

## Comparing the Land Acquisition of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay By Walker Haynes

While not the first English settlement in today's United States of America, Plymouth Colony is arguably the most important early settlement for the establishment of American values. Pilgrims today are a representative of religious freedom in America. The Mayflower Compact was the first example of a democratically elected government among English Colonists. Each November Americans remember how the Pilgrims and Native Americans came together for the first Thanksgiving. However, the nearby Massachusetts Bay Colony, established almost a decade after, was larger in land and population, economically more successful, and established the city of Boston which became the most important American city in the American Revolution. The two colonies would eventually be merged and given the name Massachusetts. How could the most famous British settlement in America fade into obscurity in under a century? Part of the reason had to do with the differences in land acquisition policies in the two colonies. The expansion of Plymouth settlers into Native American land was heavily regulated by the government and forced to be transactional and non-violent while the Massachusetts Bay colony used a combination of land purchases and conquests to expand.

It is known that Plymouth Colony was very strict when upholding the land rights of Native Americans. Colonists were forced to pay Native Americans for any land that they wanted. They were also forced to either pay for or release any recently claimed unoccupied land should a Native American make a claim to that land. However, it is up for debate how fair these purchases were. It is also true that Native Americans valued the metal tools and manufactured goods that the settlers used as payment much more than the land that they were giving up. It is also a myth that Native Americans often did not understand what a land purchase meant. Many deeds that

represented land purchases had clauses written into them that allowed continued usage of the land by Native Americans, showing that they understood what would happen without these clauses. It would appear that both the Plymouth Colonists and Native Americans understood and were eager to make these land transactions (Bushnell, 1953).

The differences between the policies were seen early on when the Massachusetts Bay Colony went to war with a Native American nation in less than a decade after it was founded. This conflict, known as the Pequot War, saw English settlers from the Massachusetts Bay Colony massacre Native American villages of the Pequot Tribe (“Pequot War”, 2019). While the war was also Plymouth’s first major conflict with Native Americans, the colony was more or less forced to join the war (“Jamestown and Plymouth: Compare and Contrast”, 2015).

The two colonies had very different policies regarding expansion into Native American lands, but where did these differences come from? The over 20,000 Puritans who settled in Massachusetts Bay in its first ten years (“Puritans”, 2019) was a much larger number than the 102 Pilgrims who founded Plymouth Colony in 1620. Additionally, Plymouth colony grew very slowly and sparsely, and the growing Massachusetts Bay colony fell under considerably more population pressure to expand its borders. In fact, Plymouth Colony never grew to a size of more than 3100 people (Deetz, 2007), while the city of Boston alone had 7000 people in 1690 (Population Trends in Boston 1640 - 1990”, 2008) a year before the two colonies were combined.

Another reason for the more aggressive policy of Massachusetts Bay compared to Plymouth Colony was the governing systems of both colonies. Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth had directly elected legislatures. This meant that Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay would have policies that directly reflected the needs of the people. This would multiply the effects of the

population stressors on the colonies. The crowding of Massachusetts Bay would lead the people to demand a more aggressive policy of expansion from their elected leaders while the concerns of the Pilgrims tended to be more focused on survival.

Another possible influence on the policies of the two colonies may have been their differing amounts of religious tolerance. The Massachusetts Bay colony was significantly less tolerant than Plymouth. The colony of Rhode Island was established as a safe haven for those that the Puritans deemed heretical. This can be seen in how Massachusetts Bay Colony settlers considered Native Americans to be beyond the saving grace of God. This is in part due to their belief in predestination. Puritans believed that only those that God has already chosen would receive salvation. It is possible that the lack of religious tolerance in the society impacted how the colonists felt about taking land from the Native Americans.

Part of Plymouth's religious tolerance was a result of its famous leader William Bradford. Bradford was a much more tolerant leader than those of Massachusetts Bay and even his fellow Pilgrims. He also was a major reason for Plymouth's good relations with Native Americans. He helped negotiate Plymouth's alliance with the Narragansett tribe and helped the colonists make friends with the Wampanoags, Massasoit, Squanto, and Samoset (O'Brien, 2019).

However, following the death of Bradford and other early pilgrims as well as the stabilization and eventual growth of the colony, the expansionary policy of Plymouth changed to one much closer to that of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In fact, Plymouth's founding of the Swansea settlement was one of the main causes of King Phillip's War, the last major conflict between British colonists and Native Americans in New England.

By the time Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay Colony merged in 1691, the latter was significantly larger in size and population. Massachusetts Bay had received many more

immigrants from England and as a result was much more aggressive in its expansion. The merged colony was given the name of Massachusetts, and the capitol became Boston. The separatist safe haven was no more. Instead, there remained a Puritan colony that was intolerant of even the Pilgrims that originally settled in the area. Plymouth's downfall was two-fold: its limited population and unwillingness to expand. Massachusetts Bay had ample people and the desire to grow. As a result, the biggest city in New England today is Boston, not Plymouth. But we shouldn't be so quick to say that Plymouth died out. The values of the Pilgrims who first settled on Cape Cod in 1622 are still linchpins of American society today. Many of the values that caused Plymouth to disappear are the values that are the most enduring to this day.

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