The Natives and the English - Crash Course US History #3

Crash Course: U.S. History
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===== Introduction (00:00)=====

Hi I'm John Green, this is Crash Course US History and today we're going to talk about one of the worst relationships in American history. No Thought Bubble, not my college girlfriend and me.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Your relationship with your high school girlfriend?

Oh Me From The Past, you and I both know that I didn't have a high school girlfriend. No, I'm talking about the relationship between Native Americans and English Settlers.

(Intro)

So as you'll no doubt remember from last week, the first English settlers came to the Chesapeake area--now Virginia--in 1607. The land the English found was, of course, already inhabited by Indian tribes unified under the leadership of Chief Wahunsenacawh, and I will remind you that mispronouncing things is my thing! The English called this Chief Powhatan because, of course, mispronouncing things was also their thing. Powhatan was actually his title and the name of his tribe, but to say that the English lacked cultural sensitivity would be an understatement. So Powhatan didn't get to be leader of over 30 tribes by being a dummy and he quickly realized that;

1. The English were pretty clueless, when it came to not dying of starvation, and

2. They were useful--because they had guns.

So he decided to help them and the English were indeed grateful. In fact, colony leader John Smith went so far as to order the colonists to stop stealing food from the Indians. Aaauugh, in the book business this is known as foreshadowing.

=====Beginning Relationships (1:15)=====

So as previously noted, relationships, whether between individuals or collectives, tend to go well when they are mutually beneficial, and for a while, both the English and the Indians were better off for these interactions. I mean, you know, post-smallpox.

The Virginia Company existed to make money, and since the Chesapeake lacked gold or silver, making money required trade. Okay, let's go to the Thought Bubble:

We tend to think of trade between Europeans and Natives as being a one-way exchange, like savvy, exploitative Europeans tricking primitive, pure, indigenous people into unfair deals. But that isn't quite accurate. Both sides traded goods that they had in surplus for those they did not. The English were happy to give up iron utensils, tools, guns, woven cloth in exchange for furs and, especially in the early days, food, which the Indians could easily part with because they had plenty.

Soon, though, there were problems. In order to keep up trade relations, Indian men devoted more time to hunting and less to agriculture which upset traditional gender balance in their society. And European ideas about land use started to overcome traditional Indian ways of life, and that led to conflict. The English liked to fence in some of their land, which kept the Indians off it, and also the English let their pigs and cattle roam freely and the animals would eat Natives' crops. And as Europeans' appetite for furs grew, Indian tribes began to fight with each other over access to the best hunting grounds, leading to inter-tribal warfare, which suddenly included guns.

But this was still a relatively calm time. Yes, at one point John Smith was captured by the Indians and had to be "saved" by Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, but this was probably all a ritual planned by Powhatan to demonstrate his dominance over the English. Pocahontas never married John Smith by the way, but she was kidnapped by the English and held for ransom in 1613 and she did eventually marry another Englishman, John Rolfe, she converted to Christianity and went to England, where she became a sensation and died of disease. Stupid disease always deciding the course of human history.

Anyway, despite not marrying Pocahontas, John Smith is still important to this story because when he left Virginia for England after being injured in a gunpowder explosion, things between the Native Americans and the English immediately began to deteriorate. How? Well, the English went back to stealing Indians' crops and also began stealing their lives by massacres.

Thanks, Thought Bubble - man, you guys sure know how to end on a downer. Although to be fair, there are not a lot of uppers in this story.

=====Relationship Deterioration (3:30)=====

So after a period of peace following Pocahontas' marriage to John Rolfe in 1614 dramatized here [blackboard], things finally came to a head in 1622, when Chief Opechancanough led a rebellion against the English. It had become abundantly clear that more and more English were going to show up and they weren't just there to trade. They wanted to take Indian land. But the English struck back, as empires will, and the uprising of 1622 ultimately failed. And after another failed uprising in 1644, the 2,000 remaining Native Americans were forced to sign a treaty that consigned them to reservations in the West. Well, the west of Virginia, at least.

But the 1622 uprising was the final nail in the coffin of the Virginia Company, which was a failure in every way. It never turned a profit, and despite sponsoring 6,000 colonists, by 1644 when Virginia became a royal colony, only 1,200 of those people were still alive, proving once again that governments are better at governing than corporations.

Up in New England, you'll recall that the Pilgrims probably wouldn't have survived their first winter without help from the Native Americans, which of course led to the first Thanksgiving, and then centuries of mutually beneficial trade and generosity...just kidding.

While some of the Puritans that settled in New England--notably Roger Williams--tried to treat the Indians fairly, in general it was very similar to what we saw in the Chesapeake. Settlers thought Native Americans could be replaced because they weren't "properly using the land." Now John Winthrop, who you'll remember from last week, at least realized that it was better to buy land from Indians than just take it. But Puritan land purchases usually came with strings attached. The main string being that the Native Americans had to submit to English authority.

Now, the Puritans had a rather conflicted view of the Indians. On the one hand, they saw natives as heathens in need of salvation, as evidenced by the Massachusetts seal, which features an Indian saying "Come over and help us." On the other hand, they recognized that the Native American way of life--with its relative abundance and equality, especially when it came to women--might be tempting to some people, who might want to go native.

This was such a concern that in 1642, the Massachusetts General Court prescribed a sentence of three years hard labor for anyone who left the colony and went to live with the indigenous people. There was even anti-Indian propaganda in the form of books. Captivity narratives, in which Europeans recounted their desire to return to Christian society after living with the Indians, were quite popular. Even though some, like the famous *Sovereignty and Goodness of God* by Mary Rowlandson, did admit that the Indians often treated their European captives quite well.

=====The Pequot War (5:40)=====

New England's native population lacked an overarching leader like Powhatan, but by 1637, the inevitable conflict between the English and the Indians did happen. It was called the Pequot War. After some Pequots killed an English fur trader, soldiers from Massachusetts, the newly-formed colony of Connecticut, and some Narragansett Indians, who saw an opportunity to gain an upper hand over the Pequots, attacked a Pequot village at Mystic, burning it and massacring over 500 people.

The war continued for a few months after this, but to call it a war is, in a way, to give it too much credit. The Indians were overmatched from the beginning, and by the end, almost all of them had been massacred or sold into slavery in the Caribbean.

The War opened up the Connecticut River to further settlement. It also showed that Native Americans were going to have a tough time resisting, because they were outnumbered and they had inferior weapons. But the brutality of the massacre in Mystic shocked even some Puritans, like William Bradford, who wrote, "It was a fearful sight to see them frying in the fire."

But despite the odds, New England natives continued to resist the English. In 1675, Native Americans launched their biggest attack on New England colonists in what would come to be known as King Philip's War. It was led by a Wampanoag chief named Metacomet, which was why it is also sometimes called Metacomet's War. The English called Metacomet "King Philip" due to their fantastic cultural sensitivity.

The conflict was marked by brutality on both sides and it nearly ended English settlements in the northeast. The fighting itself lasted 2 years. Indians attacked half of the 90 towns the English had founded, and 12 of those towns were destroyed. About 1,000 of the 52,000 Europeans and 3,000 of the 20,000 Indians involved died in the War. As I mentioned before, the War was particularly brutal. The Battle of the Great Swamp was really just a massacre of Indians by the English and when King Philip was finally killed, ending the War, his decapitated head was placed on a stake in the Plymouth town square, where it remained for decades.

And on the other side? Well, to quote Nathaniel Saltonstall, who lived through the war, "The heathen rarely [gave] quarter to those that they take, but if they were women, they first forced them to satisfy their filthy lusts and then murdered them." Saltonstall went on to describe a particularly brutal way that natives would kill colonists' cows: by cutting "their bellies and letting them go several days trailing their guts after them."

That indigenous people would reserve such brutality for livestock says something really important about this war. The Indians correctly saw European colonization as a threat to their way of life, and that included the animals who trampled Indians' land and whose grazing patterns required the English to take more and more territory. Some of the stories told about Native American brutality also suggest the symbolic nature of this war. Like, one English colonist was disemboweled and had a Bible stuck in his body cavity. Supposedly, the natives who buried him explained, "You English, since you came into this country have grown exceedingly above the ground. Let us see how well you grow when planted into the ground." But it wasn't just the Indians who felt their way of life being threatened.

=====Mystery Document (8:20)=====

It's time for this week's Mystery Document!

The rules here are simple. I read the Mystery Document, I try to guess its author. If I'm right, I don't get shocked with the shock pen. If I'm wrong, I do.

"The righteous god hath heightened our calamity and given commission to the barbarous heathen to rise up against us and to become a smart rod and a sever scourge to us in burning and depopulating several hopeful plantations, murdering many of our people of all sorts and seeming as it were to cast us off...hereby speaking aloud to us to search and try out our ways and turn again unto the Lord our God from whom we have departed with a great backsliding."

Okay, I don't know this one, so I'm going to have to piece it together. Uh, we have a plural narrator, that's important, seemingly monotheistic, feels like the heathens in this context--likely the Native Americans--have been sent as a scourge, or scourge, as it is apparently properly pronounced. What, I'm from Alabama, I don't know how to say a ton of words. I mean, I just recently learned that you don't check your Yahoo! mail, you check your YA-hoo! mail, and Yahoo!'s over already!

Alright so plural narrator, scourge, great backsliding...uhh...Stan, you're going to get to shock me this time, who is it? The Laws of War passed by the General Court of Massachusetts in 1675. Are you kidding? From now on, the Mystery Document must always be written by a single human person!

I hate this. I hate this so much. It's worse now, because I've had it before, so I know it's gonna--GAHHHHHH!!!

=====Native Americans in Our History (9:50)=====

This shows us the way the Puritans understand the world, but it also show us that within 50 years of its founding, Puritans already felt that the mission of their colony--to be a great Christian community--was already kind of a failure. If they'd been as righteous as they were supposed to be, God wouldn't have sent the Indians to burn their homes and kill them. So it's important to understand that this was a war to preserve a way of life for both the Indians and the English.

And that brings us to another question: What's the point of even telling these bloody stories about massacres and atrocities. One point is to remind ourselves that much of what we learn about American history, like all history, has been cleaned up to conform to our mythological view of ourselves. Native Americans have been so successfully marginalized, both geographically and metaphorically, that it's easy to either forget about them or else to view them merely as people to be pitied or reviled. But it's important to know the ways that they resisted colonization, because it reminds us that Native Americans were people who acted in history, not just people who were acted upon by it. And it also reminds us that the history of Indigenous people on this land mass isn't separate from American history; it's an essential part of it.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

=====Credits (10:52)=====

Crash course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the associate producer is Danica Johnson, and the show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer and myself. Our graphics team is Thought Bubble. If you have questions about today's video, please ask them in comments. They will be answered by our team of crack historians. By the way, our team of crack historians is a team of excellent historians, not a team of historians who study crack cocaine.

Thanks for watching and, as we say in my home town, don't forget to be awesome.