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In studying the colonization of the so called “New World”, historians came up with an idea known as the “American Paradox”. Put simply, the “American Paradox” is that the New World was not new at all, but was already inhabited by thousands of indigenous tribes, and while the America’s were new to the Europeans, they were not new to the people that had called this land “home” for thousands of years. The history of the relations between Native Americans and European settlers is marked by war, death, and the destruction of entire cultures at the hands of European colonists. While it is true that this is the defining characteristic of Native-European relations, not all of their relations were based around death and destruction. While most of the interactions between these two peoples were very bad, there were instances where these two groups cooperated. In this podcast, I will examine both the good and bad aspects of the relationship between the Native Americans and the British colonists.

The first wave of British colonists arrived on the eastern coast of America in 1607, and founded the Jamestown colony. Relations between the two peoples had immediately turned sour, when a group of Natives from the Powhatan Confederacy attacked the colonists before Jamestown had even been properly built. While the chief of the Powhatan Confederacy attempted to make peace between the two peoples, tensions over land and a mutual distrust between each other lead to constant raids between the two groups, eventually leading to the destruction of the Powhatan Confederacy. According to historian Alan Taylor the population of Natives belonging to the confederacy went from 24,000 in 1607 to a mere 2,000 in 1669.1

Rocky relations between the two peoples persisted in other British colonies as well. In the town of Plymouth, located in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, an English tradesman was killed by a member of the Pequot Tribe, who believed that the Englishman had swindled him during a deal between the two. Combined with disputes over hunting grounds, this escalated into what is now
called the Pequot War, which lasted from 1636-1637. With the help of a few allied Native tribes, the English massacred the Pequot Tribe. The Plymouth colony had had a history of conflict with their neighbors, the Wampanoag Tribe, with whom they had broken several treaties with. In 1675, Chief Metacom, known to the English as Phillip, declared War on the English, believing that the culture of his people, and their very existence was threatened by the colonists. Belief in that he must defend his people was not enough to win the war, however, as Metacom and his armies were defeated and exterminated in 1676.

Relations between the colonists and the Natives, while mostly bad, were not completely marked by conflict. There were moments where the two groups cooperated with each other, and in rare cases, seemed to have a slight respect for each other. After the initial rocky start to their relationship, the Jamestown colonists and the Powhatan’s did briefly engage in trade, with the Powhatans teaching the colonists to farm in exchange for guns. Meanwhile in the Plymouth colony, the English and the Wampanoag tribe signed the first peace treaty between Europeans and Native Americans in 1621. The Wampanoag also helped the English farm the land, and engaged them in trade deals.

The English, unbeknownst to many people today, did, in some cases, have positive views on the Native Americans, instead of viewing them as savages. For example, an Englishman, Thomas Morton, once noted his admiration for the respect that younger Natives showed their elders, stating that:

“The younger are always obedient unto the elder people, and at their commands in every respect without grumbling; in all counccels, (as therein they are circumspect to do their actions by advise and counccell, and not rashly or inconsiderately) the younger mens opinion shall be heard, but the old mens opinion and counccell embraced and followed.”²
In another, equally surprising manuscript, Roger Williams, the founder of the Rhode Island colony, stated his admiration for the Natives, believing that they, along with the Europeans were equal in the eyes of God, stating that:

“Nature knows no difference between Europe and Americans in blood, birth, bodies, etc. God having of one blood made all mankind, Acts 17, and all by nature being children of wrath, Ephes, 2.”

These views, while different from the opinions of the majority of English settlers, nonetheless existed, and are a part of the history of the relationships between the natives and Europeans.

The “New World” was not new, and both the natives and the European settlers would have to come to terms with strange visitors that they encountered. Unfortunately, relations between the two groups were, for the most part, sour, leading to the destruction of thousands of Native American cultures and languages. While we must never forget that, we must also acknowledge that there were moments of cooperation, and even admiration between the two groups.
Notes


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