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New World Tempests: Environment, Scarcity, and the Coming of the Pequot War

Katherine A. Grandjean

In the earliest English colonies, hunger and violence often traveled in lock-step. Across the fledgling empire, quite a lot of men and women felt “the sharpe pricke of hunger” and, as George Percy explained in writing about early Virginia, quite a lot of “miseris enseeded.” The “Crewell hunger,” whose punishments “noe man [can] trewly descrybe butt he w[hi]ch hathe Tasted the bitternesse thereof,” was a nasty character that pushed Englishmen to do nasty things.¹ Colonists went hungry, it seems, not simply because they failed to cultivate food but because they suffered the wrath of the American environment. Early English colonization, historians are now learning, was frustrated by some profound environmental challenges. Though the Little Ice Age has long been a part of the colonial narrative, scholars are just now beginning to map shorter cold spells, droughts, and storms that wrought particular havoc on English planting. All these things had rather poisonous effects on English encounters with Indians. To a degree not yet grasped, food scarcity directly preceded much of the violence that characterized English colonization. In telling the story of English encounters with New World natives, historians have not fully accounted for the roles hunger and scarcity played in thwarting peaceful relationships. Across the colonies, in different times and places, the pattern repeated: competition for food sparked violence. This pattern even lurks in the background of some unexpected scenes of early American history. An illustrative case is the Pequot War.

In the 1630s an “ocean of Troubles” engulfed New England.² It crested with a war waged by English colonists and their native allies on the Pequot

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¹ Mark Nicholls, “George Percy’s ‘Trew Relacyon’: A Primary Source for the Jamestown Settlement,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 3 (2005): 212–75 (quotations, 248).

² Roger Williams to John Winthrop, [July 3, 1637], in Allyn Bailey Forbes et al., eds., *Winthrop Papers, 1498–1654* (Boston, 1943), 3: 439.

Indians. The Pequot War—named for its eventual losers—lasted roughly from 1636 to 1638. War is, in fact, a lofty word for what occurred during these years; the conflict is better understood as a series of bloody raids and surprise attacks: traders killed, corn burned, and captives taken. Eventually, the violence escalated toward a wholesale assault on the Pequot people. The war reached its gruesome apex with the burning of Mystic Fort, where, in May 1637, hundreds of Pequots perished in a single morning. This attack was the bloodiest episode that the newly planted New England colonies had yet known.³ Despite a rich documentary record, historians have long had difficulty explaining the coming of this war. In unraveling the mystery of what sent the English colonies barreling into war with the Pequots, scholars have pointed to a complex array of factors. Some have stressed Puritan religious fervor, which predisposed colonists to read Indian actions as Satan's test of the very project of New England's city on a hill; others highlight economic competition between the English and the Pequots, who had long enjoyed control of the Long Island Sound trading market. Many have faulted a rapacious colonial appetite for Indian land.⁴ In recent years a rough

³ The best comprehensive treatment of the war can be found in Alfred Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst, Mass., 1996). See also Alden T. Vaughan, "Pequots and Puritans: The Causes of the War of 1637," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 21, no. 2 (April 1964): 256–69; Vaughan, *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620–1675* (Boston, 1965), 93–154; Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975), 177–227; Neal Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500–1643* (New York, 1982), 203–24; Vaughan, "Pequots and Puritans: The Causes of the War of 1637," in *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York, 1995), 177–99.

⁴ Historians have identified a complex constellation of causes responsible for sparking the Pequot War. Most now characterize it as resulting from English belligerence, emanating from aspirations to seize territory and to control trade in the Pequots' backyard. Francis Jennings, in particular, casts the war as the result of English land hunger. The first to blame English economic motives for instigating the war, Jennings contends that the conflict arose when "Puritan appetites for land" moved toward "accelerated acquisition." In his narrative rivalries between Connecticut and Massachusetts colonies over territory—especially the attractive floodplain of the Connecticut River valley—led to the "conquest of the Pequots." Jennings goes on to write that "all the colonists knew that the availability of landed property to an individual depended upon the extent of territory under his government's jurisdiction. All the colonies," therefore, "struggled anxiously to gain preemptive dominion over Indian territories." See Jennings, *Invasion of America*, 178–79 (quotations). Neal Salisbury similarly cites English "hunger for land" as a primary cause for war, though he also sees a religious significance in the war's meaning for a fracturing Puritan experiment. See Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence*, 215, 219–25. The war's most recent narrator, Alfred Cave, offers a slightly different view. Ultimately, Cave rejects explanations that turn on "English greed" and the "desire to annex land and seize fur, slaves, and wampum," all of which fall short, in his view, of an "adequate explanation of Puritan behavior." Instead, his interpretation—still placing "primary responsibility" with the English—rests on more religio-psychological causes, boiling down to "Puritans' concept of savagery as a manifestation of the Devil in history and their suspicion that the history of God's people in the wilderness would be marked by recur-

consensus has formed around the notion that the war was driven largely by the belligerent English “determined to extend their authority” into the Pequots’ domain.⁵ What most studies miss is that, among the factors pushing New England over the brink, a different sort of hunger was also at work.

The Pequot War arrived in a season of want. In the mid-1630s New England was experiencing widespread scarcity brought about largely by environmental distress. A great hurricane blasted through the colonies in 1635, destroying much of that year’s harvest; harsh cold followed. Yet in the same moment, the colonies were also expanding wildly. Thousands were pouring into the northeast, in a great migration that stretched English provisions thin. Crops failed and cattle died just as waves of new immigrants put sudden stresses on New England’s ability to provide for itself. Scholars tend to imagine early New England as a steady bastion of English strength, better fed and more orderly, for instance, than its chaotic stepsibling, the Chesapeake. But if one scratches beneath the bluster of contemporary accounts, the Pequot War somewhat complicates that image. The truth is that, in some regards, New England may not have been so markedly different. As in Virginia, combat over resources—in particular that humble staple, Indian corn—drove English colonists—in blows with their native neighbors. Here, too, it pushed them to do unspeakably brutal things. Though it has been broadly overlooked, this is the Pequot War’s proper context: a time of dearth and desperation for perhaps both the English and native people. No historian has yet examined the Pequot War in light of these environmental realities, but the glaring backdrop against which the war broke out was this struggle with hunger and scarcity.

Nothing can justify the war’s injustices. No explanation, despite historians’ compulsion to somehow explain the inexplicable, satisfies entirely. But, with scarcity and hunger in view, certain things about the war that have consistently nettled scholars become more comprehensible. The environmental context is critical to understanding why English colonists behaved as they did, eventually precipitating war with the Pequots. It helps explain, for instance, why the most immediate catalyst of the war was the death of an English trader, John Oldham. In sticky midsummer 1636, Oldham’s corpse was discovered in his boat, near Block Island; native men had taken over the vessel. It was this incident that triggered the war by setting off a series of events that ultimately sent English soldiers into Pequot

rent conflicts with the Devil’s minions.” See Cave, *Pequot War*, 9–11, 121. Though much of the scholarship on the war has centered on questions of causality, Andrew Lipman’s reinterpretation finds surprising evidence of accommodation in the exchange of body parts during the war. See Lipman, “A means to knitt them together: The Exchange of Body Parts in the Pequot War,” *WMQ* 65, no. 1 (January 2008): 3–28.

⁵ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York, 2001), 194. Taylor’s volume includes a synthesis of scholarship on the war.

territory. But, though colonial writers nearly always cited that macabre scene on Long Island Sound—Oldham’s demise—as a chief “ground of the Pequote warr which followed,” modern historians have seldom been satisfied with that explanation.⁶ The death of a grizzled English trader, in short, hardly seems sufficient explanation for the horrors that followed. Only by seeing the scarcity that was gripping New England in 1636 does one understand the true menace that colonists must have perceived in Oldham’s loss. In the 1630s only a precious few coastal traders were ferrying provisions among the far-flung colonies of early New England. One of them, a veritable embodiment of food supplies, was Oldham.

Of all the things that shaped New World encounters, few were more fundamental than the need to eat. That scarcity and hunger had roles in provoking the Pequot War—a conflict hitherto seen as having little, if anything, to do with such issues—suggests how profoundly these early encounters were shaped by simple, desperate competition for food. The story of the war merits revisiting, if only as a measure of how thoroughly environmental factors may have influenced colonial interactions with native people. It points to new possibilities for scholars plotting the intersection of the early American environment with human actions and human consequences as well as new ways of investigating why early colonial efforts sometimes veered toward such tragic and violent ends. As inhabitants of early America struggled to come to terms with one another, nature’s hand sometimes intervened. By looking for such moments of contingency, scholars gain a broader view of the environmental stressors on which early colonial projects turned. When correlated carefully with environmental conditions, even the most painfully familiar episodes can look very different. The Pequot War is a case in point. Plain hunger, greatly exacerbated by the awkward and uncertain communication patterns that made it difficult for the exploding numbers of immigrants to New England to feed themselves, lay at the core of the frenzied English stumble toward war.

IT IS HARDLY A SECRET that many of the earliest English colonies struggled with hunger. Roanoke suffered when Algonquian neighbors refused aid; Bermuda went hungry in the 1610s, after rats dispatched by a Spanish ship devoured the island’s supplies; Barbados and Providence Island were similarly strained in the 1630s. Early Jamestown colonists endured a Starving Time so severe that some of its inhabitants may have been driven to cannibalism, perhaps even unearthing corpses that had been claimed by the colony’s double curse of famine and disease. To some scholars the inability

⁶ [William Bradford], *Bradford’s History “Of Plimoth Plantation.” From the Original Manuscript . . .* (Boston, 1901), 232.

of England's first colonists to feed themselves appears almost baffling, inexplicable. Part of the problem was that many expected to be fed by Indians, who were to supply food in exchange for English trade goods. The English in Virginia, for instance, brought great sheets of copper that they cut into pendants and jewelry and gave to the Powhatans, often in return for corn. But native people could only afford to feed so many English—Powhatan told John Smith that he thought corn "more pretious" than copper because "he could eate his corne, but not his copper"—and they did not like to be bullied into the exchange.⁷ Moreover the Powhatans' repeated protests that they had insufficient corn to spare may have been true. Recent clues drawn from tree rings and other environmental evidence suggest that the Chesapeake Indians, too, may have been experiencing hard times brought on by record drought and cold.⁸ In the end tensions over foodstuffs sparked a great deal of violence between the English and Indians of Virginia, including the 1622 massacre, in which Opechancanough's men rose up to slay four hundred English colonists, in some cases after first sitting down to breakfast with them.

Yet New England's story was different. Except, perhaps, for the miserable and deadly first winter the Pilgrims suffered in 1620 (an ordeal that sent William Bradford's wife, intentionally or not, over the side of the *Mayflower*), historians have viewed early New England as largely exempt from such trauma. If some of its first immigrants battled scurvy, none was desperate enough to eat "powdered wife."⁹ Though the woes of New England's colonists hardly compared with the horrors known elsewhere, they nonetheless experienced some rather sharp growing pains. In Virginia famine resulted largely because the Chesapeake was for so long a death trap, in which countless numbers died and those left behind were either too weak or too listless to grow any food. New England's plight was just the opposite: nearly all its immigrants arrived in a great rush, in a few short years during the 1630s. And almost none died. In a sense the northern colonies suffered from their own successes.¹⁰ Just as they were booming, hardship hit. What

⁷ Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *The Jamestown Project* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 175. Leftover scraps of copper used for trade have recently been unearthed by the Jamestown Rediscovery archaeological excavation. For examples from the dig, see the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities' website, search under "copper" and "trade," <http://www.apva.org/>. For Powhatan's protestations, as well as discussion of the environmental context of Chesapeake settlement, see Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 166–76, 223–25.

⁸ See esp. Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975), esp. 72–90.

⁹ John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles . . .* (London, 1624), 106.

¹⁰ Dorothy Bradford's death remains something of a mystery, though it seems to have been accidental. No contemporary accounts explain her death; William Bradford barely mentioned the incident in his own history, *Of Plimoth Plantation*. Cotton Mather first suggested she had fallen overboard accidentally. See Mather, *Magnalia Christi*

historians have not yet fully explained, however, is that the difficulties of the 1630s—themselves somewhat hidden—figured heavily into the coming of the Pequot War.

The years immediately preceding the war were hungry ones for English colonists and perhaps for native people as well. The period's scarcity had its origins in a year of punishing weather that preyed on crops and livestock. In August 1635 a mighty hurricane roared through New England and swept away much that had been planted. Calling it "strang & fearfull to behould," Bradford likened the storm to "those Hauricanes and Tuffons that writers make mention of in ye Indeas." He described a dizzying swath of destruction: blown-over houses, missing roofs, trees uprooted by the thousands, and a twenty-foot storm surge. "Signes and marks of it," Bradford noted, "will remaine this 100. years."¹¹ At Narragansett a fourteen-foot flood reportedly drowned eight fleeing Indians as they scrambled to climb trees. Where it did not destroy people and their homes, the tempest certainly threatened crops. "It threw down all the Corn to the ground, which never rose more," Nathaniel Morton wrote.¹² Extreme frost and snow followed in early winter.¹³

Americana (Hartford, Conn., 1853), 1: III. But speculation that she committed suicide persists. Alison Games highlights the hardships resulting from New England's massive immigration. "The very successes of colonies could cause scarcity," notes Games, in comparing New England's early years with the struggles of Bermuda, Virginia, and other colonial projects. See Games, *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 86.

¹¹ Bradford, *History "Of Plimoth Plantation,"* 401–2. The storm's exact path is impossible to reconstruct, but it seems to have come up from the south, passed over eastern parts of Connecticut and Narragansett Bay, and moved north over Plymouth (where destruction was severe) and Massachusetts Bay. Lack of evidence makes it impossible to gauge the damage in other parts of New England, such as the towns north and east of Boston, but records suggest the destruction was widespread and major.

¹² Nathaniel Morton, *New-Englands Memoriall . . .* (Cambridge, Mass., 1669), 95 (quotation). For other contemporary descriptions of the great hurricane of 1635, see Samuel Danforth, *An Almanack for the year of our Lord 1649 . . .* (Cambridge, Mass., 1649), n.p.; William Hubbard, *A General History of New England: From the Discovery to MDCLXXX* (Boston, 1848), 199–201; John Hull, "The Diaries of John Hull, Mint-Master and Treasurer of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay," in *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* 7 (1857): 109–316, esp. 169; Richard S. Dunn et al., eds., *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 151–53. A strikingly detailed account survives of Anthony Thacher's pinnacle being caught in the storm and subsequently shipwrecked off the coast of Massachusetts. See A. Thacher to Peter Thacher, September 1635, in Everett Emerson, ed., *Letters from New England: The Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1629–1638* (Amherst, Mass., 1976), 167–74. Climatologists at the National Hurricane Center analyzed some of these historical descriptions and now theorize that the storm was a major hurricane—a category 3—with maximum winds of 130 miles per hour and a vicious storm surge. See Associated Press, "Great New England Hurricane of 1635 Even Worse Than Thought," Nov. 21, 2006.

¹³ Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Climate and Mastery of the Wilderness in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, ed. David D. Hall and David Grayson Allen (Boston, 1984), 3–37, esp. 6–7.

Across New England the season just before the outbreak of the Pequot War—the spring of 1636—seems to have been a difficult time. Environmental challenges exacted an especially heavy toll on the fledgling Connecticut settlements, which had been planted barely a month before the hurricane struck. So difficult was the ensuing winter that some in Connecticut, starving, chose to return to Massachusetts. During the winter of 1635, the *Rebecka* delivered a group of about “70: men & woemen” back to the Bay Colony. But even these poor folks encountered trouble. Seeking relief after some expected provisions had failed to arrive at Connecticut, they had hastily clambered aboard. Unfortunately, the *Rebecka* promptly ran aground. As its crew struggled to free the boat from sandbars, some of the passengers reportedly succumbed to starvation. Spring brought little relief. The “greatest parte” of the cattle that had been brought to Connecticut prior to winter, John Winthrop noted in April 1636, had been lost to the season’s punishments (though some were miraculously able to survive, even “without any haye”). Winthrop estimated these losses at “neere 20ooli: worth of Cattle.” English families were thus “putt to great streightes for want of provision,” even reduced to eating “Acornes.” Though the pattern was most acute in Connecticut, it was evident elsewhere as well. In February 1636 Winthrop noted the “great scarcitie of Corne” in Massachusetts Bay. That same month colonists were heartened when the *Rebecka* sailed into the bay carrying thousands of potatoes, lemons, and oranges, “which were a great releife to our people” (though the ship, disappointingly, had already off-loaded its corn in the West Indies). Months later food was still in short supply. In April 1636 Massachusetts allowed its more remote towns to participate by proxy in that year’s court of election due to the “scarcity of victualls” in the country.¹⁴

Weather was not the only factor contributing to such scarcity. Early colonial harvests likely fell short as the newcomers adjusted awkwardly to the American environment. Aggravating these shortfalls was the fact that New England was undergoing an unwieldy expansion. Perhaps as much as the storms that soaked the harvest, the endless tide of new arrivals from England spurred shortages. The 1630s witnessed a Great Migration, in which roughly fourteen to twenty-one thousand new colonists voyaged to New England.¹⁵ But the pace of that immigration was not evenly spread

¹⁴ Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 162 (“70: men”); Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 174 (“greatest parte,” “victualls”), 171 (“scarcitie of Corne”), 172.

¹⁵ New England, though more similar ecologically to England than some other colonial settings, required a period of familiarization with new soil types, strategies of cultivation, and crops (including corn). On these adjustments to the New England environment, see for example Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven, Conn., 2004). On migration to New England in the 1630s, see Roger Thompson, *Mobility and Migration: East Anglian Founders of New England, 1629–1640* (Amherst, Mass., 1994), 14. In fact the phenomenon reached

across the decade; in fact, 1634 witnessed a “steep increase” in the number of immigrants, a surge that did not abate until decade’s end. Historian Robert Charles Anderson has identified no less than thirteen hundred individuals and families arriving just in the years 1634–35, “amounting probably to twenty percent or more of the entire Great Migration.”¹⁶ Roughly two thousand to twenty-five hundred people reached New English shores in 1634 alone. All these additional mouths necessarily placed untenable demands on New England’s food supply. That the Great Migration exerted such a strain is now rarely remembered, yet contemporary writers drew the link repeatedly. One account, William Wood’s *New England’s Prospect*, suggests that the colonies were feeling hunger pangs caused by immigration as early as 1633. Though his object was to paint New England in a bright and promotional light, Wood, writing in 1633, conceded that “of late time there hath been great want.” He blamed the “many hundreds” who, departing England, brought with them few or no provisions, “which made things [in New England] both dear and scant.”¹⁷ What likely exacerbated the problem was the timing of these migrations. Most immigrants left England in early spring—in hopes of encountering pleasant weather during their transatlantic voyage—and arrived in summer, too late to help plant, but just in time to make a run on the year’s harvests.¹⁸ Several more years of record immigration only made the problem worse. In 1636 Edward Trelawny lamented this issue in a letter to his brother in England. “The country at present is sick in a general want of provisions, by reason of the multiplicity of people that came this year and relying wholly on it,” he wrote, before pleading for “all sorts of provisions and cattle.”¹⁹

far beyond New England; other regions of the British New World received far greater numbers of immigrants. In 1630, estimates Alison Games, the colonial population hovered somewhere near 9,500; ten years later, it had ballooned to 53,700. Games has called the 1630s an “originative moment” in which this westward migration essentially “secured England’s Atlantic World.” See Games, *Migration and the English Atlantic World*, 4.

¹⁶ Robert Charles Anderson et al., eds., *The Great Migration: Immigrants to New England, 1634–1635* (Boston, 1999), 1: xvii (quotation); Anderson, “A Note on the Changing Pace of the Great Migration,” *New England Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 1986): 406–7.

¹⁷ William Wood, *New England’s Prospect*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan (Amherst, Mass., 1977), 67–68.

¹⁸ On the timing of Atlantic immigration to New England, see Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *New England’s Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1991), 65–66. Virginians also complained of new arrivals from England disembarking with too few provisions and at the wrong time of year. In 1620 Governor George Yeardley wrote to the Virginia Company that if such immigrants continued to arrive “to late to sett Corne,” then he would not be able to “feed them owt of others labors.” See Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 105. He asked that they be sent before Christmas instead (*ibid.*).

¹⁹ Edward Trelawny to Robert Trelawny, Jan. 10, 1635/36, in Emerson, *Letters from New England*, 185–87 (quotations, 186).

If, in the seasons just preceding the war, the colonies were rather pinched, were the region's native people equally straitened? Had not the same storms and frost also preyed upon their cornfields? Answering those questions is difficult, much harder than gauging English distress, given how little testimony affords a view into native communities in these years. But it makes sense to wonder. Though it is doubtful that the region's Indians were undergoing any kind of dire hunger, circumstances suggest that they had probably known want recently as well. That native people's harvests were also falling short is suggested by a trip John Oldham made to trade with the Narragansetts in November 1634: "the Indians had promised him 1000: bz.," Winthrop reported, "but their store fell out lesse then they expected."²⁰ The great hurricane of 1635—a tempest that roundly "spoiled the maize harvest," according to English testament—must have taken a long-term toll.²¹ An additional problem in procuring corn was that there were fewer people to plant it. Indians across the northeast were experiencing a demographic catastrophe entirely opposite to that of the English. For decades plagues had raged through native villages, most recently in 1633–34. In January 1633/34 an English visitor to the Connecticut River valley reported that smallpox had ravaged native settlements "as farr as any Indian plantation was knowne to the west & muche people dead of it."²² Though it is not clear how deeply the Pequots were affected by this "great mortalitie," it surely claimed untold numbers of the subordinate bands who paid tribute to them.²³ They had also recently lost the allegiance of several tributary groups, defectors to Narragansett protection, who may have been supplying the Pequots with a heavy tribute in corn for years. Gone went this supply as well. It thus stands to reason that the Pequots, if not native people generally, were experiencing some of the same hardships.²⁴

But their troubles may not have been quite as acute. Native people were better prepared, in many ways, to handle scarcity. Certainly they would have had difficulty warding off the damages of a major hurricane, but northeastern Indians had some strategies with which to cope with lesser environmental challenges. To protect food stores, for instance, Algonquians built deep storage pits of earth and tree bark, ideal for shielding vegetables

²⁰ Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 132.

²¹ Kupperman, "Climate and Mastery of the Wilderness," 6.

²² Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 108–9 (quotation). The English who reported this epidemic had hoped to trade with western Indians, but the effect of the disease prevented them from doing so.

²³ Bradford, *History "Of Plimoth Plantation,"* 402.

²⁴ John Winthrop noted that the 1635 storm had been even "more violente" to the south of Massachusetts Bay (where groups such as the Pequots and Narragansetts dwelled) and "made a double Tide all that coast." See Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 152. On the several Pequot sachems who "renounced their allegiance to the grand sachem," see Cave, *Pequot War*, 66.

from frost and rain. The Indian diet was also mercifully diverse; the Pequots and their neighbors were accustomed to eating a prodigious array of different foods: squashes, melons, berries, beans, roots, nuts, turkeys and other wild game, fish, clams, crabs, and lobster. Should any one of these food sources fail, others would likely be available. English newcomers, by contrast, may have suffered for their inflexibility in adhering rigidly to Old World dietary custom. Colonists mostly attempted to replicate “traditional English fare,” eating meat stews accompanied by breads, cakes, or puddings.²⁵ Small amounts of vegetables and garden crops brightened the summer diet, and butter and cheese supplemented some meals, especially in late summer and fall. But in the winter colonists were reduced to eating mainly salted meat from the autumn slaughter and peas porridge. Spring was the hungriest season of the year as families transitioned from dwindling stored supplies to fresh. The principal food on which colonists relied throughout the year—the backbone of the English diet—was grain, the very fodder that would eventually take center stage in the Pequot War.²⁶ Native people had more of this staple, English records make clear, and yet there was simply not enough in the mid-1630s to go around.

THE HUNGER bearing down on New England might not have spiraled into war had it not been for John Oldham’s murder. In July 1636, a thick heat hovering over Long Island Sound, the English trader’s corpse was discovered entangled in the netting of his pinnace, afloat off Block Island. Sailing by, fellow trader John Gallop spied the vessel moving erratically and quickly realized something was amiss. Gallop’s crew first spotted “an old seyne” dangling from the boat and only later “perceived a dead body under it, with the head cut off.” That the body was Oldham’s was not immediately obvious. The hapless trader was “starke naked” and “his head cleft to the braynes.” When the boat was discovered, Indians were still aboard, apparently cutting off his hands and feet. After forcing the native men from the pinnace (tossing some overboard with their hands tied, thereby precluding any swimming), Gallop took up the “bloody head and . . . knew it to be Mr. Oldham’s.” “Ah

²⁵ Sarah F. McMahon, “A Comfortable Subsistence: The Changing Composition of Diet in Rural New England, 1620–1840,” *WMQ* 42, no. 1 (January 1985): 26–65 (quotation, 28), esp. 28, 31; Linda Murray Berzok, *American Indian Food* (Westport, Conn., 2005), 123.

²⁶ McMahon, *WMQ* 42: 31, 35–39, 44. On the Algonquian diet, see Howard S. Russell, *Indian New England before the Mayflower* (Hanover, N.H., 1980), 72–95; Kathleen J. Bragdon, *Native People of Southern New England, 1500–1650* (Norman, Okla., 1996), 102–18.

Brother Oldham, it is thee," he said. "I am resolved to avenge thy blood."²⁷ He then reverently slipped the body into the sea.²⁸

For the English the Pequot War began with several English traders' deaths. Though Oldham's death became the most notorious incident, it was not the first. It recalled other attacks, including one that had happened two years earlier, in 1634. That summer another English trader—Captain John Stone—had been slain, apparently by Pequot tributaries. He had coerced these Indians "to go as Pilots" with two of his crewmen toward the Dutch colonies. But before the cohort had departed, the two Englishmen "were both Murdered by their Indian Guides." Stone, "asleep in his Cabbin," was slain next, followed by the rest of his crew, seven men in all. The Indian pilots, according to a later account, then heedlessly "plundered what they pleased and sunk the Bark."²⁹ More recently, yet another English trader, William Hammond, had fallen prey to Indians on the shores of Long Island. When colonial historians took up their pens to explain the coming of the war, nearly all pointed first to these incidents. John Mason opened his *Brief History of the Pequot War* with the scene of Stone's crew being "Murdered," and John Underhill cited the "taking away the life of one Master John Oldham" as a critical spark.³⁰ William Bradford, too, identified Oldham's death as "one ground of the Pequente warr."³¹ And in fact, in the wake of this discovery, the colonies stirred toward war: barely a month after Oldham perished, soldiers from Massachusetts and Connecticut ran roughshod over both Block Island and Pequot villages.

²⁷ Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 180 ("old seyne," "starke naked"); Thomas Cobbet, "A Narrative of New England's Deliverances," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 7, no. 3 (July 1853): 209–19 ("perceived," "bloody head," 211). John Gallop's vow to avenge John Oldham's death may have been an embellishment that his son John Jr. added to the story later, neatly setting up Oldham's death as a convenient justification for the war that followed.

²⁸ The discovery of John Oldham's body is a much-told story. For primary accounts of it, see Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 179–80; John Underhill, *Newes from America; Or, A New and Experimentall Discoverie of New England*, 1638, in Charles Orr, ed., *History of the Pequot War: The Contemporary Accounts of Mason, Underhill, Vincent and Gard[i]ner* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1897), 50–51; Cobbet, *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 7: 211–12, which includes a purportedly firsthand telling of the event by an eyewitness, John Gallop Jr.

²⁹ John Mason, *A Brief History of the Pequot War: Especially of the memorable Taking of their Fort at Mistick in Connecticut in 1637*, 1736, in Orr, *History of the Pequot War*, 17. See also Bradford, *History "Of Plimoth Plantation,"* 386–87. John Winthrop's journal entry on John Stone's death states: "Newes came from *Plim.* that Capt. *Stone* who this *last summer* went out of the Baye," had been slain by "Pequins." See Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 108. The details and significance of Stone's death are analyzed closely in Alfred A. Cave, "Who Killed John Stone? A Note on the Origins of the Pequot War," *WMQ* 49, no. 3 (July 1992): 509–21.

³⁰ Mason, *Brief History of the Pequot War*, 17 ("Murdered"); Underhill, *Newes from America*, 50 ("taking away").

³¹ Bradford, *History "Of Plimoth Plantation,"* 232.

Why a few such episodes escalated into Indian war remains one of the riddles of early American history. If the English reaction to Stone's and Oldham's deaths was extreme, it seems difficult to believe that it had anything to do with the particular people killed. Stone had been something of a ne'er-do-well, a "freebooter" and a rascal.³² Oldham, too, had a colorful past. Though he had lately become somewhat respected in elite circles, he had gained a reputation as a troublemaker years earlier in Plymouth.³³ That these men were hardly eminent citizens has left some historians doubtful that English leaders would provoke a war simply to avenge their deaths. It is easier to imagine that Englishmen conveniently seized on these "relatively minor incidents" to justify attacking one of the more formidable native groups nearby.³⁴ The Pequots were indeed powerful. Situated along the northern shore of Long Island Sound, mostly to the east of the Pequot (later Thames) River, they had recently enjoyed a period of great power coinciding with the advent of native-European trade. The waters that eventually claimed Oldham's body lay at the nexus of complex trading spheres, where Dutch, English, and native interests overlapped. Though they had recently fallen out with Dutch traders, the Pequots largely dictated trade terms in the region. Living along a coast whose shores brimmed with quahog shells, they enjoyed a great measure of control over the making and trading of wampum—the white and purple beads so prized by Dutch and Indian traders. The Pequots' relative power in this trading world undoubtedly made them special targets for English economic jealousy. It seems possible, then, that the English-driven escalation of violence was attributable to plainly economic motives, a bold and transparent grab at Pequot wealth and territory. Certainly the Pequot War was, in some respects, an "economic contest."³⁵ But to read the war's origins as so much high-level jousting over trade overlooks the more fundamentally troubling lessons that its prelude held for the English.

³² Jennings, *Invasion of America*, 189–90 (quotation, 190).

³³ Bradford, *History "Of Plimoth Plantation,"* 230–32. John Oldham had been in the colonies thirteen years before meeting his death in the sound. Unfortunately, little is known about his earlier life or about how he got his start as a trader. For overviews of Oldham's life, see Henry Bond, *Genealogies of the Families and Descendants of the Early Settlers of Watertown, Massachusetts Including Waltham and Weston . . .* (Boston, 1855), 861–64; Robert Charles Anderson, *The Pilgrim Migration: Immigrants to Plymouth Colony, 1620–1633* (Boston, 2004), 345–48.

³⁴ Lynn Ceci, "Native Wampum as a Peripheral Resource in the Seventeenth-Century World-System," in *The Pequots in Southern New England: The Fall and Rise of an American Indian Nation*, ed. Laurence M. Hauptman and James D. Wherry (Norman, Okla., 1990), 60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 48 (quotation). Noting that the amount of wampum collected in the war's aftermath amounted to "the partial underwriting of New England colonization costs by the conquered natives," Lynn Ceci gives wampum causal import in the escalation to violence in the 1630s (*ibid.*, 61). In her reading, John Oldham's death and other incidents were an "excuse to punish the mintmasters and extract wampum payments" (*ibid.*, 60).

The overblown English reaction to these traders' deaths becomes far less surprising when one reconstructs the role such men played in knitting together the English northeast, especially in light of the scarcity of circulating provisions. Consider the region's social geography. Early New England was little more than a spotty patchwork of settlements. In the late 1630s, it was perhaps at its spottiest (Figure 1). The English settlements had just begun to expand: in a few short, recent years, the near-bursting Massachusetts Bay had spun off several new plantations, none particularly nearby. Connecticut was settled in mid-1635, not long before the great hurricane; Providence and Springfield, in 1636. By water these places were separated by long, arduous boat trips; by land, lengthy and unfamiliar woodland stretches. Between English settlements lay huge pockets of uncertainties, deterring all but the most intrepid travelers. Even dauntless Englishmen had only a tenuous command of the great, yawning spaces between colonies. In 1648 Roger Williams hinted at how the English felt about this geography when he described his fellow colonists as "poore grasshoppers, hopping and skipping from branch to twig in [a] vale of teares."³⁶ Herein lay the fundamental importance of early New England's watermen: in the 1630s, traders such as Oldham were among New England's few grasshoppers. In a time when provisions were precariously short, Oldham was one of the only traders transporting goods to the northeast's scattered English settlements.

Much about the communications landscape in the seventeenth century remains murky, but English letters permit something of a reconstruction. They make plain that in the 1630s communications were fragile and waterborne and rested on the backs of just a few seamen. We can glimpse the role that men such as Oldham played in connecting the English colonies in Pequot War-era correspondence. Those carrying letters between Massachusetts and Connecticut, for instance, were a select few English shipmasters and traders: Gallop, John Hodges, Oldham, John Throckmorton, and Joseph Tilly. Bostonian John Winthrop relied on these important figures to send messages to his son, John Winthrop Jr., isolated in the fort at the mouth of the Connecticut River, and his letters reflect that the exchange was almost wholly water-bound. Ships and seamen sail through Winthrop's script, looping back and forth along the coast: "Sonne, I wrote vnto you by the Rebecka," he noted, before taking another opportunity to send "by mr. Oldhams Pinace." The "Blessing," the "Wrenne," the "Bachelor" all came and went. All these voyages were not easy. Even under the best of circumstances, navigating New England's coastal geography could be tricky. Early on, travel and communications between Connecticut and Massachusetts Bay proved nettlesome, as frequent shipwrecks and other calamities vexed

³⁶ Roger Williams to John Winthrop Jr., Nov. 7, 1648, in Forbes et al., *Winthrop Papers*, 5: 279.



FIGURE I

New England in the era of the Pequot War, ca. 1635–37. In the mid-1630s the scattered nature of English settlement in the region made intercolonial communication difficult. Sailing from Boston to the Connecticut River towns, a trip that meant rounding Cape Cod and navigating tricky coastal geography, could take as long as a week. When the war arrived, many of its major sites of conflict were concentrated along the waterways of lower New England. Drawn by Rebecca Wrenn.

intercolonial carriers. Weather took its toll on boats, much as it did on crops and cattle. In October 1635 two shallops “goeinge laden with goodes to Conectec[o]t” were dashed against Brown’s Island; all aboard drowned. The following month a pinnace returning from Connecticut to the Massachusetts Bay was “cast away in manemett Baye.” Its crew wandered for ten lonely days through “extreame Colde, & deepe snowe.” In October 1637 another furious storm claimed one more coasting vessel. “The Wren, a small pinnace, coming from Connecticut,” Winthrop recorded, “was taken in a N.E. storm, and . . . wrecked.”³⁷ Her crew survived, if only to see pieces of the pinnace pulled out to sea. Land travel was little better. It was also far less common. Though traces of those traveling the one hundred miles between Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut are meager, for these years, it is clear that few did. Not until 1633 is there a record of any Englishman attempting that trek, and then it was the infamous Oldham.³⁸

³⁷ John Winthrop to John Winthrop Jr., Apr. 4, 1636, in Forbes et al., *Winthrop Papers*, 3: 244 (“Sonne”); J. Winthrop to J. Winthrop Jr., Apr. 26, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 255–56 (“Blessing,” 3: 255); J. Winthrop to J. Winthrop Jr., June 23, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 275–76 (“Wrenne,” 3: 275); J. Winthrop Jr. to J. Winthrop, May 16, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 260 (“Bachelor”); Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 156 (“goeinge”), 161 (“cast away”), 238 (“small pinnace”). The *Winthrop Papers* offers the best portrait of water communications in early southern New England. See “Couriers Traveling between the Connecticut River Valley and Massachusetts Bay,” <http://jstor.org/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.68.1.75/>. For letters carried by boat between Connecticut and Massachusetts Bay in the years 1635–40, see for example J. Winthrop to J. Winthrop Jr., Apr. 4, 1636, in Forbes et al., *Winthrop Papers*, 3: 244 (“Rebecka,” “mr. Oldhams Pinace”); J. Winthrop Jr. to J. Winthrop, Apr. 7, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 246–47 (“mr. Gibbon,” 3: 247); J. Winthrop to J. Winthrop Jr., Apr. 26, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 255–56 (“Blessing,” “mr. Hodges,” “mr. Oldham,” “mr. Tilly,” unnamed “Shipp”); J. Winthrop Jr. to J. Winthrop, May 16, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 260 (“Bachelor”); Israel Stoughton to J. Winthrop Jr., ca. June 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 264–65 (“Mr. Tilley,” 3: 264); J. Winthrop to J. Winthrop Jr., June 10, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 268–70 (“Rebecka,” 3: 268); J. Winthrop to J. Winthrop Jr., June 23, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 275–76 (“Wrenne,” “Jo: Gallop,” “Batchelor”); Adam Winthrop to J. Winthrop Jr., July 3, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 283 (“batchelor”); Thomas Hooker to J. Winthrop, ca. May 1637, *ibid.*, 3: 407–8 (“these pynaces,” 3: 408); Israel Stoughton to J. Winthrop, ca. June 28, 1637, *ibid.*, 3: 435–36 (“Giggles” pinnace).

³⁸ For similar stories of boat wrecks, including the story of “2. shallops going to Coonigtectutt with goods from ye Massachusetts,” cast away in an “easterly storme,” see Bradford, *History “Of Plimoth Plantation,”* 415. On colonial apprehensions about negotiating the coasts, see John R. Stilgoe, “A New England Coastal Wilderness,” in *New England Prospect: Maps, Place Names, and the Historical Landscape*, ed. Peter Benes (Boston, 1982), 89–105. On how English colonists wrote about shipwrecks as evidence of God’s will, see Julie Sievers, “Drowned Pens and Shaking Hands: Sea Providence Narratives in Seventeenth-Century New England,” *WMQ* 63, no. 4 (October 2006): 743–76. Evidence of land-borne exchange is harder to find, though some occurred. A portion of the Connecticut migrants braved the hundred-mile trek westward and took letters with them. “I sent you a few lines by land and now againe by sea,” William Pynchon wrote from Roxbury to Saybrook in 1636. See Pynchon to John Winthrop Jr., July 4, 1636, in Forbes et al., *Winthrop Papers*, 3: 285. But the land route was little known and mostly untested. For Thomas Hooker carrying letters—likely overland—on his way to Connecticut,

The wheel of New England's economy turned on these men, but the colonies depended on them in more basic ways.³⁹ Even in bountiful times, coastal traders were often the ones to procure and supply food. Newer settlements often looked to add to their own meager harvests by trading with more established English towns or with Indians. Men such as Oldham, therefore, had a special role to play in transporting precious goods to places in need. Plymouth and Massachusetts had relied on purchases of Indian corn, the latter using Oldham as an intermediary. As a trader he had brokered for corn when necessary from Indian neighbors. On at least one occasion, he had helped feed Massachusetts Bay, where, in 1634, the *Rebecka* unloaded "500: bz. of Corne given to mr Io: Oldham" by the Narragansetts.⁴⁰ And after his death, the Connecticut government's first concern was with Oldham's stock of corn. Even as they dealt with escalating tensions with the Pequots, magistrates carefully appointed men to "looke to & prserue the Corne of Mr. Olda & . . . bringe an Accompt the next Cort what quantitie there is of it."⁴¹ Another trader's downfall is perhaps more revealing than Oldham's. Though less remembered, Hammond's fate also hints at traders' crucial role, especially in times of crisis. Only a month before Oldham was found, Hammond, on his way to Virginia, had shipwrecked in the sound. He and a companion had "escaped on shore" but were subsequently "killed by the Indians." What made Hammond's fate so grievous was that it scuttled a crucial voyage: when he died the coaster had been on his way to Virginia—his boat loaded with everything he could "make and borrow"—to trade for "Corne."⁴² He had been engaged in an important journey seeking food for the hungry northern English. Historians rarely, if ever, cast Hammond's death as a factor in the coming of the Pequot War, yet Massachusetts Bay considered it a serious grievance against the Pequots.⁴³ With English hunger restored to view, the fearful meaning of

see John Winthrop to J. Winthrop Jr., June 10, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 268: "Mr. Hooker went hence vpon teusday the last of maye by whom I wrote to you, and sent all your Lettres." On John Oldham's first overland trek to Connecticut, see Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 97. For an expanded discussion of English communications in the seventeenth century, see Katherine Alysia Grandjean, "Reckoning: The Communications Frontier in Early New England" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2008).

³⁹ For a discussion of the importance of early coastal trading in New England, see esp. Daniel Vickers with Vince Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven, Conn., 2005), 7–24.

⁴⁰ Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 132.

⁴¹ J[ames] Hammond Trumbull, ed., *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, 1636–1776* (Hartford, Conn., 1850), 1: 3 (quotation). How John Oldham's corn was ultimately dispensed is not clear. But those to whom Oldham had been indebted were surely comforted when his stash of corn was finally appraised.

⁴² J[ohn] W[inthrop] to Sir Simonds D'Ewes, June [24], 1636, in Forbes et al., *Winthrop Papers*, 3: 276–77 (quotations, 3: 276).

⁴³ William Hammond's death has barely registered in recent readings of the war, but Massachusetts named it as a grievance against the Pequots shortly after he died.

these deaths becomes easier to grasp. These men were the ones who brought letters, news, provisions, and food. The lesson English observers surely drew, in watching such events unfold, was this one: because the violence threatened those who carried goods between English colonies, it threatened all.

Some were more vulnerable than others, especially the two hundred or so colonists huddled along the Connecticut River. These souls were at pains to communicate with other English, from whom they were separated by a chancy overland trek or a week-long boat trip. The lonely predicament of Connecticut settlements goes far in explaining how the murders of a few traders—even traders with arguably sordid pasts—could have triggered such a tremendous overreaction. Begun barely a year before Oldham's death, the Connecticut plantations were in a precarious position in 1636. They had endured the ferocious weather and hunger pangs afflicting most of New England, though not well. Conditions at Saybrook, downriver from the Connecticut plantations, were no better. Servants in the fort lodged a written complaint that they were insufficiently clothed and fed. Bread, breakfast, and beer had all been "taken away," they protested, leaving them nothing to eat but "peass porig." The hunger extended beyond the fort's lower ranks. When a shipmaster failed to bring him corn in May 1636, John Winthrop Jr. pleaded to his father in writing to be "supplied by the first shipping that arrive with any store of provisions." He complained, "I see noe meanes to be supplied heere."⁴⁴ Only two months later, Oldham was discovered dead. And here was the problem: scarcity was amplified by even small hiccups in English shipping. These fledgling villages relied on ties to markets in Massachusetts Bay for survival. Particularly for Connecticut colonists, Oldham's loss made the possibility of being cut off from other Englishmen real. Oldham's killing was offensive not merely because it was at the hands of Indians; it also literally robbed grain from English colonists' mouths.

One wonders whether robbing food from colonists was precisely the point. Though the evidence will likely never be conclusive, the timing and context of Oldham's death are telling: he died in July, just about the time when local native groups would have been readying themselves for the green corn feasts, an annual celebration of immature summer corn. It was also a moment in which the English colonies were experiencing the height of scarcity. Those circumstances raise the possibility that Oldham had tried to bully some Block Islanders into sparing some corn, thus inviting retaliation, or even that they had looked to remedy their own hardships with a

See "The Instructions which are recommended to John Winthrop, Junr., Esqr. in his Negotiation with the Pequots," July 4, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 284–85.

⁴⁴ "Grievances of the Servants at Saybrook," ca. July 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 281 ("taken away"), 282; John Winthrop Jr. to John Winthrop, May 16, 1636, *ibid.*, 3: 260 ("supplied"). For the population of Connecticut settlers, likely no more than 250 by 1637, see Cave, *Pequot War*, 136.

rash grab at Oldham's goods. Plunder, in some sense, was a factor: when Oldham's pinnace was discovered, a canoe "full of Indians and goodes" was hastily departing.⁴⁵ But even if the tug-of-war over food had little to do with Oldham's fate, it had everything to do with what followed, not least because the episode presented new reasons and opportunities for the hungry English to seize food from natives. In what followed Oldham's downfall, it became clear just how desperate a few lonely men in Connecticut were to lay their hands on a bit of Indian corn.

CORN WAS CENTRAL to waging the Pequot War. Some English clamored for Indian corn, whereas others burned and destroyed it with abandon. Corn was everywhere stolen, fired, or dug up. In the records surrounding the war, English interest in corn is palpable. War narratives show almost a bald obsession with it. To witness Englishmen razing Indian cornfields may not seem especially notable; it was a favorite strategy for crippling native enemies throughout early American history.⁴⁶ But, once one comprehends the environmental difficulties that had plagued New England in these years, the records that capture the Pequot War's unfolding assume a somewhat different countenance. The recurrent mentions of corn that are threaded into these tales begin to appear in telling relief. When the English and their Mohegan and Narragansett allies finally crushed the Pequots in 1637, it is worth pausing to remember that among the principal spoils they shared was corn taken from the Pequots. Corn may not have been merely coincidental to the fighting of the Pequot War. Eagerness for provisions pushed some English into a desperate and belligerent stance; it led them to make hasty decisions that contributed to the coming of the war.

That corn should take center stage in the march toward war is perhaps unsurprising; it was a prized commodity both among the English

⁴⁵ Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 179 (quotation). Discussions of the hypothetical circumstances behind John Oldham's death can be found in Jennings, *Invasion of America*, 207–8; Cave, *Pequot War*, 108. One plausible theory holds that Oldham's murder was Narragansett retribution for his recent dealings with the Pequots. After interviewing one of the native men involved in Oldham's death, John Winthrop suggested that Block Islanders had attacked Oldham "because he went to make pease & trade with the Pekodes last yeare"; Block Island was tributary to the Narragansetts, bitter rivals to Oldham's new Pequot trading partners. See Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 181 (quotation). But simple robbery may also have been a motivation: when John Gallop discovered the hijacked pinnace, Indians were rowing away in a canoe filled with plunder from Oldham's boat, including "neere 100: fath: of wampom & other goodes" (ibid.). John Underhill also posited that the Block Islanders merely meant to rob Oldham. See Underhill, *Newes from America*, 50.

⁴⁶ This strategy was not limited to early America; it was common during the age of religious wars of Europe and was used extensively by the English, for instance, in Ireland during the same period. For discussion and examples of this phenomenon, see Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore, 1997), 109.

and Indians. Corn was the one food on which both peoples depended. In early modern England, the word “corn” would have referred to virtually any grain; by “corn,” what New Englanders truly meant was Indian corn, or maize, which was not a part of the English diet prior to colonization but was embraced almost instantly by English colonists. Indian corn was hearty and easy to grow, whereas English grains required more coaxing and labor before they would thrive. When efforts to plant wheat and other traditional English crops faltered, colonists converted quickly, and maize soon became a staple food for people and livestock. Corn consumption fueled the settlement of English colonies. Maize was also fundamental to native culture. Indians ate corn in many ways: dried, ground, boiled, baked into bread, or “whole like beans, eating three or four corns with a mouthful of fish or flesh,” as William Wood reported in 1633.⁴⁷ On hunts, while traveling, or during war, Indian men ate *nókehick*, parched corn mixed with water for a quick and easy meal. The staple was also celebrated in a variety of rituals and ceremonies, including the green corn feasts that many native groups staged around the mid- to late-summer growth of immature, new corn.⁴⁸ Corn was such a precious resource in early New England that it sometimes functioned as a kind of currency; colonists were occasionally allowed to pay taxes in bushels of corn, and native and English alike used it to pay off debts.

The English military reaction to John Oldham’s death revolved around Indian corn. Early actions taken against the Block Islanders and the Pequots—the assaults that finally provoked full-scale warfare—essentially amounted to corn raids. To avenge Oldham’s death, in August 1636 Massachusetts dispatched a force of men under John Endecott to Block Island to raid and punish its inhabitants, who were Oldham’s reputed killers. Endecott’s men, to their disappointment, met with few Indians on the island. What they found were “great heaps of pleasant corn ready shelled,” which, only after realizing they were “not able to bring it away,” they burned. Failing to find many people, Endecott’s men took out their frustrations on the Block Islanders’ crops. The wanton destruction they unleashed on the island was extensive; John Underhill, a party to the expedition,

⁴⁷ Wood, *New England’s Prospect*, 86–87 (quotation, 86); Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America; Or, An help to the Language of the Natives in that part of America, called New England* (London, 1643), 12.

⁴⁸ On corn cultivation and consumption among English colonists, see Anderson, *New England’s Generation*, 150–51; Sandra L. Oliver, *Food in Colonial and Federal America* (Westport, Conn., 2005), 9–11, 40–41. Maize, attests Joyce E. Chaplin, “was the everyday foundation of English colonization” and therefore “essential to settlement.” See Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 209–12 (quotations, 209–10). On the importance of maize to native cultures, see esp. Berzok, *American Indian Food*, 50–55. According to Linda Murray Berzok, green corn ceremonies were “almost universal among maize-growing Native Americans” as a ritual honoring the late-summer growth of immature corn (*ibid.*, 154–56 [quotation, 154]).

remembered spending nearly two days pillaging the island. When they discovered a village “where was much corn,” the soldiers took out their weapons and cut it all down, as if doing battle with the stiff, defenseless stalks.⁴⁹ If English colonists did not have enough to eat, the soldiers ensured that neither would the island’s Indians.

Not all Englishmen were ready to engage in such rampant waste, no matter how fervently they resented the great heaps of corn the Indians possessed. If Massachusetts men had the luxury of punishing Block Island by devastating its food supply, those in Connecticut did not. Unsurprisingly, given their need for provisions, some in Connecticut disagreed with Endecott’s tactics. Perhaps revealing how ill fed colonists in Connecticut were versus those in Massachusetts, military men differed over how to handle Indian corn stores. Bay militiamen were rather quick with flame, whereas those garrisoned at Fort Saybrook hoped to salvage the corn for themselves. The man in charge at Saybrook, Lion Gardiner, was not pleased with Massachusetts Bay’s reckless instigation of Indian war. Saybrook was “famished” even in peace, he warned, and war would be disastrous, sure to divorce Saybrook from access to its meager cornfields.⁵⁰ Thus, when he heard that Endecott’s force also planned to visit Pequot territory and to demand answer for John Stone’s still-unresolved killing, Gardiner—at least according to his own claims—objected strenuously.⁵¹

But it was Gardiner’s own empty belly that helped ignite the Pequot War. The best evidence that English desire for corn tipped the colonies toward war comes from his pen. Gardiner had been concerned about the specter of hunger well before the war. Preparing to build Fort Saybrook in 1636, he had warned Massachusetts magistrates of the danger in attending to fortifications before provisions. “I said it was Capt. Hunger that threatened them most,” Gardiner later wrote.⁵² When it was clear that his protests against Endecott’s expedition would do nothing, he decided to be pragmatic. Gardiner saw in the escalating tensions with the Pequots an opportunity to secure some much-needed sustenance. He thought of the Pequots’ piles of corn, “gathered” and “ready to put into their barns,” and suggested the

⁴⁹ Underhill, *Newes from America*, 55 (“great heaps”), 54 (“where was much corn”).

⁵⁰ Lion Gard[i]ner, “Leift Lion Gard[i]ner His Relation of the Pequot Warres,” in Orr, *History of the Pequot War*, 123–24 (quotation, 124).

⁵¹ In his study of the war, Alfred Cave also notes this discrepancy. See Cave, *Pequot War*, 117. For the long-standing concern at Fort Saybrook regarding hunger, see Gardiner, “Relation of the Pequot Warres.” Almost from the beginning of his time at Saybrook, and certainly as war seemed to draw closer, Lion Gardiner had been concerned about hunger. Once he realized the English colonies were beginning to turn hawkish, Gardiner was even further alarmed, fearing that he and the others at Saybrook would be left “at the stake to be roasted, or for hunger to be starved, for Indian corn is now 12s. per bushel, and we have but three acres planted” (*ibid.*, 123).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 124.

English soldiers raid the harvested grain. "Sirs, Seeing you will go," he begged Endecott's men, "I pray you, if you don't load your Barks with Pequits, load them with corn, for . . . both you and we have need of it." Gardiner's haste to procure Pequot corn even extended to supplying vessels and bags in which to carry it ("I will send my shallop . . . to go with you, [and] you may load your barks with corn," he offered. "But they said they had no bags to load them with, then said I, here is three dozen of new bags, you shall have thirty of them, and my shallop to carry them").⁵³ Gardiner even suggested an elaborate system for guarding the corn and carrying it to the waterside.

It was the resulting rampage at Pequot that ultimately provoked war. Even if they had not endured quite the same hardships, Pequot men and women were surely in no mood to share. Imagine their horror when English soldiers arrived in August 1636 and began plundering. When Endecott's men disembarked at Pequot after raiding Block Island, they threatened to "march through the country, and spoil your corn" if given no explanation for Stone's murder.⁵⁴ Satisfaction eluding them (a short, perhaps perfunctory, parley went nowhere), Endecott's soldiers went about laying waste to Pequot much as they had to Block Island. When they spied Pequots hurriedly burying corn and other items, the English made it their mission to dig up even these hidden stores. Gardiner's men, in the meantime, rushed to scoop as much corn as possible into their sacks (though they were attacked as they scurried back to their boats). Burned, trampled, or stolen, much corn was destroyed. Corn raiding was not the sole offense committed by the English, nor was it the only explanation for Pequot anger. But the decision to plunder ruthlessly helped set New England on the course to war with the Pequots. The Indians could not sit idly by as Gardiner's henchmen snatched grain by the sackful. That they understood Gardiner's men to be key offenders during the raid is clear from their immediate reaction. Pequot vengeance came to Fort Saybrook in the form of a siege: supplies were cut off as the Indians harassed the fort and pilfered its livestock. They also retaliated in kind for what Gardiner's men had done: they attacked Saybrook's pitiable cornfield.⁵⁵

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 126–27 (quotations, 126).

⁵⁴ Underhill, *Newes from America*, 59.

⁵⁵ In his narrative Lion Gardiner fingered Cutshamakin—a Massachusetts man acting as interpreter and guide to the English during the Block Island expedition—as the prime culprit precipitating the war. Gardiner asserted that the war's main point of ignition occurred when Cutshamakin killed and scalped a Pequot, a provocation that could not go unanswered. That Gardiner thought nothing had issued from his own orders to plunder wantonly, however, seems a bit convenient; at the very least, the tale neatly excuses Gardiner from responsibility for the bloodshed that followed. For the assaults on Fort Saybrook following the episode at Pequot, see Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 189–90.

Unfortunately for the English, stealing Indian corn solved very little. After the raids on Block Island and Pequot, Gardiner's men had returned to Fort Saybrook with a "pretty quantity of corn." ("I was glad of the corn," Gardiner remembered.)⁵⁶ But whatever relief Gardiner felt that August was short lived. As the calendar turned again toward winter, cattle and corn were once more costly and scarce. "Cattle were grown to high rates;—[and] Corn was now at 5s. the bushel," John Winthrop recorded before adding, "Things went not well at Connecticut. Their cattle did, many of them, cast their young, as they had done the year before."⁵⁷ By November Saybrook was once again desperate for "victualls." When a ketch passed by, carrying corn from the nearby Narragansetts, Gardiner hurriedly commandeered some of its booty. "I haue tacken one hondard buchils of it," he explained, "becaus I do not know whethar we shall haue anie relief or not."⁵⁸ Connecticut's hunger problem still had not abated when Pequot retaliation reached the river towns in an attack on Wethersfield in April 1637. Even as Connecticut soldiers prepared to march on Pequot in response, John Mason felt the gnawing in his empty stomach. "Our Commons were very short," he wrote, "there being a general scarcity throughout the Colony of all sorts of Provision." As they boarded the boat for Pequot, the Reverend Thomas Hooker said a few words to the soldiers. Hooker prayed that the Pequots "*should be Bread for us*. And thus when the Lord turned the Captivity of his People, and turned the Wheel upon their Enemies . . . then was our Mouth filled with Laughter, and our Tongues with Singing."⁵⁹

No surviving account of the war casts the conflict as having been fought for corn. Nowhere, in ink, did any Englishman admit any such thing. But given the scarcity of provisions vexing New England, raiding native corn as well as punishing Indians was clearly all too tempting to English leaders as well as ordinary souls in 1636. Perhaps Oldham's death was, after all, merely an excuse for what terrors came later. Yet in the matrix of causality, in the calculus that unfolded in English minds, hunger certainly played a role. Never underestimate the yearning, particularly on the part of Connecticut colonists, for food. Reading English provocation of the war as having simply been about trade, then, misses some of the desperation—and contingency—that lay behind colonists' belligerence. It misses the privation that pushed Gardiner's hand in 1636. The Pequot War

⁵⁶ Gardiner, "Relation of the Pequot Warres," 128.

⁵⁷ Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 200.

⁵⁸ Lion Gardiner to John Winthrop Jr., Nov. 6, 1636, in Forbes et al., *Winthrop Papers*, 3: 319 ("vicutalls"), 320 ("I haue tacken").

⁵⁹ Mason, *Brief History of the Pequot War*, 44 ("Our Commons"), 45 ("*should be Bread*," my emphasis), 46. Despite John Mason's delight that his mouth would soon be filled, the following year was equally cruel (ibid., 45). Connecticut bartered desperately for Indian corn from Pocumtucks to the north.

thus illuminates a pattern of events that extends far beyond New England. This story unfurled itself countless times in many other dark corners of the English Empire. When in 1625 George Percy wrote his “Trew Relacyon” of Jamestown’s now-famous Starving Time, he prefaced it with a feeble reminder that “if we Trewly Consider the diversety of miseries mutenies and famishmentts w[hi]ch have attended upon discoveries and plantacyons in theis our moderne Tymes, we shall nott fynde our plantacyon in Virginia to have Suffered aloane.”⁶⁰ He may have been more right than historians have yet understood.

THE HARDSHIPS NEW ENGLAND EXPERIENCED in the 1630s were not unique. They paled next to the horrors endured by English colonists in other places and times. Early Virginia, Roanoke, and even Plymouth, during its infancy years earlier, all weathered much more severe periods of deprivation, ordeals that resulted in innumerable deaths and famously inspired Englishmen to procure corn from Indians by whatever means necessary. The brutal tactics often employed by colonists, in turn, sometimes led to fighting, bloodshed, and butchery. It is stunning how often this pattern repeated itself in early English efforts at colonization. Scarcity—in many cases caused by environmental stress—repeatedly begat violence. At Roanoke in the 1580s, colonists found themselves “utterly dependent” on Indians for food, which was an unhappy situation given that their attempt to begin a colony unluckily coincided with the worst drought in eight centuries. When Indians finally lost their patience with colonists, Karen Ordahl Kupperman has concluded, it was largely due to “pressure that the colonists’ demands for food placed on native reserves.”⁶¹ During the Starving Time of 1609–10, Virginians lived to rue their reliance on native corn when several were “slayne wth their mowthes stopped full of Breade, beinge donn as itt seamethe in Contempte and skorne, thatt others mighte expectt the Lyke when they shold come to seeke for breade and reliefe amongste them.”⁶² Elsewhere Indians and Englishmen came to blows when the latter simply helped themselves to Indian corn. That seems to have been what transpired at Wessagusset, an outpost of servants settled on the Neponset River in 1622. When Wessagusset men filched corn from nearby Massachusetts Indians, they set in motion events that ultimately led to a violent intervention by Plymouth colony and left several Indians dead. Here, too, scarcity directly preceded violence.⁶³

⁶⁰ Nicholls, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113: 242.

⁶¹ Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Roanoke: The Abandoned Colony* (Lanham, Md., 2007), 175 (“utterly dependent”), 76 (“pressure”).

⁶² Nicholls, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113: 247.

⁶³ Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence*, 125–34.

The pattern extends beyond the English colonies. During Kieft's War, the first Indian war weathered by New Netherland, "desire for food and other plunder" contributed to "Dutch hostility to the Indians around New Amsterdam."⁶⁴ Kieft's War may or may not have had a climatic dimension (though, perhaps not coincidentally, it followed almost immediately on the heels of the Pequot War). But New Spain's most famous Indian rebellion clearly did. The 1680 Pueblo Revolt was preceded by years of drought, paltry harvests, and famine. When hungry Apaches and Navajos "began attacking the kingdom's settlements . . . and carrying off whatever food they found," Pueblos were thus easily inspired to vent years of bitterness toward the Spanish in a devastatingly successful uprising.⁶⁵ Though historians have studied all these episodes in some depth, they have rarely considered them collectively. Yet together they suggest a pattern of interaction that cut across colonies and even empires. If European powers dealt differently with Indians, attention to the backdrop of the early American environment nonetheless suggests some commonalities. The equation, in fact, seems tragically simple: the contest for food resources that was triggered by European colonization and exacerbated by environmental stressors all too frequently set encounters off on the wrong foot. Oddly, perhaps because scholars have not fully noted the Pequot War's context of environmental and demographic distress, they have not read it as a similar story. But in many ways, it was.

To those living in New England in the 1630s, the parallel would not have been nearly so hidden. New Englanders had the benefit of knowing what had happened in some of those other places. They knew what calamities Virginians had undergone, which raises nagging questions: why did they not know better? Did New Englanders not know what might issue from a too-hasty decision to steal, burn, or otherwise destroy Indian corn? They did, but perhaps Virginia's example was not so much a deterrent as an accelerant. Perhaps northern colonists were all too eager to escape the fates of their southern compatriots. At least one narrative of the Pequot War (though written by one whose role in the war is unclear) hinted that the knowledge of what had happened in Virginia may have prompted New England settlers to act with greater severity toward the Pequots. Virginia's colonists had done too much to placate the Indians, went this lesson, and had thus invited destruction: "Too much lenity of the English towards the Virginian salvages," Philip Vincent wrote, "had like to have been the destruction of the whole plantation." New Englanders, by contrast, had "assured [themselves] of their peace, by killing the barbarians, better than

⁶⁴ Evan Haefeli, "Kieft's War and the Cultures of Violence in Colonial America," in *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History*, ed. Michael A. Bellesiles (New York, 1999), 17–40 (quotation, 33).

⁶⁵ Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, Calif., 1991), 130.

our English Virginians were by being killed by them.”⁶⁶ The harsh culmination of the Pequot War turned Virginia’s story on its head. Virginia’s Indian problems had peaked with the 1622 attack in which hundreds of English died in a single day; the Pequot War neatly reversed this outcome. It was a similar story with the opposite end: victory came, instead, with an English assault that claimed hundreds of Pequot lives.

In May 1637 the war reached its climax in a grisly spectacle of fire and death. At dawn on May 26, 1637, English soldiers surprised the Pequots slumbering at Mystic Fort. John Mason’s forces—fresh from praying that the Pequots might be “bread for us”—had with them “little refreshment”; some on the march had fainted and were given sips of liquor to revive them.⁶⁷ The plan, Mason later wrote, had been to kill the Pequots and then raid their supplies. “We had formerly concluded to destroy them by the Sword and save the Plunder,” he remembered. But when it became clear that this tactic would not work, Mason arrived at a new plan: “We must Burn them.”⁶⁸ He acted quickly. Mohegan and Narragansett allies to the English formed a loop around the fort, preventing escape, as Mason and other English soldiers took burning wood from within the Pequots’ own wigwams and set fire to all inside. Hundreds of Pequots burned alive. The enormity of this event is almost blinding. So numerous were the deaths that morning that John Underhill, present at the burning, later empathized with the English militiamen who were unaccustomed to seeing such carnage. “Great and doleful was the bloody sight,” he wrote, “to the view of young soldiers that never had been in war, to see so many souls lie gasping on the ground.”⁶⁹ Trying to grasp the whole of the war’s story while looking backward through the Fort Mystic massacre is not unlike gazing downward, through water, at the bottom of a pond: much is distorted. After this one morning, the Pequots were all but broken. Captivity, slavery, and death followed for most that had survived. The gravity of English actions on May 26 thus makes it difficult to avoid viewing the Pequot War as a great and brutal

⁶⁶ [Philip Vincent], *A True Relation of the Late Battell fought in New-England, between the English and the Pequet Salvages*, 1638, in Orr, *History of the Pequot War*, 103 (“Too much lenity”), 109–10 (“assured [themselves]”). Vincent may have been echoing the Virginia Company’s interpretation of the 1622 attack. But his gloss on the Pequot War suggests at least that other Englishmen may have been thinking similarly. For the notion that English leniency and kindness somehow invited 1622’s violence, see for example Edward Waterhouse, *A Declaration of the state of the Colony and Affaires in Virginia . . .*, in Susan Myra Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, D.C., 1933), 3: 541–71, esp. 3: 541–64.

⁶⁷ Increase Mather, *A Relation of the Troubles which have hapned in New-England by reason of the Indians there . . .* (Boston, 1677), 42. (Pages 24–43 of Mather’s narrative contain an early version of Mason, *Brief History of the Pequot War*.)

⁶⁸ Mason, *Brief History of the Pequot War*, 28–29.

⁶⁹ Underhill, *Newes from America*, 81.

display of English strength.⁷⁰ It was not. What happened in the war was as much the result of English desperation.

As the war drew to a close in 1637, some English looked eagerly toward a brighter, less hungry future. In his account of the conflict, Vincent grafted an impossibly happy ending onto the narrative, complete with corn aplenty. "Corn and cattle are wonderfully increased," he reported buoyantly, so much so that colonists sometimes even had enough "to spare to new comers." Lush fields of planted grain now greeted these new arrivals, gushed Vincent: indeed they "never saw such a field of four hundred acres of all sorts of English grain, as they saw at Winter-towne."⁷¹ His descriptions may not have been entirely fanciful. There was some relief: in July 1637 the English shared Pequot corn stores with their Narragansett allies.⁷² And though 1638 greeted New Englanders with a notably severe winter and a spring so cold that the corn seed "rotted in the ground" (not to mention an April snowstorm featuring "flakes as great as shillings"), John Winthrop reported that the year's harvest happily yielded "corn beyond expectation" in Massachusetts.⁷³ Things were not quite as hopeful in Connecticut. Dearth struck again in 1638, forcing colonists to beg corn from the Pocumtucks to their north. It is probably not a coincidence, furthermore, that harvest-time found Mason making yet another visit to Pequot, ostensibly to punish the Pequots who had begun to resettle there. In effect it was another corn raid: the Connecticut militia planned to "supplant them, by burning their Wigwams, and *bringing away their Corn.*" While there the English spent the day filling their bark with corn, "whereof there was Plenty, it being their time of Harvest."⁷⁴ At last, and once more at Pequots' expense, Connecticut filled its rumbling belly. Its colonists ate well that year.

⁷⁰ Historians have debated extensively whether English actions amounted to intended genocide. On that question, see Steven T. Katz, "The Pequot War Reconsidered," *New England Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (June 1991): 206–24; Michael Freeman, "Puritans and Pequots: The Question of Genocide," *New England Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 1995): 278–93; Katz, "Pequots and the Question of Genocide: A Reply to Michael Freeman," *New England Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (December 1995): 641–49. For two articles that closely examine the burning of Mystic Fort, see Adam J. Hirsch, "The Collision of Military Cultures in Seventeenth-Century New England," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 4 (March 1988): 1187–1212; Ronald Dale Karr, "'Why Should You Be So Furious?' The Violence of the Pequot War," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 3 (December 1998): 876–909.

⁷¹ Vincent, *True Relation of the Late Battell*, 109.

⁷² There is little evidence to suggest that native groups in New England engaged in warfare for the purpose of raiding grain or other plunder, though they undertook campaigns to gain trade and tributaries. Still, the Narragansetts in particular had been especially hard hit by the 1635 hurricane and may have had special incentive to plunder Pequot corn. According to Roger Williams, "they desire the Pequots Corne might be enjoyed by the English and themselves as Mr. Governour please." See Williams to John Winthrop, July 10, 1637, letter no. 2, in Forbes et al., *Winthrop Papers*, 3: 446–48 (quotation, 3: 448).

⁷³ Dunn et al., *Journal of John Winthrop*, 257 ("rotted in the ground," "corn beyond expectation"), 256 ("flakes").

⁷⁴ Mason, *Brief History of the Pequot War*, 40 ("supplant them," my emphasis), 41 ("there was Plenty"), 43.