

The Great Dying: God's Will or Unfortunate Circumstance?

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Between 1616 and 1619 Native villages of coastal New England from Maine to Cape Cod were stricken by a catastrophic plague that killed tens of thousands of people. Weakening the Wampanoag nation politically, economically, and militarily.

The illness is speculated to have been the unintended import of a French fishing vessel wrecked in Cape Cod Bay in 1616. According to a third hand account of the misfortune five sailors, one gravely ill, were stranded. Phineas Pratt, a colonist of Plymouth, recalled the story of the shipwrecked fisherman as told by a "Pequot" who said the Frenchmen were captured and enslaved by Natives and "wept much" at their predicament. The one who was sick died and soon after the Native villagers became sick.

The colonials, particularly the Puritans and saints among them, purported the plague to be evidence of God's will to punish the "tawny pagans" in such a way that prepared their territory for the arrival of the pilgrims; empirical logic that failed to explain why God would punish Natives for enslaving French fishermen but not the common practice of Europeans to kidnap and enslave Natives.

The exact nature of the Great Dying may never be known. However, it was described as one that consumed its victims, rotting them from within and causing their skin to turn yellow and fall off. As told to Thomas Morton it was as if, "... the hand of God fell heavily upon them, with such a mortal stroke that they died on heaps as they lay in their houses ..."

Among the dozens of villages wiped out was Patuxet, the very same village where Thomas Hunt kidnapped twenty men to be sold as slaves in Spain in 1614. Among the Hunt's captives was Squanto, the only one known to return; he came back in 1619 to find his village wiped out. Patuxet ultimately was renamed Plymouth Colony.

This article was written by Paula Peters, a former journalist and current writer and independent scholar of Wampanoag history. She is a socially and culturally active member of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe.