

How the Mayflower Story Fits Into Native American History

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Sun shines through the statue of Wampanoag Indian chief Massasoit that stands atop a hill overlooking Plymouth Rock in Plymouth, Mass., on Aug. 27, 2015. John Tlumacki—Boston Globe via Getty Images

The 400th anniversary of the day the Mayflower dropped anchor [in Plymouth Harbor](#) on Dec. 16, 1620, is the 400th anniversary of an American beginning—for the nation as a practice, an idea, an experiment. That’s true even though, for the colonists and their descendants, 1620 was not much more than a blip in colonial history. For Native people—in whose communities and homelands the Puritans arrived—the date, and what it signifies and symbolizes, matters a great deal.

It’s an anniversary that’s [hard to celebrate](#). From where I stand, 1620 wasn’t a terribly good year. Many more bad years followed for my tribe, the Ojibwe, and our allies. I would much prefer to celebrate a year like, for example, 1917. A lot was happening then, too: the United States entered the First World War; the Russian Revolution kicked off; the British entered Jerusalem. But a quieter, and to me more profound, thing was happening in the U.S. For the first time in centuries, American Indian births surged ahead of American Indian deaths. We

were on the rise. After [centuries of theft and aggression](#); of the [making and breaking of treaties](#); of the attempted destruction of Indian tribes, governments, and families; after centuries of assault and [diminishment](#), we were finally beginning to rebound.

The story of how we got there doesn't begin with the [Pilgrims landing at Plymouth](#)—and not just because parallel stories [played out in Virginia](#) and in the areas where the Spanish settled. Rather, the landing and the ensuing relationship (alternately mutually beneficial, antagonistic, honest, dishonest, peaceful and violent) offered a preview of the tempestuous 400-year-long relationship between tribes and the American Republic that followed.

Having anchored a while near present-day Provincetown, the Pilgrims met some Native people who disappeared into the woods as the colonists approached. Later, the colonists dug up some graves and robbed some food caches. Continuing on, they landed in the territory of the Nauset. They found more graves (which they didn't disturb) and more food (which they took). The Nauset attacked and the colonists fought back. The Nauset had reason for taking an aggressive stance toward the newcomers: they and other tribes had already experienced what the English had to offer. A few years earlier, Thomas Hunt, an Englishman who had come to the area to explore and trade, had attacked and captured 20 Nauset and Patuxet and intended to sell them into slavery.

Among them was Squanto. So when the colonists landed at the abandoned Patuxet village where Plymouth now stands, it was empty because Hunt and other English had sowed disease and, as an American first act, enslaved the others. Nonetheless, shortly after they landed, they met Squanto—who greeted them, in English, by saying “Hello Englishmen.”

As the anniversary of that meeting approaches, with the story of Plymouth and the Mayflower [still firmly ensconced](#) in the U.S. national consciousness, should we celebrate the fact that the tribes around Plymouth provided food and seed and technological knowledge so that the colonists survived? Should we celebrate [the so-called First Thanksgiving](#) that came the following year? Or should we celebrate the treaty the colonists entered into with Massasoit of the Wampanoags, in which the colonists and the tribe agreed to offer one another mutual support in times of crisis?

Should we celebrate the death of hundreds, if not thousands, of New England natives in 1631 during a particularly bad outbreak of disease? Puritan minister Cotton Mather did. “[A]bout this time,” he wrote, “the Indians began to be quarrelsome touching the Bounds of the Land which they had sold to the English, but God ended the Controversy by sending the Smallpox amongst the Indians.” Or should we remember and celebrate the death of over half of the original colonists during the first six months of their tenure in America? There is no record of rejoicing or of thanks being given to God by Native people for *those* deaths. Or should we celebrate the eventual encroachment of settlers on Native land and the resulting conflict, known as King Philip's War, launched by tribes in 1675 trying to reclaim their land?

Perhaps better to remember Plymouth as one of the starting dates for our [ongoing American drama](#)? All of the ingredients were there in 1620: faith, greed, solipsism, white supremacy, hard work, endurance, aggression, empty gestures, grave robbing, theft, goodwill and hope.

And yet, 400 years after the beginning of the supposed end of Native peoples—because Plymouth has certainly been understood that way—there are over 5 million of us, according to the 2010 census. There are more Native people in the U.S. than Jewish people, and almost twice as many Native people as there are those who identify as Muslim American.

The year 1620 was surely the start of a story that has become part of the founding mythology of the U.S., but it was also the start of an American Indian ordeal. The same ordeal played out across the continent in years that preceded and followed the Mayflower's landing, though the Plymouth story—like all its analogues—was unique in its details. That ordeal has tempered us, shaped us, made us the modern Natives we are: still here, yes. And still fighting for our tribes and our homelands and fighting—on the banks of the Missouri at Standing Rock; in the halls of Congress as Senators; in the south Minneapolis streets in the weeks after George Floyd's killing; in the written works of our genius; in the quiet ceremonies of our traditions—for a better, more inclusive, more thoughtful, more peaceful nation. Let's celebrate that.