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## “A Lamentable and Woeful Sight”: The Indian Attack in Springfield

Richard J. Pinkos

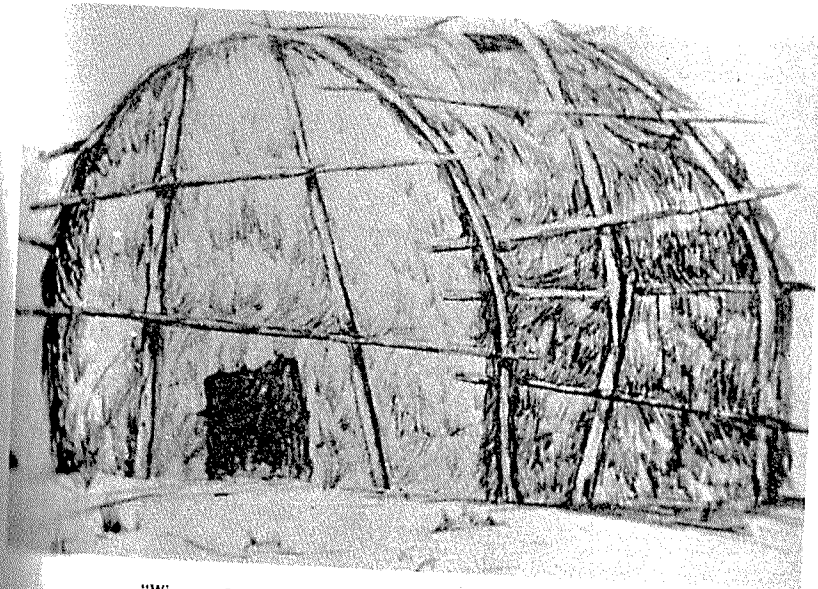
In 1631, two Agawam Indians from Connecticut River Valley went to Boston seeking settlement in their area by members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They said the soil was rich and fertile and that the area had many streams full of beaver. They even offered a yearly tribute of eighty beaver skins and corn seed to Englishmen who would settle in the Valley.<sup>1</sup> These Indians had been troubled by the aggressive Mohawks who periodically descended from their northern home west of the Albany demanding tribute in furs and corn. The Agawams hoped that British settlement would prevent that harassment from continuing to occur.

While the British initially declined this offer, it did not fall on deaf ears. Two years later, anxious for the opportunity to exploit the fur trade outside the highly competitive Boston market, William Pynchon, an enterprising young colonist, sent two men to visit the area prior to his arrival. They were greeted by the Agawams and given gifts, and they reported to Pynchon that the Indians were friendly and the earlier report of rich soil was true.<sup>2</sup> Buttrressing that report was the knowledge of a smallpox epidemic among the Indians which, according to one contemporary historian of the period, William Hubbard, “was so noisome and terrible to these naked Indians that they in many places left their dead unburied, as appeared by the bones of the dead carcases that were found.” Hubbard added that “God cast out the heathen to make room for his people.”<sup>4</sup> While this view may not have been shared by Pynchon, the epidemic might have reduced any fear which he may have had of the natives.

When Pynchon first explored the area in 1635 he intended to settle on the west side of the Connecticut River, an excellent site for a fur trading post; the woods were full of game and edible plants, the rivers teeming with fish, and rich farm land was available. A house was built in the area and two of Pynchon's men were left behind to raise some corn and care for some hogs.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Pynchon returned to Boston where on May 6, 1635, he was granted permission by the General Court to leave his home in Roxbury and settle in the Connecticut River Valley.<sup>6</sup>

When he returned a few months later, trouble had developed. It seems that the hogs had upset the Indians by uprooting some of their corn. Pynchon then decided to establish the settlement across the river, reducing the possibility of future problems with the natives. While the second site was also excellent for fur trading, the soil was poor, there were only a few trees, and mosquitoes were abundant. The nearest sizeable British settlement was in Hartford, almost thirty miles away, and the new village was in the wilderness and surrounded by several small Indian tribes which, “if angered, could easily destroy the new settlement.”<sup>7</sup> Given that situation, good relations with the Indians were crucial.

On July 15, 1636 Pynchon bought from the Agawam Indians an area approximately five miles long and one mile wide.<sup>8</sup> The purchase price was eighteen coats (a strip of clothing like a small blanket), eighteen hoes, eighteen hatchets, eighteen knives, and eighteen fathoms of wampum. The original name of the settlement, Agawam Plantation, was changed in 1640 to Springfield in honor of Pynchon's birthplace—Springfield, England.<sup>9</sup>



“Wigwam, Connecticut Valley Indians” (all illustrations in this article are provided through the courtesy of the Springfield City Library)

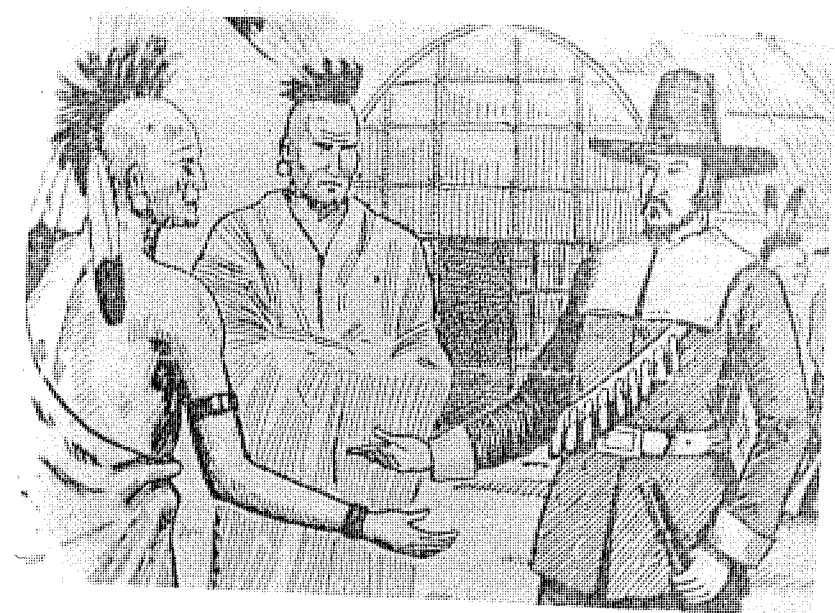
In an effort to maintain friendly relations with the natives, the early settlers of Springfield "never occupied a foot of ground without paying for it" and they were certain to obtain deeds to the land. Moreover, Pynchon and later his son, William, both of whom served as Magistrates, maintained a "rule of even justice toward the Indian which was known to tribes hundreds of miles away."<sup>10</sup> In 1669, an Agawam Indian named Coa accused Francis Hall of striking his wife with a stick and Pynchon ordered the defendant to pay a fine of two fathoms of wampum in satisfaction of the family's wounded pride. Several years later, a prominent Springfield settler, Thomas Miller, was ordered to give four fathoms of wampum to an Indian he had struck with the butt of his gun. Some time later, Miller charged that a group of natives came to his house, knocked down his wife with a blow on the head, and frightened his children. This time Pynchon ordered the Indians fourteen fathoms of wampum—six to cover the expense of the Indians who pursued the troublemakers and eight for Miller.<sup>11</sup>

Having no respect for the Indian religion and a certainty that their own customs were correct, the Puritans required everyone, including the Indians, to properly observe the Lord's Day. In 1669, some Agawams were charged with "violation of Sabbath" by "traveling to and fro and working." Since this was their first offense, they were ordered to pay twenty bushels of corn to the County Treasurer. The fine was reduced when the defendants promised "better order in the future."<sup>12</sup>

Outside the courtroom, the English pursued a friendly and cordial relationship with the Agawams. The natives were welcomed in the settlements and the Englishmen even plowed the Indians' land, while the Indians were used to carry messages over long distances. While this indicates a close relationship, the extent of the contact is called into question by another report which indicated that not more than twenty Agawams, approximately ten percent of those in the area, were known by sight and name to most settlers.<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly, the friendly relations between the Agawams and the Springfield settlers were a major factor in preventing the terrorism which plagued outlying areas in the late 1630's. There was however a growing problem with the Indians elsewhere, and in 1643, the Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven colonies banded together in a loose organization known as the New England Confederation.<sup>14</sup> Springfield's connection with the up was primarily related to the development of the Pocumtuck Confederacy which brought together the Agawams, the Warranokes on the Westfield River, the Naunawtucks from Hadley and Northampton, and the most powerful tribe in the region, the Pocumtucks of the Deerfield River Valley.

In 1645, the Indian who had burnt a camp in Windsor, Connecticut, fled with the Warranokes. When the Indians hid the fugitive and refused to turn him over, the Commissioners of the New England Confederation sent a letter to the



"Portrayal of William Pynchon and the Agawam Indians developing the agreement over the sale of land to the white settlers"

administer reprisals; any captives would be held as slaves unless the fugitive was handed over to the authorities. The crisis ended when the Warranokes agreed to pay a fine. Although neither the Agawams nor the Springfield settlers were directly involved, that incident and several others resulted in increased tension in the entire region. At one point, the Commissioners charged that the Pocumtucks "had been growing bold and insolent," while the Indians complained of "some particular abuses" by the colonists.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, an uneasy peace continued until 1664 when a treaty of "peace and accommodation" between the British and the Mohawks left the latter free to wage a successful war on their arch-enemies, the Pocumtucks. That terminated the once powerful tribe and destroyed the Pocumtuck Confederacy.<sup>16</sup> Although references to the Agawams are limited, it is safe to assume that they were upset when the British signed a treaty with their enemies, the Mohawks, which resulted in war against their allies. Perhaps the action of the British was in character, as in the early years of their settlement, the Springfield colonists disappointed the natives by their failure to act when hostile Indians terrorized some of their fellow tribesmen.<sup>17</sup>

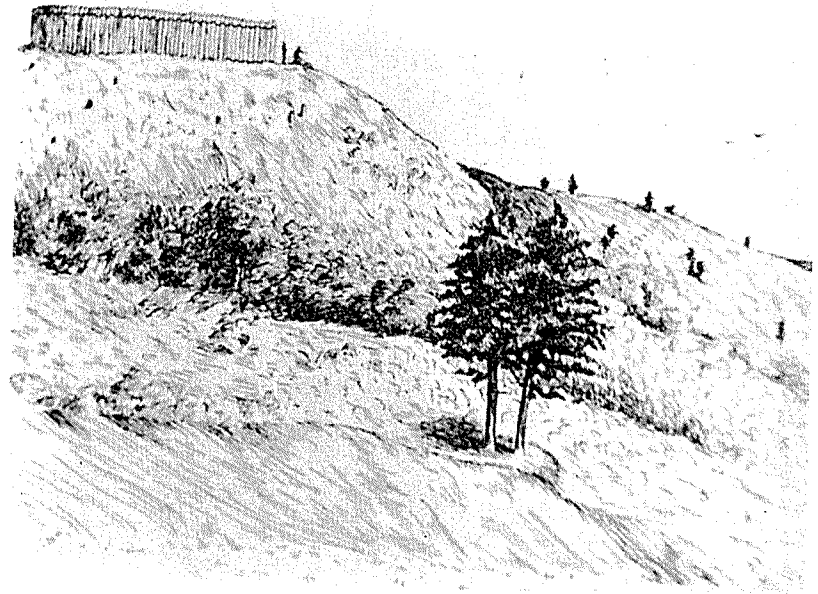
The firearms of the colonists were far superior to the bow and arrow. As a result there was little fear of the Agawams. To insure that the situation remained unchanged, a law was passed in November of 1639 which prohibited the Indians from owning guns or gunpowder. Other provisions of this law

required every man in town to drill one day a month as a member of the militia and also to have guns, a pound of powder and twenty bullets ready at all times.<sup>18</sup> In time, however, the Agawams acquired guns, either from fur traders who sought special concessions, or from the settlers themselves. In 1640, the widow of Thomas Horton was charged with "selling her husband's piece to the Indians." She claimed to be ignorant of the law and Pynchon ordered her to bring the gun "home again speedily or else it would cost her dear, for no commonwealth would allow of such a misdemeanor." Yet, even Major John Pynchon, who succeeded his father as Magistrate, was guilty of a violation of the law; his account books indicate he sold a gun to an Indian chief, for land.<sup>19</sup>

Uneasiness in the village increased as the Indians acquired arms and became more proficient than the average settler in their use. In addition, there was a change in the natives' attitude from one of "superstitious awe" to a "feeling of contempt" for the white man.<sup>20</sup> The settlers had not provided defense against invaders and it is reasonable to assume that the Agawams became increasingly disturbed with the enforcement of colonial laws upon them and their culture, however even those laws were enforced. In contrast, many settlers viewed the natives as pests who had to be tolerated, and they were characterized as "lazy, unreliable, and not above breaking their word."<sup>21</sup>

The sources of their resentment with the colonial laws are a major factor in explaining the Agawams' growing alienation from the Springfield colonists. The Indians had become subject to and dependent upon the white man at the expense of their own culture. Not only were the white man's laws supreme but the natives had come to rely on the settler for blankets, food, tools, and liquor, though the latter was not supposed to be sold to them. When the natives were not able to pay their bills in cash, they were allowed to buy on credit. However, many times the terms could not be met and some Agawams lost their land or even were sold into slavery.<sup>22</sup> By 1675 the Agawam Indians had been so fully submerged in the white man's culture that they even dressed like the British settlers from whom, according to one report, they then "differed little in appearance from."<sup>23</sup>

In 1666 Major Pynchon yielded to the demands of the settlers for expansion and purchased another tract of land from the Indians. Part of the purchase price included the construction of a fort located on what is now Longhill Hill. Inasmuch as a function of the fort was to quarter all the natives in the area, this location, it has been referred to as one of the first Indian reservations in North America.<sup>24</sup> Thus, by the late 1660s, it may have appeared to the Agawam Indians, who had willingly invited William Pynchon into the Connecticut Valley in 1636, that their land, their independence, indeed their very way of life was dying.



"The Indian Fort on Longhill"

Meanwhile, problems faced by the Agawams in Springfield were characteristic of the situation elsewhere. Indeed, they provided a source of unity for hitherto disorganized tribes on the Northeastern coast of the continent and led to King Philip's War. This war had its roots with the Wampanoag tribe just outside of Plymouth. When Chief Massasoit, who had been friendly with the Puritans, died in 1661, leadership was passed on to his son, Metacom, known to the English as Philip. Smelling more than a scent of trouble as Philip voiced his disaffection for the British, the colonial authorities forced him to sign a statement in 1662 that he "was a subject of the English king."<sup>25</sup> This did not prevent Philip from organizing the Northeastern tribes into a confederation. His ultimate goal was to drive the British settlers into the ocean.

Finally, in June of 1675 the first blow was delivered at the frontier village of Wampanoag, about thirty miles from Plymouth. King Philip's warriors raided the village, burnt many of the houses, and terrified the people, though not a single life was lost on either side. Then, between July and September colonial settlements in Northfield and Deerfield were "extinguished" and one hundred and twenty-eight lives were lost. As the rampaging warriors came closer to Springfield, "almost a panic prevailed in the valley." The settlers worried where their next tomahawks would fall.<sup>26</sup>

In all likelihood, their fears were concentrated beyond Springfield because the Agawams were docile and many of them had never put on war paint. The natives' actions had been reassuring, as they signed non-aggression pledges and even offered hostages, taken to Hartford, as a reaffirmation of their peaceful intent. The situation charged, however, as Philip's supporters were victorious elsewhere. The Agawams and other uncommitted tribes began to side with their brothers as their pride was rekindled. Perhaps more important, the Hadley sachem whose followers had allied with Philip married the daughter of the Agawam's sachem; natural grounds for an alliance were established.<sup>27</sup>

From this point, events moved rapidly. On October 4, Major John Pynchon, the Commander-in-Chief of Springfield's militia, was ordered by colonial authorities to take a detachment of approximately forty-five troops to Hadley where some Indian activity had been reported. When Pynchon arrived in Hadley there were no Indians in sight. While he was searching for the elusive Indians, the Agawams were preparing to attack the unprotected settlement of Springfield.

In the evening of that same day, a friendly Indian named Toto, living with a settler's family in Windsor, Connecticut, told authorities there that an attack on Springfield was planned, with the Agawams aided by nearly three hundred Indians who had secretly entered the Agawams' fort. "In post-haste, a man was sent to carry the news to Springfield." The messenger rode into town in the middle of the night and aroused the inhabitants who were "doubly terrified" since their militia was then in Hadley. The men who were still in town gathered the women and children, as well as the available guns and ammunition, and brought them all to the three garrisoned houses which had recently been repaired and fortified for the town's defense. Messages were sent to Pynchon in Hadley and to Captain Treat, who commanded troops in Westfield, pleading for their help. It was "a night of dramatic consternation."<sup>28</sup>

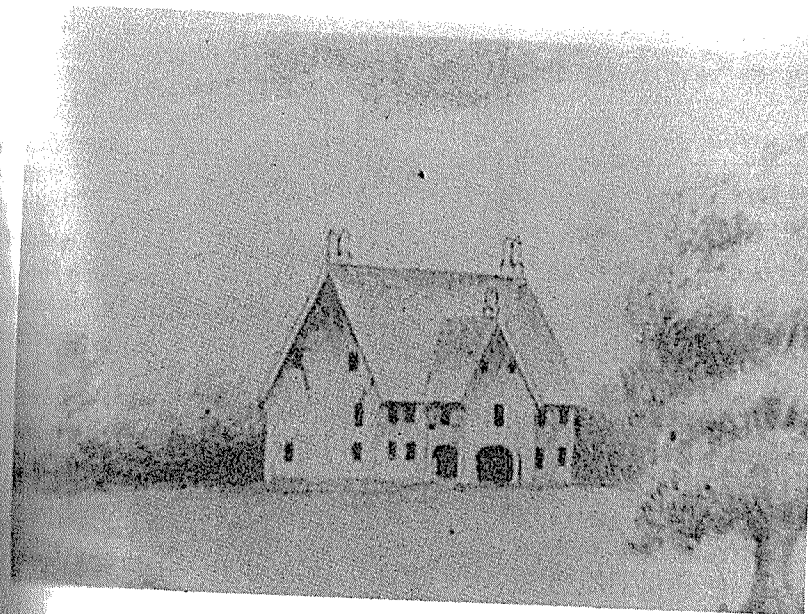
The next morning, the besieged group had breakfast, and they probably attended religious services in the garrison. Since no attack had yet taken place, many began to question the report received the night before. Reverend Debrah Glover, the minister who had brought his valuable library to the garrison, returned it to his home. Lieutenant Thomas Cooper, who had done business with the Agawams and was openly skeptical of the report, felt safe enough to go with a companion, Thomas Miller, to the Indians' stockade. When they began to ride up the hill on which the fort was located, a volley of shots rang out and Miller was killed. Cooper was also hit, but he was able to remain on his horse, which sped back to town. Oddly enough, Cooper's horse went as far as the road to Pynchon's house, which was the main garrison, where it stopped and fell dead. "The dreadful secret was out. Springfield had indeed been set on fire and slaughter." Meanwhile, the Agawams and their allies, in war

and chanting war cries, had already begun to attack. The defenseless houses and barns were quickly burned. Attempts were made to destroy the garrisoned houses as well but they were unsuccessful because the fortresses were "so well built and defended."<sup>29</sup>

While the attack was proceeding, Major Treat arrived with his men on the other side of the Connecticut River in what is now West Springfield. They were held there by gunfire from warriors who were involved in the raid. Some hours after the attack had begun, Pynchon arrived with his troops "on a dead run all the way from Hadley" and they quickly routed the Indians who perhaps felt they had accomplished their objectives.<sup>30</sup>

The Indians had killed three men and one woman, and destroyed thirty-two houses and twenty-five barns. Pynchon, who noted that it was "a lamentable and woeful sight," lost his grist mill and corn mill as well as many houses and barns, though his house (the Garrison) was unscathed. Only thirteen houses survived the attack and they now had to provide a residence for all the families and the troops at a time when medicine was needed for the wounded, supplies were short and the fields had been ravaged.<sup>31</sup>

Bleak as it was, the situation could have been worse. Without Toto's warning, the settlers would not have been in the garrisons and they all would have been killed. Moreover, Pynchon's detachment would not have known of the impending attack.



"William Pynchon's House"

With winter approaching, many residents believed that the town had received its death blow. In fact, Major John Pynchon said as much in a note sent on the evening of the attack to Reverend Russell, pastor of the Hadley Church:

The Lord will have us lie in the dust before him. We that were full are emptied... The Lord show mercy to us. I see not how it is possible for us to live here this winter.<sup>32</sup>

At the age of 49 Pynchon was a broken man. The work of a lifetime had been swept away and one historian declared: "it is not unlikely that the graceless return which the Indians had made for his kindness had an effect upon his mind."<sup>33</sup> He advocated abandoning the town, but stouter hearts prevailed and the residents were ordered by colonial authorities to maintain their position as a frontier outpost against the enemy.

Long after the darkest day in Springfield's history, nagging questions persist. Pynchon criticized the use of the militia in searching for hostile Indians, as that left the town defenseless. That was the case with Springfield. In a letter to Pynchon dated October 15, 1675, the Colony's Commissioners tried to absolve themselves of blame by stating that as Commander-in-Chief of Springfield's militia, Pynchon could have used the troops in any way that would have contributed to Springfield's "greatest security."<sup>34</sup> This was a strange statement, as it meant that Pynchon could have disobeyed a specific order issued earlier by the Commissioners.

While the Commissioners can not escape censure for the town's burning, at least one critic has stated that John Pynchon should not be totally absolved of any such charges. In his *History of Springfield, 1636-1886*, Mason A. Green concludes that, "A bolder man - Pynchon's father for example - would have chosen to stand the ordeal of explaining to his superiors how he saved the town by disobeying orders."<sup>35</sup>

Of course, this is all said with the benefit of hindsight and does not reflect on what might have happened had Pynchon remained in town only to find that it was not attacked. In any case, Pynchon, who even before the attack on Springfield had requested and been relieved of his command of the militia, was formally replaced in mid-October by Captain Samuel Appleton. In a letter to the Governor, Appleton made it clear that while favoring a continued settlement in Springfield, he would use his own judgement in defending the town.

For some time after the attack on Springfield, there were reports that Philip had been seen on his black horse, directing the raid. It was certainly unexpected for the colonists to "recognize" Philip since he was greatly feared. There is no doubt that his "cunning hand was felt in the operation." Letters and contemporary accounts never mention Philip in connection with the

Springfield affair. On the other hand, Wequogan, the former Agawam sachem, was noted quite often. In a letter to the Governor pleading for relief for Springfield, Reverend John Russell stated that "Wequogan, in whom as much confidence was put as in any of the Indians, was ringleader in word and deed."<sup>38</sup>

It is quite understandable that many Springfield residents who were fraught with fear at the sight of what was happening in their town imagined Philip leading the charge when in fact he was nowhere in sight. However, it might be that the inhabitants of the village simply could not accept accounts which indicated that the old sachem of the Agawams, with whom they had lived and worked for almost forty years, had turned upon them.

After Pynchon and his men routed the Indians, most of the three hundred warriors involved, including approximately forty Agawams, proceeded to Indian Orchard, six miles east of Springfield, where they built fires, "slept in perfect security and awoke in triumph."<sup>39</sup> A small number of natives remained in the area and continued to periodically harass the settlers. For example, on October 27, three Springfield men, who went to inspect land in Westfield which they had just purchased from Pynchon, were ambushed and killed by Indians.<sup>40</sup> On other occasions, the remaining Indians would terrorize the settlers and destroy cattle, fields, and houses. Compared to the earlier attack on Springfield, however, these incidents were relatively insignificant.

Most of the natives involved in the attack, including the Agawams, fled into New York after their temporary encampment in Indian Orchard. On the way, many were captured, killed or wounded by pursuing troops. Several who survived the retreat to New York died in epidemics. Those Agawams who survived eventually joined the St. Regis Indians on a reservation in New York. Very few Agawams remained in the Springfield area. One lived in a cottage on Pecousic Brook in Forest Park and another lived somewhere in the area of Russell.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in the aftermath of King Philip's War, the Agawam Indians permanently left the Springfield area.

As the remaining warriors left and memories of the destruction slowly began to fade, the settlement once again began to expand. A 1688 report indicated that more than half the settlers lived three or more miles from the center of town.<sup>43</sup> Now that the Indian threat had been eliminated, with the removal of the Agawams and the suppression of King Philip and his allies, life could go on in an atmosphere of greater security.

- 1 *Springfield Shopping News*, May 6, 1936, p.6.
- 2 Donald J. D'Amato, "The Indians of Agawam," in D'Amato, *Colonial Springfield*, (Springfield, 1973), p. 45.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 4 William Hubbard, *A General History of New England* (Cambridge, 1815), p. 195.
- 5 D'Amato, "William Pynchon and Springfield," in D'Amato, *Colonial Springfield*, p. 8.
- 6 *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, June 1, 1930, p. 2E, col. 2.
- 7 D'Amato, "William Pynchon and Springfield," p. 6.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 9 Harry Andrew Wright, *The Story of Western Massachusetts*, I (New York, 1949), p. 196.
- 10 Mason A. Green, *Springfield: 1636-1886* (Boston, 1888), p. 147.
- 11 Wright, *The Story of Western Massachusetts*, I, p. 175.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 14 Douglas Edward Leach, *The Northern Colonial Frontier: 1607-1763* (New York, 1966), p. 55.
- 15 George Sheldon, "The Pocumtuck Confederacy," in *The Connecticut Valley Indian*, William R. Young Ed., (Springfield, 1909) pp. 112-121.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 17 D'Amato, "The Indians of Agawam," p. 46.
- 18 Wright, *The Story of Western Massachusetts*, I, 262.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 263
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 21 Green, *Springfield: 1636-1886*, p. 148.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 23 Wright, *The Story of Western Massachusetts*, I, 38.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 25 Green, *Springfield: 1636-1886*, p. 156.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 27 Hubbard, *A General History of New England*, p. 340.
- 28 Green, *Springfield: 1636-1886*, p. 162.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 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. 159.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 37 Wright, *The Story of Western Massachusetts*, I, 270.
- 38 Reverend Russell to Massachusetts Governor, October 22, 1675, cited in *Springfield Union*, April 24, 1930, p. 8, col. 2.
- 39 Green, *Springfield: 1636-1886*, p. 165.
- 40 Wright, *The Story of Western Massachusetts*, I, 269.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 42 D'Amato, "The Indians of Agawam," p. 48.
- 43 Leach, *The Northern Colonial Frontier: 1607-1763*, p. 180.

## 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