JAST, **2020; 54: 27-40**

Submitted: 03.10.2019

Accepted: 05.10.2020

ORCID# 000-0002-7110-0442

A Reflection on the 1637 Mystic Fort Massacre in Connecticut

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Abstract

The bloody surprise attack by Puritans on Mystic Fort in 1637 resulted in the wanton slaughter of hundreds of Pequot. The Puritans hailed the decimation as an act of God that saved the English colony from the depredations of savage heathens. In 1889 a heroic statue to John Mason, the Puritan commander, was erected in the Connecticut town of Mystic. A century later, Indian activists and their allies succeeded in removing the offensive monument. This essay makes two points. First, the Puritan slaughter in the brutal tradition of European religious wars was an archetype of racial hegemony and ethnic cleansing that began in the colony of Connecticut and unfolded across the continent. Second, the removal of the Mason statue in 1995 marked a remarkable shift in historical commemoration, one that had celebrated extensive killing, particularly of Pequot women and children.

Keywords: Pequot, Mystic Fort, Sassacus, Puritan, John Mason, Connecticut

Connecticut'ta Yaşanan 1637 Mystic Kalesi Katliamı'na Bir Bakış

Öz

Püritenlerin 1637 yılında Mystic Kalesi'ne düzenledikleri sürpriz kanlı saldırı yüzlerce Pequot yerlisinin vahşi şekilde katledilmesiyle sonuçlandı. Puritenler katliamı Tanrının İngiliz kolonisini barbarların yağmasından kurtarışı olarak gördüler. 1899'da Connecticut'un Mystic kasabasında Puriten kumandan John Mason'un kahramanlık heykeli dikildi. Bir asır sonra Kızılderili aktivistler ve destekçileri bu aşağılayıcı heykeli kaldırtmayı başardı. Bu makalenin iki bulgusundan ilki, Püritenlerin Avrupa dini savaşlarında görülen geleneğe uygun vahşi katliamın Connecticut kolonisinde başlayan ve kıtanın geri kalanına yayılacak olan ırksal hakimiyet ve etnik arındırmanın ilk örneği olmasıdır. İkincisi ise, 1995'te Mason heykelinin kaldırılışının anılmasında görülen dikkat çekici değişime işaret etmesidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pequot, Mystic Kalesi, Sassacus, Puriten, John Mason, Connecticut

In an era of patriotic monument building after the Civil War, a large bronze statue of John Mason with sword at the ready was erected in 1889 in Mystic, Connecticut, the site of a bloody surprise attack by English colonists in 1637. Mason was the Puritan commander who, as the attached plaque stated, "overthrew the Pequot Indians and preserved the settlements from destruction" (Libby 13). The installation was a clear example of history written from the victor's point of view. The commemoration was a reminder that the then current subjugation of Native American people in the West had been rehearsed centuries earlier in the East. One hundred years later, Indian activists and scholars have stood the celebration of Mason's victory on its head. The Puritan victory is now widely regarded as a massacre. Moreover, the wanton slaughter is an archetype for the racial hegemony and ethnic cleansing that played out from the Atlantic to the Pacific.[1] The dramatic reversal in historical memory demonstrates the persistence voice of Native Americans that has reshaped public opinion.

In recent decades, a new appreciation of the Native American experience has emerged in full force. The African American civil rights and Black Power movement during the 1950s and 1960s provided a model for the assertion of other downtrodden groups, including Native Americans in a multitude of ways. To cite only two early examples in popular culture, both in 1970, Dee Brown's best-selling book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and the widely seen movie *Little Big Man* directed by Arthur Penn had a significant impact on mainstream audiences. Brown's relentless documentation of atrocities and the graphic depiction in *Little Big Man* of the United States Army's massacre at Sand Creek in 1864 mirrored contemporary criticism in the streets and in the academy of United States imperial adventures, particularly in Southeast Asia and Latin America. The continuing Native American renaissance went well beyond a saga of victimization. In addition to burgeoning cultural, educational, literary, and spiritual endeavors, the American Indian Movement and the Long March provided compelling prototypes of direct political action.

There was no more dramatic example in New England than the resurfacing of the long submerged Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan, once foes. Gaining federal recognition of their tribal status, the two groups negotiated an arrangement with the state of Connecticut in which they shared a percentage of their revenue from lucrative gambling casinos, the first in the region.[2] With largesse from Foxwood, the most profitable casino in the United States, the Pequot constructed a state of the art museum dedicated to recovering their history on their own terms. In this facility and through other educational outlets, the tribe, now the largest private employer in the state, brought to the attention of the general public, including busloads of school children, a new narrative of the past.

The Puritan Perspective

Among the important reinterpretations at the Pequot Museum are what happened at Mystic Fort on May 26, 1637. In order to understand the horrific event, some background on the Puritan mindset is needed.

New England was a Puritan redoubt in the contentious religious wars that continued a century after the origins of the Reforma-

tion. What the dissident monk Martin Luther had wrought with his 95 theses posted on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517 laid out with fresh urgency with the ascension of Charles I in 1625 to the throne in England. A divine right autocrat, the Stuart monarch in 1629 arrogantly suspended Parliament and instituted personal rule. Among his critics were Puritans who also hoped to purge the Anglican church of its popish ways encouraged by Archbishop William Laud. The royal power hounded the Puritans and harried thousands from the land in what became the Great Migration of the 1630s. The errand into the wilderness was less a retreat than a flanking movement in the Atlantic world by which these latter day Calvinists hoped eventually to redeem England, if not the world. As the Cambridge educated John Winthrop famously instructed his fellow emigrants on board the ship *Arabella* in 1630, “Wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill, the eies of all people are upon us.” Like the Hebrews, the relentless God of Israel demanded that his chosen people were “to walke in his wayes and to keepe his Commandments and his ordinance, and his lawes”[3] (Winthrop 64-65). Winthrop, who would be a twelve term governor of Massachusetts Bay, and 700 settlers, founded the colony with a charter from the king, who was pleased that these zealots were far away.

Among those seeking refuge from Anglican persecution of non-conformist ministers were the influential John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, and Samuel Stone – all graduates of Cambridge University, who arrived at Boston abroad the ship *Griffin* in 1634. Hooker and his assistant Stone joined their followers in Newton (Cambridge), where they were ordained. The Newton residents were eager for farm land and hopefully looked westward toward the fertile valley of the Connecticut River. Already in 1633 the Dutch from New Netherlands, who explored the area in 1614, had established a trading post with the Indians. Pilgrims from Plymouth Colony in the same year established a base to the north at Windsor, which received additional arrivals in 1635 from a congregation in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Another Connecticut River town in 1634 was formed to the south at Wethersfield, principally by emigrants from Watertown, Massachusetts and people from other locations, including those that arrived directly from England. With permission from the Massachusetts General Court, Hooker and Stone in 1636 moved their congregation 100 miles overland to the Dutch settlement at Hartford.

Antagonism between Puritans in Connecticut and the indigenous people quickly escalated. Contention pivoted on several points. Imbued with European concepts of religion, race, and land, the Puritans had little tolerance for diversity in any form. The bloody sectarian wars in Reformation Europe were marked by intolerance, absolutism, and carnage. Scholars estimate that one of three people – men, women, and children – died in Central Europe during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) between Roman Catholics and Protestants. At the time of initial settlement in Connecticut, there was little effort to proselytize, as the minister John Eliot did, later in the century. These early pioneers saw Native Americans less as potential "praying Indians" than "bloody savages," diabolical heathen.

Although slavery of whites had ended during the Early Middle Ages, Europeans enslaved African peoples in the Old World even before the Portuguese and Spanish began the horrific Atlantic trade after 1500. Christians, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, had little hesitation in enslaving Africans or Native Americans. With the notable exception of dissident Roger Williams, who was exiled in 1635 to the wilds of Rhode Island, Puritans conceded little to the Indians, except as a matter of *Realpolitik* when the odds were too high to provoke confrontation. The racial caste system that was an integral part of European conquest in the Americas was taken for granted in early New England.

In addition, colonists' coveted Indian land. What scholar C. B. MacPherson calls "possessive individualism" – the capitalist conceit of private ownership secured by contract law and enforced by the state - contrasted with broader collective assumptions among tribal people whose varied land use allowed for gathering, hunting, and farming over a wide area.[4] An environment that appeared idle and abandoned, neither cultivated nor grazed, if not howling wilderness, was counter to the biblical injunction to subdue the earth and render it fruitful. As John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, declared, if land "lies common, and hath never been replenished or subdued, [it] is free to any that possess or improve it."[5]

Outbreak of the Pequot War

During the initial period of contact, both sides found it mutually advantageous to accommodate to the others concept of justice.

The interchange between colonists and Indians soon became one-sided with the willingness of the English to use their growing numbers and technological superiority to establish supremacy. Antagonism, including violence and atrocities, came quickly. [6]

European contact – epidemiological and commercial - upset the balance of power among rival tribes. During the 1630s southern New England was in turmoil. Small pox over the three previous decades had decimated the indigenous population and created a power vacuum. The Pequot aggressively sought to extend their area of control at the expense of the Wampanoag to the north, the Narragansett to the east, their traditional enemies the Mohegan to the West, and other Algonquians along the Connecticut River Valley and Long Island Sound. All vied for dominance of the European trade. The Dutch in New York and the English to the east contended to expand their lucrative commerce further into the interior. The Dutch established a trading base at what now is Hartford, and Puritans from Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth established frontier settlements along the Connecticut River at Windsor, Hartford, and Wethersfield.[7]

A series of incidents escalated over efforts to control the fur trade. The Pequot aligned with the Dutch; the Mohegan with the Puritans. Massachusetts Bay Colony added to the tension when it began to manufacture wampum, which the Pequot had monopolized until 1633. In 1634, the Western Niantic, a tributary of the Pequot, slayed John Stone, a notorious smuggler and slaver, and seven of his crew on the Connecticut River in retaliation for his outrages and, those of the Dutch who murdered a prominent Pequot (Cave 509-521). The Pequot Sachem Sassacus refused the demand of Massachusetts Bay Colony that the Niantic perpetrators be turned over to them for a capital trial.

Matters became more complicated on July 20, 1636 when Narragansett-allied Indians killed a respected merchant John Oldham and several of his crew on a trading voyage to Block Island in order to discourage the Puritans from trading with the Pequot (Liman 268-294). In return militia from Massachusetts Bay Colony attacked an Indian village on Block Island, burning it to the group and killing more than a dozen inhabitants. The contingent also burned a Pequot village along the coast in retaliation for the killing of Oldham before returning to Boston. Open warfare was full borne (Underhill 3-4).

The Pequot launched a series of raids in Connecticut: they besieged Fort Saybrook for months; and raided Wethersfield on April 23, 1637, killing nine residents and capturing two girls. In a series of attacks, the Pequot slew cattle, burned homes and killed some thirty settlers. With the river towns in panic, the General Court at Hartford on May 1 authorized an offensive on the Pequot under the command of Captain John Mason, a veteran of war in the Netherlands (Underhill 17, 22-23). Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay set the general tone when he declared that if Mason prevailed, "he will surely pursue his advantage to the routing out of the whole nation."[8]

The Pequot effort to enlist the Narragansett in a common front against the English failed. They hoped, as William Bradford described it, to use hit and run tactics to force the intruders out (Bradford 294-295). The Narragansett resented the dominance of the Pequot and were further influenced by Roger Williams to join the Puritans. Mason's force of 90 militia and 70 Mohegan warriors under Uncas were augmented at Fort Saybrook by John Underhill with 19 men. Unable to take a Pequot fort at Groton, Mason sailed east where Narragansett warriors swelled the contingent to over 400 (Bradford 295; Mason 1-2 and Underhill 23).

The Massacre at Fort Mystic, May 26, 1637

Thinking that the Puritans had gone to Boston, Sassasus took a substantial detachment of warriors westward to attack Hartford and left Mystic Fort largely unprotected. On May 26, 1637, with a force of some 400 fighting men, Mason and Underhill, guided by the Narragansett, camped within two miles from the Pequot fort. At daybreak after prayers for victory by the Reverend Samuel Stone, they attacked the compound on the west bank of the Mystic River in complete surprise. Mason estimated that "six or seven Hundred" Pequot were there when his forces assaulted the palisade. Some 150 warriors had accompanied Sassacus, so that Mystic's inhabitants were largely Pequot women and children (Mason 10; Drinnon 35-45 and Kiernan 225-236).

The militia directly entered the fort. There was fierce resistance and hand to hand fighting. In response, Mason ordered, "WE MUST BURN THEM" (Mason 8). He took a firebrand from a wigwam and set the closely packed wooden houses ablaze. Wind fanned the flames,

and the fort burned to the ground within an hour (Underhill 39 and Mason 10). Mason declared that the holocaust against the Pequot was also the act of a God who "laughed his Enemies and the Enemies of his People to scorn making [the Pequot] as a fiery Oven . . . Thus did the Lord judge among the Heathen, filling [Mystic] with dead Bodies" (Mason 10). Of the 600 to 700 Pequot at Mystic that day, Underhill estimated that no more than a handful escaped.[9] More people burned to death than were slain (Bradford 295). English losses were exponentially lower - two dead and twenty wounded.

A crude but revealing Puritan woodcut [illustration, p. 11] illustrates Underhill's account of the relentless assault (Underhill 2). The caption at top reads, "The figure of the Indian fort or Palizado in NEW ENGLAND. And the manner of the Destroying It by Captain Underhill and Captain Mason." Within a circular palisade are identified straight rows of "The Indian Houses," closely packed, and "Their Streets." Systematic slaughter ensued. The fort was encircled by an outer ring of allied Indians with bow and arrow, and an inner ring of militia with muskets. Underhill at the top (the west side) and Mason at the bottom (the south side) block the only two exits. Amid the dwellings, colonists with their smoking muskets shoot down fleeing residents who attempt to escape the conflagration. In other depictions, militia fire upon several groups of armed Pequot who have engaged them just outside the fort. Underhill added that the militia killed men, women, and children with their swords. The English are shown as the active combatants, while the Indian allies wait at the periphery as a separate force.

In his history of the Pequot War, Bradford captured the horror as well as the rationale for the brutality. He wrote:

> It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them, thus to enclose their enemies in their hands and give them so speedy a victory over so proud and insulting an enemy. (*Chronicles* 129)

Like the Hebrews of the Old Testament, the Puritans assumed it was divine will that the chosen people eradicate their enemies.

The Narragansett and Mohegan warriors who allied with the colonial militia were horrified, as Underhill described it, by the actions and "manner of the Englishmen's fight . . . because it is too furious, and slays too many men" (Underhill 41-42). Repulsed by the genocidal tactics of the Puritan English, the Narragansett returned home.

Extensive killing, particularly of non-combatants, was characteristic of European religious wars, such as the concurrent Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in Germany, in which one of three inhabitants was slain.[10] Underhill made clear the difference between Indian and European warfare. "They might fight seven years," he observed, "and not kill seven men" (Underhill 40). The opponents exchange arrows at a leisurely pace and at a distance that limited casualties. In contrast, the militia fired their muskets "point blank" with mortal intent. Puritan bullets hit the Pequot before their arrows were in range. Underhill noted, "Their fighting is more for past time, then to conquer and subdue enemies" (41). After the massacre at Mystic Fort, Mason marched overland "burning and spoyled the country" in burned earth tactics alien to the indigenous people (43).

What the Puritans heralded as the Lord's judgment on the heathen reverberated in the bloodthirsty words of Ezekiel 9:5-6: "Go yet after him through the city and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity: slaughter old and young, both maids and little children." The English slaughtered the Pequot and took their land.

In mid-June, John Mason set out from Saybrook with 160 men and 40 Mohegan scouts under Uncas. They caught up with the refugees at Sasqua, a Mattabesic village near present-day Fairfield, Connecticut. Surrounded in a nearby swamp, the Pequot refused to surrender. Several hundred, mostly women and children, were allowed to leave with the Mattabesic. In the ensuing battle, Sassacus was able to break free with perhaps 80 warriors, but 180 of the Pequot were killed or captured. The colonists memorialized this event as the "Great Swamp Fight".

Sassacus and his followers had hoped to gain refuge among the Mohawk in present-day New York. However, the Mohawk had seen the display of English power and chose instead to kill Sassacus and his warriors, sending Sassacus' scalp to Hartford, as a symbolic offering of Mohawk friendship with Connecticut Colony. Puritan colonial officials continued to call for the merciless hunting down of what remained

of the Pequot months after war's end (Bradford 297). In late June, Captain Israel Stoughton of Massachusetts Bay with a force of 120 militia captured a group of a hundred Pequot refugees along the Mystic River. Subsequently twenty of the captives were bound and thrown overboard, as one account put it, to feed "the fishes with 'em" (qtd. in Drinnon 44). Like Homeric warriors, Stoughton and his men chose young women they found attractive for servants. Overall, Underhill estimated that the English killed 1,500 members of that "insolent and barbarous Nation" in two months. He exalted over the slaughter in Old Testament terms - "to the end that God's name might see his power, and his people" (Underhill 3).

Legacy

In September, the victorious Mohegan and Narragansett met at the General Court of Connecticut and agreed on the disposition of the Pequot and their lands. The agreement, known as the first Treaty of Hartford, was signed on September 21, 1638. About 200 Pequot "old men, women, and children" survived the war and massacre at Mystic. Unable to find refuge with a neighboring tribe, they finally gave up and offered themselves as slaves in exchange for life.

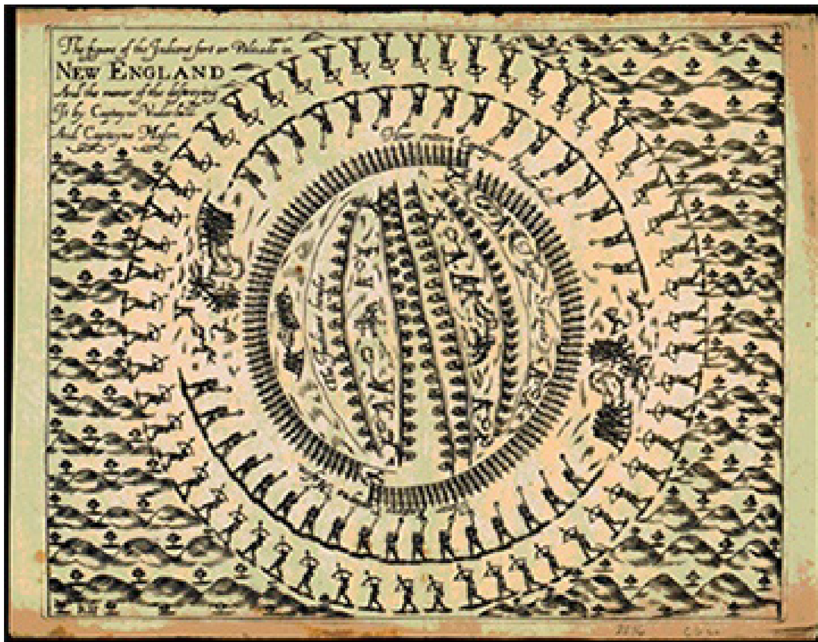
Some were enslaved and shipped to Bermuda or the West Indies. Others were forced to become household servants in Puritan households in Connecticut and Massachusetts Bay. Moreover, colonists appropriated Pequot lands under claims of a "just war" and attempted to legally extirpate the Pequot by effectively declaring them extinct and making it a crime to speak the name Pequot. Those few Pequot who managed to evade death or slavery were later recovered from captivity from the Mohegan and assigned reservations in Connecticut Colony (Mason 15-18).

The colonists attributed the success of the massacre and would be extermination of the Pequot tribe to an act of God. As Mason put it, "Let the whole Earth be filled with his Glory! Thus the LORD was pleased to smite our Enemies in the hinder Parts, and to give us their Land for an Inheritance" (Mason 20).

When Herman Melville in 1851 published *Moby Dick*, he named the ill-fated whaler the *Pequod* after the tribe "now extinct as

the ancient Medes." (Melville 867, chapter 16). Melville would be amazed by the Phoenix-like rise of the Pequot in Connecticut. Furthermore, because of protest by Native Americans and their allies, officials on May 10, 1995 removed the provocative statue of Mason from Pequot Avenue in Mystic. The statue was relocated a year later (June 26, 1996) to a historic Puritan stronghold, the Palisado Green in Windsor, Connecticut, the site of the early English town that Mason helped to found in 1635.[11] Today the Pequot Tribal Nation and the National Park Service in its American Battlefield Protection Program present a fundamentally different interpretation of what happened almost four centuries ago than what the Puritans celebrated as a divine act.

Illustration



The Figure of the Indians' Fort or Palizado in New England
Retrieved from the Library of Congress (Public Domain):
www.loc.gov/item/2001695745

Notes

[1] See Slotkin.

[2] Backed by lawsuits brought by the Native American Rights fund and Indian Rights Association, the Mashantucket Pequot were granted federal recognition in 1983 by the U.S. Congress and $900,000 to buy back lands illegally sold by the state of Connecticut in 1855. https://www.cga.ct.gov/2000/rpt/2000-R-1066.htm. Accessed 2 December 2018.

[3] Winthrop, 64-65. See Weir.

[4] See MacPherson.

[5] Winthrop quoted in Roark, 77.

[6] See Calloway; Kupperman; Hermes; and Richter.

[7] Salisbury; Cronon; and Pulsipher.

[8] Mason, ix-x; and Letter of John Winthrop to William Bradford, May 20, 1637 in Bradford, 394.

[9] Underhill, 39. Mason wrote that seven Pequot were captured and seven escaped. Mason, 10.

[10] Francis Jennings writes, "That all war is cruel, homicidal, and socially insane is easy to demonstrate, but the nationalist dwells upon destiny; glory, crusades, and other such claptrap to pretend that his own kind of war is different from and better than the horrors perpetrated by savages. This is plainly false. The qualities of ferocity and atrocity are massively visible in the practices of European and American powers all over the world." Jennings, 170.

[11] *Steven Goode,* "Windsor Plans to Move Statue of John Mason, Leader of Pequot Massacre."

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