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Springfield's Puritans and Indians: 1636-1655

By

Marty O'Shea

Throughout American history, settlements on the periphery of society have been markedly different from the more developed, more populous ones near the center. Frontier settlements have developed differently for several reasons: the physical environment often shaped the frontier community in an unusual way; the political identity and beliefs of settlers were often unique; frontier communities often had a distinct religious character; the settlement might have even differed ethnically from the community it left behind; and most obviously, the newer settlement often had a different economic base.

Several of these factors made colonial Springfield unique. The Connecticut River offered the founders of Springfield opportunities for trade and farming that were unavailable to the Puritans in the interior regions of New England. Politically and religiously, Springfield stood apart from other Puritan towns. Indeed, Springfield's founder, William Pynchon fled New England after Puritan authorities condemned and burned *The Meritorious Price of Redemption*. The distinctiveness of Springfield in these ways has been well documented by many historians.

However, the distinctiveness of Springfield's Indian policy has been largely overlooked. Springfield's location on the periphery of Puritan society contributed to it developing a significantly different Indian policy. The manner in which Springfield and its founder William Pynchon related to and viewed its Indian neighbors was very uncommon in Puritan society. This claim can be well defended. Firstly, Pynchon had a much broader conception of Indian sovereignty and independence than other Puritan leaders. He did not fully accept that God's grace and the King's charter

gave the Puritans full and final legal authority over the heathen Indians. Secondly, Springfield's land policy was beneficial to both the Indians and the settlers. The earliest settlers did not employ force or phony legal doctrine to take possession of the land. Instead, title to the land was obtained in a fair and equitable manner. Finally, it can be argued that the treatment of Indians in the Springfield courts was generally fair and impartial.

The respect accorded to the Indians by their European neighbors should not be misinterpreted, however. The earliest Europeans in Springfield were not great humanitarians. There is nothing in the records to suggest that they were more noble or kindhearted than their counterparts in other Puritan towns. In fact, Pynchon and his townspeople probably accepted the Puritan notion that the Indians were corrupted by the devil and therefore less godly than themselves. Instead, Springfield's fair and just Indian policy was simply a pragmatic response to its location on the fringes of Puritan society. More than other Puritan towns, Springfield had to maintain good relations with its Indian neighbors. Inimical relations would have endangered Springfield's fur trade and, more significantly, its security. In short, Springfield was compelled to treat the Indians with unusual fairness and justice. Regardless of their motives, the records clearly show that in matters of judicial procedure, land acquisition, and commerce, the earliest European settlers of Springfield followed a remarkably considerate and just policy in their dealings with the Native inhabitants of the area.

The first recorded Puritan visit to western Massachusetts was made by John Oldham and three other unidentified Puritan pioneers in September of 1633. Oldham's dealings with the local Indians were encouraging to the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay. In his *Journal*, Governor John Winthrop noted that:

The sachem used them kindly, and gave them some beaver. They brought of the hemp, which grows there in great abundance, and is much better than the English. He accounted it to be about one hundred and sixty miles. He brought back some black lead, whereof the Indians told

him there was a whole rock. He lodged at Indian towns the whole way.¹

Despite the potential economic rewards, Puritan leaders considered the middle Connecticut River Valley to be an unfeasible area to settle because of its numerous Indian settlements. Peter Allyn Thomas estimates that over 1,000 Indians lived between Windsor, Connecticut and Northampton, Massachusetts. prior to the arrival of Europeans into that area.² Agawam Indians inhabited the western bank of the Connecticut River at Springfield; Woronoco Indians populated Westfield, and Norwottuck Indians lived in the Hadley/Northampton area. Winthrop's *Journal* shows us that the Puritans clearly respected the dominance of the Indians in this area. In an entry dated July 12, 1633, Winthrop describes why the English were reluctant to colonize the middle Connecticut River Valley:

Mr. Edward Winslow, governor of Plymouth and Mr. Bradford, came into the bay, and went away the 18th. They came partly to confer about joining in a trade to Connecticut, for beaver and hemp. There was a motion to set up a trading house there, to prevent the Dutch, who were about to build one; but, in regard the place was not fit for plantation, there being three or four thousand warlike Indians, and the river not to be gone into but by small pinnaces, we thought not to meddle with it.³

Considering that any Puritan plantation in the middle Connecticut River Valley would consist of less than 100 Englishmen, it is understandable that the Winthrop would not want to "meddle" with the Indians.

¹ James Hosmer, ed., *Winthrop's Journal* (New York, 1908), p. 111.

² Peter Allyn Thomas, *Early Settlement in the Connecticut Valley* (Westfield, 1984), p. 17.

³ Hosmer, ed., *Winthrop's Journal*, p. 103.

Indian populations were devastated, however, by a small pox epidemic which swept through the river valley in 1633 and 1634. William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* described the epidemic's effect on an unidentified Indian settlement north of Windsor. Most likely Bradford was describing the Indian settlement at Agawam. The description also shows the European's disregard for the lives of the Native Americans. Bradford wrote, "It pleased God to visit these Indians with a great sickness, and such was the mortality that over nine hundred fifty of the thousand (in one fort) died."⁴ The epidemic apparently struck the Agawam Indians with frightening speed as Bradford noted that "Many of them did rot above the ground for want of burial."⁵

The reduction of the Indian population was probably good news to William Pynchon of Roxbury. Pynchon had a great deal of political and economic clout in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He was a patentee in the royal charter granted to the Massachusetts Bay, a magistrate in the General Court, and a dominant figure in the lucrative New England fur trade. Pynchon, however, was restless. He felt that his home in Roxbury was too far removed from the source of the furs. He wanted to deal directly with the Indians who trapped the beavers, muskrats and otters in upper and western New England.

In May of 1636, Pynchon left the Bay with eight men and their families. The selection of Agawam meant that Pynchon and his townspeople would have ongoing contact with Indians throughout the area. Agawam was essentially at the crossroads of western New England. The Connecticut River was the main thoroughfare for Indian traders traveling from north to south. The Westfield River, which bisects the Connecticut River Valley at the site of Agawam, continually brought Indian traders down from upper regions of the Connecticut River Valley. Agawam was also situated at the exact point where the main east to west Indian overland trail crossed the Connecticut River.⁶ Finally, another

⁴ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647* (New York, 1966), p. 26.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stephen Innes, *Labor in a New Land: Economy and Society in 17th Century Springfield* (Princeton, N.J., 1983), p. 17.

major tributary, the Chicopee River fed into the Connecticut River from the east at a spot roughly four miles north of Agawam.

The Agawam settlement's geopolitical location was precarious. Until Northampton was established in 1654, Agawam was the most northwesterly Puritan settlement. Pynchon and the other inhabitants of Agawam understood the vulnerability of their settlement. They quickly realized that their livelihood would depend on peaceful, stable relations with the local Indians.

That the residents of Agawam were concerned about the safety of their town was immediately apparent when the decision was made to move to the east side of the Connecticut River (present day Springfield) In May 1636, Pynchon wrote to his friend, John Winthrop Jr., that "The best ground at Agawam [was so] incombred with Indians that I shall loose halfe the benefit thereby: and am compelled to plant on the opposite side to avoid trespassing of them."⁷ Pynchon's desire to avoid intruding upon Indian lands, even if it meant temporarily abandoning the rich planting grounds on the west side of the river, is remarkable.

On July 15, 1636, the Agawam natives sold the Springfield town lands to the original settlers. Included in the sale were planting meadows on both sides of the river (land situated in present day Agawam and Longmeadow) and the land where the Springfield town center was ultimately located. The agreement required Pynchon and two other signatories to pay eleven natives "eighteen fathoms of wampam, eighteen coates, eighteen hatchets, eighteen hoes, and eighteen knives."⁸

On the surface it may seem that this transaction is a typical European swindle of the Indians. But a closer examination of this and other transactions show that Springfield's pattern of land acquisition did not follow the Puritan norm. Springfield's Puritans generally respected the land rights and needs of the natives more than other New England towns.

Most Puritan towns justified their claims to Indian lands in one of three ways: by "right" of discovery; by the ancient right of Christians to strip non-Christians of their lands; and by the theory of *vacuum*

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸ Harry Andrews Wright, ed., *Indian Deeds of Hampden County* (Springfield, 1905), p. 11.

domicilium.⁹ This final doctrine rested on the European notion that land that was unsettled, untitled, or unimproved could be considered “unoccupied.” In Puritan New England it meant that Indian lands that were roamed rather than settled could be “legally” taken by the Europeans. In the view of Puritan minister John Cotton, “he that bestoweth culture and husbandry upon [the land], his right it is.”¹⁰ Essentially *vacuum domicilium* meant the Indians could be required to forfeit their legal rights to the land. Gary Nash explains that the Puritans were able to enforce their legal notions because of their strength relative to the Indians:

That the Puritans boldly occupied the land, acknowledging no need to obtain Indian consent through negotiation or purchase, gives some idea of the position of strength they occupied among the disease-ravaged local tribes.¹¹

Nash further explains that if formal land purchases were made by the Puritans, they did not represent “an accommodation to Indian rights and demands.”¹² Instead, Nash explains, formal purchases were made simply to secure Puritan territorial claims against encroachment from other Europeans, most notably the Dutch.

This, however, does not adequately explain why Springfield sought to purchase formal title to native lands. The Dutch had given up on the Connecticut River Valley by the time Springfield Puritans bought native lands in 1636. Why, then, did Springfield negotiate a formal purchase with the Agawam Indians? Springfield was not in the position of strength which would have allowed a unilaterally planned land policy.

⁹ Gary Nash, *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974), p. 81

¹⁰ Charles M. Segal, *Puritans, Indians and Manifest Destiny* (New York: 1977), p. 48.

¹¹ Nash, *Red, White and Black*, p. 81.

¹² *Ibid.*

Springfield's vulnerable position on the Puritan frontier meant that Pynchon and the other leaders of Springfield had to negotiate fairly with the Indians. Although the local Indians were ravaged by disease, Springfield simply was not in a position to antagonize them through outright seizures of land.

There are several other reasons why Springfield's land acquisition policy was unique in Puritan New England. Firstly, the deal for the original town lands was not made with the Agawam sachem. Rather, it was made with eleven individuals. This is highly unusual, as the Indian sachem usually had the final right to determine the sale of tribal lands.¹³ We may only speculate on reasons the transaction was completed in this manner. Perhaps, Pynchon and the other signatories wanted the agreement to have legitimacy among a broader number of Agawam Indians. Or, perhaps, the epidemic of 1634 had left the Agawam Indians leaderless.

The distinctiveness of Springfield's land policy is also seen in the provisions of the deed that secured Indian rights and liberties. It provided that the Agawam Indians;

shall have and enjoy all that cottinackeesh, or ground that is now planted; And have liberty to take Fish and Deer, ground nuts, walnuts, akornes, and saschimesh or a kind of pease, And also if any of our cattle spoile their corne, to pay as it is worth; and that hogs shall not goe on the side of Agawam but in akorne time.¹⁴

Interestingly, the deed strongly rejects the prevailing Puritan doctrine that hunters and gatherers did not have property rights. The deed also indicates that the Indians would be compensated if the livestock of the townspeople damaged their lands. Considering that other Puritan towns often *intentionally* turned their livestock loose onto Indian lands as a way to drive the Indians away, this compensation provision is remarkable!¹⁵

¹³ Alden Vaughan, *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620-1675* (Boston, 1965), p. 35.

¹⁴ Andrews, ed., *Indian Deeds of Hampden County*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Segal, *Puritans, Indians and Manifest Destiny*, p. 48.

Peter Allyn Thomas correctly describes the deed as having been beneficial to both sides. It allowed the Indians to dispose of surplus lands that they simply did not use as a result of the tragic epidemic of 1633; it protected Indian rights and liberties; it gave the residents of Springfield the land they would need to create their peaceful, godly community, and most importantly it created a basis for peaceful relations between the natives and the Europeans of Springfield for many years to come.

The importance of maintaining a just land policy continued throughout the early years of Springfield's existence. Town leaders were very aware of the impact of land grants on the local Indians. A grant made to a Thomas Miller in 1652, for example, reflected, this concern:

it is also granted to Thomas Miller that vacant parsell of planting ground lying over the Great River by the higher wigam pvided hee bee not an occasion of troble and disturbance to the plantasion by any unwise Clashing with the Indians if so he shall forfitt the sayd land in to the Towns hand freely agayne.¹⁶

Further evidence of the town's desire to avoid conflict with the Indians is seen in a grant of land made to John Bliss: "John Bliss hath granted unto him ye pond agt his land in ye Long meadow; provided it wrong not the Indians nor him under them taking their pease."¹⁷ When several grants of land were made, a phrase similar to this one invariably appeared: "These grants that way are on condition yt those lands be free for this Town to dispose of, & yt if they be not purchased of the Indians they clear ye purchase there of."¹⁸ This sort of respect for Indian territorial rights should be considered possibly unique or at least uncommon in Puritan New England.

¹⁶ Henry Burt, ed., *The First Century of the History of Springfield: The Official Records from 1636 to 1736* (Springfield, 1898) I:224.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

The relationship of Springfield Puritans and the local natives is also vividly illustrated by the Quaboag Indian affair of 1647. It should be considered an event of enormous significance to anyone trying to assess Indian relations in early Springfield. Unfortunately, the value of this event has escaped most historians of early Springfield. The incident sheds historical light on the views of William Pynchon towards the local Indians. It must be remembered that Pynchon, as the town's most prominent political and economic figure, had considerable influence over Springfield's relationship with the local natives. The incident reveals Pynchon's conception of Indian independence within the Puritan state; it further illustrates Pynchon's respect for Indian territorial rights; it demonstrates Pynchon's overwhelming concern for the safety and defense of his town from Indian attack, and finally it illustrates how Indian matters greatly impacted the relationship of Springfield to authorities in the Massachusetts Bay.

The incident began in 1647 when a group of Norwottuck Indians of present day South Hadley/Northampton attacked an outlying Quaboag Indian settlement near present-day Barre, Massachusetts, killing three of the Quaboags. In the spring of the following year five more Quaboags were murdered and robbed. To help resolve the dispute and to help bring the murderers to justice, Quaboag sachem Quacunquasit appealed to Massachusetts Bay authorities in Boston.¹⁹ Governor John Winthrop recorded the response of the Bay to Quacunquasit's request in a *Journal* entry dated June 4, 1648:

The Magistrates, being informed at a court of assistants that four of five Indians, who lived upon the spoil of their neighbors, had murdered some Indians of Nipnett, *who were subject to this government* [author's italics], and robbed their wigwam, sent twenty men to Nashoway to inquire of the truth of the matter, and to apprehend the murderers, if they could be found; but being fled to Narragansett, they returned, and informed us certainly of the persons murdered, and of the actors, etc., which was

¹⁹ J. H. Temple, *History of North Brookfield, Massachusetts*. (North Brookfield, 1887), p. 35.

of this good use, (though they could not apprehend them,) that the Indians saw our care of them, and readiness to protect them, and revenge their wrongs.²⁰

After this failed attempt, Quacunquasit enlisted two Indians to once again request assistance from authorities in Boston. This time the Indian messengers appealed to Cutchamaquin, an eastern sachem to whom the Quaboags owed allegiance and who was very close to John Eliot.²¹ Eliot, the "Indian apostle" who created "praying towns" to convert the natives of New England, intervened on behalf of the Quaboags. He convinced the magistrates in Boston to secure financial support and manpower for Quacunquasit's messengers. Once again, Winthrop recorded the actions taken by the Massachusetts Bay on this issue:

After this, two Indians, of Cutshamekin's procuring, offering themselves to apprehend some of the murderers, we gave them commission, and withal wrote to Mr. Pincheon to assist them, etc. (they being near Springfield).²²

The desire of Puritan authorities to enlist William Pynchon as an intermediary was not unusual. Connecticut authorities had done the same during the Corn Trade incident of 1637, an event described below. Pynchon was often expected to coordinate relations between the Bay and the Indians on the western frontier. Springfield's location and Pynchon's commercial ties with the Indians made him a natural choice for this position. Pynchon, however, was never truly comfortable in this role. His unfavorable response to the Governor's request that Pynchon assist Quacunquasit's Indians makes this point clear. Pynchon's letter to Winthrop, dated "this 5 of 5m of 1648," is seventeen paragraphs and well over 1,000 words. It is rich with the Springfield leader's thoughts on the proper relationship of the Puritans to the Indians.

²⁰ Hosmer, ed., *Winthrop's Journal*, p. 334.

²¹ Temple, *History of North Brookfield*, p. 35.

²² Hosmer, ed., *Winthrop's Journal*, p. 345.

First, Pynchon took issue with Winthrop's claim (with which Eliot apparently agreed) that the Indians "were subject to this government." He wrote:

The principall Argut wch Mr Eliot doth use to move you is, that ye murthered are yr subjectes: & thereuppon ye warrant from the Court runns that ye said Indians may charge eather Indians or English to assist them to apprhend them at Naunotak, I. bec [because] ye murthered are yr subjects & 2ly bec the murtherers are within yr Jurisdiction.

But if thinges be well examined: I apprhend that neether the murthered are yr subjects nor yet ye murtherers wthin yr Jurisdiction.

I grant they are all wthin ye line of yr pattent, but yet you cannot say that therefore they are yr subject or yet wthin yr Jurisdiction vntill they have fully subjected themselves to yr government (wch I know they have not) & vntill you have bought their land: vntill this be done they must be esteemed as an Independent free people....²³

Pynchon's claim that the Quaboag Indians were an independent, free people is extraordinary when considered in a broader, English, historical context. English colonial leaders firmly believed that they had broad legal authority in New England, authority that even extended into lands that were not purchased from the Indians. Essentially, the Massachusetts Bay believed that its royal patent gave it full political jurisdiction over any lands mentioned in the patent or discovered in the name of King James.²⁴ In other words, "the Puritan took it for granted that he, as an agent of the mother country, had jurisdiction over all of the people within his colony's patent. The King claimed the whole of New England and a good Englishman -- Puritan or otherwise -- did not question the basic justice of this."²⁵ As his letter to Winthrop clearly reveals, however, William

²³ Temple, *History of North Brookfield*, p. 35.

²⁴ Vaughan, *New England Frontier*, p. 110.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Pynchon did question the basic justice of this premise! Like Roger Williams, Pynchon simply did not believe that the royal charter, in which he was designated a patentee, automatically gave the English jurisdiction over the Indians. Thus, the Norrwotuck Indians were not, in Pynchon's mind at least, subjects of the English crown!

As noted earlier Pynchon's reply to Winthrop underscores his role as an intermediary between the Massachusetts Bay and the Indians. Pynchon was a source of intelligence on Indian activities in the Connecticut River Valley. Throughout his stay in Western Massachusetts, Pynchon supplied the General Court with information on the alliances and the relative military strength of Indians in the Connecticut River Valley. In the letter to Winthrop, Pynchon indicated the Indians around Springfield were less trustworthy than the authorities in the Bay believed. For example, he argued that the Quaboag alliance with Cutchamaquin was a facade. He maintained that the Quaboags would "stick no longer to him than the sunn shines upon him."²⁶ This disclosure would have been very disturbing to authorities in the Massachusetts Bay. The Bay considered Cutchamaquin "the most influential chief in the Massachusetts tribe."²⁷ His prestige and clout among the tribes of New England was vital to the security and proselytizing activities of the Massachusetts Bay. In this letter Pynchon also supplied the Bay with critical information regarding the position of local Indian tribes in the "deadly fewd" between the Narragansett and Mohegan Indians. Both tribes, like the Quaboags, could not be trusted according to Pynchon.²⁸

In addition to being less trustworthy than the Bay imagined, Pynchon also claimed that the Valley Indians were more warlike than Bay authorities believed. Pynchon's reply to Winthrop regarding the Quaboag incident reveals that he was wary about Springfield's vulnerable position on the Puritan frontier. He strongly maintained that the Bay's mandate to

²⁶ Temple, *History of North Brookfield*, p. 36.

²⁷ Vaughan, *New England Frontier*, p.263.

²⁸ Ruth McIntyre, *William Pynchon: Merchant and Colonizer* (Springfield, 1961), p. 30.

apprehend and prosecute the Norwottuck murderers would endanger Springfield:

If ye the Lord should let loose the reynes to [Norwottuck] malice, I mean to their friends & Abettors, it may be of ill Consequence to ye English that intermedle in their matters by a voluntary rather [than] by a necessary calinge, for they & their friends stand upon their innocency, & in that repect they threaten to be avenged on such as lay any hands upon them: & our place is more obnoxious to their malice than the Bay by farr, especially the Naunutuk [Norwottuck] Indians are deperate Spirites, for they have their dependence on the Mowhoaks or maquas who are the Terror of all Indians.²⁹

Grudgingly, Pynchon did offer limited assistance in the matter, but, he was successful in convincing Winthrop and the General Court to drop their demands on him. The following note on the Quaboag incident appears in Winthrop's *Journal*:

Mr. Pincheon offered his assitance, but wrote to the governor, that the Indians murdered, nor yet the murderers, were not our subjects, and withal that it would endanger a war; whereupon the governor advising with the deputy, etc., wrote back presently to Mr. Pincheon, that then he should proceed no further, but send the Indians back, etc.³⁰

Unlike the Indians of Quaboag, the Agawam Indians living around Springfield had sold formal title to their land. Thus, by William Pynchon's reasoning the Agawams were not politically independent; they were, in theory and in practice, under the jurisdiction of Springfield. Springfield laws and statutes, passed by selectmen and by decree of

²⁹ Temple, *History of North Brookfield*, p. 38.

³⁰ Hosmer, ed., *Winthrop's Journal*, p. 345.

William Pynchon, did make a distinction between an English person and an Indian. Additionally, we can assume that cultural and linguistic barriers worked to the Indians' disadvantage in an English court. Despite these qualifications, the instances where Indians appear in the Pynchon court record, as both plaintiff and defendant, give the impression that the Indian did, in fact, find fair and impartial treatment where matters of legal procedure and due process were concerned.

On the surface, it appears that the frequency of litigation between Indians and Puritans in Springfield represents the failure of two vastly different cultures to co-exist peacefully. But a closer examination of the nature and outcome of the litigation reveals that most cases were unremarkable; Most of the cases involved minor theft, assault or debt recovery. They were the type of proceedings that one would find in any community, particularly a frontier settlement like Springfield. Indeed, Alden Vaughan notes that "No New England colony went for more than a few months at a time without some of its residents charging theft against neighboring Indians."³¹

One of the most serious cases, during the time period under consideration, was registered in the Pynchon Court record on May 4, 1648. The record of the case, which is printed below, reveals that despite their physical segregation, the Agawam Indians could still bring charges against the Puritan townspeople. It also shows the nature of the due process that existed in cases of this sort. And it clearly illustrates that William Pynchon was not unwilling to rule against one of his own in favor of an Indian.

Coe one of the Indians on the other sid [of the Connecticut River] did complain against Francis Ball for striking his wife two blowes with a stick. Francis Ball saith that it was but two blowes with a shorte stick about two foote long and that not so big as his little finger and he struck her only on her beare skin coate.

³¹ Vaughan, *New England Frontier*, p. 199.

I ordered him [Ball] to pay her [Coe's wife] two hands of wampam.... he refused the said 2 hands and said he would give two blows for it.³²

Another assault complaint was lodged by an Agawam Indian on June 10, 1650. This case also shows that Springfield magistrates followed formal criminal procedure even when the grievance was filed by an Indian. The full record of the case is printed here:

Having herd the Case in difference between Thomas Miller and Nippinnsuite [?] Jones: Mr. Moxon beinge present Thomas Merick, George Coulton, Thomas Cooper and John Pynchon and with their advise I [William Pynchon] have judged Thomas Miller to receive 15 lashes for the breach of the pece in striking the said Indian with the butt end of his gunn .³³

Interestingly, the guilty Englishman in this case opted to avoid the whipping by "payinge downe 4 fathom of wampam."³⁴

While Pynchon was willing to mete out harsh punishment to English persons who wronged an Indian there is evidence suggesting that he was less inclined to vigorously prosecute cases against his Indian neighbors. Pynchon's investigation and prosecution of a charge of theft directed at a local Indian by a Rowland Thomas makes this point clear. On July 20, 1650 Pynchon directed his constable, Thomas Merick, "to make inquiry amonge our Indians on the otherside what Indian hath broken open Rowlands house...."³⁵ However, after signing and dating this entry in the record Pynchon had this afterthought for Merick:

³² Smith, ed., *Colonial Justice in Western Massachusetts*, p. 217.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

If you find him at Woronoco you may persuade him to come and push him forward to make him come, but in case you cannot make him come by this meanes, then you shall not use violence but Rather leave him.³⁶

Pynchon's stipulation that Merick avoid the forceful apprehension of the alleged criminal is significant. Pynchon was willing to compromise his sense of justice and impartiality by the one maxim which influenced every decision he made: Stable and peaceful Indian relations had to be maintained at all costs. As a community dependent on the Indian fur trade and as a community on the fringes of Puritan society, Springfield simply could not afford to antagonize its Indian neighbors (even if Rowland Thomas did not get "her best redd kersy petticote" back!!)

A court record entry dated July 23, 1650 shows that Merick and his men did ultimately apprehend the bandit. They temporarily "bound him with their cords" over to Attumbesund the Sachem of Woronoco. Attumbesund, however, released the accused. Most Puritan towns would have reacted to this with hostility. Alden Vaughan claims that "the greatest potential for friction between the colonies and the subject tribes came in the rare instance when a sachem refused to surrender to the colonial courts a tribesman wanted for trial. The colony usually won the dispute by seizing hostages until the desired subject was delivered into custody."³⁷ This sort of hostile response obviously would have endangered Springfield. So, rather than confronting or impugning the Woronocos on this issue, Pynchon simply summoned the Sachem to his home in Springfield, where the two negotiated an agreement for the Woronocos to pay Rowland Thomas 5 fathom for the stolen coat.³⁸

While criminal law in Springfield either did not distinguish an Englishman from an Indian or treated the Indians favorably, other aspects of Springfield's law treated the Indians differently and put them at a disadvantage. These laws restricted and policed the conduct of the Indians who lived closer to the center of Springfield. Generally, these

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Vaughan, *New England Frontier*, p. 191.

³⁸ Smith, ed., *Colonial Justice in Western Massachusetts*, p. 223.

laws, which were designed to reduce the occurrence of episodes that might result in conflict or hostility between the Indians and the English, came straight from the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company. According to these mandates, Indians were prohibited from entering Puritan towns; all men were to be trained in the use of weapons and any Englishman found guilty of selling arms to the Indians were to be deported to England.³⁹

The Pynchon court record and the town record suggest that Springfield abided by the charter's orders regarding Indian policy. These were important orders that even Springfield, with its otherwise uncommon Indian policy, would have been reluctant to disregard. The case of Widow Horton illustrates this point. On October 9, 1640, she was questioned "about the selling of her husbands peice [firearm] to the Indians." Horton indicated that "she knew of no order against it and doth promise to take it home againe." Pynchon did not accept her unfamiliarity with the colony's statute. He "tould her if she would speedily get it home againe or else it would cost her dere for no commonwealth would allow of such a misdemenor."⁴⁰

Indian behavior was also restricted by Springfield laws which governed land usage. These laws, however, did not apply to the natives only. All the inhabitants of Springfield had their planting and harvesting closely managed by William Pynchon, whose authority was similar to that of the owner of a company town, according to Stephen Innes.⁴¹ So, it was not unusual or discriminatory when Pynchon

ordered that Henry Smith and Th: mirack shall have power to restrayne ye Indians from breaking up any new grounde or from planting any yt was broken up ye last yeare, alsoe for ye Swampe yt is in ye neck they are to pitch up stakes yt soe ye Indians may be limited & restrayned from enlarging ymselves in yt Swampe.⁴²

³⁹ Nash, *Red, White and Black*, p. 79.

⁴⁰ Smith, ed., *Colonial Justice in Western Massachusetts*, p. 208.

⁴¹ Innes, *Labor in a New Land*, p. 3.

⁴² Burt, ed., *The First Century of the History of Springfield*, I: 165.

Nor was it unusual or discriminatory that Coe, the Agawam Indian mentioned in the Francis Ball case described above, had to petition the Pyncheon court in order to “plant corn in the Swampe over the Agame River.” (Coe’s request was granted “only for one year provided he would secure it against any cattell which he was entitled to doe or else if it were Spoiled he would aske nothing for it.”)⁴³

Clearly, authorities in Springfield recognized the need to police Indian conduct with a code of laws; this was vital to the town’s survival. Yet, the cases described above show that these laws were not administered harshly. Pynchon understood the need to execute these laws with discretion. The Rowland Thomas case is a perfect example of Pynchon’s judicial restraint. Rather than harshly imposing the Puritan legal code, he chose to resolve the issue by using diplomacy and negotiation. In the Horton case there is no indication that the Indians were to be punished for possessing a firearm. Town authorities simply wanted the gun back. The good behavior of the Agawam Indians was important, but if ensuring their good behavior aggravated them, then Springfield backed off.

Indian conduct was also policed by laws which prohibited them from obtaining alcohol from the townspeople of Springfield. This is another example of a Bay Colony code that even Springfield would have been reluctant to discount. Violations of the liquor laws do not appear in either the court record or the Springfield town records prior to Pynchon’s departure in 1652. But, on June 27, 1655, the court did hear a case involving Robert Ashley, who ran the town tavern. On that day an order of restraint was issued to Robert Ashley for illegally selling wine and ‘strong waters’ to the local Indians. The preface to the restraint order allows us to understand the importance and significance of the liquor laws in colonial Springfield:

... it is famously known how the Indians abuse themselves
by excessive drinking of strong liquors whereby God is

⁴³ Smith, ed., *Colonial Justice in Western Massachusetts*, p. 217.

grievously dishonoured, and the peace of this Plantation
in great danger to be broken.⁴⁴

Once again we see how the town's safety concerns shaped and guided its Indian policy. Springfield's legal code undoubtedly treated the Indians differently. Yet this differentiation is not evidence that the European inhabitants of Springfield viewed the Indians with contempt. Nor is it evidence that the inhabitants viewed the Indians as barbaric or ungodly. The surviving records do not support these conclusions. (There is no evidence, for example, that vigorous proselytizing activities ordered by the Massachusetts General Court in 1646 were ever undertaken in Springfield.) Instead, the surviving records suggest that the Indians were treated differently simply because the townspeople were concerned about their own safety in a remote and unfamiliar environment.

Indeed, the town records show that the military defense of the settlement was a vital concern. The Springfield militia was established just three years after the inception of the town. On November 14, 1639, the selectmen ordered that "the exercise of trayning shall be practised one day in every month...."⁴⁵ The order also stipulated that "all above 15 yeares of age shall be counted for soldiers."⁴⁶ That the militia was primarily intended to ward off an Indian attack is seen in clause 3 of the selectmen's decree. It ordered "yt no P'son in ye Plantation shall trade give or lend to any Indian any quantity of powder, little or great, under ye penalty of 40s for any tyme yt any P'son shall be found a transgressor in this kind."⁴⁷ The sale of powder to an Indian was obviously a very grave offense. Forty shillings was a remarkably stiff fine. By comparison, the fine for canoe theft, also a terrible crime in Puritan society, was only 10 shillings in early Springfield.⁴⁸ The forty shilling fine and the impact of Pynchon's ruling in the Horton case of October, 1640, were probably

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁴⁵ Burt, ed., *The First Century of the History of Springfield*, I: 168.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, I: 178.

enough to discourage the townspeople from arming the local Indians. We can be reasonably assured that Springfield successfully kept English firepower out of the hands of the Agawam Indians.

Still, Springfield was not satisfied with its military defenses. In December of 1640, the requirements on members of the Springfield militia grew more demanding. On December 24 of that year, the selectmen issued the following mandate:

It is ordered yt every trayned man shall have his peice fixed fit for service, & each peice I lb of powder & 20 bullets to ly by them, besides what they use in daily service, wch they are to get in readyness by ye 8th of January next and on defect herin to be lyable to what fine shall be imposed.⁴⁹

The importance of military training in times of peace was probably a lesson learned from the Pequot War of 1637. The war represented a major turning point in the Puritans' relations with the Indians. With the elimination of the Pequots from the southern Connecticut River Valley, the dominance of the Puritans over the tribes of New England was firmly established.

For Springfield, the war was important also, but for entirely different reasons. The viciousness and the scope of the war frightened the fledgling community. The war is also significant because Springfield's reaction to it represented yet another instance where Springfield's Indian policy deviated from the Puritan norm. Ultimately, the war strained relations between Springfield and the rest of Puritan New England.

When hostilities broke out in 1637 every Puritan town was expected to dispatch men to assist the towns of southern Connecticut which were under siege. Massachusetts Bay mustered 160 soldiers; Hartford sent 42 men; Windsor, 20; Wethersfield, 18. Even Plymouth, which was far removed from the hostilities, sent over 30 men.⁵⁰ Springfield, however, refused to leave its own settlement undefended; not

⁴⁹ Burt, ed., *The First Century of the History of Springfield*, I: 165.

⁵⁰ Vaughan, *New England Frontier*, pp. 139-140.

a single man was sent. When we recall that Springfield was settled just one year before the outbreak of the Pequot War, it is not remarkable that the town did not send any men. Few hands were available, particularly in April, 1637, when the townspeople were experiencing their first planting season. In fact, Springfield petitioned the Connecticut River General Court, under whose jurisdiction it fell, for men and supplies to be sent upriver. This request was, of course, denied. It was not this manpower issue, however, that embroiled Springfield in a dispute with the rest of Puritan New England.

The other river towns understood that Springfield could not commit men to fight the Pequots. This is revealed by a letter written by Roger Ludlow to William Pynchon concerning the Pequot War. Ludlow was a close friend of Pynchon's and a magistrate on the River Town General Court. In a lengthy letter, dated May 17, 1637, Ludlow expressed concern for the safety of Springfield and warned Pynchon to be "careful and watchful that you be not betrayed by friendship" [with the Indians] and attempted to explain why the River towns were unable to send any help upriver to Springfield. He wrote:

Whereas you say we were not willing to send you any hands, I pray be not so uncharitable, for I can assure you it is our great grief we cannot, for our plantations are so gleaned by that small fleet we sent out, that those that remain are not able to supply our watches, which are day and night, that our people are scarce able to stand upon their legs; and for planting we are in like condition with you.⁵¹

Springfield's differences with the other river towns should have ended with Ludlow's letter to Pynchon. Both sides accepted the fact that if Springfield handled its own defense, then nothing more would be expected.

The mutual understanding broke down, however, when one of Pynchon's commercial shallops and its crew was pressed into service without Pynchon's consent by authorities in Hartford. Pynchon was

⁵¹ Massachusetts Historical Society collections, 2nd Series, Volume 8, p. 35.

greatly upset by this. If the manpower issue did not prove Springfield's reluctance to fight the Pequots, Pynchon's vehement protest certainly did. In Pynchon's mind, Springfield only needed to defend itself from attack during the Pequot War. Pynchon had returned to the principle that consistently influenced his Indian policy: Springfield would involve itself with the natives only to the extent that its own security and stability were at stake. In this instance, it meant that any further involvement with the Pequots and the war against them was unwise and unnecessary.

The controversy worsened when the River Towns tried to tax Springfield to defray the costs of the Pequot War. Pynchon again protested to the River Town General Court, claiming that the costs Springfield incurred defending itself "have not been chargeable to any of you."⁵² He also claimed that Springfield had already been taxed by the Massachusetts Bay. Ultimately, it appears that Springfield did pay the Connecticut tax, but Springfield's response to the Pequot War was ambivalent at best. It was concerned about the Pequots only to the extent that they represented a threat to Springfield. But when called upon, Springfield simply was unable and, to a much greater extent, unwilling, to commit manpower, boats, or taxes to help fight the Pequots!

Shortly after the Pequot War, Springfield's relationship with the River towns was further strained by yet another disagreement over Indian policy. This "corn trade incident" ultimately led to the secession of Springfield from the General Court of the River towns. The incident further illustrates how Indian matters often negatively influenced the relationship between Springfield and other Puritan towns.

The corn trade incident originated in the disruptions of the Pequot War. The war undermined the planting and harvesting efforts of virtually every town along the Connecticut River. As a result, these Puritan settlements found themselves with a shortage of corn during the winter of 1637-1638. Southern Connecticut had been particularly devastated by the Pequot War, so authorities there looked northward for Indians that could supply the needed corn reserves.

Once again William Pynchon was looked to as an intermediary. He was instructed by the River Town General Court to purchase corn from the Agawam, Woronoco, or Norwottuck Indians at 5 shillings per bushel.

⁵² Smith, ed., *Colonial Justice in Western Massachusetts*, p. 14.

Pynchon was a wise choice in this matter. His relations with the Indians were amicable and he had a legally sanctioned and protected monopoly on trade with Indians in the upper Connecticut River Valley. However, the Indians, understanding that the shortage would translate into higher prices, refused to sell at the artificially determined price. When Pynchon sent news that he was unable to obtain any corn, the River town authorities immediately dispatched Captain John Mason to Springfield. One year earlier, Mason had led the slaughter of hundreds of Pequots in Mystic, Connecticut. We can imagine that the presence of this Indian foe unnerved Pynchon, who was always careful not to antagonize his Indian neighbors. Nevertheless, Pynchon agreed to serve as an interpreter at a meeting between Mason and a group of Norwottucks. The meeting, which was held at Pynchon's home in March, 1638, was unproductive. Mason immediately suspected that Pynchon was undermining his efforts in an attempt to profit from the shortage of corn. As a result, Pynchon was formally charged by the Court with 'unfaithful dealing in the trade of corne.'⁵³ In Puritan New England, where usury and profiteering were considered sinful, this was a very serious charge. Claiming that Pynchon did not apply enough pressure on the local Indians and that Pynchon did not adequately assist Mason, the Court found Pynchon guilty and fined him 40 bushels of corn.

Pynchon angrily protested the latter claim, but probably would have accepted the Court's contention that he failed to aggressively demand that the Indians sell at 5 shillings a bushel. He respected the Indians' economic rights and certainly was not willing or able to threaten the Indians into selling their corn. In other words, he was not prepared to jeopardize Springfield's security over the matter. Mason apparently felt differently. Two months after his initial expedition he traveled to Woronoco with a squad of soldiers. But even this expedition failed, as he ultimately paid 12 shillings a bushel.

Generally, the commercial relations between the Indians and Europeans of Springfield were vibrant and healthy. Trade provided a foundation for the peaceful relations created by Springfield's land and

⁵³ Samuel E. Morison, *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, Volume 64, June 1932 "William Pynchon, the Founder of Springfield," p. 84.

judicial policies. This conclusion is inescapable; as long as the settlers needed grains and furs, the likelihood of hostilities was small.

The nature of the fur trade contributed to the stability of relations between the Indians and English for several reasons. First, trading was a licensed activity in the Bay Colony. Although he had a handful of agents working for him, Pynchon alone controlled trade with the natives in and around Springfield. Puritan authorities assumed that the fewer commercial agents dealing with the Indians, the less the chance that animosity would develop between the two groups. This assumption proved correct in early Springfield. A second reason trade furthered peaceful relations is offered by Peter Allyn Thomas. Thomas believes that trade between the English and the natives of Springfield helped to break down many of the social, cultural, and linguistic barriers that existed between the Indians and the English. He contends that the fur trade served as a "bridging mechanism" between the two cultures.⁵⁴ Allyn's contention is well grounded. Pynchon was widely respected in Puritan New England for his ability to converse in native languages. Furthermore, the commodities that the two sides exchanged created a degree of interdependency. The Indians relied on Pynchon for a wide range of manufactured items that were previously unknown to them. Prior to Pynchon's arrival, the Agawam Indian tools and wares resembled those of the stone age. They quickly became fond of and dependent upon English knives, hatchets, and brightly colored finished cloth, blankets, and coats. These are the items, in fact, that the natives obtained when they sold the original town lands to Pynchon. They also were attracted to metal trinkets and ornaments such as brass kettles, mackerel hooks, scissors, needles, pins, combs, pots, and spoons.⁵⁵ Similarly, the early settlers of Springfield were dependent upon the natives. The corn trade incident has shown that the settlers relied on the Indians for agricultural products when harvests were inadequate. We have also seen that Pynchon and the Indians traded diplomatic intelligence. But, it was the fur trade that made the settlers truly dependent on the natives. Indeed, this was Springfield's *raison d'être*. From 1636 to 1652, Pynchon obtained tens of

⁵⁴ Thomas, *Early Settlement in the Connecticut Valley*, p. 14.

⁵⁵ McIntyre, *William Pynchon*, p. 26.

thousands of skins of beaver, otter, muskrat, mink, fox, raccoon, wildcat, and moose. These skins were packed in hogsheads and carted downriver to Pynchon's warehouse at Enfield Falls. From there the skins were shipped to England and the continent, where they were in great demand.

When Pynchon did not obtain the skins with bartered goods, he offered the Indians wampum. Wampum contributed to the interdependency of Springfield and the natives. The Indians seemed to have an unlimited fondness for this shell money, and Pynchon seemed to have an unlimited supply of it. Pynchon hired townspeople, mainly children, to string thousands of fathoms of the blue and white shells. Indians, in turn, accepted wampum as a sign of status and wealth. Peter Allyn Thomas maintains that Indian sachems used their supply of it to validate their authority over their subjects.⁵⁶ As a result, wampum quickly became an accepted form of currency in Springfield as it was in the rest of Puritan New England.

The vibrant commercial relations between the Indians and the early settlers of Springfield lasted less than 30 years: By the middle of the 1650's the importance of the fur trade to the economy and survival of Springfield was dramatically lessened. The fur trade reached its highest level in 1653, the year after William Pynchon returned to England. The Pynchon account books reveal the dramatic decline of the fur trade after this. From 1651 to 1653, the Pynchons exported an average of 2,800 pounds of beaver pelt per year. Over the next four years the Pynchon's son, John, exported an average of only 1,490 pounds per year. Thereafter, the decline continued. Several factors led to the virtual demise of the fur trade by the middle of the 1650's. Most significant, was overhunting; the supply of beavers, muskrats, otters, etc. was nearly depleted by the late 1650's. Secondly, John Pynchon began to shift the basis of Springfield's economy from fur trading to agriculture. Indeed, by the mid 1660's the Connecticut River Valley was becoming the "breadbasket of New England."⁵⁷

The decline of the fur trade had enormous consequences on the relationship of the Indians and Europeans of Springfield. While the fur

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Early Settlement in the Connecticut Valley*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ Innes, *Labor in a New Land*, p. 33.

trade helped establish tranquil relations when it was healthy, its demise quickly created a rift between the Indians and Europeans. As Springfield's economy evolved and grew, the Puritan settlers became less dependent on their Indian neighbors: they no longer could or did rely on the Indians for pelts; and grain shortages, which were previously alleviated by the Indians, vanished. In short, the 'bridging mechanism' ceased to have any value to the Europeans of Springfield. The Indians, meanwhile, became more dependent on the Puritans. Peter Allyn Thomas explains that when the Indians were no longer able to provide furs after 1655, they began to obtain European goods on credit, using their land as collateral. Ultimately, this impoverished the local natives by forcing them into debt and completely eroding their land base. Indeed, in 1661, a Springfield court ordered the Agawam Indians to forfeit the last of their Springfield land holdings in order to repay a debt to a Samuel Marshfield. A higher court ultimately overturned this ruling after the Indians pleaded that the ruling had left them with "little or nothing left to plant on."⁵⁸ Thus after 1655, the leverage the Indians had in their relations with Springfield's Puritans had disappeared: The settlers no longer "needed" the Indians. With the collapse of the fur trade, the Puritans had established their economic hegemony in Springfield. The settlers no longer needed to treat the Indians as equal, commercial partners. They could conduct their Indian affairs without worrying about the economic consequences.

There were other reasons Springfield's relations with the natives deteriorated after the middle of the 1650's. First, William Pynchon, who was widely known and respected by several Indian tribes, returned to England in 1652 for religious reasons. He was replaced by his son John. John might have exceeded his father's financial achievements, but he certainly did not inherit his father's tact or diplomatic wisdom. Secondly, as other towns were settled along the Connecticut River, such as Northampton in 1654, and as the population of the town increased, Springfield felt more confident about its defenses. It was no longer an underpopulated, frontier community. Consequently, Springfield, like other Puritan towns, assumed a stronger and more antagonistic posture toward the Indians. Tragically, relations between the settlers and the natives degenerated into open warfare. In 1675, thirty-nine years after

⁵⁸ Peter Allyn Thomas, *Springfield, 1636-1986*, (Westfield, 1987), p. 17.

William Pynchon established friendly contacts with them, a group of Agawam Indians, responding to King Philip's call-to-arms, attacked and burned down the town.

Yet, the animosity of the second half of the 17th century should not overshadow the healthy and unique relationship of Springfield's Puritans and Indians from 1636 to 1655. During that time the Puritans and the native inhabitants of Springfield lived in relative peace. William Pynchon, the architect of the town's Indian policy, had a very liberal and unconventional understanding of Indian sovereignty and independence within the Puritan state. He did not believe that the King's charter automatically gave the Puritans jurisdiction over the natives. Peaceful relations were also advanced by the land policy of the earliest settlers. We have seen that Springfield's Puritans obtained Indian lands in a fair, equitable, and mutually beneficial manner. Unlike other Puritan towns, Springfield did not employ force or sham legal doctrine to take possession of Indian lands. Springfield's judicial procedures also promoted goodwill. The records reveal that the Indians were generally treated fairly and impartially in Springfield's Puritan courts. Finally, we have seen that commercial relations helped to promote harmony and interdependence between the Indians and the settlers. But we must also acknowledge that this harmony was tenuous. It was not based on the nobility or kindness of Springfield's Puritans. Instead, the settlers acted out of self-interest. Unlike other Puritan towns, Springfield simply had to maintain good relations with the Indians; there was no other option. If the Indians were antagonized, the fur trade and the town's safety would have been seriously jeopardized.