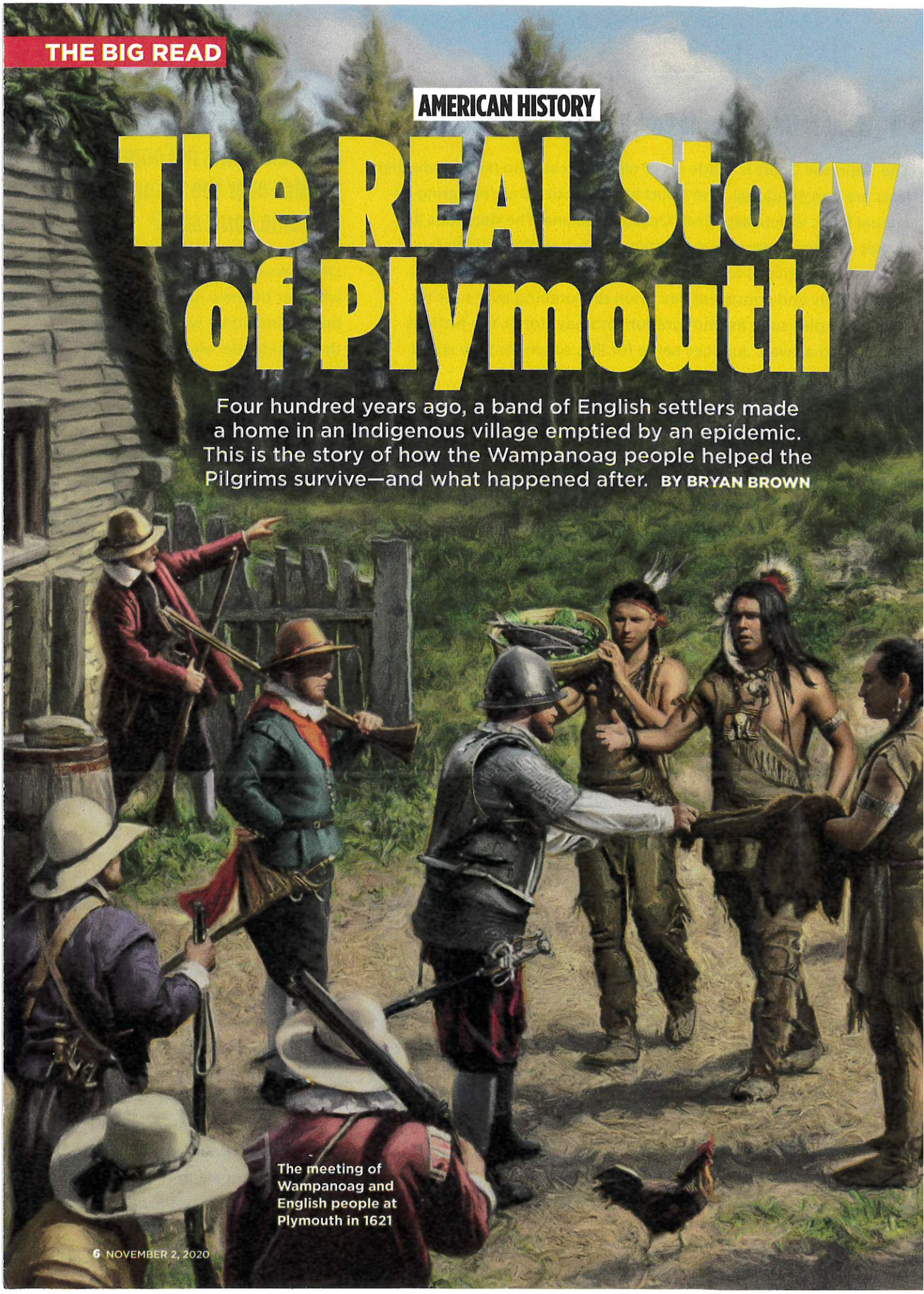
AMERICAN HISTORY

The REAL Story of Plymouth

Four hundred years ago, a band of English settlers made a home in an Indigenous village emptied by an epidemic. This is the story of how the Wampanoag people helped the Pilgrims survive—and what happened after. BY BRYAN BROWN



The meeting of Wampanoag and English people at Plymouth in 1621

AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT
How did Indigenous people react to the arrival of settlers from England?

For months during the long winter of 1620-21, the Wampanoag people watched uneasily as the strangers settled on their land. First, these white people dug into some graves, probably looking for objects of value. Then they unearthed a big stockpile of corn that was being saved for planting in the spring. Finally, they began to build a settlement on the former site of an Indigenous village on the coast of what is now Massachusetts. The village was empty because its inhabitants had recently been wiped out by a disease brought by people on a previous European ship.

The Wampanoag *(WAHM-pah-nog)* name for that place was Patuxet *(see map, p. 9)*. The newcomers, who were from England, called it Plymouth.

They are known to history as the Pilgrims. Their journey on a ship called the *Mayflower*, their settlement in today's New England, and their so-called "first Thanksgiving" are part of one of the most famous legends in all American history. →

PRIMARY SOURCE
In 1970, a Wampanoag man's speech mourned the fate of his people. Go to junior.scholastic.com for an adaptation of his historic address.

Yet that 400-year-old tale is much more complicated than what appears in most history books. Those accounts downplay the larger story of the many Indigenous peoples who already lived in the region when ships began arriving from Europe. After a period of harmony with the Pilgrims, many of the land's Native people would fiercely resist being pushed aside by other newcomers.

Most accounts also downplay the role of Ousamequin *(ooh-SAM-uh-kwin)*. The main Wampanoag *sachem* (leader) in the region, he closely followed what was happening at Plymouth from his headquarters at Pokanoket, about 40 miles west.

Sachems from other Wampanoag communities wanted to chase the Pilgrims off or kill them. They pointed to the violence and disease that other European visitors had brought in the past.

But Ousamequin thought these people might be different. After all, they included women and children. Also, they could be an ally against the nearby Narragansett tribe, his longtime enemy. This was especially necessary because the epidemic had killed thousands of Wampanoag people, weakening their defenses.

Ousamequin decided to reach out to this group of settlers. It was a risk to his people and his authority, but he was willing to take it.

About 144,000 Indigenous people inhabited what is today southeastern New England when the Pilgrims arrived.

Yet in the end, the people from the *Mayflower* would turn out to be just a small part of a coming wave of European colonists that no one would be able to stop.

Thriving Communities

In the 17th century, people in Europe referred to the Americas as the New World. It was, wrote Plymouth's longtime governor William Bradford, "a desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and wild men." But in reality, "there was little wild or new about this place," writes historian David Silverman. Humans had lived in the region for about 12,000 years.

When the Pilgrims settled in Plymouth in 1620, about 144,000 Indigenous people already inhabited what is now southeastern New England. Today, countless places in the region bear the names of their many different tribes—including one of the largest groups, the Massachusett.

Tens of thousands of those Indigenous people were Wampanoag. They lived in dozens of independent but connected communities. During the spring and summer, most of them resided in coastal villages or along waterways, fishing and farming. In the winter, they moved inland, living off their harvest.

The thriving Wampanoag communities shared the resources

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

THANKSGIVING Native American and European people had celebrated the autumn harvest for centuries before the founding of Plymouth. No one called it "Thanksgiving" in 1621. Two centuries later, New Englanders began using that name for their observance of the meal. Thanksgiving became an annual national holiday in 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln declared it a day of gratitude for Union victories in the Civil War.

around them. "As a people, we never believed in the ownership of land," explains Wampanoag historian Darius Coombs.

Tisquantum the Survivor

By the 1600s, European ships had been sailing the upper Atlantic coast for about a century. Many of the men on those ships were primarily interested in fishing or trading for beaver and otter furs with Indigenous people. But others sought to enslave them. They saw the inhabitants of the region as savages and thought little of seizing them to sell as human property.

One person who did this was an English captain who anchored off the coast of Patuxet in 1614, six years before the Pilgrims arrived. He invited a group of villagers onto his ship to trade goods. But it was a trap. When they got on board, the captain took 20 of them captive.

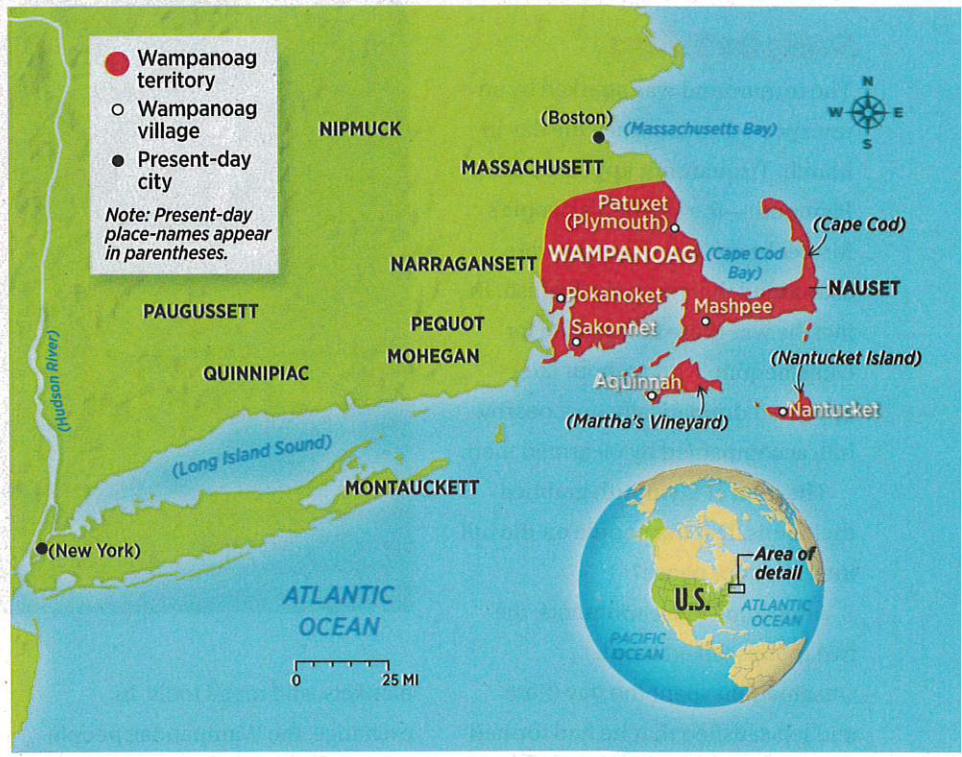
Ordinarily, such victims were never heard from again. But one of them, a Wampanoag man named Tisquantum, was a survivor—and went on to play an important role in American history.

In a stroke of luck, when the English ship reached a Spanish port, some Roman Catholic friars who opposed slavery helped set Tisquantum free. Then, over the next five years, the resourceful man worked his way home.

First, he made it to London, where a merchant trained him as an English interpreter. With this skill, Tisquantum found work on a fishing ship sailing back across the Atlantic.

This Land Was Their Land

This map shows the area occupied by the Wampanoag people in 1620, as well as the general location of other Indigenous groups in the region.



When Tisquantum finally returned to his homeland in May 1619, he was stunned by what he found. Village after village, including his own, was empty. In places, skeletons lay unburied on the ground. They were the remains of some of the thousands of Indigenous people in the area who had been killed by an epidemic brought on a European ship in 1616.

Within a year, Tisquantum was living in Pokanoket, home base for Ousamequin, the Wampanoag leader. The sachem may not have quite trusted this man who had spent so much time among the English people. Yet Ousamequin would soon find a good use for him: communicating with the strangers who had come to their land.

The Pilgrims Set Out

The English newcomers were Christians who had broken off from the Church of England. They hoped that in the New World they could freely practice their religious beliefs. Some of them referred to their group as pilgrims—those who go on a long journey for spiritual purposes.

In September 1620, 102 people set off on the *Mayflower* from Plymouth, England. Their two-month voyage was extremely difficult. Eventually, they settled on the site of Patuxet, which they may have known about from an explorer's map. Now empty of people due to the epidemic, it became their new Plymouth.

The Pilgrims almost did not make it through their first winter. →

Half of them died of malnutrition and disease. But in the spring of 1621, their fortunes began to change.

Saving the Settlers

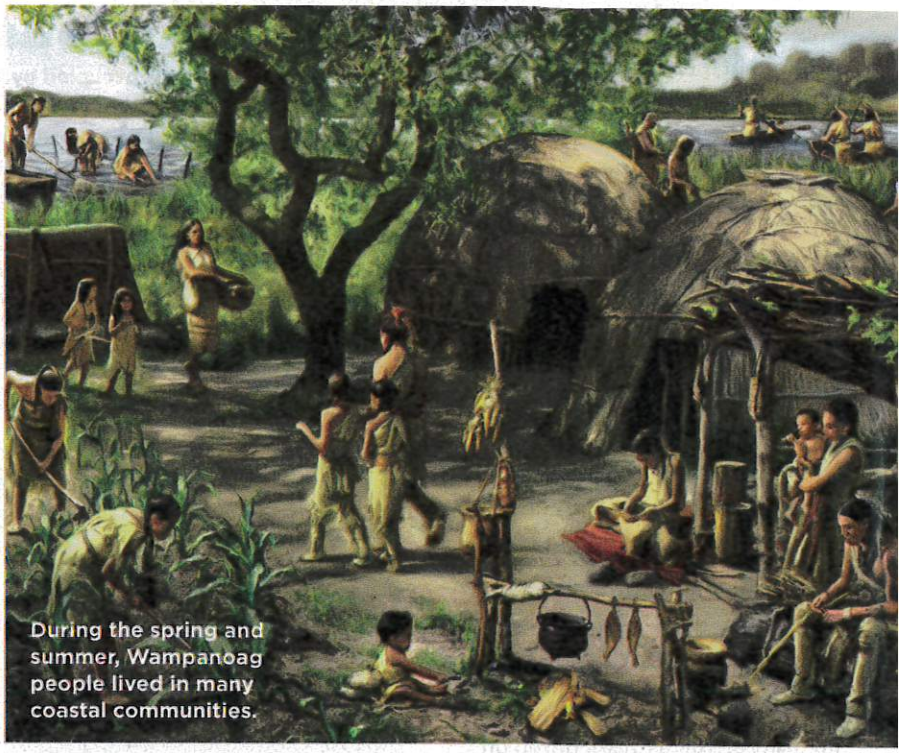
The turnaround was sparked by an unexpected encounter. One day in March, Tisquantum appeared at Plymouth—the site of his people's former home. The Pilgrims were astounded that he spoke English. In fact, he was there to translate for Ousamequin, who an hour later appeared dramatically on a nearby hill, accompanied by 60 armed men.

The men of Plymouth grabbed their guns. Did the people on the hill intend war or peace?

After some tense moments, the two groups talked it out. Ousamequin spent the day there and left satisfied that he had formed an alliance with Plymouth. The newcomers could stay, he decided.

The partnership was key to the Pilgrims' survival. With Wampanoag help, they learned to live off the land. Tisquantum showed them how to grow corn, fertilizing it with fish. As the year progressed, the two peoples collaborated more and more, says Richard Pickering. He is a director of a living history museum at the site of the Pilgrims' settlement in what is today Massachusetts. In some places, Pickering notes, the Pilgrims planted corn about 10 feet from the Wampanoag people's fields—separated only by a brook.

Wampanoag trade was also important. The Native people were eager to own items the settlers brought with them, such as coats, blankets, and metal tools. In exchange, the Wampanoag people provided furs, which the Pilgrims used to repay people in England who had invested in their colony. And crucially, the alliance with Ousamequin protected the newcomers from other sachems who would rather have seen them gone.



During the spring and summer, Wampanoag people lived in many coastal communities.

For both Ousamequin and the Pilgrims, a three-day feast helped cement a relationship that had been growing.

By fall 1621, when the harvest was in, the settlers of Plymouth felt secure enough to rest and "rejoice together," as one of them put it.

A Three-Day Party

According to the legend of the "first Thanksgiving," the Pilgrims invited the Wampanoag people to a celebration as a show of gratitude for their help. Actually, the people of Plymouth were probably already feasting when Ousamequin and 90 men showed up unannounced. Had they come just intending to trade? No one knows. Whatever the case, the sachem and his party were invited to join and the celebration resumed. It lasted for three days.

It was as much a state dinner—a banquet between officials of different governments—as a party, historians say. For both Ousamequin and the Pilgrims, the event helped cement a relationship that had been growing. "We have found [them] very faithful in their [promise] of peace with us," colonist

Edward Winslow wrote soon after the harvest feast. "[We] walk as peacefully and safely in the woods as in the highways of England."

Swarms of Settlers Arrive

The alliance between Ousamequin's people and the people of Plymouth went on for 50 years. But it could not last. The main reason: New settlers began coming to the region in droves. In 1629, a group of about 1,000 people from England established Massachusetts Bay Colony to the north. Their numbers exploded as they expanded into new colonies, including Connecticut. By 1670, there were as many as 70,000 English colonists in New England.

Silverman, the historian, likens the population boom to a swarm of animals overwhelming a region. From the start, he says, Ousamequin expected the newcomers to live beside his people as guests and share the land. But newer colonists did not respect the sachem's wishes. They put up fences, not welcome signs. Soon, Wampanoag people couldn't fish or plant in the best areas. More and more old forest was cut down for new settlements or livestock.

Ousamequin's death in 1660, along with that of Plymouth's original leaders, ended an era of cooperation. Finally, Ousamequin's son Metacomet, also known as King Philip, attempted to take back control before it was too late.

In late 1675, he formed an alliance with other tribes—including his people's former rivals, the Narragansett—and began attacking English settlements. The colonists fought back. They were aided by their own Indigenous allies, including the Pequot tribe and even some Wampanoag groups who had converted to Christianity.

The conflict, called King Philip's War, was brutal. Thousands of Native people were killed, along with hundreds of colonial soldiers. Without access to their farming and fishing lands, Metacomet's fighters starved. They had few guns and little gunpowder. By the summer of 1676, the colonists had crushed the uprising. They now had almost complete control of the land they had only recently set foot on.

A History of Loss

Today, four centuries later, the Wampanoag people continue to feel the impact of the *Mayflower*'s →

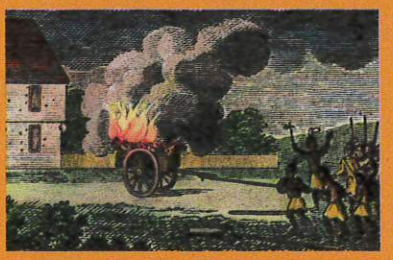
KEY MOMENTS

The Wampanoag World

1614

Naming "New England"

English captain John Smith maps part of the Atlantic Ocean coast, calling it New England. Another captain on the expedition kidnaps Tisquantum and others.



1675

King Philip's War

The Wampanoag sachem Metacomet leads an uprising against English colonists. His forces are crushed, largely ending Native resistance to English colonization.

1970

Day of Mourning

Frank James, a Wampanoag man, helps spark a Native rights movement with a speech at Plymouth on Thanksgiving, mourning the damage done to his people.

PAGE 10: ILLUSTRATION BY GREG COPELAND; PAGE 11: BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY (1614); SARIN IMAGES/THE GRANGER COLLECTION (1675); COURTESY OF UAINE (1970)

arrival. To many of them, the ship symbolizes European colonization and the suffering it brought them—and America's other first people.

As the United States took shape, Indigenous groups across the country lost more and more, including much of their culture *(see "Understanding Colonization's Effects," right)*. By the 1900s, almost no one in Wampanoag communities could speak their old language.

"We're Still Here"

But unlike the members of most other Native American nations, the Wampanoag people were never forced by the U.S. government to relocate far from their ancestral homes. Today, five Wampanoag communities are recognized by the federal or Massachusetts state government as tribes. This acknowledges their unique historical and cultural role in the U.S.

In recent years, historians have written fuller accounts of the Wampanoag place in the American story. And on the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims' arrival, the living museum at the site of the Pilgrims' settlement—formerly called Plimoth Plantation—is changing its name to Plimoth Patuxet Museum to reflect its complex history.

Meanwhile, the Wampanoag people have been reviving traditional ways, including their language. In the 1990s, Jessie Littledoe Baird of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe embarked upon a quest to reconstruct it from sources such as old letters and a 1663 Bible translated into Wampanoag. For the first time in decades, a generation of young Wampanoag people is now speaking its native tongue.

For Darius Coombs, the Wampanoag historian, these are hopeful signs of a recovery of his ancestors' culture. "Kids are learning their language, learning their culture, being proud of who they are," he says. "We're still here." ◆

A family on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota

JAMES NORD/AP IMAGES

UNDERSTANDING Colonization's Effects

Millions of Indigenous people lived in North America when Europeans arrived in the 1500s. Colonization spelled disaster for them and their way of life. Countless numbers died from European diseases or in battle with the U.S. Army, which backed settlers' expansion into Native lands.

The U.S. government worked to take those lands. One of its most notorious actions was the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which displaced at least 100,000 Indigenous people from the American Southeast, moving them to reservations west of the Mississippi River. Even then, the government commonly broke its own treaties that promised to protect those areas from further settlement.

Also, for about a century beginning in the 1870s, tens of thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their homes and forced to attend boarding schools run by the government. The schools worked to erase the children's traditional practices, beliefs, languages, and even names.

Because of years of discrimination, the descendants of the continent's first people continue to face many challenges. People on reservations suffer higher than normal rates of poverty and unemployment, along with notoriously poor access to health care and housing.

WRITE ABOUT IT!

How did colonization affect the Indigenous people who lived in North America? Include details from the article to help explain some of the causes and effects it discusses.