

THE CAMBRIDGE
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Emory Elliott

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EMORY ELLIOTT



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Preface

An earlier version of this book appeared as part of the first volume of *Cambridge History of American Literature* edited by Sacvan Bercovitch. That volume contains contributions by five different contributors and examines the development of culture and literature in the Americas from 1492 until 1820. My contribution to that work, on the literature of Puritan New England, was not the opening section of the volume, but rather, it followed one on the literature of the European exploration from 1492 through the 1700s. In opening this way, the *Cambridge History* makes very explicit the point that the English Puritans were not the first, nor the only, Europeans to live in and write about their experiences in the Americas.

This book is intended primarily to tell the story of the literature of the New England Puritans, but anthologies of American literature today no longer begin with the landing of the Pilgrims in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. Quite properly, they follow the lead of the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988) and the *Cambridge History of American Literature, Vol. I* (1994) that open long before Columbus first viewed the West Indies. The purpose of the first chapter of this book is to provide a concise overview of the long and complex history of Europe and the Americas of which the English Puritans were a small part when they set sail for America in 1620.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page vii	
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii	
Chapter 1	Brave New World	1
Chapter 2	The language of Salem witchcraft	17
Chapter 3	The dream of a Christian utopia	29
Chapter 4	Personal narrative and history	51
Chapter 5	Poetry	71
Chapter 6	The Jeremiad	100
Chapter 7	Reason and revivalism	125
Chapter 8	Toward the formation of a United States	153
<i>Afterword</i>	170	
<i>Bibliography</i>	174	
<i>Index</i>	187	

Chapter One

Brave New World

In 1611, Shakespeare wrote his last comedy, *The Tempest*, during one of the most perilous times in English political history. In 1603, Queen Elizabeth I had died, ending her reign of forty-five years. Throughout most of his career as a playwright, Shakespeare had benefited from and celebrated the period of economic growth and political stability credited to Her Majesty's strength and wisdom, and he and other writers were grateful for her support of the theater and of English literature in general. The ascendancy of James I to the throne sparked political and religious turmoil as both Catholic and Protestant reformers perceived the moment of transition to be an opportunity to reduce the power of the Anglican Church. With James' support, Church of England officials responded by increasing persecution of all religious dissenters.

Although England was emerging as a European power by virtue of its strong navy, global exploration, and colonization into the New World, Shakespeare and his audiences were conscious of the danger that civil war might be imminent. In fact, a bloody Civil War was on the horizon, but it would not begin for another thirty years. During those three decades, thousands of Puritans and Catholics suffered persecution, imprisonment, and torture, which finally led to the overthrow and execution of James' son King Charles I in 1649. Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans took control of the government and ruled the country for eleven years during which the theaters of England were closed. In 1660, the Puritans lost control of the Parliament, and King Charles II returned from exile in France to assume the throne and reestablish the English monarchy. In the form of veiled allegory, Shakespeare used his fanciful comedy of *The Tempest* to allude to some of the domestic and global issues that his country was facing as the play was being performed and to express national apprehensions about the future that many English people felt at the time.

Throughout the five decades of the Elizabethan monarchy (1552–1603), Spain, France, Portugal, and other European nations were vigorously competing in the Americas for control over the territory and wealth the New World offered. After John Cabot explored the coast of North America for England in 1598, Elizabeth displayed little interest in establishing a

colony in America. Perhaps, Elizabeth believed that she could not afford the financial risks. Shortly after her death, however, James I commissioned the London Trading Company to establish a settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607.

With Elizabeth gone, the Spanish Armada defeated, and England emerging as the dominant Atlantic power, Shakespeare set his play in the Americas. He seems to have read the accounts that appeared in England in 1610 of the wreck of one of England's vessels in the Bermudas, islands that were said to be enchanted and inhabited by witches and devils. Envisioning the Americas as constituting either a "brave New World" that offered Europeans a new beginning or an exotic, dangerous place that threatened English stability and normality, Shakespeare imaginatively projected himself as artist into the role of his Columbus-like Prospero. Shipwrecked on an island off the coast of North America near the very spot on which Columbus had landed a century before, Prospero dreams that his beautiful daughter Miranda may have a secure future in a safe New World. But the presence already in America of Old World corruption, as well as local demonic spirits and monsters, undermines Miranda's safety. To triumph over such evils, Prospero must employ all of his knowledge of science, religion, and witchcraft in his encounter with a savage creature whose mother was a witch and whose father a devil. Although Prospero's real enemies are his evil brother Antonio and other malicious members of the courts of Milan and Naples, the play focuses upon the crude and offensive Caliban, a "savage and deformed slave." Because of the fantastic nature of the setting, Caliban functions less as a representation of Native peoples of America than as an inconceivable and grotesque challenge to the power of Prospero. Shakespeare makes Caliban's speeches and actions strange and disorienting – unsettling for Prospero and the audience. Some of Caliban's speeches even parody and mock those given earlier in earnest innocence by Miranda. The world seems upside down for Prospero for much of the play, so that the audience must have found rather absurd this story of a New World in which everything is distorted and where witches challenge scientists and aristocrats and slaves spurn their masters. For Shakespeare's audience, the play presents an ambiguous vision of the New World as a place full of promise but also threatening disaster and death. Underlying the attitudes of the people of Europe and the decisions of their leaders regarding the Americas would be the anxieties, fears, and dread of the exotic and the unknown that Shakespeare played upon so effectively in *The Tempest*.

When Christopher Columbus recorded in his journal on October 12, 1492, that "two hours after midnight appeared the land," he was gazing at the shoreline of the island he would name San Salvador in what would be called the Bahamas, meaning a place of splendor. Historians have long debated the question of exactly when the first people from across the Atlantic

reached the Americas. Some scholars believe that around 1000 AD the Vikings landed in what is now Canada while others claim that Egyptian and Nubian people from Africa sailed on Atlantic currents to the Americas sometime around 1200 BC and left their traces in the cultural forms and facial features of the inhabitants whom Columbus met 2700 years later. For most historians, however, the arrival of Columbus marked an important moment as the beginning of continuous and accelerating connections between the people of the Americas and the rest of the world. The writings of Columbus initiated a vast literature of exploration and description that contributed to the European perceptions and understanding of the Americas. Many of these accounts provide quite accurate factual details while others are as fanciful as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or present a blend of the actual and imagined.

Regarding the presence of people on the American continents in 1492, it is generally agreed among anthropologists that in pre-historic times a land bridge that existed between what are now Siberia and Alaska enabled people from Asia to migrate to the Americas. Between the time that the bridge was submerged about 20,000 years ago and Columbus' arrival, the population of the Americas grew to about 300 million people whose ancestors had developed over 300 different cultures in which were spoken as many as 800 different languages. Although sharing similar ethnic heritages, the peoples of the American continents were as diverse as those in Europe, Africa, and Asia in their religions, modes of social organization, economies, technical expertise, artistic expression, and military prowess and methods. Some communities, such as the Mayans and Aztecs in what is now New Mexico and Mexico and the Incas in South America, were extraordinarily advanced in science, mathematics, and engineering, and they built remarkable physical structures equal to those of the Egyptians in complexity. Other tribes and nations, such as those inhabiting the Northern plains, became expert hunter-gatherers while those living between the Atlantic seaboard and the Rocky Mountains lived in clans and villages and practiced highly developed forms of agriculture.

Although they appear not to have developed written languages, the oral languages of these native peoples were quite advanced, and they possessed language traditions that consisted of oral narratives, poetry, songs, and oratory. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, anthropologists, literary scholars, historians, and independent scholars of the indigenous peoples of the Americas have been determined to preserve what remained of these long cultural traditions. Researchers have recorded examples of the various forms of oral expression of Native Americans and have translated them into English. Nearly every anthology of American literature published in the last decade opens with a section devoted to Native American expression and contains selections of poetry, trickster stories, songs, and oratory.

Scholars of the field of Native American literature emphasize two important points that modern readers should remember about such written selections. First, English translations usually attempt to present these oral expressions in forms that resemble English literary genres of fiction and poetry, but most Native American artists adhered to generic traditions that are very different from those of the English and Europeans; these forms are also quite diverse among the Indians themselves, depending upon the particular tribal culture and the inclinations of the individual artist. Adherence to a strict form is not as much a feature of Native American genres as in English literature. Second, the very act of placing examples of the expression of the first inhabitants of the Americas at the beginning of a history or anthology suggests that their literary traditions existed only until 1492 and died away soon after Columbus arrived. But across America today, tribal cultures are alive and their artists continue to create new works of material culture and of oral and written literature both in English and in the tribal languages. These artistic productions are part of contemporary American art and literature, even as they also share an ancient heritage of Native America that extends back at least 25,000 years.

In a classic historical study which he titled *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (1975), the historian Francis Jennings dramatically shifted the modern perception of the arrival of the Europeans in America in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in order to make contemporary readers more aware of the genocide and cultural destruction that followed swiftly upon the arrival of Columbus. Millions of Native Americans died from diseases, such as smallpox, typhus, measles, and syphilis, that the invaders brought with them from Europe and for which the Native population had no immunities. By 1592 AD, only 100 years after the start of the European invasion of the Americas, twenty-three million Indians had died in central Mexico alone in the slaughter of battle, from the ravages of new diseases carried by Europeans, and under the brutal conditions of slavery to which millions were subjected.

Because Columbus came to be so idealized for his conviction that the earth was round, for his courage in sailing to the edge of what may have been a flat ocean emptying into a black hole of space, and for his “discovery” of a “New World” of fabulous wealth and natural resources, historians were long inclined to depict him as a scientist and an adventurer of great humanity, as very unlike the later conquistadors who led well-equipped armies against the poorly armed Native peoples. Yet, more recently, some historians have argued that Columbus was very much a participant in the system of eradication and plunder that generated a rapid return of European investment by transporting gold, spices, and other precious commodities from the Americas to the treasuries of Europe. Such a sense of urgency

resulted in the killing of countless Indians and Africans who resisted being enslaved to work in the mines and the deaths of thousands of others from the brutal working conditions. Upon the news of what was at first thought to be Columbus's success in finding a passage to Asia, explorers from Italy, Portugal, and Spain followed in his wake.

In 1501, the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci made careful calculations to determine that the land that he and Columbus had reached earlier was part of a continent previously unknown to Europeans, and soon his own name became attached to the Americas. As word spread of the richness of the soil and the abundance of gold in the New World, European leaders recognized how resources from America would strengthen their own powers within Europe.

Throughout the sixteenth century, the Spanish, Portuguese and the French were especially active in trying to gain control over large portions of South America and Mexico and of the Southern portions of what is now the United States. The French built networks of colonies in Florida and along the Gulf of Mexico. The Portuguese controlled portions of South America that became Brazil, and the Spanish dominated much of Central America, Mexico, and the North American southwest. While the English did not settle Jamestown, Virginia, until 1607, the Spanish established a permanent settlement in St Augustine, Florida, in 1565. Moving across what is often called the Sun Belt, the Spanish established New Mexico (1598), Texas (1683), Arizona (1687), and California (1769). As they did so, they recorded their activities and some composed histories and even epic poems to preserve and celebrate their accomplishments. In 1542, Alvar Nunez Cabeza Vaca produced his *Relacion*, a personal narrative describing his adventures as one of the four survivors of an expedition of five hundred who then endured various hardships for eight years as they trekked from Florida along the Gulf coast to Mexico City. In 1610, Gaspar Perez de Villagra published his epic poem, *Historia de la Nueva Mexico*, which describes the regions settled and the feats of exploration and warfare in the New World.

In retrospect, it almost seems it was a cleverly designed plot of history that as the nations of Southern Europe were raiding the Americas, a religious revolution would be taking place in Northern Europe that would give rise to the Puritan Movement and thereafter the Puritan colonies in New England. However, the two events were not unconnected, for the economic changes produced by the wealth transported to Europe from the Americas in the sixteenth century helped to produce dramatic political and religious changes in Europe.

For centuries, the Catholic Church reigned as the single form of Christianity across Europe, and the Catholic faith was part of an elaborate theological system that explained every aspect of the universe in terms of

the Great Chain of Being. At the top of the chain was God followed by the Pope, God's representative and spokesman on earth; next came the Kings of nations who lacked the supreme power of the Pope but who did possess the divine right of kings within their realms. The structure of the universe and ordering of the planets reflected the system of divine authority with the earth at the center and the sun and planets revolving around it.

The intellectual force of this theology and cosmology laid the foundation for the power of the church-states, which was buttressed when needed by methods of terror, such as in the Inquisition, and military power, such as in the Crusades. Historians have often noted that Columbus' ships were delayed in their departure for three days because in the harbor at Cadiz, Spain was blocked by the boatloads of Jewish refugees who were trying to flee Spain, which was expelling all Jews and Muslims to restore racial purity after the defeat of the Moors. In fact, the commissioning of Columbus' expedition was part of the celebration of the victory of Queen Isabella. While his explorations appeared to bolster the powers of the Church and the aristocracy, Columbus' discoveries confirmed the controversial theories of Copernicus and Galileo about the nature of the earth in relation to the rest of the solar system, thereby posing a major challenge to the idea of the Great Chain of Being and to the authority of the Pope. Such undermining of hierarchy would eventually make it possible for King Henry VIII to defy the authority of a Pope who would not grant him a divorce. When Henry made himself the head of the Church of England in 1533, he inadvertently encouraged religious dissenters all over Europe to consider that they might challenge the authority of Rome as well. Among those reformers the Puritans emerged as part of the Reformation movement, and they brought down the English monarchy by committing regicide against Charles I in 1649. But before that traumatic event, while the dissenters were still being persecuted by the Church of England, a small band of Puritans embarked for Holland and eventually sailed to America to seek religious freedom. In America, they imagined themselves to be fulfilling a sacred errand into the wilderness, and that act would come to be seen as the foundational event for the later establishment of the United States of America.

Before turning to the full story of the Puritans, however, there is one other European country that must be recognized for its strong presence in America decades before the Pilgrims landed. While the significance of "New France" has not held the attention of historians in the way that "New England" has, the relationships that the French established with the Indians in the sixteenth century had a major impact on the attitudes that the Native peoples had toward the English settlers when they did arrive in the early seventeenth century.

Neighbors to the Puritans in the northeastern part of North America, who are almost never mentioned in books about the English settlers, are the French. Nearly fifty years before the first Jamestown settlement was established in 1605, and seventy years before the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth, the French had two settlements in what would become Florida, Charlesfort in 1562 and Fort Caroline in 1564. Fort Caroline was destroyed by the Spanish in 1565 as part of a continuing rivalry between the two nations for control of the North American South and southwest. In 1605, the French established the first European colony in what would become Canada at Port Royal, and the destruction of that colony by the English in 1613 initiated a French-English contest for control of Canada. In 1627, the territory of New France was formally established in North America by a royal charter that designated the lands from the Atlantic to the Great Lakes and from Florida to the Arctic to be under French control. Of course, the Spanish and the English both took issue with that French proclamation. Because of a continuing war between France and England in Europe, intermittent fighting between the forces of these two countries occurred in North America, but in spite of these distractions, French traders and missionaries made considerable progress developing profitable business and farming in the areas around the Great Lakes near what would be, many decades later, the borderlands of Canada and the United States.

While there were many similarities between the colonizing done by the French Catholics and the English Puritans, there were also marked differences that reflect the two cultures as well as the physical circumstances of their differing geographic settings. Just as in Puritan New England where economic motives and religious fervor combined to inspire colonization, so too did the French combine trading and proselytizing in their efforts to serve God and country. Both colonies also were separated by an ocean and great distance from their home governments and thus were able to operate with a high degree of autonomy. In both cases, the result was that within a few decades of their beginnings, the attitudes, lifestyles, and cultural identities of those in America led them to seem to be nearly a distinct people from their European countrymen and women. It should be noted, however, that there were also a significant number of French Protestants, or Huguenots, who migrated to America in the seventeenth century to escape persecution in France, and the New England Puritans felt a strong alliance with them as a people who also had fled Europe to practice their own form of Christianity in a new land. But the Huguenots did not compose a substantially large enough community in New France to affect the relations between the French Catholics and the English Protestants of New England. For the most part then, there was no sense of alliance between the English in New England and the French colonists only three or four hundred miles

to their west, since long-standing distrust between the two countries in Europe had persisted for centuries. In fact, by the end of the seventeenth century, the French presence in the upper mid-west had come to be viewed by the English as a barrier to their westward expansion, and the military engagements between the French and their Indian allies on the one side and the forces of the British Army and their New England militia grew into the devastating French and Indian Wars of the mid-eighteenth century.

All of which leads to this question: how did it happen that the French colonies were able to develop such positive relations with the Native peoples that they fought together as allies against the English in 1763, while associations between the Indians and the Puritans as well as the other English colonies along the eastern seaboard were more often hostile and verging on violence? There are several distinct reasons for these divergent relationships: religious, economic, and cultural.

The English were mainly farmers, fishermen, and manufacturers. They viewed land as something to be possessed, enclosed, cultivated, and protected, and they sought to establish towns and cities that required square miles of cleared land. Such a process of clearing and expansion meant that the English were constantly moving west, infringing upon tribal lands, and claiming new lands as their own. The French depended mainly on trapping, hunting, and trading and thus only set up small outposts and a few forts along the rivers of the New France territories. Indeed, they left the forests untouched since they needed the vast woods of the Northwest for the fur trade. Since the Native people themselves knew the forests so well, the French hired Indian guides to show them the richest trapping and hunting area. Thus, the French seemed to be taking very little and offering a profitable arrangement in return. The French also adapted themselves to the ways of the Indians; they became expert at living on the land and negotiating the complex web of waterways that enabled them to travel by canoe from the Saint Lawrence River to the Great Lakes to the Mississippi and on to the Gulf of Mexico.

Such differences in approach did not depend entirely upon economic interests, however. The French were far more inclined to adapt to the lifestyle and habits of the Native peoples than the English Protestants. For unlike the English, the French practiced "cultural relativism," and early on, they adopted the clothing, languages, food, and customs of the Indians, and encouraged intermarriage. While not giving up their religious beliefs or their identity as French people, the colonizers quickly blended with the Natives, and their priests converted far higher number of Indians to Catholicism. This was not achieved without great sacrifice and perseverance, for many of the Jesuits, or the "Black-Robes" as the Indians called them, were tortured and killed in America for their efforts. These devoted missionaries

frequently found themselves at odds with the leaders of the French government who were more inclined to view the Native peoples as savages to be exploited rather than as human with souls to be saved. But unlike the Protestant clergy in New England who, as a rule, worked closely together with the civic leaders for the common goals of the community, the Catholic priests emphasized their independence from the state and persisted in their own mission of conversion long after most of the Protestant ministers in New England had abandoned that part of their errand into the wilderness. The English Puritans were far more insistent that Indian converts become more like white people culturally as well as spiritually. To be sure, there were examples of Puritans who were captured by the Natives and who became "Indianized" after living with a tribe for a long period, and there were some like Thomas Morton and Roger Williams who chose to live with the Indians and who came to appreciate their form of civilization. Not known for their tolerance for difference, however, Puritan clergy and magistrates viewed such "white Indians" as freaks or aberrations who had been bewitched and given up their identities as English.

The worldview of the Puritans, as this book will show, was not relativist at all. There were only two ways of doing things: God's way or the Devil's way. God's people were meant to live in enclosed communities surrounding a church, safe from the demons of the forests, and God's chosen were meant to marry among themselves. The rigorous requirements for proving oneself worthy to be a member of the congregation and of the chosen were, as we shall see later, quite demanding. Consequently, very few Indians could be identified as saved Christians, and thus there was little intermarriage between Natives and English in Puritan New England. For these reasons, the historian Edmund S. Morgan proclaimed that the Puritans were themselves the most "tribal" of all peoples.

When we look back today on the colonization of North America and examine the English Protestants in isolation, it appears inevitable that the English would soon abandon their plan to convert the Indians to Christianity and then initiate a process of expulsion and annihilation of the Native peoples from their lands that would not end until every indigenous nation had been destroyed. When we look at the ways in which the French and the Indians of the Ohio valley and upper Great Lake regions integrated, prospered, and fought together against the English, however, it is evident that there was an alternative model of behavior to the pursuit of the elimination of the Native peoples that became the goal of the English Protestants. It was, instead, the result of an inexorable coming together of cultural vision, religious values, particular government policies, and economic pursuits. As the Puritan scholar Sacvan Bercovitch has expressed it, the English Puritans looked at the land of North America and saw it in terms of Biblical

types – the New Zion or Promised Land waiting for them to cultivate it for Christ. The French Catholics looked at it and saw it as an allegory, a stage on which several different narratives might be inscribed simultaneously. Clearly, a singleness of vision and purpose results in more direct and aggressive action with devastating consequences for those who stand in the way of its fulfillment.

Like the Spanish explorers, the French also published writings about their experiences in the New World. Authors whose names have rarely appeared in anthologies of American literature – such as Jean Ribault, Rene de Laudonniere, Marc Lescarbot, Jaques Cartier, Samuel de Champlain, Rene Robert Cavelier Sieur de La Salle, Gavbriel Sagard, and Jacques Marquette, and others – contributed important histories, personal narratives, and captivity narratives that describe experiences with the Native Americans and the New World from perspectives that are quite different from those of the English. The seventy-three volumes of the *Jesuit Relations*, which contain the reports from the Jesuit missions in North America over the course of the seventeenth century, describe the peculiarities of the human experiences of the Indians and the colonists in detail not found in many English texts. The works of these French writers are powerful in their own right and help to provide an important dimension of the cultural context into which the English settlers were entering as their ships arrived on the coast of New England.

It is important when examining the history and writings of the New England Puritans to remember that the Native peoples were always present in the daily lives and thoughts of the English colonists. Too many histories of early America have given the impression that the Europeans were settlers in a New World that was nearly devoid of other peoples or that the people who were there were unsophisticated and lacking in cultural traditions. A substantial body of scholarship now exists that demonstrates beyond any doubt that the Europeans and their descendents created the myth of the virgin land inhabited by primitive savages as one part of their strategy for justifying the invasion and occupation of the rich territories of the Americas.

When the English arrived in New England, they understood that the land upon which they settled had been occupied and disputed over by many tribes and clans for centuries. In the New England region, resided the nations of the Pequot, the Massachusetts, the Mohegan, the Narragansett, the Pocumtuck, the Wampanoag, the Algonquian, the Abenakis, the Niantic, and the Iroquois, among others. Each group spoke a different language or dialect and differed from others as distinctly as the peoples of different European nations did. The Native people knew very well of the technological superiority of the Europeans in war, for news had been circulating for decades throughout the Americas about the devastating effects of firearms.

Some of the Indians in New England had already managed to get possession of a few muskets. In their wisdom, however, they knew their military disadvantage and sought first to find a peaceful arrangement for accommodating the English.

In the first years of the settlement at Plymouth, the Wampanoag king, Chief Massasoit, and the English settlers established a treaty that led the Chief to bring ninety of his braves and a supply of venison to celebrate. This event was romanticized in the nineteenth century as part of a myth that characterized the Native people as willing participants in their own passive demise. In reality, the Indian toleration of English encroachment and the English restraint did not last long, and by the mid-1620s armed conflict was imminent. This pattern of a wary peace followed by armed conflict was established in the first decade of the English occupation, and it was repeated on an increasingly larger scale over the next century.

The English also learned about some bitter rivalries among the local Native tribes, and for a time they were able to exploit these differences among the Indians to their own advantage. From the time of the arrival of the first Europeans, firearms were highly valued as items of barter with the Indians who could gain a significant advantage over their tribal enemies with these new weapons. Fur traders and fishermen who were not Puritans were willing to trade guns to the Indians for furs and information that would help their fishing and hunting. Even before the Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth in 1620, some of the coastal tribes possessed a few guns. The first English settlers recognized the grave danger to their lives and communities of the growing number of guns, and by 1627, they were trying to put a stop to the spread of firearms among the tribes. One of the most famous rascals of Puritan New England was Thomas Morton who between 1625 and 1627 established a very anti-Puritan village near Plymouth that he called Merrymount where he held festivities with dancing and drinking for his fellow Englishmen and Indian women. In addition to his offensive morals, he also sold guns to the Native Americans in the region, and for that violation he was arrested and deported to England. This event was only the beginning, however, of increasing conflicts between the Indians and the Puritans that grew more frequent as the number of English colonists grew rapidly in the 1630s. The war between the colonists and the Pequot nation in 1637 was the first major conflict and an important turning point in the relations between the whites and the indigenous peoples. It culminated in horrific destruction in which the English surrounded Mystic Fort where about 500 Pequot men, women, and children were sleeping; they set fire to the fort with the result that all of the Pequot either burned to death or were killed trying to escape the flames.

From that day forward, the tribal peoples of the northeast avoided challenging the Puritans, but they also remained suspicious of them and