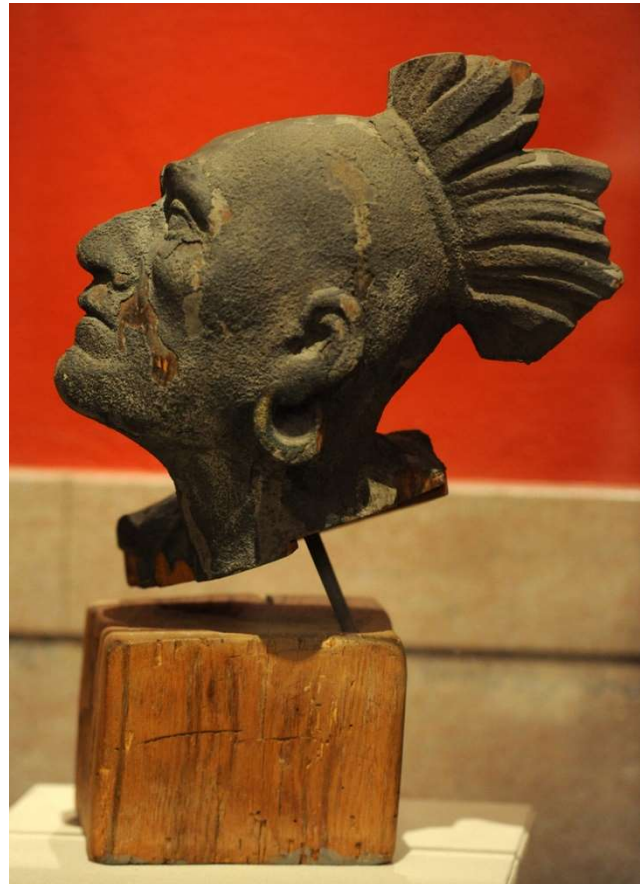
As a young man he was among 20 unfortunate men of Patuxet lured aboard the ship of Thomas Hunt in 1614 to be sold into slavery in Spain. He spent at least six weeks in the dank, dark belly of a ship, chained to his brothers, given just enough fresh water, raw fish and stale bread to keep them alive.

In Malaga, Spain, Hunt attempted to unload his cargo of stunned and bewildered Wampanoag men in the slave market with little success, due to uninterested brokers and the intervention of a religious order of friars. Squanto ultimately made his way to London, where he found himself living with John Slaney, a man who had great potential to afford him passage home. He likely did all he could to appease Slaney, who was a merchant and shipbuilder and also a grantee of the land patent issued to the Newfoundland Company. Squanto bided his time, charming his host and earning celebrity as a novelty. The presence of a Native man fascinated Londoners. Not only were Native men set apart by their bronze skin, chiseled features and dark eyes, but they were virtual giants to the small-statured Englishmen. Squanto’s faithfulness paid off. Slaney allowed Squanto to travel as a guide to Newfoundland, where he met Thomas Dermer, an English explorer who brought him home in 1619.

Very few personal details of Squanto’s life are known, not even his age or if he had a wife or children, and with the exception of a brief remark in Dermer’s notes, nothing is said about his homecoming. However, as news of the Great Dying had reached England, he almost certainly had been forewarned. But could Squanto have possibly been prepared for the stark stillness to the hum of life overtaken by weeds, windswept by neglect, abandoned but for the bones and rotting flesh of the dead, his loved ones, left as they clung to their last

breath in gruesome repose? This defining moment was described by Dermer in remarkably few words: “We arrived at my savage's native country (finding all dead).”

If the reality of Patuxet was mortifying — and despite the lack of descriptive text on the occasion, there is little doubt of that — the welcome home, or lack thereof, must have been a crushing anticlimax after Squanto’s five-year absence.



LEFT: Massasoit statue stands on Cole’s Hill, in Plymouth. RIGHT: The wooden head likeness of Native American Squanto, which is the only surviving piece of the wooden pediment that was installed on the Pilgrim Hall Museum building in 1880. ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO, CAPE COD TIMES FILE PHOTO

He was taken in, but as a captive of his own people living in Sowams, the village of the Wampanoag Massasoit, Ousamequin, about 40 miles inland from Patuxet. There he made contact with a few relatives who survived the sickness but was otherwise a man without a tribe.

When the English settlers arrived, any foreboding was suspended, as he was lent to the alliance as an emissary, employing his uncommon capacity to interpret the settlers’ intentions. While Squanto moved easily in the company of the English, he was under the watchful eye of Hobomock, who was a pniese, a trusted and powerful adviser in the inner circle of Ousamequin, the supreme leader of the Wampanoag. Hobomock

established a small compound with his family near the English settlement, where he was a convenience to the settlers, a surreptitious chaperone of Squanto and informant to Ousamequin.

Cast in the role of interpreter, Squanto was far more helpful to the English than he was to his own people. In fact, if we are to judge his effectiveness as an interpreter by his first and perhaps most important translation, he was an epic failure.

He assisted in the construction of the treaty of peace between the settlers and the Wampanoag. Bradford outlined the treaty in the following terms:

1. That neither he nor any of his, should injure or do hurt, to any of their people.
2. That if any of his did hurt to any of theirs, he should send the offender, that they might punish him.
3. That if anything were taken away from any of theirs, he should cause it to be restored; and they should do the like to his.
4. If any did unjustly war against him, they would aid him; If any did war against them, he should aid them.
5. He should send to his neighbours confederates, to certify them of this, that they might not wrong them us, but might be likewise comprised in the conditions of peace.
6. That when their men came to them, they should leave their bows & arrows behind them.

To this day, this treaty is passed off as a harmless and friendly agreement. However, the authors, penning the document in English, took clear advantage of the language and cultural ambiguity to deceive Ousamequin, who was unable to discern the not-so-subtle threat to Wampanoag sovereignty.

Among those with less confidence in the good intentions of the English newcomers was Corbitant, the sachem of the Pocasset tribe of Wampanoag, who objected to the settlement. But as a sachem, he was powerless to overrule Ousamequin, who misinterpreted key language in the treaty that was not in the best interest of the Wampanoag, specifically the requirement for them to disarm in the company of the English, which proved to be a harbinger of subjugation.

The English were allowed freely to don their armor and blast their muskets and did so with regularity, a custom that was unnerving to neighboring sachems. The treaty also empowered only the English to punish an offender and exercise the rule of law. The Wampanoag were served by their own system of justice to address disputes and breaches of conduct from thievery to homicide, not omitting treason.

The furtively overbearing treaty would establish a new law of the land that doomed the Wampanoag. Ousamequin expected a cooperative alliance, and while he was placated to his dying day in 1661, the colonists leveraged an oppressive rule over the Wampanoag, dissolving trust and setting the stage for an inevitable war.

Whether Squanto intentionally blurred the lines when translating the treaty terms or was himself duped is unknown, but his loyalty to the English quickly became apparent as he morphed into his diplomatic role. Perhaps to seek protection, or even as a result of a sort of Stockholm syndrome in which the hostage becomes allied with the captors, Squanto took up residence among the English where he was no doubt charming and entertaining in the ways he had learned while living in London.

The previously austere Wampanoag also assumed a new role with the English by interpreting the alliance as a sign of friendship. However, the social customs of the Wampanoag — which included frequent visits and mutual hospitality — quickly overwhelmed the settlers who were challenged to entertain their guests with their limited stores of food. Bradford arranged for Edward Winslow, Stephen Hopkins and Squanto to visit Ousamequin to seek a diplomatic solution to the overly friendly neighbors. “But whereas his people came very often,” wrote Winslow, “and very many together unto us, bringing for the most part their wives and children with them, they were welcome; yet we being but strangers as yet at Patuxet, alias New Plymouth, and not knowing how our corn might prosper, we could no longer give them such entertainment as we had done, and as we desired still to do” ([Mourt's Relation \[1622\], 41](#)).

They brought gifts to Ousamequin, including a horseman's coat and a copper chain. The Wampanoag leader delighted in the coat. He was politely asked to urge his people to be less sociable and that he and his immediate companions be the primary visitors to the English village. If he was to send a messenger, they might bring the copper chain as a sign that the visitor was authorized by Ousamequin himself. This new protocol formalized the relationship between the English and Wampanoag but did little to help them to understand one another's customs.



When the English celebrated their first harvest with a bullish muster performed by the colony's militia, the repeated blast of muskets, considered entertainment by the settlers, was interpreted as a threat by the Wampanoag. Soon after, Ousamequin approached the settlement with about 90 warriors. The virtual army of Natives appearing without warning, contrary to the diplomatic efforts of Stephen Hopkins and Edward Winslow just a few months earlier, was a clear show of force on the part of Ousamequin and his men in response to the muster that likely created a very tense situation.

Bradford's history makes only a brief reference to this harvest feast, with no mention of the participation of the Wampanoag. Winslow, however, does write about the uninvited dinner guests, "Whom for three days we entertained and feasted," no doubt in another act of diplomacy to ease the strained confrontation, which could only be achieved by each side letting down its guard. For his part, Ousamequin and his warriors contributed to the feast: "they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others."

But nearly 250 years later this event serves as the inspiration for one of America's most popular holidays. On the third Thursday of November, American families gather together and celebrate a national day of unity and mutual gratitude inspired by a warped interpretation of that first harvest feast. The contemporary holiday perpetuates the myths of Wampanoag and Pilgrim relations. It further buries the truths of kidnappings, pestilence and subjugation and ignores the scant details of the tense encounter, while it conjures up Hallmark images of happy Natives and Pilgrims feasting on a cornucopia of corn, pies, and meats, including a fully dressed roast turkey.



Former Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick meets with Plimoth Patuxet living museum interpreter acting as Gov. William Bradford on Nov. 13, 2011. The museum includes a Pilgrim village circa 1628 and a recreation of a 17th-century Wampanoag coastal home. CAPE COD TIMES FILE PHOTO

Squanto's true circumstance as a man without a country is deleted from the pages of history. Orphaned or rejected by his own people, he found comfort among the English, who took pleasure in his company and invaluable service. But there could be no solace in the arms of his new family for the loss and betrayal of his own people.

And the English were very protective of their adopted son. When word reached the settlement in the summer of 1621 that Corbitant had captured Squanto and intended to kill him so as to "cut out the English tongue," they armed their militia and proceeded to Nemasket to rescue their valued interpreter. He was brought back to the English settlement and would not again leave without the security of his protectors.

Threatened by his own people, Squanto soon became empowered by his status and used his bilingual ability to his advantage. A transgression Edward Winslow reported in his *Good Newes from New England*: "Here let me not omit one notable, though wicked practice of this Tisquantum; who, to the end he might possess his countrymen with the greater fear of us, and so consequently of himself, told them we had the plague buried in our store-house; which at our pleasure, we could send forth to what place or people we would, and destroy them therewith, though we stirred not from home."

Despite being discovered, Squanto continued to try to manipulate his people for his personal benefit. Bradford observed, “they began to see that Squanto sought his own ends and played his own game, by putting the Indians in fear and drawing gifts from them to enrich himself, making them believe he could stir up war against whom he would and make peace for whom he would.”

Enlisting the help of a surviving relative, Squanto contrived an ill-conceived plan to make it appear that Massasoit had joined forces with the Massachusett and the ever-wary Corbitant to attack the English settlement. The lie was quickly found out when Hobomock's wife visited Ousamequin.

Here it becomes clear that Ousamequin could not have knowingly relinquished his judicial authority over his people, as implied in the treaty. If he understood the treaty he would not have demanded Squanto's head when the Pilgrim's ambassador attempted to manipulate the consciousness of the Wampanoag to serve his own purpose.

As outraged as he was, Ousamequin would never be avenged. Repeated requests to execute his authority under the Wampanoag rule of law were denied. Insisting on their own law at great risk to their alliance, the English flatly refused to turn over their "instrument of God" for execution. The rift caused Ousamequin, at least for a short time, to cease communication with the colonists.

And Squanto, despite being home in Patuxet, would never again be among the Wampanoag. His storied and dramatic life came to a tragic end when he suffered a common illness less than two years after the English settled in Plimoth. With his last breath, he begged to be delivered to the heaven of the Englishmen. The English god would forgive Squanto's scheming behavior, because he represented an important success for the colonists as a convert to Christianity. As it turns out, they had come to the New World for religious freedom — but only their own — and the Wampanoag would not be entitled to that same grace.

Originally Published 6:00 a.m. EST Nov. 19, 2020

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