

The Vanishing Indian

Michael Penney
Hi 990 Colonial Native American History
Professor Haller

Preface

The Native Americans of colonial New England, while suffering injustices, hardship and almost insurmountable odds did not vanish. There exists a myth that after colonization by the English and other European entities Native American tribes were wiped out, relocated or simply disappeared. This is not the case at all and upon exploration we see that the Native populations of colonial New England were forced to assimilate, take upon themselves different cultural identities or adapt and evolve into European culture and systems of government and law. The standards imposed by the English and other colonizers completely changed the ways of life for Native Americans and resulted in several different responses. Some chose to retaliate, and usually lost. Others chose to conform to new laws, regulations and ways of life which sometimes included indentured servitude and slavery. Many intermarried with other cultures, mostly African Americans, which further complicated matters when it came to race and identity. Such intermarriages were often more advantageous for one side of the bargain and the children of these marriages would carry on Indian heritage and culture while belonging to another culture which they may have been more commonly identified with.

The history of the United States as covered in the high schools we teach in often times includes Native peoples only as a footnote and often times extends and carries on the myth that Indian peoples vanished after first contact. They are included in the fun little story of the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving and then disappear from the textbooks until it's time to remove them from the South on the Trail of Tears. In this huge gap of time the Indians did not vanish and although they often took on different cultural identities or were subjugated into servitude, they continued to be Indian peoples, whether

the government recognized them as such or not. What happened to the majority of Native people is certainly not a bright spot in our Nation's history, but it's one that the students of today need to be made aware of so that they do not become convinced, like so many other generations, that the Indians did not vanish and how some were able to persevere, albeit within different contexts, identities and ways of life.

Early Contact with Native People

While some textbook manufacturers would like the story of America and Native people to start in Jamestown, Virginia in 1609 with Pocahontas or in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620 with the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag, the reality is, that contact occurred much earlier, and with not so good results for the Indians. Contact meant subjugation for Native peoples and kidnapping in the early years of exploration in the New World. The policies set forth as precedents by the early explorers would start the long line of injustices against the Indian people by the Europeans.

In 1493, Christopher Columbus brought back Indians from the Caribbean region and gave them to the Spanish court. With this action Columbus set forth a precedent which would be followed for the next hundred years of kidnapping and subjugation of Indians.¹ On his 2nd, 3rd and 4th voyages, Columbus sent back hundreds of Natives back to Spain. Most of these Indians became slaves. This became the en vogue trend for explorers, to capture Natives and send them back to Europe to be used as slave labor, curiosities and novelties. Right from the beginning of European contact, the Indians were treated as inferior people whom could be taken on a whim by the superior explorers. However, Spanish settlement would focus on Central and South America in the early years of exploration and so to understand what would happen in New England, which is the focus

¹ Alden Vaughan Lecture, 7/14/08

of our work in the grant, we must understand how contact initially happened with the English.

In the very early sixteenth century, English ships ventured closer and closer to New England. Eventually, the English made contact with the Indians. They followed the precedent of Columbus and brought back Natives to England. Some went willingly, some were forced or kidnapped. Most would learn English and serve as translators on later voyages. This policy continued until 1584 when Sir Walter Raleigh changed it.² Raleigh decided to use a volunteer system, and take back Natives to learn English. This precedent would be followed in New England where by the time the English started making regular contact and began colonization the policy was to take Indians willingly, or force them but train them as translators. They were treated well and were indoctrinated in European language, custom and culture. This would benefit the Europeans by being able to communicate and trade with Natives, as well as exploit and take advantage of them as colonization began.

History can work in very funny ways. In 1614, Thomas Hunt captured 24-30 Indians from New England in the Plymouth area. He then took those Natives to Spain and sold them into slavery. He was chastised by the English government for doing this. One of the Natives made his way to England where he learned English and eventually returned to New England in 1621. All of his former tribe had been decimated by disease and he was only spared because he had been in Europe at the time of the plague.³ This Native was of course Squanto, who is an integral part of the story of the colonization of Plymouth and the tale of the Pilgrims. Along with Samosett, who was originally from Maine and had

² Alden Vaughan Lecture 7/14/08

³ Alden Vaughan Lecture 7/14/08

learned English from fishermen, they were able to communicate very easily with the Pilgrims. Their decision to advise Chief Massasoit to befriend the Pilgrims rather than battle them possibly changed the course of American history. They advised that they could be useful allies against their traditional enemies, the Narragansett.⁴ While communication with the Wampanoag would have probably happened anyways, the ability of Squanto to speak English, based on his previous kidnapping, expedited the process and surely made communication easier.

Throughout the 1620's the pattern of taking captured back to Natives disappeared, due to poor markets for Indian slaves in Spain and the push towards colonization of the New World. Some would continue to be used as servants in England, or would be taken prisoner and be brought back to Europe after King Phillip's War, but for the most part, Natives stayed where they were, forcing the mingling of two cultures, Native and European, with in many cases, disastrous results for the Natives.

By the time 1620 had come, the consensus of Native peoples' perception of Europeans was mixed, but generally was low.⁵ There had been kidnappings, which depending on your tribal allies and enemies, could be a good thing. Some gained the skill of being able to serve as translators which facilitated trade. However, for the most part kidnapping did not lead to a more prosperous life for Natives. It meant servitude or slavery in many cases which started the long road of injustice for Native peoples. It would only continue and grow larger as colonization exploded and the Europeans invaded the shores of New England. The Native identity was about to change. Colonization of America by Europeans would mean a forced change of culture and identity for Native people.

⁴ Alden Vaughan Lecture 7/14/08

⁵ Alden Vaughan Lecture 7/14/08

Indian Servitude

When we tend to think about, or teach about the institution of slavery, we usually think of the experiences of African Americans in the South in the centuries prior to the Civil War. Obviously this was a huge part of our Nation's history, however, the experience of slavery is not unique to African Americans. A much more unknown aspect of the history of New England is the slavery of Indians in New England. It is absolutely critical for students that we teach them to have an understanding of how Indians were treated by Europeans to get a sense of why the myth of the vanishing Indian exists.

The early encounters of the Europeans with the Natives became crucial to their ideas about race and identity. We don't trust what we don't understand and we often times think ourselves superior to those that are different. This is still the case today where change is feared and people rally against causes they deem inappropriate, just because they may not be what they consider the norm. Such was the case for Europeans when they began to settle in New England.

There also exists a myth of how the people of New England were exceptional compared to those that would use the institution of slavery in the South. We tend to think of ourselves as the good guys or the moral victors of the Civil War who had abstained from the evil institution of slavery. However, the reality is that New England was a society with slavery in its midst. Slavery and servitude evolved into common practices in New England, and while the numbers may not be comparable to African slaves in the South, it is still widespread enough to be examined as a practice or institution that was a contributing factor to the myth of the vanishing Indian.

As evidenced before, there had been sporadic kidnappings of Indians who were brought to Europe. However, once colonization began, bringing with it the conflicts and wars we are used to learning about, slavery became another viable option for Europeans and Indians alike to use against other Natives. After the Pequot War in 1637, 1/7 of the survivors on the losing Pequot side were made servants or slaves.⁶ This included combatants and noncombatants such as women and children. The rationale given for putting these people into slavery were that they were the losers of a just war and that slavery was a lesser penalty than death.⁷ They were seen as compensation and the spoils of war, which as we know goes to the victors. This is simply something we don't often find in our curriculum, the discussion of Indians who were forced into slavery. The Pequot War was not the only example of this type of behavior either.

King Phillip's War is an event which has come more to the forefront of American history in recent times. The magnitude of this event is more and more coming to light as we see the consequences of the results, with many Indians being defeated and subjugated after a kind of last ditch effort against European colonization. After the war ended in 1676, there were mass enslavements of Native people. More than 1/10 of the Natives who survived the war were enslaved.⁸ There were group sales performed by local governments. There was internment and kidnapping of Indians whom colonists saw as a threat to their security.⁹ The motivations behind this enslavement is very similar to other forms and uses of the evil institution. It became a source of labor, it became an export commodity, a form of social control over Natives and it became a way to acculturate the

⁶ Margaret Newell Lecture 7/15/08

⁷ Margaret Newell Lecture 7/15/08

⁸ Margaret Newell Lecture 7/15/08

⁹ Margaret Newell Lecture 7/15/08

Indians. So much for the moral people of New England who were supposedly so righteous.

It was not an accepted practice everywhere in New England. Roger Williams spoke out against Indian slavery and the state of Rhode Island banned it, as did other areas in New England.¹⁰ However, the fact that it became an acceptable practice at all in New England shows the dire situation that many Natives were put into. It is hard for an individual to hold onto their cultural identity when enslaved. This is a contributing factor to the idea of the vanishing Indian. However, many who were enslaved did endure, or found new means of continuing on their identity and heritage.

Isolation

When talking about a topic as large as the vanishing Indian in a geographic area as large as New England, there are going to be exceptions. There were in fact people who did not face the fate that most other Natives did based on their geographic situations that made them unique. Sometimes alliances of convenience are formed, which help people thrive and survive and not vanish. The Wampanoags of Martha's Vineyard are just such a people who because of their situation, surrounded by water, had an entirely different experience over time than many of the other Natives who lived in New England.

Sometimes you can simply be in the right place at the right time. Sometimes your biggest ally can be the geographical situation you find yourself in. The Wampanoags who were living on Martha's Vineyard were not affected by the major plagues that devastated Native populations in the early 17th century.¹¹ These epidemics wiped out nearly 90% of some tribes in New England. To avoid that kind of fate was a very lucky

¹⁰ Margaret Newell Lecture 7/15/08

¹¹ David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

thing for the Indians of Martha's Vineyard. They also were able to stay neutral and uninvolved in the Pequot War and its staggering violence.¹² This two had a devastating impact on some tribes, especially the Pequots, as earlier discussed.

Eventually, the Europeans came to Martha's Vineyard. Thomas Mayhew was granted an English title to settle Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket.¹³ He was able to negotiate the purchase of land in what is now Edgartown. Now, things were not perfect in relations between the whites and Indians. The Natives thought they were selling the rights to plant on the land, not the land itself. This misunderstanding caused some tensions, however the Indians eventually came to understand what was meant by their negotiations.¹⁴ There was also some tensions when the English explained that it was the Native responsibility to fence out the English settler's animals, rather than their responsibility to fence them in. The Indians killed several of the English settlers livestock. However, over time the English and Natives of Martha's Vineyard would form mutually beneficial alliances.

While the Natives were lucky enough to survive the epidemic of 1616-1619, they were not so lucky when another epidemic hit in the 1630's. The Natives thought the staggering number of deaths was due to a witch. The English explained it as God's will. Through conversion of Wampanoag's like Hyacooms, they were able to spread Christianity.¹⁵ The Native preachers were able to blend Wampanoag concepts with Christian ideas and convert much of the Native population. The English were able to

¹² David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

¹³ David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

¹⁴ David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

¹⁵ David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

convince the Wampanoags to stop paying tribute to mainland natives such as Massasoit or King Phillip.¹⁶

King Phillip's war forged the alliance that would enable the Wampanoags of Martha's Vineyard to exist in a very different way than most of the mainland Indians. Many of the English wanted to disarm the Native population during and after King Phillip's war. This had backfired and caused more conflict in most of the areas it was tried on the mainland. The English of Martha's Vineyard tried the opposite. They armed the Natives of Martha's Vineyard and used them as a guard against mainland Natives.¹⁷ This was a very successful plan and they were able to stay out of King Phillips war and attack by mainland Wampanoags because of the Indians guarding the island.

Even though the Natives of Martha's Vineyard were able to have unique experiences and avoid some of the difficult transitions of identity suffered by mainland Indians, they were not without their own hardships and challenges of an ever changing cultural significance and identity. Over time, the Indians of Martha's Vineyard encountered problems with mounting debt to the English. Most of the land was sold as compensation for debt and the Indians were only able to hold on to small parcels of land on the island.¹⁸ Debt also meant an increasing level of voluntary servitude in English homes. When Native children started growing up as servants in white homes, that meant a loss of identity as Native.¹⁹ Another problem was that as time went on, many of the men of the Native community were killed in wars, or lost due to the hardships of the fishing industry. As a result, many Native women married black men. This led to an increasing

¹⁶ David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

¹⁷ David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

¹⁸ David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

¹⁹ David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

level of non-nativeness for many. It expanded the population of black servant population while contracting the Native population. However, a small population did endure. They were able to hold onto some land and continue throughout the past centuries with a Native identity. This led to their Federal recognition as a tribe in the 1980's.²⁰ Throughout the TAH program, we have learned how difficult Federal recognition is to get. The tribes must be able to document and account for lineage and uninterrupted tribal meetings through tedious record keeping. This is a testament to the Wampanoags of Martha's Vineyard who were able to endure and retain their identity, while so many were not.

Even one of the more hopeful stories of Natives retaining their identity is not without its depressing marks. As we saw huge populations were wiped out by disease and many of the Natives of Martha's Vineyard did lose or have a changing cultural identity. Even when geographic factors went in their favor as opposed to mainland Natives, they faced identity crisis's. The Wampanoags of Martha's Vineyard did not vanish. Some intermarried, and lost some of their cultural aspects, but others were able to endure and carry on. Other tribes on the mainland were not as successful at retaining identity.

Religious Conversion as a Way to Survival: The Brothertown Indians

Part of the myth of the vanishing Indian surely has to do with the changes that went on in Indian cultures after the arrival of Europeans in New England. Despite plagues, war and enslavement, some Indians still held on to their identity as an Indian despite an ever-changing landscape that made it harder and harder to do so. Some chose to abandon beliefs held for generations and convert to Christianity. This conversion in a sense was an assimilation or acculturation to European ways. However, for many, it was a way in

²⁰ David Silverman Lecture 7/16/08

which to continue to survive and not be seen as such a savage or heathen by the English community.

The story of the Brothertown Indians highlights the internal struggle that many Indians went through when undergoing the process of conversion to Christianity. In one sense it was a way to recognition or acceptance by the now dominant white society. In another it was an abandonment of Native ideals and beliefs held for centuries prior to first contact. They created new identities for themselves because of the treatment they received and saw happening to other Indians. This conversion to Christianity became an opportunity for survival and continuation of tribes.

The past relationships and alliances of tribes became a very important tool when Indians began to preach Christianity. Communities devastated by war and disease became smaller and were forced to merge or create alliances with other tribes to simply stay viable. Many communities had long standing ties and traditions of intermarriage such as the Narragansett, Pequots, Mohegans, Niyantics, and the Farmington Indians.²¹ Throw in the fact that many Indians had been intermarrying with African Americans and it only shows how interwoven some of these small communities were.

Religion was a thread that tied many Indians together. When the Great Awakening hit in the 1740's many were stirred to become more religious and live their lives based on the preaching and teachings of influential religious figures who taught them the gospel. James Davenport was one such speaker who preached to both whites, blacks and Indians. He said that you didn't need wealth or education to be saved²², which was very appealing to many Indians who had neither. Native people began forming their own churches and

²¹ David Silverman Lecture 7/17/08

²² David Silverman Lecture 7/17/08

preached to each other. They renewed old paths of communication and alliance to bring the Christian word to each other.²³ Many Indians would separate from those who did not believe and form their own communities. This pleased many English who thought that conversion would be the first step to civilizing the savages.

Some Native people became very successful preachers and were able to bring the Christian message to many through their writings and appearances. Samson Occom, a Mohegan was the first published Native American. He published poems, hymns and his autobiography.²⁴ He traveled, raised money for schools to train preachers and wrote extensively. He was trained by Eleazar Wheelock, who founded a school to train preachers. Occom was used as a spearhead to create alliances with tribes that were still very powerful. It was through the preaching and conversion that the English hoped to avoid conflict with these tribes, especially the Iroquois Nation.²⁵ Eventually, Wheelock shifted his mission from training Indians to training whites, due to the fact that many Indian preachers were not as successful as Occom. It was time for a new strategy for Occom and others like him.

By the 1760's, many Indian communities were on the verge of disappearing due to land disputes.²⁶ In almost every community there were religious, family and political divides that served as schisms to wedge between the tribes. Joseph Johnson, son in law of Samson Occom, brokered a deal with the Oneidas to form a new community based on Christian principals in New York.²⁷ This worked out for the Oneidas because it served as a buffer with the English and the English liked it because the Christians were seen as

²³ David Silverman Lecture 7/17/08

²⁴ David Silverman Lecture 7/17/08

²⁵ David Silverman Lecture 7/17/08

²⁶ David Silverman Lecture 7/17/08

²⁷ David Silverman Lecture 7/17/08

more civilized and would hopefully through missionary work, convert more tribes. The first group settled, but was quickly wrapped up in the violence of the American Revolution.²⁸ The pattern of gathering of communities and attempting to settle together repeated itself over the next decades. They ended up in Wisconsin, where they built a community, only to be forced further west to Lake Winnebago.²⁹ They were on the verge of being moved again, when instead they became U.S. citizens. This strategy worked, however, the cost was a loss of identity.

The Brothertown Indians show that a willingness to adapt can aide in survival as a community. They survived upheaval, constant moving around, and a loss of their tribal identity to keep their people going. They still exist today, although, with a vastly different concept of identity than perhaps the founders of the community had. Religion was a tie that kept them together and was a benefit when being looked at from the eyes of white society. They did not vanish. They moved, and stuck together and adapted.

Conclusions about the Identity of the Vanishing Indian

As we have seen, Indian culture and English colonial culture are so intertwined, that the notion of the vanishing Indian is not very accurate. Indians were able to survive, adapt, and take on new notions of their identity, but did not vanish. There were wars, disease and other factors which worked against the success of many Indians, however many others were able to endure. They were able to survive, intermarry, move to safer communities, use alliances with other tribes that had also become less powerful over time and they were able to succeed. It is not a happy story, and most of the hardship and loss

²⁸ David Silverman Lecture 7/17/08

²⁹ David Silverman Lecture 7/17/08

is on the side of the Indians. However, there are Indians who did endure and did not vanish and were a central part of the American identity and culture over the centuries.

Some Indians as we saw were only able to remain in existence through bondage, forced servitude or voluntary servitude. Some were forced or simply had no other option. They did not vanish, but remained as a lower caste of society, used and exploited by the wealthier more successful white society. It is not commonly known the extent to which Indians were used as slaves in New England. This is a travesty of history and it is important for people to know that they did not fade away in these instances, but worked, or were forced to work to remain alive.

In many cases, the Indians did not vanish but were overtaken or were swindled out of their land. There are numerous examples of Indians losing large tracts of land due to debt, or trickery by white government officials, or simply through bad treaties misunderstood by the Indians. When their pre-existing culture came into contact with the English, who had an entirely different notion of what land ownership meant, the Indians usually lost out on the deal. They were exploited. They did not vanish in many cases but were forced to relocate, or intermarry into a culture that may not have been quite Indian or Native. They were woven into a different type of culture, but endured.

Another aspect commonly not known or ignored is the extent to which disease depleted the Indian population. When we read texts by English settlers who note how well the land has been prepared for them by God, what they either manipulate or are unaware of is the efforts of Indians who were ravaged by disease and plague. This was not divine intervention to help the English but an unlucky circumstance that unfortunately for the Indians, made them weaker and unable to halt the colonial advance into their

territories. Many did die, but those that remained did not vanish. They were unfortunately just put into a position that was difficult for them to win in.

Religion helped some Indians escape vanishing. The conversion and preaching of people like Samson Occam served as a catalyst to a new way of life for many Indians. It meant an abandoning of several traditional Indian beliefs and practices, but it was an avenue to continued existence. It unified several groups of Indians who may or may not have had alliances in the past. It served as a way to acceptance, even if they were still deemed uncivilized by English society. The conversion made the English feel safer about many Indians, and it became a commonality they could look at between them and the Native people. They could listen to an Indian voice like Occam's who was as intelligent and successful in his writings as many whites. It did not mean complete acceptance, but it meant that they did not have to disappear, for they believed many of the same things as the Europeans.

One of the aspects of Indian identity that changed the most after contact by the Europeans was who they identified with and how they did so. Many Indians found it more advantageous to abandon an Indian identity. Others found intermarriage helped continue their bloodlines. With so many Indian males lost to maritime and military lives, there had to be a void filled and intermarriage was a solution. New groups, alliances, families and groups emerged. They were for the most part smaller, may have had a weaker sense of identity than their ancestors, but they endured. The Indian did not vanish. They adapted, changed, endured. They survived despite so many obstacles, burdens and road blocks to their success. They had so many factors going against them which did mean a tragic end for so many Natives. But not all. Some endured and

adapted, and for students today to realize this is an extremely important goal. They have to be made aware of what happened, why it happened and what it means for us today.

Race, ethnicity and identity are such a large part of our students lives today that to understand that it is an issue which has been important to this country from the very start can help them grapple with the tough questions that are raised.