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- 28 Green, *Springfield: 1636-1886*, p. 162.
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- 31 Wright, *The Story of Western Massachusetts*, I, 267.
- 32 John Pynchon to Reverend Russell, October 5, 1675, cited in Wright, *The Story of Western Massachusetts*, I, 266.
- 33 Alfred M. Copeland, *A History of Hampden County, Massachusetts* (Springfield, 1902), p. 50.
- 34 Massachusetts Bay Colony Commissioners to John Pynchon, October 15, 1675, cited in Green, *Springfield: 1636-1886*, p. 148.
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- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
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## The Real William Pynchon: Merchant and Politician

Stephen J. Cote

In 1652 William Pynchon left New England and sailed back to his birthplace near Essex, England. Behind him, he left a considerable heritage, an expanding family and the extensive businesses that he had built over the years. But in the legend of William Pynchon there is little mention of him as a colonial politician. While it would be impossible to recount all of his dealings in these few pages, it would be in order to illustrate, by some of his activities, how a man of influence operated in the early days of colonization. William Pynchon was a classic example of the mercantile colonist. He came to the New World for a chance to profit by the availability of land and resources; and, in 1652, having accomplished this, he returned to England to live his remaining years in comfort from the profits gleaned in America.

Pynchon was born on December 26, 1590 near the shire of Essex. His parents were neither wealthy nor aristocratic. Nevertheless, they were possessed of some influence in the area and were included in much of the social life in and around their town of Springfield.<sup>1</sup> William's education is somewhat of a mystery, no one is quite sure where he went to school but it is known that the boy had extensive knowledge of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. His religious education was not neglected; he was active in the Church, serving as Church Warden at Christ Church in Springfield in January of 1620 and again in December of 1624. He was married in that year to Anna Andrew and by the time they left for America in 1630, they had one son and three daughters.<sup>2</sup>

In March of 1629 Pynchon joined the Company of the Massachusetts Bay with a subscription of £25.<sup>3</sup> In May he was made an Assistant to the Governor. He was such, made plans to leave for the New World on March 29 of the following year.<sup>4</sup> Upon arriving in New England, Pynchon settled in Dorchester. There, weakened by the arduous voyage, his wife died. The motherless status of

his children was soon remedied when he married Frances Sanford, widow, of that town. Soon after he moved the household to Roxbury where he became a prominent citizen.<sup>5</sup>

Pynchon's work as an Assistant in the General Court was not outstanding and his name is seldom mentioned in the Court records except for being a member of one or two minor committees. But during this time he was gaining influence both by his position and by the lucrative fur trade he had developed shortly after his arrival. In August of 1632, he was made Treasurer of the General Court and he held that post until 1634 when he resigned.<sup>6</sup> At that time, the Court examined his books and records and announced that all was in order.<sup>7</sup>

Pynchon had resigned from his post because he had joined a group of men who sought to venture westward to the "Great Ryver," the Connecticut, and to establish settlements there. On March 3, 1636, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony granted a Commission to these men to establish such a settlement.<sup>8</sup> Since there were already people living along the banks of the river, the Commission might seem an unnecessary detail. However, the men, Pynchon among them, saw to it that this document gave them powers of jurisdiction over the residents of the area by reason of the distance from the General Court. The Commission granted that "Roger Ludlowe Esq., Willm Pinchon Esq., John Steele, Willm Swaine, Henry Smythe, Willm Phelpes, Willm Westwood, and Andrew Ward, or the greater pte of them, shall have full power and authoritie to hear and determine in a judicial way,...those differences which may arise..."<sup>9</sup>

With their Commission in hand, the party moved westward and settled at the location then called "Agawaam," after the local Indians. Settlements began to spread up and down the river and, as they did, Pynchon's fur trade expanded. He dealt extensively with the Indians and the few white trappers who ventured south from Canada. While he maintained some business with the Dutch in New Amsterdam, Pynchon was stymied by the "riff" and rapids at Windsor. To compensate for this and to centralize his operations, he erected a large trading center near the settlement of Windsor at what is still known as "Warehouse Point."<sup>10</sup> By the end of the first year, the extent of the Commission, Pynchon and the other leaders were prospering.

With prosperity came the feeling that the towns and hamlets along the river need no longer remain under the control of the court almost one hundred miles away. Therefore, at the end of the year, instead of applying for renewal of the Commission, the leaders of the settlements gathered and declared the existence of a General Court at Hartford which claimed jurisdiction over the entire Connecticut valley.<sup>11</sup>



"Portrait of William Pynchon (all illustrations in this paper are provided through the courtesy of the Springfield City Library)

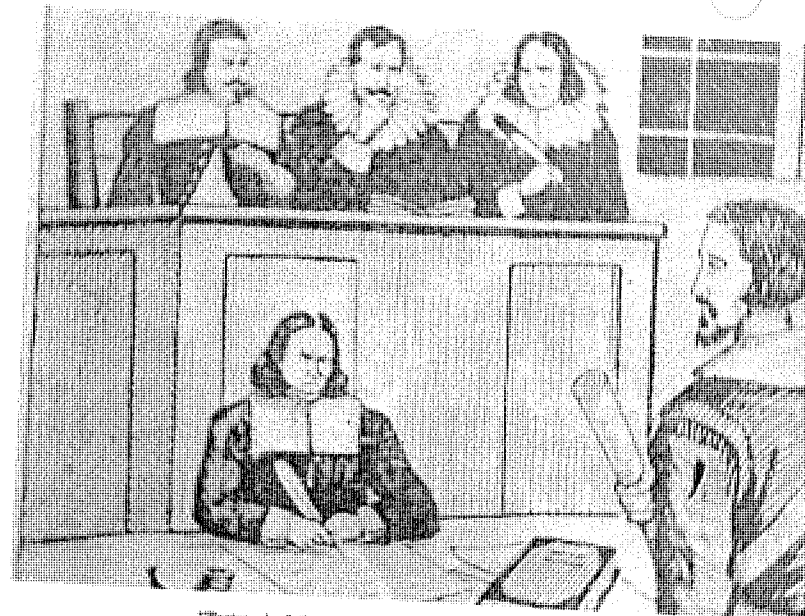
During this time, Pynchon's personal power developed and he gained influence throughout the area. His personal account books indicate that he was acquiring considerable wealth from his various enterprises. Further, they indicate that he was extending his control over the settlers through loans or credit on goods purchased through him.<sup>12</sup> By the end of 1638 there was increasing hostility between the Court at Hartford and Pynchon's businesses. At one point, for example, Pynchon was ordered by the Court to purchase corn from the Indians at Agawaam. When he reported that he was unable to purchase the grain at the specified price, Thomas Hooker, Governor of Hartford, suggested that he had deliberately sabotaged the deal in order to purchase the corn privately and then to sell it to Hartford at an inflated rate.<sup>13</sup> Later, even with a show of force, the authorities were forced to pay more to the Indians than Pynchon's rate.<sup>14</sup>

From then until February of the following year, the Hartford Court attempted to limit or to regulate businesses that involved Pynchon. It was in response to this that Pynchon began to exhibit the extent of his political skills. At the start of the venture on the Connecticut River, the nominal leader of the original Commissioners was Roger Ludlow, a gentleman of considerable means and popularity. By 1639, however, he had been supplanted by Pynchon, whose businesses and general economic hold on the area placed him in a position of greater influence than Ludlow. Based on this fact, Pynchon, and not Ludlow, has always been acclaimed as the founder of Springfield, Massachusetts. This is perhaps a moot point since without Pynchon's burgeoning operations, the settlement of Agawaam might not have expanded the way it did.

When the action of the General Court at Hartford became intolerable to Pynchon, he gathered the leaders of the community for a meeting. Of the original eight Commissioners, only Roger Ludlow, Henry Smith, and William Swain were present.<sup>15</sup> Smith was Pynchon's son-in-law and, according to Pynchon's account books, Ludlow was in debt to Pynchon to a moderate degree. Therefore, it would seem that effective control of the meeting was in the hands of William Pynchon. The meeting adjourned with the decision that Agawaam was no longer subject to the jurisdiction of the Hartford Court and "reaffirmed" the ties to the General Court at Massachusetts Bay.<sup>16</sup> The first entry in the personal records of the settlement under Pynchon stated that the residents of "Agaam uppon Quinnetecot Being now by Godes providence fallen into the line of the Massachusetts Jurisdiction" thought it best to ordain William Pynchon "to execute the office of a magistrate in this our plantation."<sup>17</sup> There followed a list of the powers vested in the position but they were summed up with the acknowledgement that they tend to "the Kings peace, and the manifestation of our fidellity to the Bay Jurisdiction..."<sup>18</sup> The main thrust of the document was similar to the Commission of 1636; however, this time there was only one man exercising the power—William Pynchon.

The members of the General Court at Hartford were annoyed at the unilateral action taken by the Agawaam Plantation. They were, no doubt, even more annoyed that the move took place under the auspices of the man they had tried to contain. Though there was nothing they could legally do to exert control, they continued to denounce the people of Agawaam for their actions. They maintained that the settlement was not a part of Massachusetts Bay and that the people could not make it so by their word alone.<sup>19</sup> William Pynchon was already working on that one.

In April of 1641 a petition was sent to the Massachusetts General Court outlining the situation. On June 2, 1641 the Court responded in favor of the petitioners, claiming that the grounds on which the government at Hartford based its sovereignty were non-existent. In a lengthy statement the Court claimed that the original wording of the Commission of 1636 had been



"Portrait of the General Court granting Pynchon the right to settle near the Connecticut River"

"misrecited" and gave the corrected version.<sup>20</sup> Whole sections of the document were now rewritten. According to the colony records: "In the commission it is said that those noble parsonages have interest in the ryver, & by vertue of their patent do require jurisdiction there; in the recital it is, that we confesse it belongeth to their jurisdiction."<sup>21</sup> The change is obvious—without a "patent" there was no clear separation from the original body. There was a wider latitude of authority in the second version, but not an outright commission.

Furthermore, the Court claimed that "wee intended to reserve an interest there upon the ryver, & that themselves also intended to stand to the condition of the first licence of departure given the most of them, wch was, that they should still remain of our body."<sup>22</sup> The General Court characterized the separation and formation of the Hartford Court as "drawn out onely by some of the majistrates of each pte," without "order or allowance of this Court..."<sup>23</sup> The statement alluded to a meeting of the General Court in April of 1639, previously unrecorded, where the Court met with members of the Commission and decided that Springfield, "then called Agawam, was claymed by the Court...to belong to us..."<sup>24</sup> It was further agreed by the Court, and "yielded into by their comissionrs, that so much of the ryver of Conectcot as should fall within the line of our patent should continew under our jurisdiction."<sup>25</sup> The statement concluded by reaffirming the choice of William Pynchon "as Magistrate" and gave him "full power and authority to governe the inhabitants at Springfield..."<sup>26</sup>

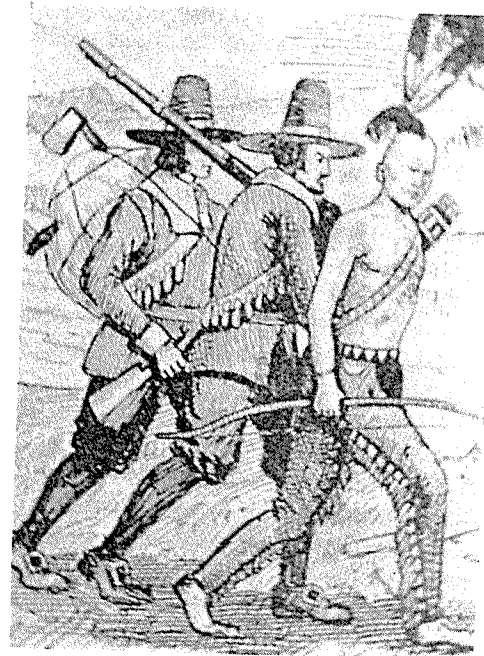
Some indication of the influence wielded by Pynchon can be gained by noting the name of the settlement. Pynchon changed it from "Agawaam" to "Springfield" after his home in England. There are no records recounting a meeting or discussion concerning the desirability of such a change. It suddenly appears in the records of the Bay Colony. The change apparently took place on the whim of the most powerful man in the area.

William Pynchon was a shrewd man who always looked out for his own interests, even if they conflicted with the interests of others. In 1648, a group of Nonotuk Indians attacked two hunting parties of Quabaug Indians near what is now Brookfield. Not wishing to initiate a war with the rival tribe, the Sachem of the Quabaugs, Quacunquasit, applied to Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay for aid in bringing the murderers to justice.<sup>27</sup> Winthrop wrote to Pynchon asking for a report and for his recommendations. Pynchon's reply was that although the Quabaugs were within "yr line of yr pattent," Winthrop could not say that they were his subjects, "nor yet within yr Jurisdiction."<sup>28</sup> Until they had fully subjected themselves, Pynchon maintained or until the English had bought the Indians land, "they must be esteemed as an Independent free people."<sup>29</sup> If, however, it could be proven that the Quabaugs were subject to Winthrop, warned Pynchon, the Governor had best be careful not to start another inter-tribal war into which the English would be drawn. They already had a bad experience in the struggle between the Narragansetts and the Mohegans the year before. Therefore, he set forth a scheme by which the Nonotuks would be induced to turn over the murderers at Pynchon's house at Springfield. However this plan would net only two of the accused natives, the other two being released for delivering their partners to the English.<sup>30</sup> Pynchon also requested force, from Boston to help carry out the plan. The complexity of the plan, he claimed, was necessary to protect Springfield, for "our place is more obnoxious to their malice than the Bay by farr, especially the Naumook Indians are desparate Spirits for they have their dependance on the Mohawks who are the Terror of all Indians."<sup>31</sup> In view of all the "necessary" precautions and bother, he suggested that the matter be dropped.<sup>32</sup>

After his justification of the sovereignty of the Quabaugs, it would appear natural for Pynchon to suggest that the tribe solve its own problems. And it was far more expedient to allow the Nonotuk suspects to go free than to engage so many people in such a complex scheme. The heart of the matter, however, is found in Pynchon's account books. He had extensive trade with the Nonotuk Tribe, which was known to be relatively hostile and uncooperative toward white men. To assist in the arrest of members of the tribe would jeopardize the trade between Pynchon and the Nonotuks. Further, even if he did not take part in the arrest, the interference of any white men in tribal affairs could damage his business. This conflict of interest indicates that Pynchon's concern about war and the Mohawks were specious arguments intended to protect his personal interests. The Governor, rather interestingly, took his advice.

Not everything that Pynchon undertook was successful. In 1650 he managed to destroy nearly all of his support in the General Court because of his attempts at scholarship, specifically in the field of Puritan theology. He wrote a book called *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption and Justification*. It was intended to be a treatise on the significance of Christ's death as a purification of Man's guilt, but it drew violent reaction from the clergy. On October 16, 1650 the General Court condemned the book, copies of which had arrived from the English publisher a few days earlier. It was claimed that the book contained "many errors and haeresies generally condemned by all orthodoxe writers that wee have mett with."<sup>33</sup> Vehemently denying any part in the writing or publishing of the work, they found that "on the contrary, wee detest and abhor many of the opinions and assertions therein as false, erroneous, and haeretical..."<sup>34</sup> The Court ordered Pynchon to appear before them to explain why he wrote such a work without their approval. John Norton of Ipswich was commissioned to write a rebuttal which would be sent to England for printing with the endorsement of the General Court.

Initially there were six "contradicenters" who objected to the contents of the book. They were vociferous enough to sway the entire Court to adopt these extreme measures. However, when they had disposed of the entire printing, they moved that the reasons and arguments given by the "contradicenters" not be



"Portrayal of the exploration of the area prior to Pynchon's arrival"



recorded. The vote was unanimously in favor of striking that from the record.<sup>36</sup> It is possible that the motives behind the actions of the General Court were politically oriented, an effort to discredit the aging Pynchon. The public record condemned his works without explanation except in general terms. Pynchon was certainly not a novice to theology, Puritan or otherwise, and was, perhaps, better educated than most of his detractors. But he had bypassed the clergy, an unpardonable move even for one of the politically powerful Pynchons.

When the Court summoned Pynchon in March of 1651 he was given the right to confer with as many of the elders as he chose in order to learn his errors and to recant his heretical views.<sup>37</sup> Eventually he submitted and at the May 8, 1651 meeting of the General Court he presented this notice:<sup>38</sup>

According to the Court's advice, I have conferred with the Reverend Mr. Cotton, Mr. Norrice, and Mr. Norton, about some points of the greatest consequence in my booke, and hope I have so explained my meaning to them as to take of the worst construcion, and it hath pleased God to lett me see that I have not spoken in my booke so fully of the prize and merrit of Christ's sufferings as I should have done; for in my booke I call them but trjalls of his obedience, yett intending to thereby amplifie and exalt the meditorjal obedience of Christ as the only meritorjous price of mans redemption. But now at present I am inclined to thinke that his sufferings were appointed by God for a farther end, namely, as the due punishement for our sins by way of satisfaccion to divine justice for mans redemption.

Throughout his life, Pynchon made a start in many careers. He was an adventurer, fur trader, merchant, government official, diplomat, and author. Pynchon is hailed as the founder of Springfield, which, though not literally true, had a more concrete base than did the popular notion that he was there first. His success in business and other ventures at "Agawaam"/Springfield as well as the rapid growth of his influence in the Colony demonstrated an adaptability and ambition far beyond that of the average settler. Pynchon came to the New World to seek his fortune. He found it through a lucrative trade and a canny navigation of the political currents of New England. He was not the only skilled politician of the time, but he was a good example of how the drive for material wealth, and Puritan religious precepts could dove-tail in one man. Had he remained in Massachusetts instead of returning to England, he might have played a key role in the future history and direction of the Colony. However, the attraction of the Essex countryside, aided by the financial comforts gained by his ventures in America, were a greater attraction in his later years than the promise of more power in the still-wild colonies. Perhaps the fiasco of the *Meritorious Redemption* convinced him that such would not be the case. At any rate, his son, John, would carry on the family businesses and traditions which he did, not brilliantly, but adequately. Not many men had the ambition and political skill that William Pynchon consistently displayed.

## NOTES

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- 3 *Massachusetts Bay Colony Records*, 1629, cited in Nathaniel Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Co. of Mass. Bay Colony* (Boston 1853), p. 6.
- 4 Smith, *Pynchon Court Record*, p. ix.
- 4 Smith, *Pynchon Court Record*, p. xii.
- 5 *Mass. Colony Records*, in Shurtleff, p. 10.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 270.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 271.
- 10 Robert Hayden Alcorn, *The Biography of a Town: Suffield, Connecticut* (Suffield 1970), p. 4.
- 11 Smith, *Pynchon Court Record*, p. xiv.
- 12 *Wm. Pynchon's Account Books, 1638-1652*, ms. in Conn. Valley Historical Museum, Springfield, Mass.
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- 14 *Hartford Court Records*, in Smith, p. xv.
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- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 19 *Hartford Court Records*, in Smith, p. xvi.
- 20 *Mass. Bay Colony Records*, in Shurtleff, p. 320.
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25. *Ibid.*
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- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
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- 34 *Ibid.*
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- 38 *Ibid.*